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International Involvement and Education in South Africa: From Hope to Disenchantment

Abstract

Since the 1960s and before the dramatic announcement of the release of Nelson Mandela on 2 February 1990 (signalling the end of apartheid and the crossing of the proverbial Rubicon (Stone, 2014, p. 3)), the international community assisted the African National Congress (ANC) in its struggle against apartheid and put crucial pressure on the state through economic and other sanctions (Marx, 1992, p. 175). There was, however, abundant economic and other support for the ANC, the liberation organisation widely regarded as the legitimate voice of South Africa's people (Marx, 1992, p. 186). The support was intended to help the ANC to take over and transform all aspects of the government of South Africa and gave the ANC people hope that they could escape the oppression of *apartheid*.
When the dismantling of the apartheid system began, international concern about South Africa started disappearing (Marx, 1992, p. 175). The need for intervention was "now driven by more mixed and uncertain motivations" Marx (1992, p. 175) like development needs and complicated access to financial and other assistance. Despite all the aid, the South African school education system has been performing poorly since the advent of democracy (comparable to the gaining of independence of other African countries). Hope springing from international aid was replaced by a feeling of disenchantment. Apartheid has undoubtedly added to the constraints to educational development and advancement but this paper will also explore the possibility that international aid may have contributed to the apparent failure of the system.

Keywords: Rubicon, development, non-racial and democratic system, disenchantment, international aid, constraints to educational development, under-performance of officials, sanctions

Introduction

South Africa is characterised by two momentous events. The first was the release of Nelson Mandela in 1990, which culminated in 1994 when the African National Congress (ANC) replaced the ruling National Party in a peaceful transition. This event was comparable to independence (*uhuru*) in postcolonial Africa. Earlier, in 1948, the National Party became the ruling party in South Africa and became the subject of massive international pressure since the 1960s to reform its repulsive *apartheid* policy. This policy was and is still being regarded as the cause of all South Africa's problems and is now also linked erroneously to 1652 when the Dutch East African Company (DEAC) placed employees in the Cape. Pre-1990, the ANC engaged in a struggle with the state to achieve a democratic and non-racial government in South Africa (with a matching education system).

In this paper, I explore international aid and involvement in South Africa's school education system during these two epochs to identify successes and flaws of the interventions.

The playing field for both epochs: the diversity of South Africa

Semper eadem et aliud (Still the same, but different) (Stone, 2014, p. 259)

The Latin adage above suggests that international intervention during the two periods could be similar. Although 1994 brought about significant changes in the legislature, the demographics of educational institutions and the respective numbers of white and black government officials, many things did not change (especially for the poorest of the population).

The perception then that aid was going to a third-world country that consisted of a large black majority and a small white minority was an oversimplification of the country's diversity. The comments of Stone (2014), Park (2019), Lea (2020), Marx (1992), Isaacs (2021) and Nkomo (1989) below present a better picture of the diversity of the nature and fabric of South Africa that challenged international aid.

Stone (2014, p. 21) observes that:

*Our history shows two main lines: that of the **Afro-African** and that of the **Euro-African** (emphasis added). There is the story of the Afrikaner ... from the highly developed Europe ...; also the British influence. And then, obviously, the story of the disadvantaged, black continent, Africa, and its black Africans ... and the battle/struggle between white and black for equal rights.* (Translation by the author).

Czada (2013, p. 6) quotes Neville Alexander's (2001) metaphor of the *Gariep* (the great river) which changes Stone's two "lines" into three "streams" by referring to:

... the historical fact that South African society, ..., has come about through the flowing together—mostly violently, sometimes in a relatively peaceful manner—of three main "tributaries"—carrying different cultural traditions, practices, customs, beliefs, etc. These currents or streams are the African, the European and the Asian.

Park (2019, p. xi) comments on a different kind of "trilemma" for South Africa namely to effect globalisation, democracy and national self-determination. For this to be accomplished, an African country needs "a strong social fabric, well-functioning institutions, … sound economic planning and management, … good governance, accountability, …" to make the best use of international exchanges (Park, 2019, p. x), all these requirements being indisputably absent in South Africa after 1994.

Park (2019, p. 15) mentions that the attractiveness of South Africa and other African countries for development aid can be spoiled by the fact that "Sub-Saharan African countries do not have neighbouring countries to use as benchmarks … for … development" (p. viii). Lea (2020) adds to Park's ideas and mentions "ill-conceived and economically unsound" aid programmes and "reckless spending" on "extravagant projects" in these countries as deterrents to international development assistance. One could add large-scale private and public corruption to these factors.

Marx (1992, p. 188) referred to the severe problem of South Africa's "limited absorptive capacity" indicating there were few organisations "able to absorb funds and to function effectively on a large scale". Isaacs (2021) observes that South African reports on intervention projects tend to contain proof of money expended but not of services rendered or of the effect and quality of services, indicating a lack of accountability.

South Africa has 11 official languages, 4 main racial groups and even more ethnic groups. Wages, racial, gender and educational inequality dominates the scene together with high unemployment rates (30.8% on average, 50% plus for youth) (Isaacs, 2021). Senior management positions in all organisations are heavily dominated by whites.

South Africa's uniqueness in postcolonial Africa

In South Africa, international development engagement before 1994 ("independence") was not with a state but with a political liberation organisation (the ANC). Sanctions barred government (and considerable white experience and expertise) from participating in negotiations regarding foreign aid. Decolonisation played no role in South Africa, an independent republic in 1994.

President de Klerk's speech in Parliament in February 1990 was remarkable: a government in power voluntarily relinquishing sole control of a state. This led to the termination of a struggle between different elements of a nation and changed the aim of aid from liberation to development.

Aid before 1994

There was sympathy with, and support for black South African students overseas as apartheid "purposefully created tremendous impediments to the advancement of the majority of South Africans …" (Marx, 1992, p. 175). The sympathy was extended to all black South Africans. The US Agency for International Development (AID) (among the biggest donors) channelled $40m into human resource development, education and community leadership programmes (Marx, 1992, p. 181). In 1992, 60% of an amount of $80m was earmarked for education. The European Commission spent approximately R200m per year on bursaries and research but international agencies remained reluctant "to establish ties with the … regime still in power" (Marx, 1992, p. 182). They did not want to be branded as apartheid sympathisers.

After the Soweto uprisings in 1976, there was "a proliferation" of scholarship assistance to black South Africans in Europe, Britain, Canada and the United States (Nkomo, 1989, pp. 1-3). Most of the assistance came from private organisations. In 1987, 4 790 black South Africans were studying in Britain and the USA (Nkomo, 1989, p. 9), still a miniscule part of the population.

What Nkomo (1989, p. 12) said about the "magnitude of the need" which exceeded the "South African regime's capacity" still rings true and partially explains why the hopes raised by pre-1994 aid turned into disillusionment. Nkomo (1989, p. 13) was concerned that foreign aid tended to produce a "cadre of leaders whose conceptual framework and operational paradigms conform to the world view and needs" of the donor countries and not those of their native countries.

The pre-1994 era: main impressions

Marx (1992) and Nkomo (1989) provided indications of how many students benefitted from scholarships and how much money was spent on scholarship grants for black students and other aid. Because aid was mainly routed to and through a

banned organisation (the ANC), it is likely that the authors were not aware of all exchanges between the ANC and donors and prospective donors. There is no detailed information on what aid was made available in this era and what the financial implications were.

Aid after 1994: unfulfilled promises

Circumstances in the country changed markedly as more schools were built and a new legislative regime was developed (DOE, p. 2001). There was a shift in "resources in education" (Van der Berg & Hofmeyr, 2018, p. 2) to a pro-poor policy.

After 1994, the floodgates of foreign aid to education were expected to open but aid faded instead. Foreign donors still struggled to find public or private agencies capable of managing large-scale interventions in teaching and learning and infrastructure-linked projects. The DOE (2001, p. 64) observed that, after the 1994 elections, "international donors had largely shifted their focus away from civil society" to the new government. Overseas official Development Assistance (ODA) peaked at R3.8b in 1997 but has declined since 1999 and the decline was attributed to "the international community's growing confidence about South Africa's ability to govern and fund its own programmes and policies".

Engaging with donors

Donors interacted predominantly with the government of the country and not private institutions. A "flood of dignitaries" sought contact with South Africa and the need arose to coordinate funding initiatives Marx (1992, p. 187). This need required a "massive training initiative" to build capacity to counter the lack of "absorptive capacity" (Marx, 1992, p. 189) so that the country could make optimal use of available assistance.

International agreements

On 5 September 2017, the DBE (DBE, 2017) held a briefing on its international agreements. The "exchange of delegations and experts, cooperation between education institutions, exchange of information and sharing of best practice in different subject areas of interest" formed the agenda of the briefing.

Bilateral agreements

In 2013, South Africa and the People's Republic of China entered into an agreement to promote the teaching of Mandarin in South African schools. A memorandum of understanding (MOU) between the DBE and the Embassy of France in 2016 dealt with the teaching of a nutrition programme and of French in schools and in terms of an MOU (2016) with the Republic of South Korea six volunteer teachers in scarce subjects were dispatched to South Africa.

A British Council-DBE declaration of intent in 2014 led to capacity-building workshops for 900 teachers and subject advisors in the field of English language. An agreement with the Flemish Association for Development, Cooperation and Technical Assistance (2014) addressed learning outcomes in primary education.

20 mathematics and science subject specialists were deployed in South Africa in terms of an agreement with Cuba in 2016. The Japan International Cooperation

Agency (JICS) offered periodic training for mathematics and science subject specialists in terms of an intergovernmental agreement of 2011. The DBE also engaged with Germany, the UK, Finland, Turkey and the World Bank – mostly about curriculum matters like the UK and Flemish agreements.

The participants in the briefing asked a pertinent question about why there was no feedback on agreements and their benefits for the DBE. Departmental officials at the briefing could not provide clear answers.

The blueprint document for education after 1994, the White Paper on Education and Training of 1995 (White Paper) (Department of Education, 1995) surprisingly did not explicitly recognise foreign assistance (the existence of which was widely recognised in the country) in the development of this document. It is, however, clear that the ANC consulted international experts about among others Outcomes-based Education (OBE), school governance systems and teacher rights.

Activities of the DOE

The DOE's policy framework on partnership (DOE, 2001, p. 46) supported the assumption that a high-quality "education sector cannot be built by government alone" and that *partnerships among others with international partners were essential* (emphasis added).

The DOE (2001, p. 47) indicated that it cooperated with:

... the United Nations system and with numerous donors to improve access to ... education. Development co-operation partners such as DANIDA, USAID, SIDA, CIDA, DfID (UK), the Netherlands, Belgium, Irish Aid, the Finnish government, and the European Union, ...

It is important to note that aid included technical (presumably curricular) and financial assistance to the national and provincial departments of education.

25-year progress review

The DOE (2019) published a progress review report which also conveys information about international organisations and countries' involvement in the development of South African education.

The White Paper (DOE, 1995, p. 36) acknowledged the use of international instruments in the design and establishment of the new education system. These instruments included conventions dealing with the right to education and children's rights and the UNESCO Convention Against Discrimination in Education (1960). The White Paper also announced that the DOE would explore the implications of other documents such as the World Declaration on Education for All (1990), the Charter on the Rights and Welfare of the African Child (1992) and other related documents.

This indirect international assistance noticeably affected the essence of educational rights in South Africa.

Factors impeding international involvement and development

South Africa could have made better use of international involvement but factors such as the following impeded the success of international aid and involvement:

- In terms of human resources, official "appointments" in the form of "cadre deployments" as rewards for loyalty to the ANC during the struggle instead of appointment on merit made increased donors' difficulty to find effective functionaries and project partners (Bosman, 2019, pp. 9-10; Stone, 2014, pp. 254-260; Nkomo, 2021).
- Cadre deployment violates Section 197(3) of the Constitution of 1996 (Republic of South Africa, 1996) which provides that no "employee of the public service may be favoured or prejudiced only because that person supports a particular political party or cause". The state has been ignoring its own Constitution for close to 17 years and this must lead to donor misgivings about aid.
- The absence of effective human resources and other systems "to hold aid recipients and government accountable for how the money is spent" (Lea, 2020) resulted in donors' reluctance to provide aid. There was also a loss of managerial expertise in the upper echelons of the education hierarchy because of voluntary severance packages intended to equalise educational spending (Stone, 2014, p. 260).
- "[t]he majority of the populace did not benefit from both the aid and economic growth that followed" and did not encourage recipients and international agencies' involvement (Park, 2019, p. 20).
- South Africa's creditworthiness rating by major international credit-rating agencies has fallen to junk status, with obvious implications for investment in South Africa.

Conclusion

I used the work of authors like Park (2019), Nkomo (2021), Marx (1992) and Lea (2020) to link the ANC and the people's hope for aid provided to them in the struggle against the apartheid regime before 1994 ("independence") and to connect disenchantment to the outcome of the new dispensation in the post-1994 period.

SA needed (still needs and will continue to need) aid. It did receive assistance in various forms but the exact nature, scope and success of the aid cannot easily be determined from available sources. There was probably more aid than what can be stated with confidence. An obvious lack of success has been observed by among others Nkomo (2021) who comments that the system still displays "multiple educational deficits: high failure and dropout rates; abysmal educational facilities, … and generally high levels of illiteracy and innumeracy".

The authors above all suggest that foreign aid may be partially to blame for the poor results of aid and four of their observations stand out:

1) only a small fraction of available aid reached its aim,
2) mismanagement, excessive administrative costs and abuse of money,
3) a significant part of the money served the interests of the donor countries or organisations, and
4) corruption, theft and mismanagement eroded the amount of aid available.

The absence of "organizations capable of utilizing large amounts of funds effectively" (Marx, 1992, p. 181) and the argument of Lea (2020) that "… foreign aid … is out there to serve the interest of … multi-national corporations. There are

small amounts of aid that really go to helping people ...” make one understand the disappointment and the failure to some extent. One could add Park’s (2019, p. 37) opinion that that foreign aid fuelled the “dependency syndrome” and weakened “African states’ governance or administrative capacity” and “legitimacy” as factors impeding the success of donor and other aid. Receivers of aid could feel abused and that their dignity and worth were violated.

Malherbe “estimated that it would take two generations (about 60 years) to undo the damage and achieve parity …” (Nkomo, 2021). South Africa can build a quality school education system largely on its own but will need persistence, finances, and sound management and planning. The suggestions that “the DBE should focus its attention, resources and energy on a single unifying goal …” (Van der Berg & Hofmeyr, 2018, p. 21) and that “an unrelenting campaign” that puts “education on the same pedestal as the economy” should be launched (Nkomo, 2021) could be essential components of such a project.

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