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Post-2015 Development Planning: Adaption of a Holistic Approach to Planning and Research - a Commentary from a Practitioner's Perspective

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Abstract: In this article, we analyse the argument that lack of holistic approach in planning and research have contributed to the lack of sustainable development in Africa. We base our discussion on the speech by the special advisor on the national consultation on the post-2015 development as it relates to Uganda and other African Context (held on 8th August 2015). The advisor was convinced that there is a need to adopt a more integrated and comprehensive planning approach to reinventing traditional development tools, and meeting persistent and emerging challenges. Efforts must be made to start putting in place the practical measures, markers, mechanisms and partnerships that make sustainable advancements possible. Scholars and managers are called upon to take the challenge of demonstrating how the adoption of a holistic approach in planning, and research can contribute to sustainable development.

Key words: Research, Strategic planning, Sustainable development, Africa, Uganda

1. INTRODUCTION

Originating in the 12th century, the first record of the idea of sustainability as the economic principle of housekeeping was created in the monastery of Mauermuenster in south-west Germany. However, the idea was not adapted in practice until the 16th or rather 18th century, when it was applied in the area of ores tried under the policy of not using more wood resources than possible to restore within the natural regeneration cycle (Vorholz, 2002). Today's perception of sustainable development builds upon the Brundt Land Report, published in 1987, whose main idea grew into an essential component of management discipline. Holistic planning and research have not featured as expected in all management arenas for sustainable development. Through the years, each region and government department have expended effort to set up their own long-term planning or long-term strategy, but they share many common problem. One of these is a lack of integration. There is very little integration among the strategies adopted in such areas as economic, social, environmental and resource management. This simply means that each department or specialized field basically emphasizes the importance of their own impact on the national economy, and strives to convince the Central Government to pay them more attention, to give them priority investment and tilted policy support. This piecemeal approach has persisted even though many experts have recognized that integration and coordination between different strategies are far more important than whose "projects" receive or have continued to receive the greatest funding for the longest time. This calls for greater attention and prominence as far as policy makers and academia arenas are concerned.

To ensure that sustainability is fulfilled at a global level for African countries, we not only need new strategic planning and thinking but also appropriate policies coupled with action research and development to support the fulfilment of new development models. Scholars, as well as academicians, must take cognizance of the difference between the new strategic management method for sustainable development of a new economy and the traditional strategic method used in managing local-level developments. According to Kaniaru (1998), despite most of the African countries gaining

independence more than a decade ago, they are still experiencing challenges such as lack of holistic broad-based development plans. There is, therefore, need to investigate how best strategic planning and holistic policies, coupled with research and development can help in attaining sustainable development.

The investigation would underpin the critical importance of academia in opening up debate on such critical issues among policy makers. The promotion of holistic planning, research, and development of sustainable development can ensure that resources are effectively allocated and managed and ultimately providing a quality life.

Sustainability must not only refer to the sustainable development of the natural environment but also pursue sustainable development in economy, society and the use of natural resources. Therefore, strategic goals for regional development should not be purely economic, but it should also take into account such goals as social progress, ecological and environmental protection, sustainable construction, optimum development, protection and use of resources (both human and natural). The foresight of leaders, future visions based on a long-term perspective and the changes in the ideas and values of those leaders and their management team are the fundamental premises of successful strategies and strategic management.

In the light of recent economic development in Africa, it is evidently urgent to review our strategic planning and research practices that inform policy making. Many developing countries have witnessed a decline in political, social, economic, and environmental conditions (Valentine 1998). This leads to the degradation of many building blocks of society, such as government transparency and public involvement in the decision-making processes (Hecht 1999). This ongoing degradation has a long history and has lead people to a state of desperation, creating an overarching sense of cynicism, apathy, and dependence (Jreisat 2002). This dominant mindset adds to the existing complexity of community development. Therefore, there is a need to alter the peoples' convictions before lasting development can occur.

From a strategy perspective, the idea of developing nations shifting their mindsets and finding their own direction for development can be referred to as a strategic transformational change. A transformational change occurs when individuals begin to realize and understand the limitations in their overarching societal structures, and adequate support exists to alter the existing trends to a new arrangement that is more practical and desirable for the members of society (World Bank 2008). Transformational change is not an end, but rather a means to other strategic objectives. Within the context of development, individuals and societies can have more control over their destinies through understanding broader personal horizons. "This includes identifying the barriers to, as well as potential catalysts for, change. Approaching development from the perspective of transforming society has profound implications not only for what governments and aid agencies do but how they proceed, how they engage, for instance, in participation and partnership" (Stiglitz 1998). Often the most effective agents of transformational change within societies are communities. Effective leadership is also necessary to instigate transformational change. Leadership goes far beyond individuals. Patterns of relationships and the structures that shape them are often considered more important than individuals. The cohesion built through the patterns of relationships is a crucial aspect of ownership and responsibility for the development results. However building cohesion, ownership, and responsibility is not adequate to provide direction to the development. "In calling for a transformation, a central issue has to be addressed: transformation to what kind of society, and for what ends?" (Stiglitz 1998) This is where a vision of sustainability can establish a target for the community and act as main driver for transformational change. That is why the special advisor is concerned, and a lot more has to be done.

The missing link between holistic planning and research and development is the lack of structured infrastructure to disseminate research findings to end users. The findings are retained in university

libraries hence hindering industry players from benefiting from them. Efforts must be put to bring together regularly academicians and industry players so that to ensure thinking and strategic planning meet halfway in a timely manner. The advisor in his speech, indicated his point of interest was for Africa to move beyond simply talking about the importance of service delivery, infrastructure, institutions, inclusive growth, decent jobs and reduced inequality, and to start putting in place the practical measures, markers, mechanisms and partnerships that make such advancements possible and sustainable.

It is of interest to hear the submissions of experts on holistic planning, research and development in their research works. For a long time, African businesses were locked in state controls and riddled with corruption, poor governance policies, and a general lack of long-term focus while at the same time super-emerging economies were engaged in the long-term focus of strategic management and shaping of economic direction. According to Bagire and Namada (2011), the models which accounted for growth of businesses in other parts of the world like firm strategic planning became common in Africa long after. They argue that African growth was stunted for lack of strategic management models, whether borrowed from more developed nations, adapted, or locally evolved. Kiggundu (2011) argues that even the field of management has become disintegrated into "many managements"; for Africa, this is bad as it is occurring in a field that is central to development but yet to be harnessed for full exploitation of the continent's wealth.

The contents of practical and realistic strategic goals and strategic plans must be the result of a persistent research effort conducted over a long period of time, rather than "written by" a temporarily hired research team in a short time. There must be a number of experienced, responsible and stable research teams, which take a long-term perspective and conduct future studies that focus on specific key areas and holistic strategies. These will form the solid foundation for strategic analysis, for determining strategic goals and for formulating strategic plans. A strategy that embraces sustainability and strategic planning that embraces the "Scientific Outlook on Development" as its mainstream mission will no longer view maximizing economic benefit or creating the biggest possible GDP as its main objective. Instead, strategic deployment and strategic thinking must take into account the coordinated development of the economy, society, environment, and resources. This can directly be related to the few African countries who have made progress in terms of developing long-term strategies, for example, Vision 2040 of Uganda, 2030 of Kenya, 2025 of Tanzania, 2022 of Nigeria and 2020 of Rwanda. However, some of these visions have been hampered by a lack of sustainable planning and research for continuous improvement.

Any strategy, no matter what level it is at, will inevitably form a dynamic interaction of a multi-element complex system. A long-term development strategy is, without a doubt, a complex system. It involves various multi-levels, it is interdisciplinary, and it crosses domains, sectors, and systems. A successful strategy must be the result of broad systematic integrations among different domains and different systems. Strategic systems at national, regional, industrial and corporate management (macro and micro) levels need to be integrated, while long-term development strategies, medium-term planning, and short-term planning systems need to be made consistent with each other.

Institutions of higher learning as well as industry players need to focus and deliberately put in place measures to bring together the team to address structured methods of disseminating research findings to inform planning, policies and ultimately contribute to sustainable development (Kiggundu 2013). In order to transform the ideas of future thinking and long-term strategy integration into core strategic activities, a roadmap must be provided first. This roadmap not only makes possible the integration of a variety of strategic systems, but it also enables the future of the nation or a region to develop along a track of sustainable development in accordance with a designated "plan". Moreover, benchmarking tools are needed to provide standards and to verify periodically that the real implementation status matches strategic objectives closely. This clearly provides an opportunity to

link academia and industry regarding research and adoption of best practices in holistic strategic planning.

The implementation process of sustainable long-term strategy ought to include project implementation, holistic and integrated implementation, implementation capacity building, pushing holistic "Beyond GDP" performance management systems, encouraging and promoting a green business model, promoting civic education and civic participation, as well as assessment, feedback and control at various stages. Strategies at the national or regional level often involve a large number of major projects. In general, each project competes to get the necessary supporting funds, resources, talents, infrastructure, preferential policies and special institutional support. Moreover, the more support a project can obtain, the greater manoeuvring and innovation space it will have in future. However, the resources that a country or region can mobilize are ways limited. Thus, countries or regions must give up some projects in order to accomplish others, and balance and coordination must be kept among the various projects. On the one hand, key projects in the short and medium term must be guaranteed. Such practice has not been given attention they deserve and could anchor sustainable development on holistic planning, research, and development.

Available literature has led to the realization that external forces place negative effects on the development process undertaken by the practitioner. Development puts emphasis on creating sustainable change. However, this goal is contradicted by strict timelines that focus on short-term results. This contradiction hinders the natural progression of on a sustainable development path and does not allow the practitioner to implement a holistic approach that considers a long-term development process. It is important for both academicians and industry players to note sustainable development cannot be subjected to strict timelines and hence consider giving adequate time.

In conclusions, constraints on sustainable development in Sub-Saharan Africa are legion. Some are general, and others are sectoral or specific. Some are local while others are national or regional. It must also be admitted that prior to the adoption of the current sustainable development paradigm, Sub-Saharan Africa lagged behind other regions in food security, the standard of living, and various aspects of development. Consequently, the adoption of a new development paradigm that places more emphasis on environmental resource conservation does not eliminate the existing constraints on development. Rather it requires more interdisciplinary or systems approaches, greater sensitivity to the environment in policies, strategies, planning, and execution of development programmes. We state that regardless of whether it is at the national or regional level or merely at the corporate level, strategic management involves a process of future prospecting, analysis, decision-making, implementation, and evaluation. There is a need for a scientific management method that adapts to sustainable development for policy makers. Strategic planning is not the end but the beginning of strategic implementation. Without strategic management, no matter how magnificent strategic planning might be, it remains empty words. We suggest establishing a long-term strategy team responsible for the following tasks: to undertake local research on long-term futures through the entire process of tracking and management, to uncover problems, conduct analysis, and help leadership to solve any problems that may appear in the process of coordinating and integrating various holistic strategic planning systems; conduct future foresight, planning, feedback and early warning, to provide advice for decision-makers in adjusting strategic deployment, to continuously improve strategic support systems, and to provide solutions for altering strategy if necessary. The interest raised by the Special Advisor is a wake-up call to all practitioners, experts, industry players, academicians and policy makers across Africa.

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