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Statehood and Governance: Challenges in Sub-Saharan Africa

Sub-Saharan Africa comprises 48 states at various stages of social, economic and political development. Despite the heterogeneity of these countries, the following general developments relating to statehood and governance in the past 15 years can at least be identified:

- Such pan-African initiatives as the New Partnership for Africa's Development (NEPAD) and the African Union (AU) have done away with the political taboo of interference in internal affairs; it is no longer an accepted justification for inaction.
- Since the early 1990s processes of political transformation have begun in many sub-Saharan African countries; regime change has occurred in many cases. Notwithstanding regression in Zimbabwe and Ethiopia, for example, Africa as a whole has become politically more open; the participation of the people in political processes through elections has increased.
- Political transformation has tended to have little effect

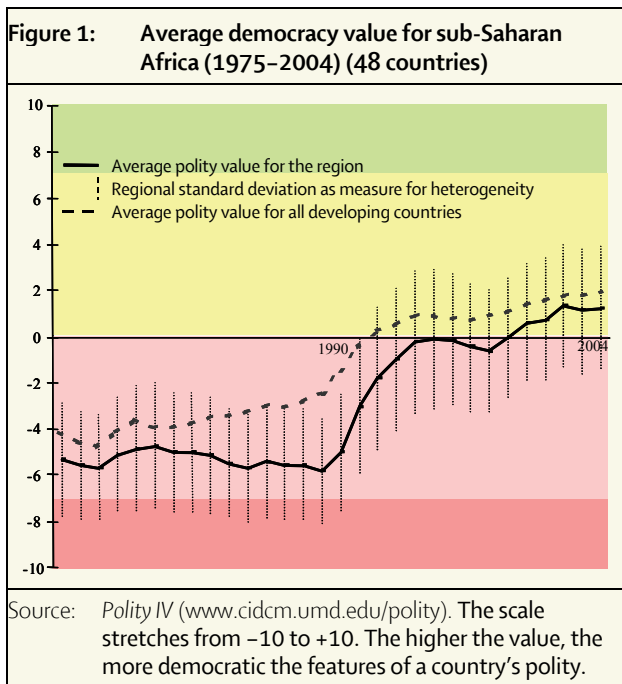
effect on the accountability of regimes; many political systems continue to be characterized by neopatrimonialism.

- The policies and service delivery undertaken by African countries have been inadequate. This is true both of basic social and economic services and of governance in the security sphere. In many cases, state does not have a secure monopoly of power.
- Although there have been changes for the better, major governance deficits persist in almost all parts of the continent and require additional efforts by the African countries themselves. The expected economic results of improved governance are a long time coming for many citizens; in the long term this poses a threat to the stability of the continent.
- The scale of external support in the form of development aid has a major influence on the political structures and policy-making of the countries assisted. In many cases, governance structures are being weakened by external actors.

1. Stability and political transformation

Authoritarian structures have given way to a more pluralistic regime in a number of countries in Africa: Benin, Cape Verde, Mali, Ethiopia, Ghana, Liberia, Sierra Leone, South Africa, Namibia and Mozambique. At the same time, there has been more or less obvious regression – only recently in certain cases – to authoritarian structures, as in Zimbabwe, Ethiopia, Eritrea, Congo-Brazzaville and the Gambia. In Botswana and Mauritius, Africa also had two consolidated democracies even before the end of the Cold War, and long-lasting structures marked by varying degrees of autocracy continued beyond 1990, as in Guinea, Gabon, Cameroon, Togo and Burkina Faso. With the change of political regime, some countries experienced an implosion of government structures, Somalia, Zaire/Congo, Guinea-Bissau and the Central African Republic being examples. But on average, sub-Saharan Africa is, together with Europe, the continent in which political rights and civil liberties are considered to have improved most in the past 15 years.

Compared to other regions, the average ratings for sub-Saharan African democracy are, despite political change, still poor, poorer than the average for all developing countries. The upward and downward departures from this general trend are particularly pronounced in sub-Saharan Africa (see Figure 1). As regards the political governance dimension, on the other hand, Africa occupies a middle position, according to World Bank data: however, the values for the governance dimension known as "voice and accountability" are, on the whole, in the negative sector, but are still higher than those for South-East Asia and well above the values for the Middle East/North Africa. In all other dimensions (political stability, effectiveness of the government, quality of regulation, rule of law and control of corruption) the sub-Saharan African region brings up the rear – save for the Central Asian region, which is not, as a rule, shown separately in the statistics. Especially poor are the results in the areas of effectiveness of the government and the rule of law.



The countries with regionally generally very good and internationally good ratings for governance include Botswana, Namibia, Mauritius and South Africa and, in West Africa, Cape Verde, Senegal, Mali, Ghana and Benin.

2. Dimensions of governance and statehood

Legitimacy: more elections, but continuing weaknesses

A distinction needs to be made in the discussion between the legitimacy of states and the legitimacy of government systems. Surveys in 18 African countries show that they are regarded as legitimate by a majority of their citizens. In addition, government in sub-Saharan Africa often has to hold its own alongside other institutions regarded as legitimate, such as religious or traditional ruling structures. Although the latter frequently tend to have cultural significance, they also play an important role in matters relating to the allocation of land and civil law at local level. Secession efforts are comparatively rare, given the ethnic plurality of African countries. Eritrea's success in (re)gaining separate statehood remains a special case. Explicitly separatist movements on different scales currently exist, for example, in Sudan (Southern Sudan), Somalia (Somaliland) and – to a much lesser degree – the south of Senegal (Casamance). But even in largely dysfunctional countries, such as the Democratic Republic of Congo and, currently, Côte d'Ivoire, local loyalties are often joined, despite the absence of functional central state structures, by the (urban) population's awareness of the state as a whole. In many cases, the aim of violent internal conflicts in these countries is to gain power for central government or autonomous administration of natural resources for regions.

Where the legitimacy of government systems is concerned, surveys reveal the African people's sound –

though, in recent years, somewhat waning – support for multi-party elections (by a majority of almost two thirds). If the participation of African people in elections is taken as an indicator of support for the regime, a similar picture results. In addition, both the number of elections held and the number of countries in which they are held have risen in sub-Saharan Africa since 1990. Where elections have been held, it is noticeable that the acceptance of the results by unsuccessful candidates has improved. Almost all one-party regimes have been abolished in Africa in the past decade in favour of multi-party systems – albeit not always at all levels of state: in some places (in Ghana, for example) parties are not admitted to local elections.

These procedural aspects of legitimacy are also complemented by – in some cases, internationally defined – standards specifying the limits to legitimate action by states. The rulers' accountability to their citizens is one of these basic standards. African citizens are evidently convinced of the value of regular elections and use them to determine who they are to be governed by. According to surveys, however, many citizens do not believe there is a role for them in demanding accountability from their government between elections. More specifically, this means that the people of many African countries have changed from subjects into convinced voters. But this has not turned them into citizens who call political leaders to account for their actions after elections. These sweeping statements should be used with caution; in many places a lively civil society has emerged.

Surveys of the people's preferences show that the protection of individual freedoms and human rights and the application of the rule of law regularly have the backing of sometimes clear majorities among those questioned. But, here again, a not inconsiderable minority often considers restrictions conceivable in these respects – either to protect the state or to "deliver results more quickly", as the same opinion polls reveal. Occasionally alleged "witchcraft" or discrimination against ethnic or other minorities also signify a restriction of the human rights of certain groups of people that is often tolerated or even advocated by large sections of the population.

Monopoly of power: still to be achieved nation-wide

The absence of a functioning state monopoly of power is a fundamental structural feature of large parts of sub-Saharan Africa. The phenomenon can be inferred from various indicators and identified in various spheres. In 27 cases (2005) force is being used in current conflicts in sub-Saharan Africa; of these, five cases can be categorized as wars. Involved in most violent conflicts are such non-state armed groups as rebels, warlords and traditional authorities, who question the government monopoly of power as such. In some cases, these groups act in a confused manner and without a clear political agenda; in others, distinct political and/or eco-

conomic motives are discernible. Private security agencies manifest themselves both as substitutes for non-existent government security services and in the form of non-legitimized, quasi-state forces intended, for instance, to enable natural resources to be exploited. The distinction between state and non-state armed groups is not always clear and, as in the case of Sudan (Darfur conflict), may be used to conceal the regime's responsibility for extremely serious human rights violations.

The state's inability to enforce its monopoly of power finds expression in different ways. The complete collapse of state structures (as in Somalia and Liberia, for example) continues to be the exception even in Africa. However, many countries in the region are structurally unstable. Almost all large African countries are unable to enforce their monopoly of power effectively (Nigeria, Sudan, Democratic Republic of Congo, etc.). Even in relatively well functioning countries (such as Kenya, Mali and Ghana) a state monopoly of power does not exist everywhere. Security activities by the police are severely restricted.

The availability of weapons contributes to instability and, in some cases, to high rates of violent crime (as in parts of Nigeria and South Africa). As many African countries are unable to enforce their monopoly of power, new substitutes (such as the Bakassi Boys in Nigeria and private security firms) have evolved in some, or (transformed) substitutes from the pre-colonial period continue to operate.

At international level the African Union, established in 2002, is in the process of developing a system of collective security, which will at least be more workable than its predecessor's. Based on subregional mechanisms, this new system is to be able to take over functions in the event of a failing monopoly of power. Despite the improved political conditions, however, existing structural weaknesses (finances, logistics, etc.) mean that the continental system will be able to take action in the foreseeable future only with massive external support. For this reason Africa is a clear focal area for UN peace missions.

State institutions: limited efficiency

In large parts of Africa state is incapable of performing its core tasks effectively. The obvious problems relating to the effectiveness of institutions are most in evidence in the executive, but also affect the legislature and the judiciary. In sub-Saharan Africa serious shortcomings are to be found in the quality of governmental regulation – if only because of the parliaments' substantive weaknesses – and the enforceability of contracts. Corruption is a widespread weakness of governance in Africa.

Most African countries are organized along centralist lines, with references to decentralized decision-making structures often no more than rhetoric. The ability of subordinate structures to function is frequently ham-

pered, if not prevented, by underfunding. Local revenue from taxes and charges is, as a rule, extremely limited. State receipts – customs duties, export revenues (from minerals, crude oil and agricultural products) and development aid – are primarily the responsibility of central government.

Even in formally democratic structures "big men" decide who has access to resources and to governmental offices or (governmental) funds; as a rule, parliaments are hardly able to perform their monitoring function. Although the distinction between public and private goods formally exists, officials often deliberately disregard the rules. Formal procedures are thus retained, but are eroded by neopatrimonial structures. The little public pressure exerted to obtain accountability – sometimes combined with the electorate's expectation of a supply of goods – ensures a limited degree of general legal certainty.

Policies and service delivery: improvements at a low level

On average, state performance in Africa in terms of welfare or basic social and economic services ranges from deficient to utterly inadequate. Of a total of 177 countries assessed by the Human Development Index (2005), 30 of the 32 with the worst figures are located in sub-Saharan Africa. South Africa and Botswana are among the few exceptions.

Basic government services in education and – to a lesser extent – health care are accessible to large proportion of the population in Africa, although they are often of a very poor quality by international standards. Viewed over a long period, basic social services (schooling, health care, access to drinking water, etc.) have improved in sub-Saharan Africa. Nonetheless, the scale of the welfare deficiencies for large population groups is considerable compared to other regions; the absolute number of poor people is even likely to increase further. Where the economy is concerned, sub-Saharan Africa was the developing region with the lowest economic growth for a period of twenty years or so; only since about 2000 has there been growth in real terms, although it has usually started from a low level and is largely confined to a number of (raw-material) economies. On the other hand, such other governmental services as the support provided by state security forces are maintained only with great difficulty in many countries. Small-scale corruption and personal contacts are often preconditions for access to public services, making them unaffordable for large sections of the population, which severely restricts the individual's legal certainty.

The poor efficiency of the state in Africa compared to other developing regions has hardly allowed government legitimacy to be strengthened in past decades. The power of public office (in the form of "big men", for example) is reflected, in particular, in the combination of political functions and economic activities. With the transition from the public to the private sphere fluid, struc-

turing is limited, given the incentives to deny access to possible participants in the market.

3. Role of external actors

The role of external actors is relevant in two respects:

Firstly, a geostrategic renaissance has been occurring in Africa since the early 2000s. On the one hand, traditional influential powers, primarily the USA and Britain (and, with qualifications, France), and new global actors (especially China) recognize that Africa has a role to play as international security risks arise against a background of fragile statehood and as a source of raw materials (oil, coltan, etc.). Other interests concern, for example, the necessary involvement of African actors in measures to combat other global risks (such as pandemics and climate change) and the repercussions of underdevelopment in Africa for adjoining regions (primarily as a result of migration).

Secondly, external support for Africa, especially in the form of official development assistance (ODA), performs an often significant function in the provision of public services by African states and regional institutions. The majority of African countries depend to a large (sometimes decisive) extent on ODA. Some 55 % of all external resource flows to sub-Saharan Africa consists of ODA. In certain economies well over 20 % of economic capacity and more than half of public budgets are dependent on ODA. Domestic efforts to mobilize resources are often underdeveloped.

The scale of external support also influences the political structures and substance of the countries assisted. External support is significant and therefore has an impact on the governance structures of African countries, but not always in the form intended. The volume of ODA inflows may tend to create dysfunctional incentives in sub-Saharan Africa and encourage rentier-state structures. Governance structures are frequently weakened by external actors in this way.

In these circumstances, the following points are important:

- The legitimacy and functions of political mechanisms in the partner country should be strengthened; this is true, for example, of the options open to parliaments to influence budgets.
- If aid is provided through national structures in the partner country, parallel or substitute structures can be avoided.

- Accountability mechanisms should be geared to local or national processes, not to the donor.
- There is also a need on the donor's side for decentralized structures which can become involved in national systems and their local cycles (such as the partner country's budgetary rhythm) rather than passing on its own system requirements to developing countries.



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Further reading

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