

My bet on the Gates' Big Bet on Development in Africa

Ahead of the unveiling of the Sustainable Development Goals in September 2015, LSE's Donnas Ojok analyses the development projections of The Gates Foundation.

Every year, Bill and Melinda Gates, the world's richest couple and co-chairs of the world's biggest philanthropic organisation, the Bill and Melinda Gates Foundation produce an annual report. **The 2015 Annual Report** is a unique one because the couple makes a second big bet after their **first bet** in the year 2000 which focused on health and education. Their bet concludes, "This new century brings with it exciting advances in health and learning. We all share the responsibility of ensuring that these opportunities are not out of reach for the people who need them the most". That same year, world leaders made a pledge at the Millennium Summit in New York and the Millennium Development Goals (MDGs) were birthed. In the year of their second bet, the Sustainable Development Goals (**SDGs**) will be also come into being.



The Gates' bet for the next 15 years are grandiose, ambitious, breathtaking but yes, very achievable according to their realistic projections considering the achievements of the past decade and a half. Their bet is premised on a fourfold framework referred to as *breakthroughs*. The first breakthrough stresses that child deaths will be reduced by half and several other diseases will be eradicated. The second breakthrough emphasises a revolution within the agricultural sector and how Africa will feed itself. The third breakthrough re-echoes how transformations within the mobile telecommunications sector will enable billions of poor people to access and make good use of financial services whereas the last one provides the possibility of a radical transformation in the educational sector thanks to increasing advances in software technology. These are well-thought theories and ideas and if progress is made towards achieving them, then the goal of eradicating poverty in Africa can be achieved.

Let's take a brief look at these breakthroughs and assess if they are indeed capable of delivering feasible and sustained benefits for Africa's socio-economic transformation. Diseases are still Africa's biggest threat. In the 21st century, many Africans still die from preventable and treatable ailments like malaria, hepatitis and typhoid, etc. The appalling state of healthcare systems across the continent allow unacceptable deaths to occur, for instance, **16 Ugandan women die every day**

from childbirth-related complications alone. However, progress has been made ahead of schedule. The Gates' must indeed be heralded for the almost complete elimination of polio from the world through funding polio research projects, providing polio vaccines and improving access to HIV& AIDS and TB treatment and care services to millions of people globally. In 2014, for instance, more than **95% of children born by HIV&AIDS positive mothers were negative**.

The next 15 years look both dark and bright for health because of its extreme complexities. Inasmuch that more focus should be on all diseases, including neglected tropical diseases (NTDs), specific attention must be paid to improvement of healthcare system because this is the bedrock of championing any fight against diseases. Rwanda, for instance, has transformed her healthcare system enabling equal access to quality healthcare for all. According to **The Lancet's recent report**, Rwanda has efficiently and effectively utilised grants like The Global Fund to subsidise premiums and co-payments for around two million of the poorest citizens. Investment in health has the potential to spur a rapid economic growth as citizens live longer and better/healthy lives with greater opportunities to enhance their capabilities and exploit their potentials to the fullest. This is what Africa needs.

Agriculture in Africa remains the same old riddle. Governments have failed to meet the **2003 Maputo Declaration's** 10% budget allocation towards the agricultural sector. Actually, the agricultural policy framework in Africa does not: deliver the right approaches to improve the physical and finance infrastructures; promote research and development and bolster the competitiveness of the African agriculture. Amid all these challenges, I, however, agree with the Gates' bet that Africa will be able to feed itself by 2030. Nobody in Africa deserves to go hungry when my father-in-law in Kigezi throws away his cabbage and onions (because there is not enough market demand) and **a child in my former school** in Karamoja is not eating lunch and/or suffering from vitamin/protein deficiencies and related illnesses. This must not be allowed in the next 15 years. But Africa does need the Gates' to do this. The leaders must rise to this occasion and start walking the talk knowing that agriculture employs more than 70% of the people on the continent and is the backbone of most economies.

The revolution within the mobile technology subsector on the continent is undoubtedly spurring unprecedented economic growth across the continent. The continent has registered the **fastest global subscriber growth** over recent years. Mobile money and even traditional banking innovations will make financial inclusion more effective in the next 15 years. We should however not get so engrossed in this *romantic affair* and forget that African entrepreneurs still face the greatest challenges when it comes to access to financial resources amid the massive mobile tech growth and innovations. Perhaps tech players could continue leading technological growth and innovations, while the Gates' instead get more grounded on investing massively on the new breed of African entrepreneurs by providing patient capital, equity and grants.

The significance of education to the continent cannot be overemphasized and technology will even make its delivery more effective and efficient as postulated by the Gates'. However, I disagree with the Gates' that the impact of technology on primary education will still be minimal in the next 15 years. Inasmuch as billions of dollars was poured in education in Africa, quality still remains a big problem to date. Internet access and computer software will create some change in but not an education revolution in 15 years as assumed by the Gates. This is because Africa is quite different from Europe and America where the ICT infrastructure is highly functional and effective. I argue that African rural primary schools still need more libraries, books, comfortable classrooms, well-paid and incentivised teachers, good food and generally, a more favourable learning environment. Yes, computer training could be introduced and/or strengthened but it should not be prioritised, especially for rural Africa. Giving rural teachers iPads/tablets to facilitate teaching will not help Africa much now. Teachers need better salaries, housing and other incentives.

African development still remains very complex and precarious. Neither the Chinese rapid model nor the Western model is ideal. It certainly needs more than 15 years to achieve a desirous development outcome on the continent. For a strong foundation, we should lay one brick at a time

and the support by philanthropic bodies like the Gates' Foundation is still an essential ingredient for this process.

Donnas Ojok is a social Entrepreneur and an MSc Student at the London School of Economics and Political Science. ***Follow him on twitter @OjokD.***

The views expressed in this post are those of the author and in no way reflect those of the Africa at LSE blog or the London School of Economics and Political Science.

April 2nd, 2015 | [Development](#) | [1 Comment](#)

☺