

Vice-Chancellor's Message to the 20th Annual All African Students Conference

It is a great pleasure to welcome participants in the 20th annual All African Students Conference to Rhodes University.

"Democracy and Development: Changing the Face of Leadership in Africa" is an apt theme for a gathering of student leaders from across the African continent.

The concepts 'democracy' and 'development' are defined in various ways and have a variety of associated meanings. Notions of democracy and development, of course, are not neutral. They are embedded in different views of the world and society, including views on what constitutes a just and good society. The values, choices, policies, actions and practices that are associated with particular conceptions of democracy and development are also not benign in that they have real and differential effects on different social classes and groups in society. Further, there are what may be described as, on the one hand, "thin" conceptions of democracy and development, and on the other hand "thick" conceptions of democracy development.

To take only the example of 'development', "thin" conceptions are essentially economic, and tend to reduce the idea of development to economic growth and enhanced economic performance as measured by various indicators. Development reduced to economic growth gives rise to goals, policies, institutional arrangements and actions that focus primarily on promoting growth and reducing obstacles to growth. In contrast, "thick" conceptions of development extend beyond a concern with economic growth to embrace issues of a wider economic nature as well as social, cultural and political issues. At their most extensive, the concern of goals, policies, institutional arrangements and actions are with structural economic change which widens ownership and eliminates or reduces income inequality, unemployment and poverty; greater social equality; equity and redress for socially disadvantaged and marginalised groups; expansion of human, economic and social rights and civil liberties; the institutionalisation of a substantive democracy and vibrant civil society; deracialisation and decolonisation of intellectual and cultural spaces; and extension and the deepening of political and citizenship participation.

Nobel Prize winner Amartya Sen's 1999 book, *Development as Freedom*, embodies well the "thick" concept of development, Sen viewing development as: "a process of expanding the real freedoms that people enjoy. Focusing on human freedoms contrasts with narrower views of development, such as identifying development with the growth of gross national product, or with the rise in personal incomes, or with industrialization, or with technological advance". In this context, it will be important to explore the ideas of democracy and development that are apposite for the economic, social and political challenges that face Africa.

In as much as ideas on democracy and development are important in their own rights, also important is how the relationship between democracy and development is conceived. This raises a wide array of questions. One is that of

the role of democracy in development - whether individual, intellectual, social, cultural, economic or political development. Another is the meaning of development in a democracy – what kinds of development are necessary conditions for the existence, extension and deepening of democracy.

In the African context it has been argued in some quarters that democracy is impossible without particular levels of economic development. The late Claude Ake noted in 1991 that many regimes tied “the issue of democratization to economic development, asserting that the quest for democracy must be considered in the context of Africa's most pressing needs, especially emancipation from 'ignorance, poverty and disease'. The pursuit of democracy will not, it is argued, feed the hungry, or heal the sick. Nor will it give shelter to the homeless. People must be educated and fed before they can appreciate democracy, for there is no choice in ignorance and there are no possibilities for self-fulfillment in extreme poverty”.

This suggests that we have to wait for economic development to ensure democracy. However, can democracy not impact positively on the process of development, as well as on its nature and trajectory? Ake's rejoinder is pertinent: “Africa's failed development experience suggests that postponing democracy does not promote development; (and) (e)ven if it were true that democracy is competitive with development, it does not follow that people must be more concerned with improving nutrition than casting votes, or more concerned with health than with political participation. The primary issue is not whether it is more important to eat well than to vote, but who is entitled to decide which is more important”. Amartya Sen argues much the same point when he speaks of ‘freedom as an end and freedom as means’ and states that “overcoming the inequalities of power associated with economic privilege is an important aspect of democracy in the full sense of the term”.

Advancing democracy and development (and social equity) requires leadership that is both attuned to African challenges and also ethical, democratic, developmental, committed, disciplined, capable and humble. To the extent that this conference facilitates the emergence of such a student leadership in each African country it will make a vital contribution to the enhancement of democracy and development in Africa.

I trust that you will find Rhodes University a stimulating physical, social and intellectual environment for your important deliberations and wish participants a productive conference.

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