



Africa in a Changing Global Order

Marginal but Meaningful?

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EXPERT INTERVIEW: CARLOS LOPES



Carlos Lopes (Guinea Bissau) is Professor at the Nelson Mandela School of Public Governance, University of Cape Town, and Visiting Professor at Sciences Po, Paris. Has occupied several leadership positions at the UN, including Political Director for Secretary-General Kofi Annan and Executive Secretary of the Economic Commission for Africa.

Q.: Global order keeps on changing with new centres of power emerging. Despite this Africa remains relatively peripheral for the world economy. What makes it so difficult to catch up with other ascending powers?

Lopes: The tragedy of African thought has to do with the absence of ideology, said African liberation hero Amílcar Cabral. When he made such pronouncements in the 1960s he was obviously not referring to the countless debates about the end of ideologies, but rather to the shyness to express will, defend a specific political project, in opposition to the mimetic posture that characterised much of African intellectualism. At the source of this posture: the persistence of an African inferiority belief.

It was Hegel who best summed up, in philosophical thought, the perception maintained in the West that Africa was dominated by an inferior human presence, traced to Cain's fate. In proclaiming that Africa was incapable of producing history, he was affirming the view that civilisation came from writing; adding to the plausibility the claim that Egypt was culturally non-African, not black, but part of a Mediterranean that served as the cradle of a world illuminated by Europeans alone. We know that all these categorisations are historically inconsistent. They do reflect though various ways of conceiving otherness. Unfortunately, such views persisted

over time. It is remarkable that in today's world, with information accessible everywhere and reachable with a few clicks, views about a certain African inferiority still are pervasively present—sometimes in an explicit way, though more often, implicitly.

Such perceptions surpass the old coloniser's view, which is used to strike the colonised with a vision of itself influenced by complex and a constant revisiting of traditional and inferior forms of political identity. Deep down such defensive behaviour is a manifestation of the absence of self-will.

Q.: At the beginning of the millennium the 'Africa rising' narrative emerged. What has been left of this momentum, is Africa still rising what narrative best fits our decade?

Lopes: While Africa has more than doubled its GDP over the past 20 years, made progress in the education and health sectors, improved its governance systems, created the world's second most attractive region for FDI and reduced poverty despite the explosion of demography and rapid urbanisation, there is little evidence of economic and social transformation. Industrialisation is the necessary step towards economic and social transformation, not only to manufacture and produce goods, but also because industrialisation is the way to change the production system and modernise the economic ecosystem. The Africa rising narrative is more about business opportunities in Africa, not about Africa's own prospects of change and transformation.

Q.: World order has become more multipolar. How has this impacted on Africa's position in the world, has the continent been able to lessen its reliance on traditional centres of power or is it merely diversifying its dependencies with a different set of actors?

Lopes: The enormous importance of the economic and financial relations of African countries with the world is undeniable. It would be simply silly and ridiculous to fight for isolationism. However, and unless there is a structural transformation, Africa will remain dependent on the mood of the international market, from both a commercial and financial point of view. As an example, the current COVID-19-induced crisis has intensified the asphyxiation that is the burden of foreign debt for the development of these countries. Requests for relief have been echoed and moratoriums on payment of debt service or principal have been announced. But it is good to be aware that, as history has shown, this is insufficient and perpetuates a vicious cycle that stifles the development of these countries.

The situation becomes even more serious when Africa cannot find its own alternative to start structural transformation and remains in the hands of those who dictate rules, paths and conditions. History has been repeating itself for sixty years. There is a need to avoid further damage. The partnerships the continent is negotiating with its key interlocutors such as the EU, China, US, Japan and other major economies will have to be different. First there is a need to acknowledge a different role for the African Union, its Agenda 2063 and its ambitious programme of institutional reforms. The time when partners expressed goodwill and soon afterwards defined what was good for Africa sounds hollow.

Q.: Current debates around global order note a decline in multilateralism especially about large trade agreements. However, the establishment of the African Continental Free Trade Area (AfCFTA) seems to point in the opposite direction. Is Africa atypical at global scale or marking a turning point?

The largest free-trade area in the world, in number of countries and geographical coverage, was launched on March 21 at an African Union (AU) Summit in Kigali, Rwanda. 44 countries signed off, with the remaining 11, which includes Nigeria and South Africa, indicating they will likely join the pack soon. With a \$3.3 trillion combined GDP, around 3% of world trade and 1,2 billion inhabitants Africa is a force to reckon with if it succeeds its regional integration. It is a dream that presided over the establishment in 1963 of the Organization of African Unity, the predecessor of the AU, in the turbulent independence period.

The pan-African ideology has proven to be a powerful rhetoric tool, although not so successful in the economic front. This can change dramatically with the establishment of the African Continental Free-Trade Area (AfCFTA). Yet a new threatening protectionist wave is shifting the rules of engagement in world trade precisely at a time Africa is embracing transformation. The AfCFTA comprises trade in goods, trade in services, investment, intellectual property rights and competition policy, and now will even add e-commerce. This requires an enormous investment to pull together an efficient machinery and coherent policy process. The political commitment demonstrated by the African leadership to pursue this ambitious project during adverse times is therefore even more remarkable.

Q.: For Africa the indirect economic effects of COVID-19 might be larger than the direct public health challenge. Ballooning public debt and increasing poverty are often cited as direct effects of the pandemic and will Africa deal with these challenges?

Lopes: Beyond the immediate health concerns, the pandemic is triggering a global economic slowdown, which will severely hamper Africa's development ambitions and curtail a successful two decades of macro-economic improvements and social gains. The continent is already working to bring 400 million people out of poverty and 200 million out of hunger. The current financial downturn will delay closing those gaps. Early estimates suggest that Africa will likely face at least \$500 billion economic loss as a result of the COVID-19.

The COVID-19 debate may have parked the discussion about the urgency of another crisis, the climate crisis. That would be absurd given that Africa is facing several climate-related threats simultaneously: drought such as a devastating drought in the Sahel, a cricket invasion in the Horn of Africa and the perennial environmental stress in the Sahel igniting armed conflicts. Africa's response to the COVID-19 crisis should and could be used as an opportunity to build resilience to future economic shocks. This cannot be achieved by continuing to rely on fossil fuel markets.

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