

Africa Policy Outlook 2000

By Africa Action

In 1999, the range of conflicts extending diagonally across Africa from Angola in the southwest to Ethiopia and Eritrea in the northeast continued to generate new humanitarian disasters and to pose formidable obstacles to hopes for continental advance. National elections were held in South Africa, Nigeria and thirteen other African countries, reinforcing democratic practices in large areas of the continent despite serious questions about the fairness of the proceedings in Nigeria and several other countries. The region with the largest number of elections considered generally free and fair was Southern Africa, where Botswana, Malawi, Mozambique and Namibia as well as South Africa all reelected incumbent governments. A December coup in Côte d'Ivoire interrupted an electoral campaign already set to exclude the opposition -- a development which despite appearances might open up new prospects for democratization.

Even in countries with competitive elections, however, international observers as well as local democracy activists increasingly stressed that real change depended on increasing public participation and on access to resources that were not forthcoming. Growth rates for 1999 were predicted to be 2.3 percent for Sub-Saharan Africa, only slightly more than in 1998 and not enough to prevent the second year in a row of declining per capita income. Despite new pledges of debt relief from creditor countries, the prospect at year's end was for continued stagnation or decline in international public investment (also known as "development assistance") and for only modest increases in private direct investment.

While HIV/AIDS was the most visible and widely publicized of the new threats to African societies that could offset advances on other fronts, the

issue of inadequate investment in human capacity and social infrastructure applied much more widely to health in general, to education and to other government services necessary to undergird economic progress.

Internationally, developing countries and debt campaigners forced a much higher level of attention to the need to resolve the debt crisis afflicting African countries. Creditor countries and multilateral institutions acknowledged the inadequacy of previous efforts to resolve the problem under the HIPC (Heavily Indebted Poor Country) initiative. New commitments still fell far short of the total cancellation campaigners argue is necessary, but promised to make modest additional resources available to qualifying countries, most of which are in Africa.

Other than these two issues -- HIV/AIDS and debt -- there was little new movement in international and U.S. policy debate on African issues. African conflicts continued to gain less high-level international attention than those in other parts of the world. And international economic policy towards Africa was still derivative from global debates in which African voices played little role.

Conflict Zones

Although the effects impacted the entire continent, ongoing open warfare in Africa showed pronounced differences between regions in 1999, a pattern that was likely to continue for the year 2000. With the exception of Angola, returned to



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full-scale conflict at the end of 1998, southern Africa remained the largest zone of stability. In West Africa, also, most countries were not at war. New peace settlements were instituted during the year after additional bitter conflict in Sierra Leone and Guinea-Bissau, although the prospects for stability were both fragile and controversial. An amnesty referendum in September in Algeria raised hopes for diminishing violence in that country's internal conflict.

The largest interlinked set of unresolved conflicts included Angola and the Republic of the Congo in west central Africa; the Democratic Republic of the Congo in the heart of the continent, Burundi and Rwanda in the Great Lakes region, tying in not only to eastern Congo to also to Uganda and to Sudan; the perennial war in Sudan; and the border conflict between Ethiopia and Eritrea.

Despite a multilateral agreement for a peace settlement in the Democratic Republic of Congo signed in Lusaka in July, the momentum for implementation of the agreement was still weak at year's end, with the Congolese antagonists, regional powers and international community all less than whole-hearted in their commitment to make it work. Finalization of a peace accord in the border conflict between Ethiopia and Eritrea seemed no closer at the end of 1999, although the blockage was identified publicly as disagreement on "technical issues."

U.S. Ambassador to the United Nations Richard Holbrooke promised to make January 2000 the "month of Africa" in the opening session of the UN Security Council in the new year. While it would take more than a month to make significant progress on any of Africa's unresolved conflicts, it should quickly become apparent whether the U.S. and other major powers will really give significantly greater attention to supporting peace efforts.

One particularly critical test will be whether the new international seriousness about implementing sanctions against UNITA in Angola displayed in 1999 continues and is strengthened this year. Another will be the level and sophistication of international diplomatic attention given and pressure mobilized to support the complex and diverse peace processes in this set of conflicts. UNITA's current military weakness in Angola, the existence of a peace framework waiting to be implemented in the Democratic Republic of the Congo, and the appointment of Nelson Mandela as the new mediator for Burundi give new opportunities in several cases. But it will not be easy to turn opportunity into real progress.

Elsewhere, particularly in countries with recent peace accords such as Sierra Leone and Guinea-Bissau, long-term stability will continue at serious risk without more rapid progress on demobilization and rebuilding of political and economic institutions.

The Economic Agenda

In 1999 economic issues affecting Africa were on the agenda in several international arenas, most prominently in discussions of debt, HIV/AIDS, international trade (around the Seattle meeting of the World Trade Organization) and, in the U.S., the congressional debate on competing bills concerning trade with Africa.

Despite the inherent interrelationships between these issues, however, the public debate resulted in no coherent discussion on economic strategies for economic progress in Africa. Ongoing debate within multilateral agencies at an African and global level had little echo within Western public policy discourse. Critical perspectives from Northern and African non-governmental sources had an impact in accentuating doubts about the Washington consensus of free-market



fundamentalism -- most dramatically in the failure of the World Trade Organization to launch a new round at Seattle. But there was little progress in gaining footholds for positive alternative strategies in the public policy arena.

Growth rates for sub-Saharan Africa are projected by the World Bank to increase modestly in 2000-2001, to 3.3 percent -- one percentage point greater than the previous two years. Export growth for the sub-Saharan region is expected to advance by 6.3 percent in the year 2000 (4.6 percent excluding South Africa and Nigeria). Imports are not projected to keep pace, allowing the current account deficit to shrink from 4.6 percent of gross domestic product in 1998 to 2.6 percent in 2000.

Despite new commitments made by creditor countries in 1999, the impact of additional debt relief is likely to be modest. In December 1999, multilateral and bilateral donors pledged an additional \$3.7 billion of "quick-disbursing" financial assistance over three years in support of "poverty reduction strategies nested within sound macroeconomic programs." How the shift to an increased emphasis on "poverty reduction" would affect structural adjustment programs in practice remained to be seen.

In the year 2000, as in previous years, Africa will continue highly vulnerable to commodity prices and global economic developments. The momentum of the debt campaign, the inconclusive outcome of the Seattle trade summit, and continuing failure to change Africa's structural position in the world economy will ensure continued questioning of the Washington consensus. It is doubtful, however, whether positive alternative strategies will gather sufficient force to win more than token acknowledgement in international and U.S. policy debates.

Democratization and Governance

For the coming year, as in 1999 and 1998, the prospects for further democratization of African countries present a very mixed picture, with entrenched hierarchical and repressive structures vying against a wide array of new initiatives.

In Nigeria, the election of President Olusegun Obasanjo last year resulted in a successful transition to civilian rule and opened up political space within the country significantly. Fundamental issues, however, are still unaddressed, including regional and ethnic inequalities -- particularly in access to oil wealth -- and the division of powers between the federal government and other units. The destruction of the Delta town of Odi by the military in November 1999, among other incidents, raised significant doubts about the government's willingness to resolve the crisis in the Delta in a democratic manner.

Elsewhere elections or referenda are scheduled during the year in a number of African countries, including Zimbabwe, Lesotho, Tanzania, Uganda, Sudan, Ethiopia, Ghana, Senegal and Western Sahara. In Kenya and in Zimbabwe new constitutional review processes are under way despite foot-dragging and manipulation by incumbent regimes. In Côte d'Ivoire, the new military regime will be under pressure to make good on its pledge to move quickly towards democracy and demonstrate more openness than the previously entrenched regime.

Whether inside or outside electoral arenas, momentum towards greater democratization will be determined by how willing political authorities show themselves to engage in real dialogue with political opposition and non-governmental citizen groups. In addition to Nigeria, countries where



such developments during the year are likely to have particularly significant impact for their subregions include Kenya, Zimbabwe and Côte d'Ivoire. The degree of progress -- or regression -- on this front within African countries will continue to be a major determinant of the prospects of advances on other issues, as well as on African capacity to project African perspectives in international debates.



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