

# Toward ‘Re-Humanizing’ Projects and Project Management in Africa <sup>1</sup>

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## Abstract

This paper is an attempt toward ‘re-humanizing’ projects and project management in Africa and ‘saving’ development projects in the continent from the shackles of ‘market fundamentalism’ inexorably driven by shareholder capitalism focused on profit maximization. As in other developing countries, projects and project management in Africa have largely been at the service of shareholder capitalists evidenced through their heightened focus on production of market and profit oriented ‘unique products and services’ that are hardly responsive to the needs and challenges that confront millions of Africa’s poorest. We maintain that projects and project management in Africa (and also in other developing countries) have historically served and continue to serve the interest of shareholder capitalists, who design, plan and finance and implement ‘development’ projects in the continent through corporatist project-based organizations. We argue that development projects can only be relevant and responsive in addressing the ‘roaming black elephants’ and the ‘wicked problems’ in Africa, namely dehumanization, marginalization and destitution, when the needs and the conditions of the historically marginalized populations and communities in the continent are placed at the center of development programming. To save projects from the shackles of market fundamentalism, projects and project management in the continent should be grounded on a philosophy of pragmatic humanism that places people and not shareholder capitalists and markets at the center of projects and project management. Africa’s development projects must be designed and managed to serve the historically marginalized millions in the continent. This calls for a new and radical project development and implementation paradigm grounded on a re-humanizing orientation. Invariably, Africa governments and their development policy elites, sponsors and managers of development projects have a responsibility to re-design and re-orientate development programming around the needs and lived experiences of millions in the continent who have historically been marginalized and made destitute by shareholder capitalism through their neoliberal development projects.

## Introduction

Development projects are the center of the so called “African Renaissance’- a ‘new’ Africa. All over Africa, massive infrastructure development projects are being implemented to open up the continent for new investments. The African Union, for instances, places innovative flagship development projects at the center of its ambitious Agenda 2063 development blue print for the continent. Development projects are shaping not only the politics in Africa, but are also being used as a strategy for marketing and repositioning individual countries in the continent as new

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investment hubs. Development projects are routinely being deployed to re-image the continent and used as evidence of a continent on the journey to economic and cultural rebirth (the ‘African Renaissance’). Flagship development projects, specifically massive infrastructure development projects, are at the center of the so-called renaissance. However, behind these massive infrastructure development projects are millions of historically destitute and marginalized populations and communities in the continent who are routinely forcibly relocated with paltry compensation or no compensations at all to give room for the ‘re-birth of the continent’ through infrastructure led development. In the face of the massive development taking place in Africa through infrastructure led development projects, the growing statistics on poverty, unemployment, marginalization and suffering of millions of people in Africa are shocking but not surprising. The 2006 World Bank summarized the deplorable and pathetic development conditions in Africa:

*Making headway against African poverty and meeting the Millennium Development Goals are raising difficult challenges in most African countries. Despite pockets of success, nearly half the region’s population still lives in extreme poverty, and Africa still houses about three-fourths of the world’s poorest countries.*

While trillions are annually sunk into development projects in the continent, millions of people in Africa go to bed without food, die from curable diseases, with skyrocketing unemployment among millions of fairly well educated and qualified young people. Whereas some development policy experts argue that the massive infrastructure-led development taking place in Africa will take time for its positive effects to be felt by the poor in the continent, there is legitimate concern about the relevance of these output-based development projects in the face of destitution, marginalization and peasantization.

## **Shareholder Capitalism and Development Projects in Africa**

The disconnect between output development and the poor quality of human life in Africa is based on a fundamentally flawed development philosophy; a development philosophy exclusively driven by shareholder capitalism. Massive development projects in the continent are not driven by the quest for promoting the quality of life of the millions of subalterns in the continent, but are implemented and financed to serve the interests of shareholder capitalist and their markets. Massive infrastructure development projects in the continent are deliberately designed and implemented to further market interests, and are hardly designed to address historical inequity and marginalization in the continent.

While capitalist corporations have historically undermined development and the quality of life of the people in Africa, project-based organizations in Africa (PBOs) are the new capitalist corporations that are driving ‘development’ and the so-called development projects in Africa. For example, the World Bank and its capitalist financial institutions have presided and continue to preside over the marginalization and destitution of the continent through projects that are deliberately designed to fail and invariably cause suffering. The power of market fundamentalism

is alive and ravaging the continent through output-based development projects that are not responsive to the suffering and marginalization of millions of poor people in Africa. For instance, the so-called structural adjustment programmes and projects that were designed and funded by the World Bank and her capitalist financial institutions led to massive job losses, suffering and destitution in the continent (Abouharb & Cingranelli 2007; SAPRI 2004; Mkandawire & Soludo 2003; Mkandawire & Soludo 1998). The destitution and dehumanization of poor people in the continent continues to be exacerbated by large scale infrastructure development projects through forced resettlement, diversion of funds for much needed social services like education, healthcare and social protection. The fundamental philosophy of these development programmes and projects in Africa, was and continues to be the same: shameless shareholder capitalist exploitation of the continent and systematic undermining of the quality of life of millions of Africans. SAPRI (2004) succinctly summarizes the diabolic effects of these neoliberal programmes and projects in Africa:

*One factor, more than any other, has crippled national economies, increased poverty and inequality, and made many millions of people hungry. It is a set of policies, called structural adjustment, that has been forced on developing countries for more than 20 years by the World Bank, the International Monetary Fund and Western aid agencies.*

The new ‘scramble and partition’ of Africa driven by ‘new development finance’ in the form of resource swaps for infrastructure development projects in Africa are driving millions of already destitute people in the continent to more suffering, destitution and marginalization. It is therefore not a paradox that as more output infrastructure-led development programmes and projects are being implemented in the continent, millions of Africans are getting poorer and destitute annually. The reason is simple: the so-called development projects in the continent are serving the interest of a clique of shareholder capitalists in and outside Africa, and their political protégés who are charged with creating political conditions for these projects. While these massive infrastructure projects give the continent some semblance of modernity and the impression that Africa is the ‘next frontier’ on the march towards a new renaissance, the reality is that these massive infrastructures led projects serve the interests of the shareholder capitalists and their agents in the continent. Sadly, the poor are heavily taxed to re-pay the loans for these so-called development projects. These massive development projects create conditions for subalternity in Africa, and in other developing countries.

Marketization and commodification of development in Africa, through these heavily financed development projects, is driving millions into destitution. Moreover, politicians and ‘development elites’ responsible for these development projects in Africa are driven by short term profit maximization at the expense of promoting the wellbeing of the poor millions in the continent. Profit maximization and marketization are the prime development goals of these massive development projects. Sadly, millions in Africa are heavily taxed and made to suffer to finance these projects. Profits and commodification have never led to improved wellbeing of the poor: this is the painful situation in Africa. In a continent where shareholder capitalism freely reins, people’s felt needs are made subservient to the forces of marketization and commodification.

Massive development projects reinforce the very subaltern conditions of the millions poor in the continent. Projects must be made to serve a higher mission, a humanizing and liberatory mission in Africa.

## **Pragmatic Humanism and Development Programming in Africa**

Pragmatic humanism is anchored on a number of theoretical principles which make it a relevant philosophy for development programming in Africa. Broadly conceptualized, people and their lived experiences are at the center of pragmatic humanism (Honnacker 2018; Reynolds 2004; Burrell 1932). This perspective was beautifully summarized by Protagoras' maxim: *man is the measure of all things*. Applied to this paper, development projects in Africa must be centred around existential challenges facing the marginalized millions in the continent. The yardstick for designing and implementing development projects in the continent should be lived experiences of the millions in Africa with marginalization, inequity and systemic oppression. Projects and project management in Africa must be re-humanized and must be made to serve the needs and address the systemic challenges that millions face in the continent and not to serve the interests of shareholder capitalists and markets.

Pragmatic humanism advocates for transformative actions centered around people and their needs (Honnacker 2018; Reynolds 2004; Burrell 1932). The call for re-humanizing development is equally relevant for the so-called urban regeneration development projects that are being implemented in Africa's urban spaces. Massive urban regeneration and transformation projects in Africa must be centred around the needs of the people living in those spaces. Urban regeneration projects in African cities deeply serve shareholder capitalists. Urban regeneration or gentrification projects in the continent are deliberately designed and implemented to serve markets and capitalist shareholders. The 'new urban colonialism' (Atkinson & Bridge 2005) has led to growth of urban squalor, misery, forced displacement and dehumanizing urban inequality and poverty among millions of poor and disposed Africans.

Pragmatic humanism is an emancipatory philosophy (Honnacker 2018; Reynolds 2004; Burrell 1932). In our context, it focuses on actions that work towards the emancipation of the millions of poor in the continent who have historically been marginalized and made destitute by shareholder capitalists and market forces (Neocosmos 2016). Using the lenses of pragmatic humanism, development projects in the continent must also be liberated from the shackles of capitalist corporations and neoliberalism. For millions of poor Africans to be at the center of development, development projects and their management must go through a transformation that is aligned to the needs and lived experiences of the poor and marginalized in the continent. An emancipatory philosophy grounded in pragmatic humanism requires not just emancipation of the marginalized millions in the continent who must be at the center of this emancipation, but also requires an emancipatory and bold political and civic leadership. African political and civic leaders must liberate themselves from the shackles of neoliberal and corporatist capitalism, if the poor millions in the continent are to benefit from these massive development projects being implemented across the continent.

Pragmatic humanism takes a rationalist outlook and precludes any supernatural powers to be at work in the world (Honnacker 2018; Reynolds 2004; Burrell 1932). We know that the historical marginalization and destitution of millions in Africa are not the result of some supernatural or suprasensible powers up in the sky or under the oceans. The historical marginalization and dispossession of millions of people in Africa were and continues to be designed by shareholder capitalists and their corporations, through the complicity of African political and development policy elites. The design of marginalization and destitution was initiated and implemented through colonialism and imperialism, and later through neoliberal policies and programs (structural adjustment programmes, privatization, deregulation, etc). If there are gods that have been destructive on the continent, then the gods are shareholder capitalists, who have historically raped the continent.

Re-humanizing development programming in Africa must be foregrounded on a thorough understanding of the historicity of underdevelopment of the continent. The powers that have been at work in Africa over the past one hundred years are colonial, imperial and neoliberal forces. These dark forces of exploitation and marginalization have recruited their African protégés in furthering their agenda for exploiting Africa. ‘Development’ projects have been the vehicles for the blatant exploitation and marginalization of the continent. The resources-for-infrastructure (R4I) swaps are new ‘development’ financing strategies (Sachs and Warner 2001; Sala-i-Martin and Subramanian 2003; Bräutigam 2011) that shareholder capitalists are using to further dispossess and underdevelop Africa.

Pragmatic humanism pursues a meliorist project and strives for human flourishing (Honnacker 2018; Reynolds 2004; Burrell 1932). Shareholder capitalism has created suffocating and marginalizing processes and conditions for millions in Africa. Evidence abounds of the dehumanizing consequences of neoliberal ‘development’ policies, programs and projects in the continent. As a result of these neoliberal ‘development’ projects driven by shareholder capital and the quest for markets, millions in the continent have been dispossessed and marginalized. A development philosophy based on pragmatic humanism requires people centered policies, programmes and interventions that are designed and implemented to ameliorate the conditions created by shareholder capitalism and its neoliberal and commodification onslaughts in the continent.

At the heart of pragmatic humanist perspective of development programming is a call for the re-design of conditions that make human flourishing possible in the continent. Marginalization is designed. Conditions that create destitutions and subalternity are equally designed. We fully agree with and support the perspectives of the Creative Reaction Lab (2018) that systems of marginalization and inequalities are designed:

*The reality of our society is that any system produces what it was designed to produce (unless a stronger force intervenes). Therefore, if oppression, inequalities, and inequities are designed, they can be redesigned. As we strive for human equity, we have to be able to recognize inequity and have the ability to recognize ourselves as designers who have the power to disrupt it.*



For human flourishing to be achieved for the historically marginalized and excluded in Africa, project management must rise to a higher calling and must re-design conditions that promote human flourishing. Development projects and the project managers in Africa must be at the forefront of re-dressing the destructive conditions that have been designed over the years by shareholder capitalists and their protégés in the continent. Development projects must be designed and implemented in ways that promote sustainable human living for the million poor in Africa. This calls for the foregrounding of development projects and project management on a philosophy of pragmatic humanism. Invariably, project sponsors and managers of development projects in Africa have a responsibility to make the continent a better home for the millions who have historically been marginalized and made poor by shareholder capitalism through corporatist project-based organizations.

## **Conclusions**

The disconnect between development projects and the quality of life for the millions of poor in Africa can be addressed through a fundamental shift from a shareholder capitalistic philosophy of projects and project management to pragmatic humanism. Pragmatic humanism is a development paradigm grounded on a praxis of action. It is a development paradigm concerned with how to mobilize people's lived experiences for transformative change. Pragmatic humanism, in the context of the lived experiences of millions of poor people in Africa with suffering and marginalization, places the lived experiences of millions of poor, marginalized and subaltern Africans at the center of development programming. Development projects and project management within a pragmatic humanism lens see "the marginalized and poor Africans as the measure of all things". In other words, development projects in Africa must be centered around the lived experiences of the millions of poor in the continent with subalternity.

We are aware of the fact that a philosophy of pragmatic humanism and its application to the lived experiences of millions of poor Africans will meet stiff opposition from capitalist shareholders and their protégé development policy experts. This is expected. However, putting the lived experiences of the poor millions in Africa at the center of development programming requires political boldness from a new breed of African leaders, who must be politically bold to ensure that development programming in the continent address historical marginalization and destitution of millions of subaltern Africans.

The design and implementation of development projects in the continent must be grounded on the experiences of the subaltern African people who have been dispossessed and marginalized by shareholder capitalists and the forms of development they market for the continent. Development projects in Africa and project management in the continent must be committed to the insights and the lived experiences of millions of destitute and disposed Africans. This mission demands the taking of a plurality of perspectives of the marginalized and disposed, and a critical stance against

market fundamentalism in order to change the story of historical marginalization of the poor in Africa. This requires bold political and civic leadership and decisions.

Pragmatic humanism in the context of development projects and project management in Africa, requires an engaged understanding and transformation of the subaltern condition of the historically marginalized and disposed Africans. Pragmatic humanism requires engaged understanding of the historicity of marginalization and dispossession in Africa. And this engaged understanding requires us to place the blame where it belongs: infatuation of Africa leaders and development managers with the trappings of shareholder capitalism and the destructive power and influence of neoliberalism. Development projects and project management in Africa must serve higher values beyond the production of unique products and services for the market, and must address the lived development challenges of millions of subaltern people in Africa. Africa can only experience a rebirth when its leaders and development experts focus their mission of re-humanizing development programming.

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