eAfrica

The electronic journal of governance and innovation

Highlights:

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Building Blocs: Are Regions the Answer?

EVERY grouping of people can fall prey to 'group think.' Ideas become dominant and conventional thinking transforms into orthodoxy – or worse, a menu of politically correct propositions that cannot be challenged.

The larger the organisation, the more difficult orthodoxy is to shake, and once entrenched, it has more damaging consequences: Unworkable policies are sustained by inertia and fear that those who criticise will incur wrath.

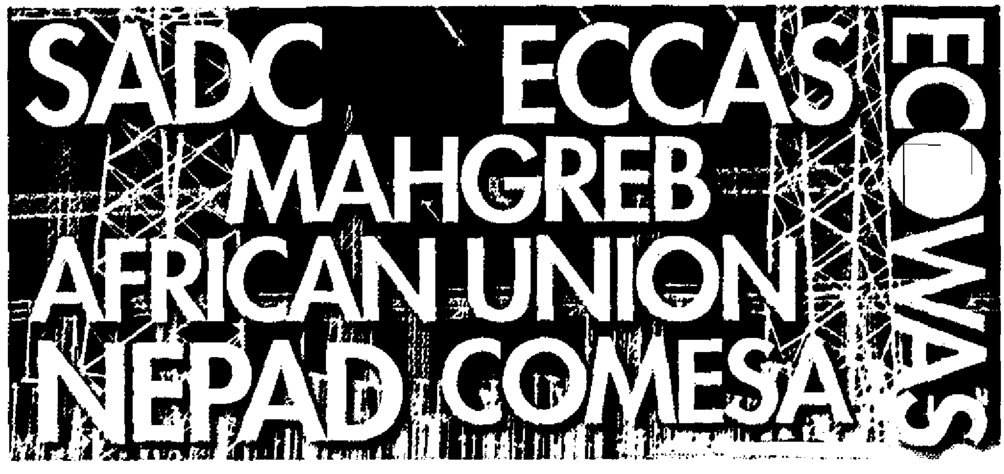
In multinational bodies, the stew of conventional thinking, orthodoxy and political correctness is doubly reinforced by the norms of diplomatic politeness. Within a free and stable nation, people feel free to criticise the police or judiciary for non-performance, but when it comes to multinational bodies, complaints are driven underground, allowing failures to go unchallenged for years.

Africa's regional economic communities (RECs) and the New Partnership for Africa's Development are in the grip of such an orthodoxy and desperately need to be reformed. Africa has 14 different regional economic entities, including the five main but substantially overlapping blocs. Most of these do little more than keep conference halls warm in fine hotels.

Africa has embraced the questionable notion that everything should be resolved through regional solutions. Nepad appointed the RECs as vehicles for implementation. These structures pretend to develop regional health strategies, education plans, science policies and other endeavours that they have no real hope of executing. They pretend to be development agencies when they fundamentally can do no more than convene meetings and facilitate.

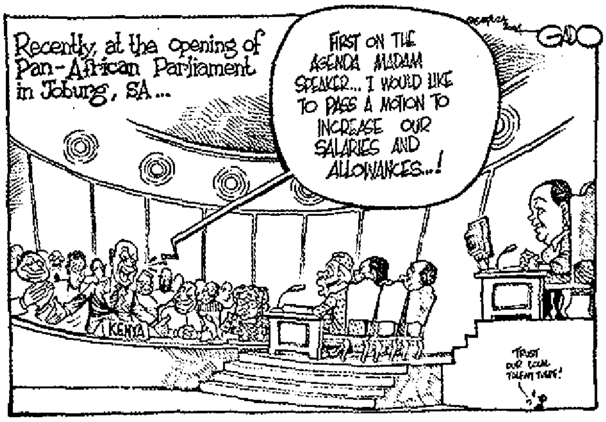
One thing RECs can do is organise free trade areas or customs unions. But there is ample evidence that rushing into free trade has benefitted more competitive economies like South Africa while deeply damaging less advanced places such as Zambia.

This issue of *eAfrica* examines some of the orthodoxies around regionalisation and trade in Africa. It is time to break the multi-layered bureaucratic logjam and find more realistic goals and methods for development on the continent.



Verbatim

"African leaders still blame colonialism for all the continent's ills, most of which stem from avarice by the ruling class and its cronies – and total disregard for good governance. So many years after independence, African leaders still expect the world … to clean their mess. The Darfur crisis is a case in point." – *The Reporter*, a Botswana newspaper, delivering a report card on governance, arguing that African leaders are trapped in a 'victim mentality.'



"When we reviewed the evidence compiled by our team, along with other information available to the State Department, we concluded that genocide has been committed in Darfur and that the government of Sudan and the Janjaweed [rebels] bear responsibility – genocide may still be occurring." – Colin Powell, US Secretary of State, on the humanitarian crisis in western Sudan, in remarks to the US Senate Foreign Relations Committee in September 2004.

"Powell is making a mistake." – Najeeb Abdel Wahab, Sudan's deputy foreign minister, who is leading the government delegation in peace talks in Abuja, Nigeria.

"The Security Council … decides to remain seized of the matter." – UN Security Council Resolution 1564, adopted 18 September 2004, indicating that the body 'shall consider' sanctions if the Sudanese government fails to takes steps outlined in previous UN resolutions to end the Darfur crisis.

"Threatening to impose sanctions gives wrong and negative signals which could be harmful." – Mutrif Siddiq, Sudan's foreign ministry undersecretary, condemning 1564.

"It is not a legal document for Zimbabwe. It is just a political document or a 'road map' to democracy. After all, we are in the leading pack in SADC in terms of democracy." – Patrick Chinamasa, Zimbabwe minister of justice, on the new protocols on elections adopted by the Southern African Development Community heads of state in August.

"We cannot recognise absolute ownership of our resources. That must be corrected." – Robert Mugabe, president of Zimbabwe, saying his government would claim half ownership of the country's privately owned mines.

"Whole irrigation systems are down, and farm equipment is at a standstill or in a shocking state of repair." – John Worsely-Worswick, a Zimbabwean farmer, on the degree to which farms have decayed since the government began forcibly acquiring land in 2000.

"They can spray pesticides as much as they like. Allah brought the locusts and only Allah can take them away. Just be grateful they don't eat people." – A goat herder in Mauritania, which is in the grip of its worst locust plague on record.

"Our country will hold its next general elections in 2009, which will also mark the moment when Thabo Mbeki will have to relinquish his position as president of the republic, as stipulated by our national constitution." – Thabo Mbeki, president of South Africa, allaying concerns that he might seek a third term.

"Circumcision is part of a people's culture and telling them that it is primitive only makes them aggressively defend it and continue practising it." – Jesse Mugambi, a professor at the University of Nairobi, on efforts to eradicate female genital mutilation.

"If dead women are not even counted, then it seems they do not count. We have an invisible epidemic." – Joy Phumaphi of the World Health Organisation, on statistics indicating that women in developing nations have a 1 in 16 chance of dying in childbirth, compared to 1 in 2,800 in developed countries.

"Starving people are reduced to objects. They are unable to take an independent stance, and are likely to kneel before whoever gives them alms." – Lourenco do Rosario, vice-chancellor of Mozambique's Higher Polytechnic Institute, arguing ahead of the country's upcoming presidential elections that eliminating hunger is requisite to building democracy.

"There can be no Mediterranean Sea without Libya." – Abdurrahman Mohamed Shalghem, Libyan foreign minister, in comments advocating a permanent seat for his country on the UN Security Council.

Africa and the US Vote

NOT TOP PRIORITY: *In the race for the White House, Africa has not featured prominently for the two candidates John Kerry, left and George W Bush, right.*

BY THE time the next issue of *eAfrica* comes out, there will be a certain degree of clarity about what the next four years might hold for the United States and, most urgently, the Middle East. American voters cast ballots on 2 November in an election that, four weeks before the poll, was a dead heat. Not since 1968 has foreign policy factored so prominently in the race for the White House. With the war in Iraq deepening, President George Bush and Senator John Kerry have sparred more over what to do in Baghdad than on any other issue.

What the election's outcome might mean for Africa is less certain. In the first face-to-face debate between the incumbent and his challenger on 30 September, only one question dealt with issues directly relevant to this continent – the crisis in Darfur, Sudan – and little of substance distinguished the positions of the candidates. Both agreed there was genocide; neither would commit US troops to stop it.

Both candidates agree on the need for an extension of the African Growth and Opportunity Act and Kerry has pledged to double the US spend on HIV/Aids assistance to Africa.

> **'Bush has had little appetite or economic or strategic incentive to intervene in the state affairs of African countries'**

Bush is a given. His policy towards Africa has been predicated on three pillars: security, stability and business. On paper his record in Africa is impressive for an American president. He met with 25 African heads of state in the first two years of his presidency, has whistle-stopped his way across the continent and, through the Millennium Challenge Account, tied new economic and political conditionalities to aid.

Whereas the administration has not dropped the word 'development' from its Africa lexicon, primary consideration has been given to supporting and strengthening African governments with whom it can do political, security and economic business. Libya notwithstanding, the US under Bush has had little appetite or economic or strategic incentive to intervene in the state affairs of African countries. This was publicly demonstrated when in 2003, Bush deferred to South African President Thabo Mbeki in dealing with Zimbabwe.

By contrast, Kerry has committed himself to repairing historic international alliances damaged by the Iraq war and to work patiently with and through the UN. This is potentially good for Africa, particularly as the momentum for UN Security Council reform gathers. A long-time member of the Senate Foreign Relations Committee, Kerry is more internationalist in outlook and has more foreign policy experience than Bush. He also brings a sentimental connection to Africa that might manifest itself in new humanitarian initiatives: Kerry's wife, Theresa Heinz-Kerry, was born in Mozambique and educated at the University of the Witwatersrand in South Africa. Furthermore, as Democratic Presidential candidate, Kerry will draw the overwhelming support of African-Americans, among whom concern for African causes is important.

Two issues will influence US engagement in Africa in the next four years more than any others: deployment and deficits. Bush has committed 90% of US military capability to Afghanistan and Iraq, significantly limiting the resources Washington has available for intervention elsewhere. He has also grown huge deficits, which will loom large over spending considerations in the years ahead. This second factor may constrain Bush more than Kerry, since new presidencies are often given more latitude to pursue their agendas, whereas presidents often find the bills from their first term coming due in the second.

Of primary political importance for Africa will be the status and complexion of the US State Department under either administration. A moderate among neo-conservatives, current Secretary of State Colin Powell was eclipsed by the collective might of Defence Secretary Donald Rumsfeld, Deputy Defence Secretary Paul Wolfowitz and Vice President Dick Cheney over Iraq and the UN. Powell has already indicated he won't be available to serve in a second Bush administration. That raises the prospect that Condoleeza Rice, Bush's more conservative national security adviser, could become Washington's chief diplomat. Multilateralism will likely fare no better in a second Bush term than it did in the first.

Kerry, on the other hand, has already signalled his intention to, as he puts it, 'restore' Washington's credibility among its allies and in the UN. Already knowing Bush, Africa's key question for Kerry in the age of Nepad, the continent's home-spun recovery programme, is: 'How will you partner us'. – **Tim Hughes and Kurt Shillinger**

SPECIAL FEATURE

Regionalisation and Africa's Search for Economic Renewal

The continent's architects pursue development through integration, but lessons from Europe and Asia suggest the approach is mistaken

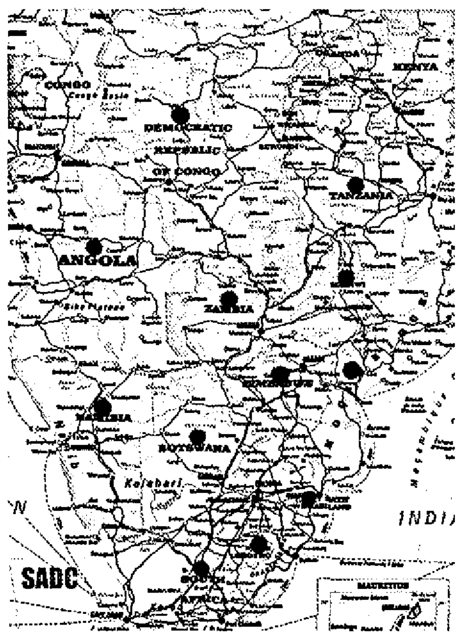
IN 1963, in the same year that Kenya gained its independence from Britain, the newly emerging states of Africa formed the Organisation of African Unity. Although the body's purpose was to help liberate those countries that remained under colonial or apartheid rule, there were those who hoped the OAU would pursue a more ambitious goal of creating a United States of Africa.

Three years ago, with the continent fully self-governed, the OAU was transformed into the African Union, and the model for regional integration has shifted from the United States to the European Union. This is telling: It suggests that regional integration in Africa is not a home-grown product, but an import of efforts by other peoples operating in very different political and economic circumstances. As with all imitations, regional integration in Africa is, consequently, a superficial movement that is unlikely to achieve many of its architects' stated objectives.

Unity and security in Europe

The experience of Europe and East Asia show that while regionalisation provides a framework for peace and security among neighbouring states, development hinges on healthy national economies.

European integration, a process that is far from complete, was a result of the recognition by Europe's leaders that if their countries did not do something to modify the founding principles of sovereign rights of states, Europe, sooner or later, would tear itself apart. In less than three generations between 1870 and 1945,



two of Europe's most powerful states, France and Germany, had fought three wars, each more devastating than the one it followed. The advent of nuclear weapons brought the message home to Europeans that urgent steps needed to be taken to prevent another war among European powers. Regional integration was seen as an inevitable road.

Western Europe, especially after World War II, was faced with another threat – that of being engulfed by Soviet as well as home-grown communist movements. Emerging from the war, Europe did not have the power to defend itself, so it turned to the US both for military protection and assistance to regenerate its shattered economy.

The Americans were glad to help, as they felt that Soviet expansionism – especially into the industrial heartlands of Europe – threatened their interests as well. To the Americans the many countries of Europe that were forever at one another's throats could not in themselves be strong partners in containing the Soviet Union. Washington therefore demanded that Europe pursue regional integration as a condition for providing it with the nuclear umbrella.

But even before regional integration initiatives got under way, Europe had developed many entrenched states that had been in existence for a number of centuries. These states enjoyed political, social, and economic control throughout their entire territories. Also, by the mid-20th century, European societies had achieved similar levels of economic development and their populations enjoyed similar standards of living. There were exceptions, of course, such as the Iberian Peninsula and parts of southern Europe, which lagged behind, but these could be pulled up by the rest of Europe at a minimum cost through all sorts of targeted subsidies.

This industrial uniformity made it possible for Europe to implement trade liberalisation measures – the cornerstone of regional integration – with relatively little fear or likelihood that some countries' economies and industries would be swamped by those of their more developed partners.

African conditions

As Africa aspires toward greater regional and continental integration, such conditions, by and large, do not exist. African states as we know them today were not created by Africans. With a few exceptions, such as Egypt, Ethiopia, Liberia and South Africa, African states were created

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by European imperial powers at the Berlin Conference of 1884-85. Nor did Africans gain control of these foreign-created states until recently.

African states therefore face a number of important obstacles to integration. They suffer from weak allegiance by their citizens; this explains why African countries during the past 30 years have been centres of many conflicts – civil wars, inter-tribal wars, violent communal conflicts and pogroms, wars of secession, and more recently in the Great Lakes region, attempts at genocide. These great conflicts have been accompanied by vast population movements in and out of different national boundaries. Africa, not surprisingly, is host to the largest number of refugees and internally displaced persons in the world.

'African elites perceive sovereignty as a valuable economic asset because it enables them to enrich themselves'

In addition, because these states have only recently been self-governed, African elites perceive sovereignty as a valuable economic asset that enables them to enrich themselves. This exacerbates the weak allegiance of the populace towards these states as the process of elite self-enrichment undermines the ability of these states to deliver services to the general population.

Trade: A faltering engine

An important aspect of conflicts in Africa, unlike conflicts of the past in Europe, has been the almost complete absence of interstate wars. As we saw in the case of Europe, fear of devastating interstate wars was one of the driving forces behind European regional integration. This is not the case in Africa. During the past 50 years there have been only three interstate wars among African countries: between Tanzania and Uganda in the 1970s; between Ethiopia and Eritrea in the 1990s; and among several states and non-state belligerents in the Democratic Republic of Congo.

Given these fundamental differences in the experiences of Europe and Africa with state formation and development, it can be argued that regional trade integration cannot, at this stage in Africa's history, be a major driving force behind Africa's corporate co-operation any more than regional trade integration was a driving force behind corporate co-operation either in Asia or Latin America. One of the oldest regional organisations in Asia – the Association of South East Asian Nations – was inspired more by the common fear of communism than by shared development objectives.

European countries, big and small, achieved a high level of industrialisation and economic development long before regional trade integration was high on their agenda. It was political and security issues, rather than economic development issues, that drove European integration.

In contrast, there are no political or security issues behind African regional integration. Attempts to introduce these issues into the continent's various regional economic communities – as happened with the Southern African Development Community following the military invasion of the DRC by Rwanda and Uganda – have been destabilising: SADC nearly collapsed as a result.

'It was political and security issues, rather than economic development issues, that drove European integration'

Instead, African countries have engaged in attempts at regional integration for economic reasons. The rationale is simple enough. Most African countries are small, poor, and under-developed, and therefore lack domestic markets. To compensate for these shortcomings, the argument goes, it is necessary that African countries to eliminate barriers to trade among themselves. In doing so, they will be able to develop enterprises with the requisite economies of scale to be competitive in the world markets.

But the experience of Europe shows that Africa's approach is flawed. Small European countries – Sweden, Switzerland, the Netherlands, Denmark, and Belgium – developed world-class companies long before European integration became reality. Consider a few examples: Electrolux, Volvo, Saab, Nestle, Philips, Unilever, Royal Dutch/Shell, Carling, Interbrew, Heineken, Ericsson, Nokia, and Norsk Hydro.

The importance of policy

The success of such companies demonstrates that it is not the size of a country's population that determines whether a country industrialises or not. It is, rather, a country's skills pool and its control over its economic and social policies that determines whether a country industrialises. This is the critical factor in determining whether a country can develop successfully, and it is seldom the case that African countries possess such control. In most instances, political, social and economic policies in Africa are highly influenced or directly controlled by foreign actors pursuing their own interests on the continent. The following are amongst the most important non-African actors that determine African policies.

Foreign multinational corporations. The most striking examples today are the oil companies that run massive extractive industries in Africa and have almost no linkages to the local economies wherein they operate other than a trickle of royalties that pays for imports to finance elite consumption and fuels corruption and repression.

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Multilateral financial institutions. Through various forms of conditionality these organisations, like the World Bank and the International Monetary Fund, dictate the economic and social policies of African states.

Foreign state and non-state actors. Because of their role as donors and/or creditors these have extensive leverage over the social and economic policies of African states.

Another important factor that determines whether a country develops or not is its ability to generate a meaningful economic surplus and its ability to direct a large part of that surplus to productive investment rather than merely to private consumption. The lion's share of sub-Saharan Africa's surplus leaves the continent as debt repayment, expatriation of profit, capital flight, etc. One of the most disgraceful but underreported scandals in Africa is the extent to which African elites export capital from the continent. According to the UN, nearly 40% of Africa's private wealth is kept outside Africa compared with only 3% of South Asia's private wealth and 6% of East Asia's. The small economic surplus that remains, as we have seen, goes to finance elite consumption and to pay for the running of the largely unaccountable state.

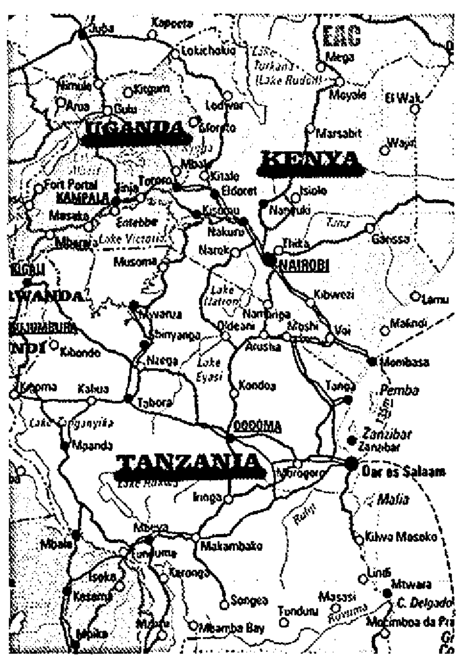
These are some of the factors that explain the inability of sub-Saharan African states to train and retain the skilled people they need in order to embark on a sustainable industrialisation drive comparable to that of, for example, South and East Asia.

Aid hasn't worked

During the last 40 years or so, vast amounts of time and money have been expended on promoting regional integration in Africa, largely to no avail. The pathetically low trade flows among African countries – excluding South Africa – have largely remained unchanged from what they were a generation ago, despite all the energy that has been devoted to regional cooperation and integration over the years.

Drawing from the experience of Western Europe in the past, and what is happening in Asia now, it would appear that two engines drive development and industrialisation: one, policies that promote capital accumulation and investment in social capital – healthcare, education, public housing and social peace; and two, competitiveness in world markets.

These are the factors that explain why small countries in Europe were able to achieve the same level of development as big countries long before European integration appeared on the horizon after World War II.



A similar message applies to Africa. It is the developmental domestic policies and practices of individual countries that will drive Africa's development in the first instance, not how neighbours cooperate. What happens between neighbours is important mainly for reasons of political stability, but what will drive African economic development is the quality of relations between individual African countries and the world market. (African markets are of course subsumed in world markets.) Similarly, it was the ability of small countries in Europe to compete in world markets that made it possible for them to achieve the same levels of development as those of large countries which had the advantage of bigger domestic markets.

Two that work

There are, of course, some exceptions in Africa to these general observations. These are most prominently South Africa and Mauritius. These two countries are developing industrial economies that if sustained over a significant period could become important drivers for African development not because of regional integration but because of their emerging role as foreign investors in the rest of Africa.

Mauritius, in fact, illustrates the relative insignificance of regional integration in the development process. At independence in the 1960s, Mauritius was a typical African country – small land mass, small population, single-crop economy (sugar) accounting for most of export earnings and formal employment, multiethnic society, and low per capita income. Today Mauritius is, next to South Africa, the richest non-oil producing country in Africa. It boasts an economy that is almost as diversified as that of South Africa and per capita income that now surpasses South Africa's.

This phenomenal achievement was not driven by regional integration, but by competitively priced, high-quality clothing and textile exports to world markets. Mauritius, like South Africa, has emerged as an important foreign investor in other African countries.

As these two countries show, the emphasis in Africa should be placed on strengthening national economies and democratic practice first. Only then will successful regionalisation follow. – **Moeletsi Mbeki, SAIIA deputy chairman**

SPECIAL FEATURE

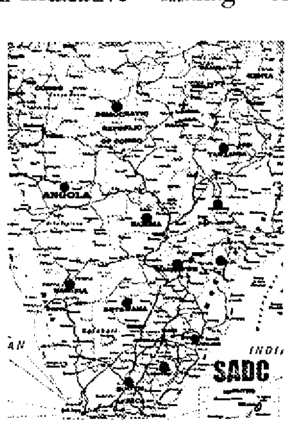
What the Blocs Are Missing

Transparency, accountability, access to information and realistic management are essential

THROUGH the New Partnership for Africa's Development, peer review and its own declarations and standards, the African Union has embraced the principle that transparency, accountability and free speech are necessary to the proper functioning of national governments. If these things are essential to keep national governments effective, why do they not apply them to the design of multinational bodies?

Africa has 14 regional economic communities. Many overlap **(See story, page 10)**. Several do little more than convene meetings. Others are moribund. All have declared grand ambitions. They variously aspire to forge free or preferential trade areas, create common currencies, harmonise policies and boost development. None, however, have the staff, funds, political commitment or organisational design needed to achieve their declared objectives.

The Southern African Development Community is illustrative. Its goals sound remarkably like the objectives of Nepad. The SADC Regional Indicative Strategic Development Plan (RISDP) lists 12 'priority' sectors, including gender equality, HIV, poverty eradication, science and technology, information and communication technology, the environment, private sector, trade, infrastructure, food security, human development and improved statistical systems.



To secure buy-in from members, SADC assigned responsibility for these to 19 'sector coordinating units' or SCUs. Dissatisfaction with performance led to restructuring starting in 1999. The SCUs were collapsed into four directorates located in SADC headquarters.

Written by a consultant, the RISDP is supposed to be SADC's guiding document. Its strategy sections are replete with words like 'encourage', 'promote', 'cultivate', 'strengthen', 'increase', 'coordinate', and 'facilitate'. Nearly three centimetres thick, however, the RISDP fails to clarify who exactly would do this promotion, encouragement and cultivation. The document simply tasks states with implementing most of the action items.

Working as a bloc, nations can get together to remove barriers to trade, collaborate on cross-border police issues, and establish common transport and trade insurance policies so companies moving goods across borders need not have a different insurance policy for every territory through which they pass. Such policy reforms are basically diplomatic in character and add value because in certain areas nations benefit when neighbours follow common rules.

SADC implies but does not quite openly declare that it is involved in project management. The RISDP is candid in noting that it is 'not a prescriptive or a command-type of plan.' Rather, it employs the faddish tool of setting targets and asserts, somewhat confusingly, that it 'sets up a logical and coherent implementation programme.'

If the UN is already engaged in extensive monitoring of poverty and development, why is SADC needed to repeat the same exercise? The operative rule for any regional body ought to be that if it cannot articulate exactly who will accomplish a task and how, it ought to conclude that the goal in question is not one appropriate for a regional body.

Why do bodies persist in pretending they will do far more than they reasonably can? One possible explanation is that heads of government find regional organisations useful in demonstrating goodwill toward neighbours. Participating in a regional body without demanding meaningful reform avoids antagonising other countries whose support may be needed in more sensitive matters. If this is so, it suggests that national leaders do not really want assertive regional bodies trying to budge stalled infrastructure projects. By its very nature, multilateralism is propelled by the lowest common denominator. Strong, decisive action more often than not undermines consensus-building.

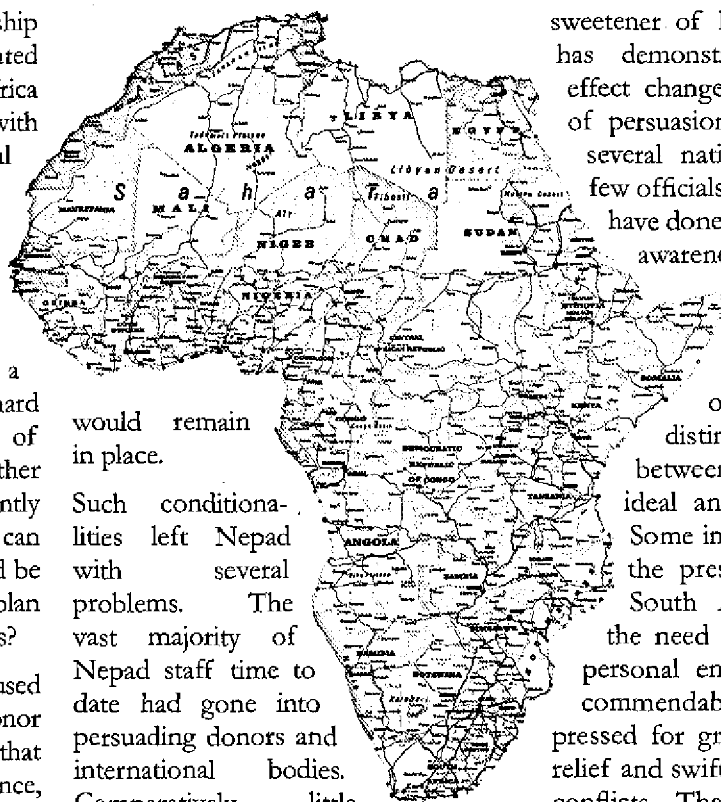
Regional bodies are not subject to the same public scrutiny directed at national governments. Questioned about the status of SADC funding (what proportions of the budget originate from donors and members), the secretariat said that such information was confidential and only the executive secretary could release it. A search on SADC's website revealed that its total budget is $16 million, but no specific budgetary breakdown is available. Operational information on the status and exact nature of SADC programmes, which would enable a SADC citizen or donor to determine if the body was delivering value for money, is extremely hard to find and seldom proffered.

It goes without saying that entities shielded from public scrutiny are prone to inefficiency, waste and corruption. The only way to get regional bodies to stop producing woolly plans and focus on delivery is to demand they follow the same principles of transparency, accountability and public access to information that the AU requires effective national governments to follow. – **Richard Meissner and Ross Herbert**

SPECIAL FEATURE

Time to Rethink Nepad

A talk shop that fails to drive implementation won't hold the world's attention much longer



FOR five years, the New Partnership for Africa's Development, first floated in 1999 as the Millennium Africa Recovery Plan, has hummed along with little scrutiny of its organisational structure and methods. Its goals, laudable as they are, engendered much hope and international goodwill.

But Nepad's promises remain largely unfulfilled, and half a decade on, it is time to ask some hard questions: If the present pace of Nepad activity continues for another five years, will Africa be significantly better off? Which Nepad activities can make real impact and which should be dropped? What is Nepad's actual plan for effecting change where it counts?

From the outset, Nepad has focused on expanding partnership with donor nations. Its central premise was that Africa would clean up its governance, fight corruption, re-energise development and end conflict. In exchange, the developed world would expand the flow of aid, debt relief and access to its markets.

That premise was put to the test in the run-up to the G8 summit in Kananaskis, Canada, in 2002, where Nepad, in its current formulation, was due to be formally presented. Months of negotiations preceded the summit. Although a few G8 members were willing to boost aid on the promises contained in Nepad, the overall message from Kananaskis – despite all the supportive rhetoric – was simple: Africa must deliver on its governance pledges *before* the status quo will change significantly. Only token funds would flow to the Nepad Secretariat. In all other respects, existing aid systems would remain in place.

Such conditionalities left Nepad with several problems. The vast majority of Nepad staff time to date had gone into persuading donors and international bodies. Comparatively little went into examining how Nepad would achieve its other goal: changing the behaviour and direction of African government policy.

The plan's unstated operational theory was that countries would be invited to conferences that would develop continental plans and, as a consequence of this participation, return home and change national policy. It is clear that a few people attending a conference do not have the clout to change the direction of the ship of state. Nepad needs a far more robust form of engagement at national level.

At Kananaskis, Nepad's message was at least plausible: Africa will embark on reforms if given the funds from outside. But the summit turned that approach on its head, and without the sweetener of larger aid flows, Nepad has demonstrated little power to effect change beyond the soft tools of persuasion and facilitation. While several nations have designated a few officials to work on Nepad, they have done little beyond conducting awareness-raising conferences and drafting project wish-lists.

In assessing its success or failure, an important distinction must be made between Nepad as a reformist ideal and Nepad as an entity. Some individual leaders, notably the presidents of Nigeria and South Africa, have embraced the need for reform and poured personal energy into a variety of commendable causes. Both have pressed for greater trade access, debt relief and swifter action to end African conflicts. They have embraced the ideals of Nepad and helped secure the ratification of the African Peace and Security Council, which has commendably asserted itself on the genocide in Darfur, Sudan.

While credit should go to these reformist individuals and the ideals that drive them, the Nepad Secretariat has played little role in these efforts.

Having a secretariat is necessary to maintain the notion that Nepad has tangible substance. That notion, in turn, keeps alive the international conversation about where and how Africa should reform. The value of Nepad as a forum for discussion among African leaders on matters of policy and previously forbidden topics of internal governance should not be underestimated. But there are signs that

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the international community's patience is starting to wane; a secretariat that does little more than engender conversation isn't likely to attract ongoing external funding.

In the wake of the Kananaskis summit, Nepad set about creating various broad sectoral strategies in areas such as health, education, and agriculture. It also sought a list of flagship infrastructure projects designed to show that something tangible was coming out of the initiative.

'Nepad can no longer afford to maintain the pretence that regional bodies will deliver what the continental body cannot'

While commendable, many of these priority projects were extant and, like all major public works initiatives, will take years to negotiate plan, fund and build. Few, according to the African Development Bank, are currently 'bankable.' And even if all were complete tomorrow, they would only marginally change the deep economic and political problems impeding African development.

Nepad's sectoral strategies have two problems. First, they do not offer any real innovation or clarity about how to manage problems more effectively. For example, Nepad suggests bridging the so-called digital divide by putting computers in schools. Yet it has done no feasibility study, has no funding for the effort and has not attempted to answer the vital question of whether money spent on computers and all that they require – security to prevent computers from being stolen, printers, printer ink, software maintenance, anti-virus software and electrification – would not be better spent on chalk, books and properly trained teachers.

Second, Nepad has been unable to get nations to take action on its plans because they tend to be too general to be implemented. Instead of directly pressing nations for action, Nepad has embraced the diplomatically easier but practically flawed notion that its programmes will be implemented by regional economic groupings like the Southern African Development Community. Nepad officials acknowledge that the regional groups lack capacity to do much of anything, but have stubbornly continued with the fiction that they are meaningful development players. In reality, they are, like Nepad itself, grossly understaffed and empowered only to engage in facilitation and conferences.

Nepad can no longer afford to maintain the pretence that regional bodies will deliver what the continental body cannot. The Secretariat needs to fundamentally rethink its activities and redesign itself to act not as a conference convenor but as a genuine, high-powered African think-tank that investigates what works and designs programmes to spread effective new ideas. At present, it has a few top managers and one or two expert advisers per sector who are collectively run off their feet by endless conference invitations and efforts to organise meetings.

The saving grace may be the African Peer Review Mechanism, which is by far the most innovative and important initiative from Nepad. Peer review offers a vehicle through which real pressure and influence can be applied to get countries to improve policies and adopt best practices.

'Nepad needs to redirect resources to ensure that peer review is done properly'

The reviews, to be conducted every three to five years, are designed to engender broad public discussion of governance priorities and secure clear, time-bound commitments from governments on intended reforms. Each country is expected to involve civil-society groups in the assessment of four areas: political and democratic governance; economic and fiscal management; corporate governance; and socio-economic policy.

By including civil society and opening governance to detailed scrutiny by a panel of experts, peer review has the potential to create a new public conversation on reform and offers civil society a tool to press for more rapid change. It is also the vehicle through which Nepad can directly persuade nations to adopt its strategies.

But the APRM Secretariat is, like the Nepad Secretariat, far too small to achieve its mission. Only about half of its 20 intended staff jobs have been filled. A total of 23 countries have acceded to peer review and are scheduled for review between now and 2007. Just conducting the background research on governance issues for all those reviews is an enormous task.

Peer review is the most important and potentially effective instrument of Nepad. Instead of dedicating limited staff to doing a lot of tasks poorly, Nepad needs to quickly redirect resources and staff to ensure that peer review is done properly. That means transforming Nepad into a genuine research organisation capable of studying what works in Africa and feeding robust information on best practice through the APRM to participating countries.

And then, crucially, Nepad and participating African governments must rise to the critical test of peer review: They must be resolved to applying sufficient standards so that the process does not become an exercise in bland praise and tepid criticism. Real reform requires rigorous scrutiny. – **Ross Herbert**

SPECIAL FEATURE

A Pending Crisis of Overlap

The many layers of regional organisation complicate trade agreements on and off the continent

REGIONALISATION has become the global game. The World Bank estimates that between 40% and 60% of world trade occurs within regional trading blocs. But Africa's appetite for integration outstrips that of any other continent, according to a study by the Harvard Institute for International Development. This has led to an unsustainable situation where African countries often belong to four or more regional entities simultaneously.

A close examination of the various regional structures and agreements in southern Africa highlights the potential problems of overlapping membership, particularly among those with commitments to forming a customs union with common external tariffs and those negotiating economic partnership agreements with the European Union. Within southern Africa there are a number of regional integration agreements and bilateral agreements taking place within the context of the worldwide multi-lateral trading system. These include (among others):

- Southern African Customs Union (SACU)
- Southern African Development Community (SADC)
- Common Market for Eastern and Southern Africa (COMESA)
- East African Community (EAC)
- Indian Ocean Commission (IOC)
- Economic Community of Central African States (ECCAS).

While the existence of numerous agreements within the region in itself is not a problem – although it does mitigate the benefits to be obtained from integration – overlapping membership between the groupings has the potential to cause conflict and certainly imposes greater transaction costs on the business communities and governments. As these regional groupings move toward deeper trade and economic integration, these problems become more severe. The move toward free trade areas within the above groupings has so far been technically possible. But the next stage – establishing a customs union – is not.

Within a free trade area each country has autonomous control of their external trade agreements, but they cannot give more preferential treatment to any third party than they give to the current members of the FTA. Within a customs union, however, this autonomy is lost and each member of the CU must adopt the group's common external tariff and apply this rate to all third parties. One country cannot realistically apply two different external tariffs.

This poses a major problem for the regional economic communities mentioned above, which have already

Table 1: Multiple memberships of regional integration groupings

Country	COMESA	EAC	ECCAS	IOC	SACU	SADC
Angola	X		X			X
Botswana					X	X
Burundi	X		X			
Comoros	X			X		
Congo (DRC)	X		X			X
Djibouti	X					
Egypt	X					
Eritrea	X					
Ethiopia	X					
Lesotho					X	X
Kenya	X	X				
Malawi	X					X
Madagascar	X			X		A
Mauritius	X			X		X
Mozambique					A	X
Namibia	W				X	X
Rwanda	X		X			
Seychelles	X			X		W
Sudan	X					
South Africa					X	X
Swaziland	X				X	X
Tanzania		X				X
Uganda	X	X				
Zambia	X					X
Zimbabwe	X					X

A = Applicant
W = Under notice of withdrawal

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implemented or are in the process of implementing a customs union. None of these groups is exclusive, with at least one member state belonging to another southern African entity. In the case of SADC, only Mozambique does not belong to another grouping – although discussions that may lead to Mozambique's membership of SACU are underway. The overlapping multiple agreements would not be such a problem if there was an overall plan to synchronise the common external tariff of each group so that in the end they would all form one large trading bloc.

But such a long-term regional plan does not appear to be in place – other than the ultimate goal of establishing the African Economic Community by 2025.

Not only will there be theoretical, political, and logistical problems with all the above blocs attempting to form their own customs union, but the current agreements as they stand will be in contradiction of one another's treaties. For example, Article XXXI paragraph 3 of the new SACU agreement prohibits members from entering into new agreements with third parties without the consent of the remaining member states. Thus, Swaziland cannot negotiate further with COMESA without the unlikely approval of the rest of SACU.

In terms of the SADC Protocol on Trade (Article XXVIII, paragraph 2), member states cannot enter into a preferential trade agreement with third countries that may: 'impede or **frustrate the objectives of [the] protocol** and that any advantage, concession, privilege or power granted to a third country under such agreements is extended to other Member States.'

Article 56 of the COMESA Treaty states: 'Member States are free to enter into bilateral or multilateral agreements provided that such agreements are not, and **would not be, in conflict** and do not undermine the COMESA FTA and CU.'

And Article 37 (4a) of the EAC Protocol on the Establishment on the East African Customs Union says: 'A Partner State may separately conclude or amend a trade agreement with a foreign country provided that the terms of such an agreement or amendments are **not in conflict** with the provisions of this Protocol.'

A formal agreement toward the implementation of another common external tariff is 'in conflict' with the first agreement signed.

Another problem of overlapping membership has arisen with the current Economic Partnership Agreement (EPA) negotiations with the European Union. Ideally, each region would negotiate its own agreement, but due to the membership of different blocs, countries in southern Africa have had to create new groups from which to negotiate. South Africa has already negotiated its own agreement with the EU, and SADC has split two other ways as well, with several members joining a selection of COMESA members in pursuit of an agreement with the EU. And that's just one example.

If the current blocs of SACU, SADC, COMESA and the EAC insist on forming their own customs unions, the current form of the regional integration agreements will not be sustainable. Several scenarios could emerge.

Scenario One: Equal sharing

If, due to political reasons, all four groupings have to remain, the distribution shown in Figure 1 would be the most likely and 'fair' scenario, where members are reasonably equally shared across the groups. As Mozambique has indicated a preference to join SACU, it has been placed in the SACU group, but if this does not materialise Maputo would be in the SADC group. Likewise, Madagascar has indicated a preference to join SADC (hence questioning their commitment to COMESA), so they have been placed in the SADC group. Otherwise, the SACU countries would pull out of SADC, the joint SADC/COMESA countries leave COMESA and the EAC countries pull out of their other groups. This scenario does, however, maintain a fragmented approach to integration with many of the gains already achieved being lost.

Figure 1: Equal Sharing Agreement

SACU	SADC	COMESA	EAC
Botswana Lesotho *Mozambique* Namibia South Africa Swaziland	Angola DRC *Madagascar* Malawi Mauritius Zambia Zimbabwe	Burundi Comoros Djibouti Egypt Eritrea Ethiopia Rwanda Seychelles Sudan	Kenya *Tanzania* Uganda

Note: Italics indicate where it is unsure which group a country may opt to join.

Scenario Two: SADC, SACU merge

Figure 2 depicts a merger between SACU and SADC – or rather the gradual expansion of SACU to incorporate the rest of SADC – with Tanzania withdrawing from SADC and the COMESA SADC countries withdrawing from COMESA. While this is theoretically possible, given the depth of integration and complexity of the SACU agreement (and the fact that it took eight years to negotiate the new agreement between five existing members) it is unlikely that such a merger could realistically take place in the near future. Nevertheless it is possible. There may however be some 'cherry picking' whereby certain SADC countries are invited into the expanded SACU (as is possibly the case currently with Mozambique) and others are left to stay in COMESA. In this scenario we also see the EAC maintaining its identity. There is cohesiveness within East Africa which is only otherwise seen in the SACU region. In this scenario COMESA ends up as a rather weak institution covering the Great Lakes, the Horn and northeast Africa.

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Scenario Three: Strong COMESA

A third scenario, depicted in Figure 3, is that COMESA becomes a dominant group in the region, and forms a customs union in the relatively near future, maintaining all its current members except Swaziland, which has to stay with SACU, but gains Tanzania after an absence of a few years. Thus those joint members of SADC and the EAC are locked into COMESA. This is based on the assumption that the EAC customs union merges with the COMESA customs union or else that the COMESA customs union is formed before that of the EAC. This then just leaves Mozambique, which joins SACU – something that is already on the cards. This scenario may be somewhat more feasible than some of the others, although it also will be difficult as those SADC countries north of the Limpopo may not want to lose the South African connection. The solution could only be in terms of developing a free trade area between the two remaining blocs of SACU and COMESA.

Scenario Four: One happy family

In terms of the African Union, one happy family covering eastern and southern Africa would be the ideal. Under this scenario all current regional economic communities agree to harmonise their current strategies and form one large regional trading bloc. In time, this bloc would be able to merge with those from Central, West and North Africa to form the African Economic Community, as per the Abuja Treaty of 1991.

The above scenarios depict the kind of options that may be followed. It must be remembered that Europe went through a process of varying memberships, rationalisation and groupings until the current situation was reached earlier this year with a 25 member European Union and a four member European free trade area, both of which are linked together by the Agreement on the European Economic Area.

Figure 2: SACU/SADC Merge

SACU + SADC	COMESA	EAC
Angola	Burundi	Kenya
Botswana	Comoros	*Tanzania*
DRC	Djibouti	Uganda
Lesotho	Egypt	
Madagascar	Eritrea	
Malawi	Ethiopia	
Mauritius	Rwanda	
Mozambique	*Seychelles*	
Namibia	Sudan	
South Africa		
Swaziland		
Zambia		
Zimbabwe		

Note: Italics indicate where it is unsure which group a country may opt to join.

What final bloc or blocs emerge in southern Africa is to some extent less important than the process and the timing by which the rationalisation process takes place. Otherwise, resources (human and financial) that are already scarce will continue to be stretched even further. Some rationalisation has already started. Over the last five years, COMESA has seen the withdrawal of Lesotho, Mozambique, Tanzania and, most recently, Namibia. Seychelles has left SADC. These are choices made for political and economic reasons.

Alongside this, however, is the continuing growth of the problem with the possibility of Mozambique joining SACU and the strong likelihood of Madagascar joining SADC in the near future. Furthermore, Rwanda, while being a member of COMESA (as well as ECCAS) has recently requested membership of both the EAC and SADC, although both institutions have put this request on the back burner. Does this indicate a collapse of COMESA? Probably not, because at the same time COMESA is clearly achieving progress through its free trade agreement with 11 members already trading without any tariff barriers. Furthermore, COMESA has made progress in preparations for the EPA negotiations and is giving strong support to its member states. Hence the decision by Malawi, Mauritius, Zambia and Zimbabwe to negotiate their EPA with selected COMESA states rather than under SADC.

Figure 3: Strong COMESA

SACU	SADC	COMESA	EAC
Botswana		Angola	
Lesotho		Burundi	
Mozambique		Comoros	
Namibia		Djibouti	
South Africa		Egypt	
Swaziland		Eritrea	
		Ethiopia	
		Kenya	
		Madagascar	
		Mauritius	
		Malawi	
		Rwanda	
		Seychelles	
		Sudan	
		Swaziland	
		Tanzania	
		Uganda	
		Zambia	
		DRC	
		Zimbabwe	

SACU will continue to exist, albeit in a possibly expanded format in years to come. It has been around for a hundred years and will not disappear overnight. The old arrangement worked for the benefit of its members. The new arrangement is also bringing about benefits for its members. Another important fact is that South Africa is a major player in the region, from both a trade and investment perspective.

Southern Africa may be going through a similar process now to what happened in Europe and may end up with a Southern African Economic Area arising from a free trade agreement between an expanded SACU (possibly merged with SADC or parts thereof) customs union and the COMESA (possibly merged with EAC) customs union. Whichever way the groupings go, it is time for our political leaders now to start making some hard choices, based on an economic as well as political rationale, to make progress with rationalisation.

– Richard Hess and Simon Hess are, respectively, managing director and research economist of Imani Development

SPECIAL FEATURE

In Pursuit of the Record

Freedom of information laws are proliferating in Africa, but access remains poor

TO DATE, 23 African states have submitted to the voluntary African Peer Review Mechanism, a component of Nepad, committing their countries' policies and practices to intense examination. Countries undergoing the process first assess their own records in political, economic and corporate governance. Then the peer review secretariat conducts a thorough external review.

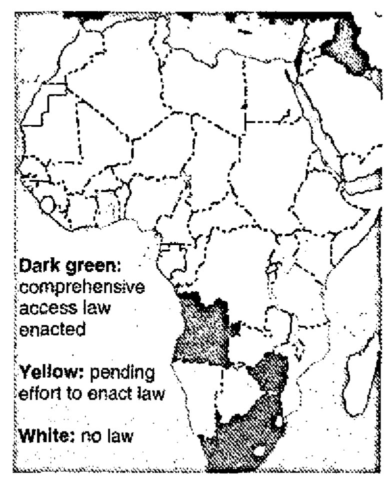
Governance depends upon – and in turn generates – information. But evidence from the first review underway in Ghana suggests that finding and receiving relevant information is tortuous and vulnerable to official manipulation. Nepad and the African Union – institutions central to Africa's attempt to reinvent itself – stress transparency, but often ignore one of the most important elements of openness: access to information.

'How can you really conclude anything about a country in peer review unless you have had access to all the available evidence?' asks Rolf Sorensen, researcher at the South African History Archive in Johannesburg.

Increasingly, the emphasis placed on good governance by Nepad and international donors is throwing a spotlight on something that has traditionally been regarded as a concern primarily for journalists and conspiracy theorists: freedom of information. As Sorenson and others argue, access to information is critical to the entire web of rights and freedoms that constitute open democracy, underpinning everything from public budgeting and transparent spending procedures to human rights and equitable justice.

'Public access to information is the lifeblood of any meaningful democratic participation,' writes the South African analyst Dale McKinley in a report entitled 'The State of Access to Information in South Africa'. 'Without the right of access, the affirmation, and more concretely the realisation, of all other rights is fundamentally compromised.'

Across the globe, the right-to-know movement is snowballing. The Open Society's Justice Initiative says that 57 countries worldwide now have legislation that creates mechanisms for people to ask for and receive government-held information. Forty-three countries have passed these laws since 1992, chiefly in Eastern Europe and the developing world.



Most post-1990 African constitutions contain the principle of freedom of information. South Africa's Promotion of Access to Information Act, operative since March 2001, is one of the most advanced in the world: It is constitutionally based and applies equally to information held by the public and private sector. Angola passed an almost identical law to Portugal's in 2002, but it has not been implemented. Draft bills exist in several others, including Nigeria, Ghana and Ethiopia.

Most African governments remain inherently clandestine even as they publicly embrace freedom of access to information. In perhaps the most draconian case of contradiction, Zimbabwe's Access to Information and Privacy Act, adopted in February 2002, gives government sweeping powers to crack down on the media and curtail 'abuse of free expression.' A climate of fear prevents people from making routine requests. Namibia, meanwhile, has paid lip service to freedom of information legislation for seven years, but without strong demand from local civil society, the initiative has languished in the prime minister's office.

Several factors frustrate access to information. Many developing countries have poor record-keeping practices. Bureaucrats ignorant of the law frequently deny routine information. Litigation is time consuming and expensive. Many government departments ignore directives to catalogue the records they hold, and few countries have adequate safeguards against destruction of records.

Some momentum for freedom of information legislation is donor-driven. 'Freedom of information laws are part of the current agenda of good governance and economic development,' says South African law professor Jonathan Klaaren. 'Such laws combat corruption and entrench transparency.'

The right to know is fundamentally about whether governments believe in democracy, which means empowering and trusting their citizens and being held accountable to the governed.

The peer review process provides an opportunity for civil society groups in Africa to ensure that their governments take access to information far more seriously.

'Good legislation is not enough,' Sorensen argues. 'You need the cultural atmosphere that supports it as well.' **– Steven Gruzd**

The High Cost of an Imported Used Spiderman T-Shirt

Second-hand clothing imports unravel local textile industries from Nigeria to Namibia

EVERY country has a different name for them, but they all evoke the same sense of loss. On the streets of Harare they call them *mupedzanhamo,* or 'where all problems end.' Tanzanians prefer the term *kafa ulaya,* 'the clothes of the dead whites.'

Down at the Tejosho Market in the Yaba district of Lagos, Okey Anorue earns his daily bread selling *okirika,* or 'bend down boutique,' from a wooden shed. Last year the government imposed a ban on his kind of trade, causing less-determined stall owners to shut down, but Anorue carries on. The money's too easy to stop.

BUSINESS IS BOOMING: *A second-hand clothing dealer gets busy with a customer on the streets of Johannesburg, South Africa.* *Photo: Anton Hammerl*

Second-hand clothing is a thriving industry – some would say problem – across Africa. Every year Western countries send hundreds of thousands of tons of used garments to the developing world. It's big business on both ends. The clothing costs pennies up North, so exporters net millions, and can be marked up as much as 3,000% by the time they hit the stalls and street corners oceans away, according to the International Textile, Garment and Leather Workers' Federation (ITGLWF).

In Nigeria alone, poverty and economic mismanagement have pushed millions of poor people to trade in second-hand clothing. Women, widows, self-sponsored students, sacked or retrenched workers take to the trade because it requires little start-up capital and they can turn a quick profit almost immediately.

Thirteen years ago Anorue started with $8. Today he lives in a three-bedroom apartment and drives a Japanese sedan. Buyers cut across all segments of society despite the widespread belief that the garments are cast-offs from people who died of communicable diseases. 'It's cheap. We don't have enough money to buy food, not to talk of spending much on clothing,' said Malara Kazeem, who sells soft drinks not far from Anorue's shed.

But there's a costly downside, too. The glut of used clothing has adversely affected local textile industries, preventing developing countries from taking advantage of favourable international trade agreements like the US African Growth and Opportunity Act (AGOA). The Uganda Importers and Exporters Association, for example, estimates that the total value of second-hand clothing imports to that country in 2002 exceeded $22 million in worth, and that 80% of Ugandans buy such apparel.

Seven years ago, the Nigerian textile industry, the largest employer in the manufacturing sector, provided 25% of the total national employment. Since then, however, the sector has shrunk dramatically from 137,000 jobs in 1997 to 57,000 in 2003 – or by almost 58% of its workforce – and 25 companies have closed shop. The local textile industry now shares just 27% of the home clothing market, according to a recent study by the United Nations Industrial Development Organisation (UNIDO).

'There is no garment industry in Nigeria. Second-hand clothing has killed it,' said Jaiyeola Olarewaju, executive director of the Nigerian Textile Manufacturers Association and Nigerian Textile Garment and Tailoring Employers Association. 'We don't have companies producing garments in this country because everybody goes for the "bend down boutique": 75% of women wear foreign dresses, and even the big madams buy from *okirika* because the garment industry is virtually gone.'

The July UNIDO 2003 report concluded that if the government could stem imports of second-hand clothing, it could revitalise the local textile industry within five years, create at least 75,000 new jobs, generate $500 million annually through exports and attract $250 million in foreign direct investment.

Last year the government imposed a ban on imported used clothing, but cranking up the local looms won't be easy. Second-hand clothes from Europe and the US do not come to Nigeria directly. The bales land at ports in neighbouring Benin or Togo and are smuggled into Nigeria through porous borders, often with the help of corrupt customs officials. It's risky work, but poverty and profits provide ample incentive. The smugglers even have their own trade union.

'It is hard to smuggle goods into the country,' said Eme Ijeoma, president of the Ogbamba (smugglers) Association. 'But because of poverty and hunger, people are ready to walk miles carrying bales of clothing in the day or at night.'

In the cat-and-mouse interplay between smugglers and border officials, bullets are often exchanged and, sometimes, lives are lost. 'Last year, we engaged the smugglers fire for fire,' said Chike Ngige, spokesman for the Nigeria Customs Service (NCS). 'The comptroller general's anti-smuggling special squad killed two of the smugglers' helmsmen.'

In the last four months customs officials have seized 384 bales of second-hand clothing. 'When somebody loses millions because his goods are seized, he will not go back to it,' Ngige said.

Breaking the ring of smuggled used clothing, says Olarewaju of the manufacturing association, would enable Nigeria to benefit in two ways. First, West Africa produces some of the cheapest cotton in the world, but high US and European subsidies for their own growers makes it nearly impossible for African producers to move their bales to market. With a revitalised local garment industry, more of that cotton would be utilised at home.

'The textile industry is unique in that it is using a high percentage of locally produced raw materials such as cotton and polyester, unlike other sectors in Nigeria,' the UNIDO report found.

Second, Nigeria would be able to take greater advantage of three favourable international trade agreements. In addition to AGOA, which gives preferential access to US markets to garments made in accredited sub-Saharan African countries, there is the Cotonou Agreement, signed in June 2000, which lifts quotas and tariffs on African textiles and garments in European markets. Then there is the regional agreement on trade liberalisation that promotes intra-regional trade across West Africa. While Nigeria's textile products, such as print fabrics, are mainly sold in domestic markets, the country dominates the West African market with more than 70% of the total regional production.

But the region isn't likely to make things easier for Nigerian textile manufacturers. Benin, Togo and Ghana, for example, have no import restrictions on second-hand clothing because they generate needed foreign revenues from import duties. With these countries ready to supply smugglers with goods, Nigerian customs officials are all too aware that they can never shut down all the traders like Anorue.

'What we are doing is to curtail the problem, as no country in the world has been able to wipe out smuggling completely,' Ngige said. – **Maureen Chigbo**

Briefs

This could be it: By the end of October Somalia should have its first president in 13 years. The last remaining major warlord has joined the peace process hosted by Kenya. Somalia has been divided into fiefdoms run by warlords since government collapsed in 1991 and previous peace bids have failed. With a new parliament, and the inclusion of all major rebels in the peace process, there is some cause for optimism about the country's future.

Aiding AIDS: Gains made by Uganda in the fight against HIV/AIDS are on the verge of being reversed due to the continuing war in the north of the country. This was revealed when half of the abducted girls who had escaped from the camps of rebel Lord's Resistance Army were found to be HIV positive. Some escapees are rejected by their families and become involved in high-risk sexual behaviour for survival, spreading the virus. In war-torn areas, the prevalence rate is double the national estimate of 6.2%.

Status quo: Attempts to change voting rights at the International Monetary Fund and the World Bank have failed. While Africa receives about half of all loans issued by the two bodies, it has just two seats on the IMF and World Bank boards; Europe has 10.

Another century lost: Instead of 2015 as the year in which extreme poverty will be eradicated in Africa – as laid out in the Millennium Development Goals – that target will only be hit in 2158. This discouraging projection was revealed at an African Union summit on poverty and unemployment held in September. Sub-Saharan African still has more than 320 million people living on less than a dollar a day. The main development sector, agriculture, is failing and needs revival for the more than 60% of African people dependent on it to survive.

Narrow escape: Mauritania, which once again warded off an attempted coup in September, the third in 16 months, accused Libya and Burkina Faso of colluding with the coup plotters.

Little Progress Toward Meeting Malaria Targets in Africa

ON A continent where HIV/AIDS has become the primary killer and most controversial health-care issue, efforts to curb another deadly disease – malaria – have faltered. Almost five years ago, African leaders signed on to the UN Millennium Development Goals, which include halting and reversing the incidence of malaria worldwide by 2015.

At roughly the same time, the continent's leaders met in Abuja and set an additional target of ensuring that protective measures would be available to at least 60% of the African population at risk of the disease by the year 2005.

But as that time-frame expires, only a fraction of the 521 million Africans affected by malaria have access to drugs and netting, and the continent continues to lose more than 1 million lives every year to the disease.

Although a few countries, such as Zambia, have shown measurable success in reducing fatalities through new treatments, drugs are more often problematic in Africa, home to the highest concentration of the world's poorest countries. Resistant strains have undermined the efficacy of medicines like chloroquine, which is the treatment of choice in many places, and the costs of new drugs are often prohibitively high.

One of the intervention strategies identified by both the Abuja initiative and the Millennium Development Goals is insecticide-treated bed nets. Malaria saps aggregate GDP in Africa by $12 billion annually, according to the World Economic Forum, making prevention the most sustainable option.

Roughly 80% of the population in 45 sub-Saharan countries is at risk of malaria, including 120 million pregnant women and children under the age of five years, according to the World Health Organisation. To reach the Abuja targets, a minimum of 20 million insecticide treated nets and 50 million regular nets need to be produced by 2005. In the first three years following the Abuja meeting, however, only 20 million nets of any type were distributed, according to the World Health Organisation (WHO), making it highly unlikely that the target would be met.

ONLY HOPE: *Treated bednets that last longer without needing retreatment could save lives of millions of African children and pregnant women. Photo: Southphoto*

Although the initial cost of a conventional net is not that high by Western standards – about $2.33, including one treatment kit – the price is beyond the reach of Africa's poorest and most vulnerable. But such nets need to be treated regularly, meaning that they can cost as much as $8.33 over three years.

The WHO has recently backed introduction of a new, long-lasting insecticidal net that requires no additional treatment and costs about $3 less than conventional nets over their life span. These nets are made out of high-density polyethylene monofilament yarn impregnated with the insecticide permethrin. So far, however, the nets are manufactured by only one company in Africa, the Tanzania-based A-Z Textile Mills, in co-operation with private-sector partners, non-governmental organisations and donors.

To expand distribution, a group of big pesticide manufacturers, oil companies and mosquito net manufacturers and traders came together in Johannesburg at the end of September to consider a business plan drawn up by the WHO's Roll Back Malaria initiative. To successfully meet the needs of the entire Africa population at risk of malaria would require an investment of up to $150 million, according to WHO estimates.

Public-private partnerships are the vital component of the strategy, said Ebrahim Samba, the WHO's African regional director, at the Johannesburg meeting.

There is no single tool against malaria, Samba argued. What is needed is a concerted effort. But there is hope that as the new, long-lasting nets become more widely available in Africa, the same manufacturing techniques and facilities can be applied to additional products like similarly treated curtains and other household fabrics. – **Luleka Mangquku**