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OPPORTUNITIES AND CHALLENGES OF THE LAGOS PLAN OF ACTION
THE ROLE OF PUBLIC ENTERPRISES

BY

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I. Introduction

The Lagos Plan of Action arose out of general awareness that the African region has become poorer after two decades of independence. After experiences of recurrent droughts and famine, internecine civil wars between diverse ethnic groupings, foreign exploitation of natural resources, drain of scarce foreign exchange, migration of talents, widespread unemployment, and rising inflation the bells of alarm were rung from various quarters - African and non-African. The ship of State, having started its maiden voyage on the rough sea of development some twenty years before, lost its course and was so clearly 'heading for the rocks'. What must be done to set it on the right course? that was the difficult question confronting those concerned about Africa's future and to which many writers on African development have addressed themselves.

With the future looking so bleak it would have been a grave and unforgivable folly to delay action, and the action needed a plan in order to be orderly and effective. A special summit was therefore held in Lagos (Nigeria) in April 1980 in order to chart the economic course of the African Continent and what the African leaders assembled in that summit decided are embodied in the Lagos Plan of Action. It is of course one thing to draw up a plan: it is quite another to execute it. Trained and experienced public servants know that a whole gamut of challenges are to be found in the latter. These challenges must be thoroughly understood before they can be met, not met before they can be understood. But the Plan happens to provide opportunities also, and these must be perceived and persued without fail. There are times, albeit few, when an opportunity so clearly presents itself and is just waiting to be taken, but in most cases it is difficult to draw the line between 'opportunity' and 'challenge': the one disguises the other.

In any case, a heavy burden falls on the Public Sector in executing the Lagos Plan of Action. In some countries it has to assume the major responsibilities of a weak and ineffective private sector in addition to its own burdonsome task of making the overall policy bearing on the economy; in others, ideology has simply thrust these responsibilities (and more) upon its shoulders. Whenever the Public Sector is mentioned one immediately thinks about public enterprises as if the two terms were synonymous when, in fact, they are not. This is understandable, however, because most African Governments have given a lion's share to public enterprises in allocating responsibility for the realization of accelerated development.

The thrust of this paper will therefore be on the performance of African public enterprises and the rele of the latter in translating the hopes and aspirations of the Lagos Plan of Action into a viable reality. The emphasis will be, however, on what they ought to do in order to fulfill that role, rather than how to do it. We shall also look briefly at the future prospects of these enterprises in so far as their place in the Lagos Plan of Action is concerned.

II. OPPORTUNITIES, CHALLENGES AND RESPONSES

As previously said the Lagos Plan of Action presents both opportunities and challenges in the various fields of development such as Agriculture, Industry, Transport and Communications, Science and Technology, Trade and Finance, and Human Resources. It is now two years since the Plan was adopted in Lagos and we are already approaching some of the deadlines set by it. It is therefore time to pause and look back at the past two years with a view to seeing the achievements so far. A re-examination of performance is always necessary and useful as a guide to future action. The performance of public enterprises in the last two years may be considered to be their response to the opportunities and challenges presented by the Lagos Plan of Action.

(a) Agriculture

The Plan gives the highest priority to what the African region has been and is in greatest need: the production of food. It seems preposterous to talk about chronic shortages of food in Africa when the land is so vast, the soil so rich, the water so abundant and the people so available. It is of course those who are supposed to set the wheel of development in motion who should bear the blame for the apathy and resignation which befall the rural majority the primary agents of food production. No other objective could take precedence over the objective of self-sufficiency in food production. This is indeed where the Lagos Plan of Action stands head and shoulders above the World Bank Report[1/] which advocated an export-oriented agriculture.

The Lagos Plan of Action clearly spells out the targets to be achieved within the Plan period. Within a period of only five years (1980-1985) African countries are requied 'to bring about immediate improvement in the food situation and to lay the foundations for the achievement of self-sufficiency in cereals and in livestock and fish products'[2/]. Furthermore, the Plan requires the member-States to make 'as a first step'[3/] strategic food resources of the order of 10% of the total food production. This obviously means that they should aim, at the outset, at a surplus of 10% because food reserves can be made only when there is suplus. By 1985, only a mere three years

1/ See, "Accelerated Development in sub-Saharan Africa: An Agenda for Action", World Bank, 1981

2/ The Lagos Plan of Action, P. 12, para 20.

3/ Ibid.

from hence, the Plan requires an annual increase of fish production by one million tons. Because of spreading desertification it calls for an expansion of areas under forestry regeneration programmes by 10% annually upto 1985, and the expansion of forest reserves by 10% from 1980 to 1985.

The policies to be followed towards the realization of these targets have similarly been laid out. The primary actors on the stage of development are the member-States and they have accepted this role unequivocally in the Lagos Plan of Action, but there are other actors to whose lot an auxillary role falls. These are the ECA, OAU, FAO, IFAD, WFP, ADB and BADEA. Therefore the policies are to be adapted by the member-States to their own domestic conditions and are to be executed by them; the organizations mentioned are to help in both instances (that is policy and execution). As far as agriculture is concerned these policies are in the areas of training, extension services, dissemination of information, marketing investment, research, credit facilities, commodity pricing systems, processing and storage, transport, and land tenure. All these areas are very closely interrelated and should be considered the components of a holistic agricultural policy. It is common place that African agriculture has failed to rise from its present level of subsistence (and a very poor subsistence at that) to a dynamic sector with a multiplication of producing power because it is not a profitable enterprise which is sustained by innovations coming out of research, credit facilities, investments and even proper policy of land use. To invigorate it, governments must not only adopt the proper policies but they must also relentessly persue these policies to their successful conclusion.

The response of African public enterprises cannot be said to have been warm so far. There is dearth of reliable data on their performance because of the difficulty of communication and lack of feedback. However, they themselves are subjected to the policies of their respective governments which may not be systematic or even rational. The ultimate test of their performance must nevertheless be determined by their proximity to the targets of the Lagos Plan of Action or even their own national development plans. The papers which will relate to us various country experiences will probably shed more definite light on the progress made in the last two years. So far, there is no record of any discernable achievement since the African countries committed themselves in 1980 to the Plan.

(b) Industry

The complementarity of agriculture and industry has been given due recognition by the Plan. Industry can ensure a multiplication of agricultural production by producing the necessary implements. Agriculture, on its part, produces some inputs to industry, especially food processing and textile industries. Therefore, agriculture and industry must not be seen as two competing and mutually hostile areas. The old debate whether to develop by industrialization or by farming on a large scale is no longer relevant; there can be no development by one means to the exclusion of the other.

The Plan sets some targets in Industry and these targets are tough, to say the least. In the first place, the Plan reaffirms the decisions passed at the Second General Conference of UNIDO at Lima and the Third General Conference of UNIDO at New Delhi on the African Industrial Development Decade and endorses the New Delhi Declaration and Plan of Action submitted by the Group of 77. In order to meet the targets set by all these, Africa will have to produce an industrial output of 1% of world industrial production by 1985 and reach the 2% mark by the year 2,000. Expressed in percentage terms these targets seem to be within easy reach, but when expressed in terms of tons of finished goods they are indeed formidable and will daunt everyone but the most determined.

The current decade (1980 to 1990) has been proclaimed the "Industrial Development Decade in Africa" in order that Africa will achieve a greater share of world industrial output. This challenge is obviously directed to the industrial public enterprises. It is they, more than any other, who should familiarize themselves not only with the Lagos Plan of Action but also with the contents and requirements of the Industrial Development Decade Programme which emphasises the development of certain core industries (such as metallurgical, chemical, engineering, and building materials) which provide effective linkages to other sectors of the economy like agriculture.

To implement the programme for the Industrial Development Decade for Africa would require at least US$140 billion. From the magnitude of this anticipated expenditure we can deduce the magnitude of the challenge to be met and the size of the effort to be made. The situation is complicated further by the fact that the core - industries are characterized by complex and sophisticated technologies and are subject to economies of scale. Unfortunately, most African countries are faced with problems of mobilizing and redeploying financial resources of the establishment of these industries and are hard pressed for foreign exchange: the private sector, being weak, cannot even dream of establishing them. This leaves the field to foreign private entrepreneurs, but they themselves would not come in without a favourable investment policy which will not only attract them but will also guarantee repatriation of capital and profits. A wise foreign investment policy should stipulate the transfer of technology to nationals. In fact some African countries, such as Zambia, have provided the material incentives for a forward-looking policy of training nationals, by deducting the cost of such training from the taxes due to the Government. But even when a country adopts a very liberal investment policy foreign investors are discouraged by apparent instability and the possibility of a socialist government coming to power.

It would be contrary to the spirit of the Lagos Plan of Action and the clamour for self-reliance to say that the Continent should industrialize by persuing a liberal investment policy which would attract foreign industrial corporations, multinationals and others. True, the required financial resources alone are formidable and cannot be wholly provided by the member-States alone without receiving generous support from international organizations and bilateral sources. These difficulties are very discouraging indeed and do not help African countries to be optimistic about meeting the challenges.

The response of African industrial enterprises has not been clear. But we are not aware of notable achievements since the Lagos Plan of Action was adopted two years ago. We will leave the papers on country experiences to tell us of any success stories, if there are any. Even the member-States have not been supplying any feed-back information to the ECA and the OAU on the difficulties encountered and the success achieved in the implementation of the Plan. By now a great deal should have been achieved. At least the foundations of a sound and coherent industrial policy which harmonizes with agricultural policy should have been laid down; again there is no evidence that even the beginnings of such a policy obtain in the member-States.

(c) Natural Resources and Science and Technology

There are obvious advantages in taking science and technology together with natural resources since the two are so closely inter-related. Africa is endowed with abundant natural resources but they remain largely underdeveloped or even untapped. The Lagos Plan of Action identifies the problems confronting African States in the field of natural resources as: "lack of information on natural resource endowment of large and unexplored areas and the activities of transnational corporations dealing with natural resource assessments;" lack of adequate capacity (capital, skills and technology) for the development of these resources; a considerable dependence on foreign transnational corporations for the development of a narrow range of

African natural resources selected by these corporations to supply new material needs of the developed countries; the inadequate share in the value added generated by the exploitation of natural resources of member-States due to imperfect pricing and marketing practices, non-integration of the raw materials exporting industries into the national economics of the member-States thus impeding backward and forward linkages; extremely low level of development and utilization of those natural resources of no interest to foreign transnational corporations; and disappointingly low general contribution of natural resources endowment to socio-economic development."1/

The excercise of sovereignty by the African States over their natural resources is limited by the above factors and the Lagos Plan of Action addresses itself to these problems. Therefore, it recommends that the strategy during the 1980s aims at: (1) assessing natural resources endowments and using the information in planning, and (2) integrating the development of natural resources in socio-economic development programmes, both national and African, in order to encourage the complementarity of different natural resources, (3) undertaking comprehensive manpower, technology and capital needs surveys, (4) strengthening existing national and African multinational institutions dealing with natural resource development, (5) harmonizing natural resource development policies, and (6) working closely with the international community as well as non-African agencies involved in natural resource development in the region. The Plan also sets some objectives in the development of particular resources such as mineral and water resources. The latter resource is indeed vital to large parts of the Continent which are so dry that even drinking water is in short supply. It takes precedence therefore (more in these areas than in others) over all the other natural resources.

4/ Ibid, P. 29, para. 76

The place of science and technology is not held in dispute. The argument may be advanced that the present level of development, which is admittedly very low, does not justify any preoccupation with science and technology. A country which cannot even execute a simple rural development project, one would say, will hardly benefit from the sophistication inherent in the application of science and technology. But African countries find themselves in a fast-moving world and have the dream to catch up with others. In President Nyerere's terms, therefore, they have to "run while others walk"; they could do so only with the aid of science and technology.

Not surprisingly, the longest chapter in the Lagos Plan of Action is the one on science and technology. This is not to say, however, that science and technology are more important than agriculture or human resource development; but the prominence given to them in the Plan is merely to undersore the importance of science and technology as accelerators of agricultural and industrial development: they are not an end in themselves, but they are sine qua none to speedy development. Furthermore, the very mention of science and technology may give the impression that the member-States are being asked to go for high technology and advanced scientific methods: perhaps, the manufacture of cars, planes and computers - and even space technology - readily come to mind. This would be presposterous in view of the current stage of African development - or underdevelopment. The science and technology programme recommended in the Plan is a very simple one - and something within the reach of African countries. The Plan actually calls for, inter alia, the encouragement of indigenous technologies, exchange of knowledge and experience among African scientists and technologists, technology transfer among member-States and technical cooperation among them.

A great many African countries do not have any institutions for the promotion of science and technology: others, though few in number, have ministries, agencies and centres for such a purpose. Since all independent African countries have committed themselves to the Lagos

Plan of Action and have therefore accepted its science and technology programme they will be well-advised to start with institution building to which the Plan devotes a great deal.

The economic debate in Europe and North America centers today on energy. After the petrol crises which followed the Arab/Israeli war of 1973 energy problems became more and more urgent. The developed world has been engaged in a frantic search for alternative sources of energy. But Africa needs energy too, not for cold winters and numerous and heavy industries, but for its limited number of industries, cities and villages. Energy is not only petrol; it is many and varied and Africa is generously endowed with present and potential sources of energy. Therefore, a good deal of research, if carried out, will greatly benefit Africa. However, the research which is now going on in the developed world is focused on finding a cheaper replacement for petrol so that factories will operate, cars will move, planes will fly, and homes will be warm in the winter.

Unfortunately, many African governments have not so far understood the value of research; they therefore think that any amonnt of money spent on research is money wasted. The developed countries are carrying out the type of research which will benefit them; it would be naive to expect them to be so ultruistic as to engage in research which will only benefit their future competetors. That is probably why research in solar energy, for example, did not go far enough: it is still in the demonstrative stage. The sun is burnning hot over most of the Third World, but one fails to understand why the oil-rich countries, notably those of Arabia, which are rich also with solar energy, do not put substantial amounts of money into the research in solar energy: perhaps somebody should direct this to their attention or, better still, the matter should be one for Arab/African cooperation.

To what extent, one may ask, have African public enterprises responded to these opportunities ? First of all, in most countries, the exploration and development of natural resources is not entrusted to public enterprises. Generally, there are ministries of mining, water supply and energy and almost no institutions at all for science and technology. This is not to deny the existence of mining and oil companies, electricity, hydraulic and other energy-tapping agencies, but these are few in number and control is firmly in the hands of the central government. Public enterprises, such as exist in these areas, have not made any successes which are worth noting. Oil has been found, as we read in the news, in some African countries, like Ivory Coast, the Sudan, Malawi, and Tanzania, but by foreign companies. It is believed that oil is available in commercial quantities in a number of other African countries and there is strong suspiscion that the reason for not drilling it out to the surface is political. If African countries had the technical capacity to do this for themselves their economic situation would have been very different from what it is today. Unfortunately, oil prospecting and drilling need a very sophisticated technology which is even beyond the reach of intermediate powers, let alone Africa. For this reason the publicly-owned oil companies in Nigeria and Libya, for instance, do not do any prospecting or drilling themselves. If public enterprises do not have the knowledge and the technical capacity to carry out the functions and responsibilities entrusted to them their existence loses sense and meaning.

(d) Transport and Communication

The role and importance of the public sector in the transport and communications sector in Africa is well established in that all the various transport modes and communications media have, are, and will continue to be developed by the public sector or by agencies under direct public control.

As far as the Lagos Plan of Action is concerned, it needs to be pointed out that a comprehensive programme for the development of the transport and communications sectors had already been established under the auspices of the United Nation's Transport and Communications Decade in Africa (UNTACDA) and the LPA merely subsumed this programme in its entirety. Thus in the transport and communications sectors, the LPA and UNTACDA are one and the same.

Already the development of railways, maritime and ports, inland water transport, air transport, and the trans-African road network are firmly under the responsibility of the public sector in Africa and the strategy advanced by the LPA does not introduce any implications for these sectors. Similarly, the PANAFTEL programme in its entirety is under the various public authorities and ministries of telecommunications in the various African countries.

Public sector responsibility for transport and communications development has invariably gone hand in hand with public enterprises and companies for the construction and maintenance of infrastructures with the result that all African ports, airports, railways, roads, telecommunications network, etc.., have either been constructed by public sector firms or under public sector control, by private firms.

It should be pointed out that once transport and communications infrastructures and facilities have been constructed in place, they last a long time and require adequate periodic and occasional emergency maintenance. This is true for ports, airports, railways, highways, telecommunications networks etc.., and the perpetual existence of public enterprises to operate these facilities does not necessarily imply that public construction companies should be maintained for each of these modes, since in most cases construction of new facilities occurs between long intervals. The existence of public oonstruction companies in many African countries with expensive capital and specialized equipment which is seldom used, partly because heavy/specialized construction is not a continuous process and partly because such companies are not suited for contract works, is uneconomical. What is important and indispensable is well-equipped maintenance crews for the upkeep of the system.

While acknowledging the role of the public sector in the transport and communications sectors, national self-sufficiency in public construction companies for each country is not necessarily viable for each country. A rational solution to this problem lies in multinational or subregional approaches which could encourage the setting up of a few number of multinational or subregional construction companies which can carry out work on subregional basis and thus be assured of sufficient work and efficient use of heavy capital-intensive equipment and it does not paticularly matter whether such companies are public or private.

Both the LPA and the UNTACDA call for close co-operation both at the regional/subregional levels in the implementation of transport and communications sector programmes. Policies for such co-operation and programmes for joint implementation have already been established in the transport and communications subsectors. These include policies and programmes on regional and subregional activities in maritime, air, railway, highways, training institutions and programmes, some of which are already being implemented under the first phase of the Decade.

The major constraints encountered so far and likely to be encountered in the future are:

(i) lack of the large financial and technical resources to carry out some of these multinational projects;

(ii) lack of an established subregional or intergovernmental body to co-ordinate some of the activities on behalf of the various countries involved; and

(iii) the legal implications and thus the unwillingness of any one country to promote some multinational, subregional and regional programmes and activities of co-operation.

In conclusion, all public sectors in Africa should play an active and important role in the implementation of the LPA in the transport and communications sectors, not so much because the LPA requires them, but because transport and communications have traditionally been public sector activities. In the fields of transport and communications, but more so in the former, the public sector has made noticeable improvements especially in so far as the construction of roads is concerned.

(e) Trade and Finance

Public enterprises in the sector of trade are usually engaged in domestic trade. Those for foreign trade exist but they are admittedly few because international trade is balanced in favour of imports: in other words there is a trade deficit because countries in Africa, indeed in the Third World as a whole, import much more than they export. This blatant imbalance can be remedied in large measure by increasing exports and reducing imports through import-substitution and by changing the pattern of consumption in favour of domestic goods.

Many African countries have established public enterprises which will produce for the domestic market goods which were previously imported. These enterprises operate what have been termed as "infant industries" which were said to require protection until they were strong enough to stand on their own feet and compete with the more established industries of the developed countries. The arguments for and against import-substitution-raging in the sixties and seventies - are very well-known, but African countries will be well advised to listen to foreign criticism if only for the purpose of self improvement. They should therefore, pause, for self-re-examination and self-reassessment; the vital question they should ponder about is whether African industries have been "spoilt" by continued dependence on protection or whether they have languished for lack of it. However varied and commonplace the reasons may be the fact remains, to this date, that imports have devoured the foreign currency resources of most African countries.

If African countries must import why can't they import from each other ? In other words, why shouldn't there be an inter-African trade which should be given a chance to take root and prosper ? In this sphere also the problems are frustrating and at the height of these problems are transport and communication difficulties which are the life-blood of any trade. We have covered these problems briefly in this Section under the relevant title but when it comes to trade, be it domestic or international, one is unavoidably impressed with the importance of transport and communication. But there are other barriers to inter-African trade: even such contiguous countries as Nigeria and the Cameroon find it much easier to trade with Britain and France respectively than with each other; there are problems of language and outlook, of politics and ethnics, and of financial and institutional arrangements. In addition, African goods are generally very highly priced and of low quality and are not therefore competitive.

The Lagos Plan of Action lays heavy emphasis on the removal of these barriers and the establishment of economic integration groupings. It sets a number of goals which have to be attained in the first half of this decade. The role of public enterprises, so far, in promoting and venturing into economic integration has not been very clearly defined or successfully played. There are economic integration groupings such as ECOWAS and UDEAC, to mention just two, and we have seen recently the establishment of the Eastern and Southern African Preferential Trade Area ; but there have been some failures too, such as the collapse of the once-promising East African Economic Community. Public enterprises generally operate as far as foreign trade is concerned in the export of, say, coffee, cocoa, bananas or whatever else a country may have as its main export; they are also concerned in imports and wholesale supply to domestic business establishments: there are those enterprises which specialize in importing medical drugs for distribution to pharmacies as there are others which import things like building materials, petrol and its affiliates, and even cars, tractors and the like. In countries where socialism has been declared as a national ideology public enterprises spring up for every conceivable trade. However, the public enterprises in the sector of trade (and we must include those in agriculture and industry not only because they export their goods, but also because they are involved in a very vital hard-currency saving exercise) have not made a very impressive performance. This conclusion can be reached very easily when one sees chronic shortages of commodities for which they have been made responsible or the dwindling of their foreign exchange earning capacity.

Finance is of course supremely important. If late, the lack of it has been blamed for conveivable short-falls in supplies - especially, the lack of hard currency. Finance is the life-blood of development; but it is also true that development produces finance. Public sector institutions in the financial sector, especially the banks (central banks, credit banks, commercial banks, and all sorts of development banks) bear the responsibility for financing development projects, not those of government only, but also those in the private sector. In fact, it is the public sector which sets the pace and tempo of the private sector but it is the private sector which invigorates the economy. Financial institutions which have now become quite ineffective should be vivified so that they will in turn breath a new life into the multifarious projects which are dying for lack of development finance.

Development finance is not only in credits and insurance but it is also in the realm of taxation. The latter can be used either to encourage or to kill development. There is a type of greed on the part of governments desirous of filling up the public purse, which leads to heavy and burdonsome taxation and therefore stifles development. Governments should encourage national entrepreneurs through tax incentives without which they cannot forge ahead their development schemes;

these incentives are also essential for those public enterprises which show positive results in their endeavours.

III. CONCLUSIONS

We have noted the reasons why the public sector should play such a dominant role in the economic life of African nations: one reason is purely ideological; the other is that the private sector is very weak. In countries where a free-market economy operates the public sector takes the responsibility to vivify the private sector so that it will shoulder its own share of responsibilities in the development task. In most countries in Africa (even in those without compelling ideological reasons) we find that the public sector has actually stifled the initiative of the private sector and has consequently and unnecessarily overburdened itself with responsibilities. For this reason it has been very sluggish when in fact the situation demanded a great deal of dynamism.

The Lagos Plan of Action presents difficult challenges to public enterprises in particular, but it also provides some opportunities. The first and greatest challenge of all is whether the opportunities will be perceived, correctly interpreted and vigorously persued. Although concrete information on the performance of each public center enterprise is lacking it appears to be fair to say that they seem to have fallen somewhat behind expectations. How could this conclusion be reached, one may ask, without "facts and figures" ? the fact is that the progress made, since the Plan was adopted in 1980, in the various fields of development activity is quite imperceptible - if the situation has not even deteriorated. One only needs to look at the acute shortages which have not been remedied, the drain of valuable and scarce hard currency still unabated, the old practices of maladministration not anywhere near falling into desuetude, the misguided policies still in use and the serious departures from some vital tenets of the Plan. As previously mentioned, it is for the country papers to recount to us some success stories which occurred since the Plan was adopted two years ago.

The first priority of the Lagos Plan of Action is, understandably, self-sufficiency in food; in other words, the fight against hunger comes first. The main reason for this is that the wide-spread prevalence of hunger has caused malnutrition, disease and even starvation and, in consequence, African countries have been compelled to compromise their sovereignty in order to save lives: a man who needs others for his basic necessities cannot be free. The primary goal, therefore, is freedom from want after having wore freedom from colonial domination. Exports have not been given in the Lagos Plan of Action the prominence they found in the pages of the World Bank Report which is seen in some quarters, mainly African, as a device to deflect African countries from the course they have chosen for themselves; one does not give away, for anything, something on which one's own survival hinges and anything to be exported away must be classified as surplus. In Africa, therefore, the battle for development is a battle for survival and the public sector as a whole (and public enterprises in particular) should, with that in view, endeavour to fulfill the requirements of the Lagos Plan of Action. They should continually and on periodical basis examine themselves and assess their own performance so that they would see where they are going and will never lose sight of the main goal.