

SA is crucial cornerstone in Africa's renaissance

MY PhD supervisor, Professor Chris Freeman, in the foreword to our book: *Putting Africa First*, wrote: "Especially at this time of global economic instability, this work is needed more than ever to protect science and education from inept and misdirected programmes of 'structural adjustment' and to put the last first. Then the stone that the builders rejected may indeed become the cornerstone of the arch."

In the same book, another eminent scholar, Bengt Åake Lundvall, wrote: "Can the introduction of the innovation system... open up a new vision, 'where the last becomes first'?"

Still the last remains last!

The world is going through turmoil and the Africa builders condemned has not yet become the cornerstone of the arch. It is not only those from outside who have learned how to exploit Africa's mineral and human wealth, condemning Africa to remain where it has been for over 500 years – in the last place – but also the rent-seeking and public service elites in Africa who have developed the currency of corruption to make, retain and condemn Africa to remain last with so much private vice.

If Nigeria produces 2 million barrels of oil a day and sells it at \$100 a barrel, why is it that it still does not have a reliable energy infrastructure?

If Angola harvests 700 000 barrels of oil from Cabinda, why does it continue to harvest war rather than electricity for its people in Cabinda?

What else can we say about those who get so much wealth by digging Africa's mines but still have disproportionate sections of their people in abject poverty?

Why not use the riches to provide food security, modernise agriculture, health, education, water, sanitation, electricity, IT and all that enhance human and ecological wellbeing?

Why not start changing conditions of the least advantaged to allow them entitlement and enhance their productive powers and differential capability?

Why are those who export abundant energy poor themselves, while those that import are energy secure?

The elites who plunder Africa do not hold the continent or its people as their priority. Their priority is their pocket.

This is why eminent scholars like Freeman and Lundvall support the wake-up call for Africans to put Africa first to raise awareness and promulgate policies that reverse the relegation of Africa to last position.

It is 125 years since European powers partitioned Africa into bizarre pieces. It is 50 years since a third of Africa, including Nigeria, attained post-colonial independence. The problems from that cynical project of the divide-and-rule of Africa continue to hurt Africa. Sudan's independence was also a moment of rebellion that has not been settled to this day. Cabinda is carved as a small independent enclave between Angola and the two Congo republics. The DRC has minerals that have

The development of the continent must be the top priority of its economic powerhouse if we are to experience the full promise of the 21st century



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caused instability since its independence from the Belgian kings. There are states within a state like Lesotho and Swaziland in South Africa.

The list of clubbing together disparate groups and splitting cognate groups is endless. Every African state has this problem inscribed in the artificial borders others drew with callous indifference and greed. In spite of this negative legacy, Africa faces great opportunities and many problems.

South Africa has the potential to provide leadership. One of the greatest opportunities for Africa is the coming of South Africa from exclusion to be part of Africa and the rest of the world.

In 1994 South Africa declared a society of freedom and democracy for citizens and the continent; a grand vision meant to propel Africa into a renaissance and an African 21st century.

The twinning of freedom and democracy and an African renaissance and African century were the distinctive hallmarks that emerged with South Africa's emergence from a racist era to fire the liberation imagination of the African universe.

Its liberation constitutes part of the African struggle signified by the long Ethiopian resistance never to surrender to colonialism, slavery and imperialism since the 15th century proxy war was fought on Ethiopian soil by the declining Ottoman Empire and the rising Iberian power of Portugal.

The freedom of South Africa closed the humiliating chapter of African colonisation and opened the historical era of freedom, independence and unity.

This historical significance of South Africa's freedom needs to be appreciated.

Such an appreciation means the country has to provide leadership to realise the unity of Africans and Africa.

South Africa should be prepared even to amend its constitution to accommodate the African Renaissance and African century.

The country should be willing to rescind its borders and enter into agreement to forge and consolidate African unity or the African-unification nation.

As a leading African economy, its clarity on readiness to unite with the rest of Africa is a paramount principle we should have been hearing from local intellectuals, media and the government since 1994.

It is not clear how South Africa is relating to the rest of Africa and how the continent sees the role of South Africa's leadership.

As an Ethiopian, I am happy for South Africa to provide leadership in Africa. It has access to forums that many other African states do not have.

South Africa is often invited to G8 and G20 (summits) and has ties with states like Brazil, China and India.

At the climate meeting in Copenhagen, it was not the AU or the EU the US chose to negotiate with, it was South Africa, Brazil, India and China.

But as South Africa continues to focus attention to these transition countries, it may lose its pivotal role to inspire the unity of Africa and inadvertently render Africa open to forces that may undermine even South Africa itself in the long run.

The determination with which South Africa must put Africa first in all its policies is paramount in making progress that expands the African liberation imagination.

South Africa can reach out with its research and knowledge infrastructure to the rest of Africa

Some of us recognised a possible research, training and knowledge infrastructure-building role in Africa as early as 2003, when Globelics was launched.

I went to KwaZulu-Natal and tried to initiate a knowledge infrastructure building effort connecting South Africa with the rest of Africa. The knowledge arena can be a useful way of relating to the strength of South Africa in redressing the knowledge gap in Africa.

In the research and knowledge arena, there is a lot South Africa can do for itself and Africa. It has resources, research, training and quality education which, if deployed wisely, can put Africa first, as we put it in our book.

It can be the real motivator for opening a new imagination to realise where the last becomes the first.

It can also challenge those who have denigrated Africa as a research area, claiming that what Africa needs is not universities, but primary schools; not PhDs, but vocational graduates.

Science and Technology Minister Naledi Pandor rightly stated: "Increasing the number of graduates was one of the most critical challenges. I talked about well-trained PhDs intentionally, and avoided talking about numbers. Whereas it would look good for SA to produce more PhDs, it would be even better if the PhD graduates could contribute to innovation, through which the production and dissemination of knowledge leads to economic benefit and enriches all fields of human endeavour." From South Africa, Africa can learn

how to:

- Build an African research system and quality training where research productivity, capability, utility and quality are integrated.

- Redirect the production of knowledge at local level so that knowledge for policy learning and innovation can be generated.

- Organise programmes to strengthen and sustain research-developing capabilities.

- Demonstrate achievements to challenge the assumptions that Africans are not researchers.

- Use its research rating and ranking to strengthen the self-confidence of African researchers and remove the prejudice against them of refraining from curiosity-driven venturesome research.

- Build research communities and build strong inter-African research communities to make Africa relate well with the rest of the world.

- Inspire, spearhead and build strong research universities.

- Undertake learning by integrating research and development at community level.

- Build excellence through the African Globelics doctoral academy (<http://agda.uonbi.ac.ke>) to increase the production of high-quality PhD graduates, research and knowledge.

There is a need to provide PhD courses and strengthen research methods training through organising laboratories and top scientists to train fearless, venturesome, ethical researchers; to learn from the National Research Foundation, the Department of Science and Technology and other institutions to strengthen African research management and leadership skills.

We have developed a proposal and with Lundvall we will launch a sequel to *Putting Africa First* to remind us of the 10-year anniversary in August 2011. Our strategy is not only to write another book, but to find ways in which the unacceptable proclivity of putting Africa last both by Africans and others is challenged with convincing action and evidence-based research.

We need to narrow or close the intellectual gap that continues to fester: the inadequate production, knowledge and learning systems in Africa to challenge the deficit for building an African-unification nation where South Africa plays a pivotal part instead of using its advances to distance itself from Africa in relation to the vision of creating a strong and robust African economy.

This is a great challenge that needs to be overcome to put Africa first, realise the African renaissance and make this century that of Africa's also, and not merely for others. Nothing but the productive power of Africans can make Africa strong. Education, research, knowledge can make a big difference to Africa's future. South Africa has a lot to offer to this challenge right now.

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