

**REVIEW ESSAY**  
**AFRICA'S "DEVELOPMENT CRISIS:"**  
**A FAILURE OF ECONOMICS OR IDEOLOGY?**

By Andrew F. Clark\*

McCarthy, Stephen. *Africa: The Challenge of Transformation*. London and New York: I.B. Tauris & Co., 1994.

Sindima, Harvey J. *Africa's Agenda: The Legacy of Liberalism and Colonialism in the Crisis of African Values*. Westport, CT: Greenwood Press, 1995.

Anyone with even a passing interest in Third World studies cannot help but be aware of Africa's seemingly perpetual "state of crisis," usually portrayed in terms of the continent's failure to keep pace economically with other parts of the so-called developing world. Some commentators have even suggested that most countries in Africa constitute a "fourth world," lacking even the ability to feed their own populations and, rather than gaining ground, rapidly falling behind other Third World regions. The litany of Africa's economic and political problems is well-known and well-rehearsed by the experts and the media. Corrupt and dictatorial governments, often kept in power by outside donors; military regimes more interested in acquiring the latest weaponry than in economic and social development; repressive states concerned with preserving their own power; and governments with no legitimacy or political will to change existing harmful political and economic structures are often cited as some of the indigenous political factors contributing to Africa's poverty. External political elements, such as ideologically motivated aid programs, outside support for rebel movements and "friendly" authoritarian regime, and unfair trading practices, including poor terms of trade on the international market, are criticized as delaying if not actually undoing development efforts. Literacy, lack of education, especially for girls and women, little general respect for women and their contribution to the economy, resistance to structural change and altering traditional ways of doing things, urban bias in development plans, ethnic

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rivalries, overpopulation, and other internal social factors preventing African economic progress are duly noted. Finally, declining environmental conditions such as soil erosion, increasing decertification, overgrazing, tree cutting, and droughts likewise hinder development success. The odds are seemingly overwhelming against any sort of economic development for most of the African continent. Africa's current crisis seems to be an inevitable and perhaps permanent state of affairs.

In spite of such apparent defeat, the development experts must be able to generate some hope and to provide some cause for optimism to keep aid money flowing, and often to keep their jobs. The experts generally have their small handful of "success stories" that are praised as having found a way to overcome these obstacles. Every region of the Third World has its familiar models, and sub-Saharan Africa is no exception. Botswana in southern Africa and Ghana in West Africa are current favorites. Their political and economic progress is often accepted uncritically and at face value. Zimbabwe has had its share of partisans but also detractors, both of whom have usually been motivated more by ideology than by actual economic indicators. Cote d'Ivoire in West Africa has had an interesting career as both a story of success to some and dismal failure to others, often simultaneously. Post-apartheid South Africa occupies a position all its own, and it cannot be realistically compared to any other country. Some commentators do suggest hopefully that the southern African region and perhaps the entire continent will develop more rapidly with the end of minority rule in the continent's economic, industrial powerhouse. In a few years, other success stories will undoubtedly emerge to continue to fuel cautious optimism.

At the current time, no country in sub-Saharan Africa, nor any external aid agency or think tank, has found a lasting solution or model that can usefully be applied to all sub-Saharan countries. Perhaps this is an unreasonably high expectation. There are common problems, obviously, but they interact in different ways in different places and some are more pronounced and intractable than others. Rather than seeking general models for such a vast and diverse region, scholars could make a greater contribution to development efforts by analyzing individual countries or at least regional groupings in a search for possible solutions. Lumping all of Africa together as one undifferentiated mass of negative circumstances heralds back to the nineteenth century notion of Africa as the "dark continent" with no history or civilization and hardy part of the known world. Every country in sub-Saharan Africa faces its own problems and must seek its own path to improving the living conditions of its people.

The two books under review bear comparison on a broad level as they cover some common ground but they also require separate treatment on more

specific points because of their vastly divergent approaches. Both lump all of sub-Saharan Africa together as a single unit of analysis and crisscross back and forth across the continent. This is a particular problem with Stephen McCarthy's book which tries to cover too much political and economic ground. Regional experts will be disappointed in his treatment of particular areas and thus will have serious questions about his treatment of other regions. McCarthy's book is the more conventional primer on the causes and impacts of "underdevelopment" in sub-Saharan Africa, focusing on economic, political and social issues. Sindima's book focuses on the imposition of Western notions of liberalism on African thoughts and values which, the author argues, resulted in a serious identity crisis for Africans. While McCarthy focuses on economic underdevelopment, Sindima concentrates on what might be called "value underdevelopment." Both agree that Africa is in a state of crisis and attempt to explain the essential causes from their diverse standpoints.

The two authors endorse the much debated and recently largely discarded theory of dependency and underdevelopment without making a substantial contribution to the literature. Neither makes a convincing argument in favor of embracing dependency theory for Africa. Both are based on secondary rather than primary sources. In neither case is the intended audience clear. Sindima's work is the more academic, specialized tome and yet it is more of a general literature review and enthusiastic endorsement of Christianity than an objective monograph. McCarthy's book is clearly tailored for a general audience and yet, amidst some sweeping generalizations and undocumented claims, it often gets bogged down in undigested figures, charts and meaningless comparisons. Despite a rightfully caution note about using statistics on Africa, McCarthy cites them liberally throughout his book without qualifications or much scrutiny. Neither book breaks particularly new ground or proposes creative solutions to the crisis they both agree currently exists. Neither book is suitable for undergraduates in a university course and neither will satisfy scholars in development studies. A clearer appreciation for their intended reading public would have given the books a much-needed clearer focus and consistent tone.

Harvey Sindima begins with a conventional and grossly oversimplified historical overview of the African past which might have been better left out, given the availability of works on this topic. The author refers to his first chapter as "Africa's biography," and yet it mainly consists of a tirade against European contacts with Africa, especially colonialism and its legacy. Africans are portrayed as victims, more acted upon than acting, and being betrayed by crafty Europeans intent on subjugating Africans economically and, more importantly, ideologically. Traditional Africa is viewed as an idyllic paradise of equality and strong values which were corrupted by the arrival of inherently evil Europeans,

causing profound intellectual dislocation, personal alienation and the rupture of sublimely good African thought and identity. By making a caricature of both Europeans and Africans, the author considerably undermines the remainder of his study which purports to be an objective dissection of Western liberal thought and values clashing with traditional African socialist precepts. Not surprisingly, Western philosophers are harshly criticized while African thinkers are uniformly praised. The triumph of Western over African values is seen as a cause of Africa's numerous problems.

Sindima examines several so-called liberal Western philosophers, such as J. Locke, J.S. Mill, D. Hume, I. Kant and G. Hegel, without shedding new light on their works. He essentially criticizes them for removing God from the center of human affairs, and for stressing individualism rather than communalism. These philosophers laid the groundwork for materialistic Western thought which missionaries, colonial administrators, and aid experts brought with them when they encountered Africa. Sindima then analyzes the ideas of L. Senghor, J. Nyerere, K. Nkrumah, and K. Kaunda as proponents of "African socialism." Obviously, the author endorses these African thinkers and their rather abstract and not very convincingly explained ideas. Sindima does not consider whether these African leaders implemented their philosophies or why the countries they led failed to overcome the values crisis the author claims is so prevalent in Africa. He is only interested in setting up the clash between the West and Africa which Africa loses, thus causing the current crisis.

Having set up this false dichotomy and innately assuming there can be no compromise between the two sets of values, Sindima is now in a position to propose a solution. Despite its role in displacing Africans from their traditional identity, Christianity is seen as the answer to Africa's ideological crisis of values. He does not resolve the inherent contradiction in this conclusion, leaving the reader dissatisfied. One must accept Sindima's view that Christianity itself has become corrupted and in its "pure" form (whatever that is) it would help resolve the current crisis in Africa. The conclusion is unconvincing and weak. It is also striking that in a book dealing with African philosophies and religions, a total of two sentences are devoted to Islam. The book is full of jargon, long diversions from its thesis, and extended discourses that do not relate to the book's arguments. Often the author seems to be engaged in pure literary criticism for its own sake, showing off his knowledge of Western philosophers. Finally, the book is plagued by poor proofreading with numerous and very disruptive typos, missing words, etc. Overall, it is an unsatisfactory book that cannot be recommended very highly.

Stephen McCarthy also begins his book with a conventional history section, focusing on Europe's interactions with Africa, rather than on African-

centered history. It is unclear why he feels compelled to retell the familiar stories available in any general work on African history while offering no new insights or interpretations. In stark contrast to Sindima, who lashes out at colonial rulers for exploiting Africans and at Christian missionaries for betraying their faith and mission, McCarthy offers a rather rosy view of European colonial rule and, interestingly, of missionary activity in particular. The missionaries are praised for apparently introducing literacy and education to sub-Saharan Africa. This denies the role of Islam in much of eastern and Western Africa, and ignores the presence of precolonial written African languages and traditional forms of education. But McCarthy is determined to portray the Christian missionaries as early aid workers and colorful officials as their development partners. This is a tough sell, given the colonial record in Africa, and McCarthy weakens his entire book by this endorsement of European colonial rule as beneficial for Africa and Africans without any substantiation or documentation.

McCarthy then moves on to discussing recent political and economic developments in Africa. Again, the author offers no documentation or support for his observations. He offers a descriptive account with very little in-depth analysis. This type of broad-stroke, descriptive overview, characteristic of the entire book, with the usual facts and figures and rays of optimism amidst the gloom, is overly familiar to anyone in development studies. He discusses the various problems faced by African countries rather superficially, and conventionally, usually giving one example to make a point. Since independence, Africa has had its share of political and economic setbacks, and McCarthy singles out many of these various obstacles. However, he has to explain how these factors come together and exacerbate one another. While correctly stressing that no single problem is the cause of Africa's apparent economic crisis, McCarthy never investigates how the different causes interact. His analysis of each problem one by one, which is often how governments and aid agencies proceed, is perhaps one reason so little progress has been made. A holistic approach to development is required as is a local focus. This book lacks such an approach and such a clear focus.

McCarthy then proposes that the proper utilization of human resources at the grass-roots level is the solution without proposing how that utilization is to take place. It is hard to argue against mass education for all and the grass-roots mobilization of the people. The problem is how to implement such a program in a desperately poor country run by a military regime or dictator. McCarthy embraces the idea of a "civil society" as the locus for change and development, yet he never discusses precisely what he means by the term or, more importantly, how to create such a society. The book's vagueness is particularly acute here. Clearly, anyone in development would agree that people are a

country's or region's most valuable resource. The obstacle is organizing people and harnessing that human energy for the common good. The author does not offer any suggestions on such practical matters. He is content to conclude on a fairly abstract note, extolling the virtues of human resources in development efforts. Like Sindima's work, this book promises more than it delivers and is ultimately unsatisfying. This book takes conventional wisdom at face value, never provides any creative solutions, and is fairly pedestrian. There are no notes or documentation which raises serious questions about the figures cited in the book. The bibliography is primarily standard books from the 1970s and 1980s. It would have benefitted greatly from some clearly focused recent articles on particular development issues.

These two books do raise questions on a critically important subject. Why has Africa fallen behind other regions of the Third World in terms of economic developments? What are the causes and what are the solutions? What new approaches are required since clearly the old ways have failed? Unfortunately, these two books make only a mediocre contribution to the literature. It remains for future studies to analyze adequately these issues and perhaps propose some viable and concrete solutions.