

African Study Group -- Record of Joint ASG – CCIC Africa Canada Forum meeting of October 16, 2014

Guest speaker/ Invité d'honneur: Ousainou Ngum, Executive Director of ACORD (Agency for Cooperation and Research in Development), based in Nairobi

Participants: 28

Discussion

Le thème abordé par M Ousainou Ngum était “Le récit de la montée de l’Afrique et le partenariat avec le secteur privé” / The topic addressed by ACORD’s Executive Director was “The Africa Rising narrative and partnering with the private sector”.

It was quickly apparent that ACORD’s Executive Director considered the "Africa Rising" narrative as at best a work in progress and at worst a sham. On the basis of its vast resources and land mass -- the equivalent in area of the US, Western Europe and China rolled into one -- Africa should be a wealthy continent. However, that is far from the reality, a situation which Ousainou attributes to uneven distribution of resources, heavy income inequality, grossly inadequate infrastructure, and a lack of commitment to human capacity building, all of which he attributes to an absence of accountability of the ruling class to an informed citizenry.

In his view, the Africa Rising narrative is contestable because economic growth has not been solidly grounded, is not sustainable, and doesn't serve Africans. In his view a framework for development is lacking. Economic growth will not trickle down unless you invest in systems and mechanisms. Previous economic growth has been driven by debt, so that it has not benefited the average savannah dweller. The wealth has rather flowed to the ruling class and out of Africa.

Among members of the audience, Ousainou's thesis that African growth has been highly unequal and therefore unsustainable, drew a large measure of support. Africa, it was claimed, is rising -- for the donors and the dictators in Africa, not for the common man or woman. Most resources are stored in financial institutions outside Africa. Real unemployment in Africa is 50 per cent. Educated Africans are leaving in droves to find opportunity elsewhere because in many countries the governance system is corrupt and the rule of law is absent. Foreign aid is futile because it is siphoned off and the outflow is greater than the input. African governments don't bother taxing their rich citizens because they live off the avails of foreign aid.

A contrary view expressed was that the period of highest growth in Africa corresponded to a period of high out-migration and inequality. ACORD's Executive Director pointed out, however, that such growth will not be sustainable.

Several participants proposed corrective action. The international community could use its influence to promote greater social justice. The African Diaspora whose remittances now exceed the volume of foreign aid could practise conditionality. A strong civil society in Africa could push the envelope on governance. Kenya was cited as one country where civil society could no longer be ignored. The African Union could be empowered to be more accountable to the citizens rather than to the governments of Africa. The suggestion was made that Africans should be obliged to keep their money in African banks, not offshore.

Louise Ouimet summed up the discussion as follows:

- Africa is rising, but Africans are not.
- There is too much inequality in Africa.
- Our goal should be to promote greater prosperity and inclusiveness in Africa.
- What happens in Africa affects Canada's self-interest.
- There are no easy solutions.