

NEPAD: new or old partnership for African women?

Saturday 29 April 2006, by [PHEKO Mohau](#) (Date first published: 4 May 2002).

It is not the first time that Africa's leaders are actively working on a set of new continent. The new African initiative in the words of African governments "is a pledge by African leaders, based on a common vision and a firm and shared conviction, that they have a pressing duty to eradicate poverty and to place their countries, both individually and collectively, on a path of sustainable growth and development." They see the Programme anchored on the determination of Africans to extricate themselves and the continent from the malaise of underdevelopment, in particular the exclusion of Africa in a globalising world.

The New Partnership for Africa's Development (Nepad) gives African women the opportunity to examine whether previous partnerships around development have benefited them. It is an opportunity to analyse whether Nepad offers a framework for a new relationship and partnership with African women. A partnership that can move them away from merely surviving to advancing them as key players in the development of their countries, economically, politically, culturally, and in ways that give them the space to influence the discourse around partnership.

The word partnership is one of the most popular concepts in international development today. Partnerships vary. There is one where individuals freely and deliberately create partnership for the purposes of promoting or achieving their common objectives or interests. This emerges after a long process of consultation and arriving at the same place with the same vision.

There is another type of partnership. A partnership that promotes the interests of a certain class, gender, race, or interest groups. This is an imposed or engineered partnership by a few individuals over the collective. The question I want to pose, is which partnership does Nepad offer African women?

Every woman on the African continent has a sacred memory drawn from the long battle to free ourselves from colonization, racism, bigotry, and so called "civilising agendas" attempting to modernise Africa through capitalism. In this regard, African women generally and African feminists particularly have been linking women's issues to other concerns as part of their critique of development models especially the manner in which structural adjustment programs have impacted upon women in Africa.

A document "Development, Crisis and Alternative Visions: Third World Women's Perspectives" written prior to the World Conference on Women for the Nairobi forum marking the end of the UN Decade for women (1975).

It is clear, that in the 21st century this conclusion continues to be vindicated. The growing pauperisation of African women. The increasing number and rate in which women are being informalised in the economy, the feminisation of poverty, the increase of gender violence, the shrinking political space to debate Structural Adjustment Programmes have placed a great burden on African women.

Coupled with this is the emerging global order that is driven and characterised by enormous economic growth and worldwide expansion and penetration named globalisation, facilitated and promoted by liberalisation. Women are caught in a quagmire of declining social expenditure in key sectors like education, health, electricity, water, food security and environmental sustainability.

More significantly, this contestation between economic and social policy has impacted on the social and political fabric. It has changed relations with governments in favour of the private sector and multinational corporations producing for profit. African women are paying a high price for the negative impact of these policies that are increasing the gap between rich and poor.

In this scenario, it is clear, that women in African have long opted for the need for an alternative vision of the economy and development in Africa. The challenge has been to challenge the notion that markets are adequate in meeting women's need. It has been necessary for African women pose this challenge with their demand for the reconstruction of the state in an effort to make it more responsive and accountable for its actions.

Having said that, Nepad poses a dilemma for African women. I cannot help feeling a tragedy is being enacted on African women. A tragedy equal to or greater than Rwanda may be in the pipeline. African women, the poorest people in the world, are being sacrificed on the altar of neoliberalism.

Nepad at the outset states that African leaders are implementing it on behalf of their people and not with the African people. This is a significant nuance that will be a deciding factor in terms of how African women participate within Nepad.

Besides being gender blind, it has experienced a very low profile among the rank and file at the national and even continental level. The idea according to the managers of this initiative is to hand it over to a marketing company that can begin to raise awareness about it among the African people. This brings into question the nature of this "partnership." A plan that is supposed to fundamentally change our lives has curiously not been a part of the discourse and the subject of debate within African communities from its conception.

How then does it become implemented? Who is it being implemented for? For African women these are old questions. In our struggle fighting for our space in political decision

An in depth analysis of the Nepad document underscores its dependency on World Bank and IMF policies in Africa. It refers for example to the Banks Poverty Reduction Strategies as a key way of routing poverty out of Africa. African women have consistently offered a sharp critique to the failed policies of the IMF and World Bank. In essence this re

Research and experience by African women show how these policies has displaced the development vision of many African countries and destroyed the industrialization process necessary to make Africa a formidable force in world affairs. One of the objectives of Nepad is "to promote the role of women in social and economic development by reinforcing their capacity in the domains of education and training by the development of revenue

When one looks at the Beijing Platform of Action, the conclusions of the United Nations Conference on Environment and Development "Agenda 21" are a radical shift. These development summits adopted the call for the participation of women, as equal partners in economic social and political development, as well as in all sectors of economy in decision

Nepad is far behind, when it keeps women in areas of the economy that perpetuate exclusion from the macro economy. Nepad's lack of reference in terms of analysis and experience of the African women and people regarding these policies is a glaring omission resulting in a rather peculiar

conclusion about how Africa has experienced SAP's.

The indictment on SAP's is not only panel beating our fiscal and monetary policies, but they have fundamentally destroyed the social policies of many countries in Africa. It is women, the majority in Africa who has suffered through privatization, HIV/AIDS, job losses, and declining literacy and nutrition rates. It is therefore necessary for women to rearticulate an agenda that will bring back elements of the developmental state, and a strong state that can invest liberally in its people.

Nepad calls for investment in education and infrastructure. African women can hardly disagree with this. However, African women phrased this in a much better way than Nepad. When the Women call for investment, they have realigned it with the visions, needs and aspirations of the African people. This means that any education and infrastructure developments should work in the interests of the African women and people, and not export or investor oriented as articulated in Nepad.

Nepad fails to build on many documents developed around African development. The Lagos Plan of Action, the African People's Consensus document and a score of other documents developed or facilitated by the OAU. The failure to select the positive aspects of these documents constructs a Nepad in a vacuum.

Globalisation is treated as a "fact" and "reality" without a deeper probing of our memory and experience of globalisation, which has existed for centuries in various forms in Africa. Women need to clearly define globalisation as a new world for imperialism and the manner in which it serves to consolidate economic and political domination to the west. The relationship between the spread of markets and the changing nature of poverty is not examined in Nepad. It ignores the fact that women poverty in Africa is shaped by gender, class, ethnicity and religion and by unequal relations in the international economy.

Nepad fails to give a clear history of domination in Africa and the impact it has had on women economically, socially and politically. It describes globalisation as neutral yet the proof is there to show that Africa's processed goods are closed to western markets because of the growing wall of protectionism in the industrialized countries. Nepad because of this shallow analysis of globalisation goes on to demand coherence of documents such as AGOA (US African Growth and Opportunity Act) Cotonou Agreement between Africa, Caribbean and Pacific countries and the European Union, as well as the WTO (World Trade Organization). These are all instruments of neoliberalism leading to the enslavement of African women.

Nepad reinforces these by presenting women as "mere victims" of development with no alternatives. The power relations in the world are never challenged in the document. This is a crucial debate and discourse that African women have articulated for decades. Regional integration is not recognized as a significant process of strengthening Africa's economy and collaboration within Africa. It views it as a stopgap and a way to jump onto the globalisation train.

This is a complex, comprised document produced in another reality that argues that in order for Africa to "recover" it must take responsibility for itself. This is a dangerous notion because it ignores the other reality of wars, corruption, debt that the west has and continues to contribute to in order to support its strategic economic interests.

The women of Africa are unambiguous. The problems of Africa are not only internally; they are also external to it. Africa cannot reform without the west reforming its policies contempt and cynicism in a global environment that is actively hostile towards Africa. In the midst of this hostility, Africa is told there is no alternative. The response and solidarity of the northern women's movement needs to join African women by stating clearly to their government that there must be an alternative. In Nepad's place, they need to call for a reconstruction of the entire global economic system in favor of

poor African women.

In challenging the key themes of Nepad such as concepts of global governance, globalization, agriculture, technology, International aid, foreign direct investment, education, economic management, regional integration, political will and a host of other ideas put forward in the document, African women will need political and economic support to prevail against the current power structures.

P.S.

* Mohau Pheko is from Africa Trade Network.