

Information, Society and Justice, Volume 1.2, June 2008: pp 203-207
ISSN 1756-1078 (Online); DOI: 10.3734/isj.2008.1207

Pambazuka News: building a progressive pan African movement

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There are few African organisations able to build and support pan-African solidarity efforts in this kind of committed and yet rigorous manner. African civil society, including the women's movement, has come to need its services.

L Muthoni Wanyeki, Director Kenya Human Rights Commission

Pambazuka News is described variously as a e-newsletter or platform or website about social justice in Africa. There are some who see it as an example of innovative use of information and communication technologies. Yet it is both all of these and none of them.

Pambazuka News is an attempt to nurture and encourage the building of a progressive pan African movement within Africa and amongst what is popularly described as the African diaspora. The basis for this pan Africanism is only partly rooted in the ideas and aspirations of those such as Garvey, DuBois, Nkrumah and others. For us, Africa is not defined only by geography, but rather by its history. Previous attempts to define Africa in terms of its geography or other constructs such as 'African' fall inevitably into the trap of defining Africa racially, a trap that inevitably falls into the trap of creating stereotypical images of the African, and creates the kind of divisive politics that has led to caricatures about Darfur as a battleground between 'Arabs' and 'Africans'. Being African cannot be adequately defined in cultural terms, nor in religious or tribal terms. For us, it is a political identity, forged by our history, forged by a nascent anti-imperialism that has informed the development of the very construct of 'being African'.

To understand how Pambazuka News came about, I need to set the context of political developments in Africa since the end of the 2nd World War. The post 2WW period in Africa was characterised by an extraordinary phenomenon that swept the continent, from Cape to Cairo, from Mombasa to Dakar. In every country, popular movements emerged in villages, ghettos, factories, ports, farms, pastoralists, women, workers and amongst the mass of disenfranchised, Fanon's 'wretched of the earth'. This mass upsurge organised itself in a myriad of political formations, each in their own ways expressing resistance to the colonial yoke that had oppressed them for centuries. It was this mass resurgence that was effectively captured by the nationalist movement who promised the movement that their path to

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freedom from oppression and exploitation would be through political independence as defined by the nationalist programme. The nationalist governments were thrown into power on the basis of a social and political contract with the masses, a contract that was to be rapidly and universally breached and betrayed as the ruling elites took over the control of the untransformed, unreconstructed colonial state machinery in the aftermath of independence.

The betrayal was comprised of a number of elements. The first was built into the 'modernisation' project that in essence sought to say to the mass movement that the problem faced was no longer about freedom and emancipation, but instead about 'development' and 'poverty alleviation'. What that reconstruction of concepts allowed was that the problems faced by the masses was no longer political but rather technical. This reconstruction allowed the former colonial offices of the imperial powers to present themselves in their new guise as Overseas Development Agencies, and for their entourage of the new missionaries, the development NGOs, to come in with their technical tools and tricks to bring about 'development'. That said, we should not underestimate the continued power of the social contract established with the masses: in a very short period, universal education, universal access to healthcare, major improvements in life expectancy, child and infant mortality, maternal mortality – all these statistics showed dramatic improvements.

The second moment of this betrayal was for nationalist leadership (comprised usually of representatives of the newly emerging capitalist class) to see its task as one of preventing "centrifugal forces" from competing for political power or seeking greater autonomy from the newly formed "nation". Having grasped political self-determination from colonial authority, it was reluctant to accord the same rights to others. The new occupiers of the state machinery saw their role as the "sole developer" and "sole unifier" of society. The state defined for itself an interventionist role in "modernisation" and a centralising and controlling role in the political realm. In this role, they had no hesitation in banning political opposition, locking up, killing or disappearing leaders of the anti-colonial movement who were unwilling to buy into the new paradigm. Trade unions, mass organisations of women, and others were incorporated into the single political party. Before long, intellectuals who had failed to participate in the nationalist project were marginalised, locked up or forced into exile. Meanwhile, accumulation through the state machinery and the development of a parasitic relationship with the multinationals was the order of the day. Competition between different sections of the elites was fierce, with the armed forces frequently taking decisions into their own hands. And if development had become the game about who gets access to what, civil war became merely an extension of that project.

The next phase of betrayal came as a consequence of the spiralling debts accumulated as a result of the global glut of capital that emerged from the oil crisis. With the rise of Reagan in the US and Thatcher in the UK, neoliberal policies became the order of the day. Through the international financial institutions, structural adjustment programmes were 'imposed' – well more strictly willingly adopted by the ruling elites. These economic and social policies systematically undid all the gains of independence, removing subsidy to agriculture, freeing the market to international capital and commodities, disinvesting the education, health and social infrastructures, and freeing up the ability of the elite and its international allies to accumulate at unprecedented levels. Within two decades, the rich were richer than in any previous time in history, the poor poorer. And where the retrenching state left a vacuum in the provision of social services, that space was filled by the ever willing development NGO,

happily releasing the state of its obligations to provide such services to its citizens. And what was a citizen's right to expect the state to provide was replaced by charity and free enterprise. We were turned from citizen to consumer. And as such, our rights were determined by our purchasing power. And since the majority of citizens had no longer any purchasing power, the majority became disenfranchised. By the turn of the century, all the gains of independence were lost. We were left for the most part worse off than we were at independence. And social and economic policy was now determined not by the state or its citizens, but by the international financial institutions and the so-called donor agencies.

Two major events were to have a gigantic impact on the consciousness of everyone. In 1994, Africa looked on powerless as nearly a million Rwandans were hacked to death while the international community made polite noises or frankly colluded in the genocide. In the same year, the seemingly unbreachable walls of apartheid collapsed with the election of the ANC and investiture of Nelson Mandela as President of the South Africa. The impact of these events were to have resonance across the continent. Rwanda demonstrated to most that the rhetoric about good governance and human rights of the international community was just that: idle rhetoric. But South Africa showed that the subjective element remained important in determining our history: we could change the world – even the most impregnable forces could be brought down.

It was these two events that acted as the catalyst to the resurgence in the 1990s to the re-emergence of civic associations organising on a range of issues, and a questioning amongst activists about the legitimacy of the nationalist agenda. And it was this re-emergence of popular organisations that laid the foundations for Pambazuka News.

But the period was also overshadowed by the collapse of the former Soviet Union and the final crisis of Stalinism: this was to have a massive impact on the discrediting of socialist ideas and create the illusion that there was no alternative to current iterations of capitalist ideologies. How were we to lay the basis upon which the alternative to beggar-thy-neighbour, profiteering-at-any-price, imperial ideologies could be created. It was no use simply banging the drum and slogans of the past? We had to set about the task of forging the conditions for new thinking and for legitimizing a critique of capitalism that would enable a new generation of people who had had no contact with the socialist movement to reconnect with those ideas and ideologies, to learn the lessons of that movement, and to begin to build the basis for liberation.

In 1998, we researched into the information, communications and campaigning priorities of human rights and activist organisations, meeting with some 120 organisations in eight countries. What we found was that while POP3 email access (store and forward) was more or less ubiquitous amongst these organisations, access to the web was slow, frustrating and expensive because of the poor bandwidth and poor telecommunications infrastructure. Following this survey, we were inundated with request from organisations wanting us to help with doing online searches for them, with disseminating information about campaigns that they were carrying out, and connecting them with others campaigning on similar initiatives. Initially we supplied such services on a case by case basis, but as the word got around, we realised that there was an opportunity arising. It's easy to forget that even in the mid-1990s, interactions between activists in different African countries was limited – we knew more about what was going on in Europe than what was happening in a neighbouring country.

In December 2000, we launched Pambazuka News. The idea was simple. Given that the internet – or at least email – now enabled us to communicate across national boundaries, and given that most people still had difficulties in finding information on the internet because of poor connections, we could provide this service for them in a systematic and regular way. But instead of just providing this service, we decided that this would be an opportunity for opening up discussions, debates and analyses about critical political, economic and other social or cultural issues as a way of nurturing the development of a progressive pan Africanism based on solidarity with those engaged in similar struggles.

Little did we really understand what we were about to unleash. With a starting subscription of 300 subscribers, we had reached 6000 within a year. Today, we estimate that Pambazuka News is read by some 500,000 people across the world, the majority of whom are in Africa. There are more than 10000 authors who contribute articles to Pambazuka News, and some 400 articles are published every year. Originally starting as a weekly publication, the English edition appears three times a week, while the French edition appears weekly. And as of this week, the Portuguese edition was launched and will appear initially on a fortnightly basis. Articles appearing in Pambazuka News are widely published on numerous websites, lists and the media, and are today frequently cited even in the academic literature.

There have been two key elements to its ‘success’. First, we have sought to avoid the sectarianism that has destroyed previous pan African (as well as left wing) movements that get embroiled in a “holier/more pan Africanist/ more African/ more ‘correct’ political” positions. We have encouraged and enabled people with a spectrum of political positions to express their views. But this is no liberal platform: we provide that platform for those on this side of the barricades, knowing that others have plenty of opportunities to spread their ideas in mainstream outlets.

Secondly, and probably most important, we have resisted the temptation of being merely a commentator in the struggle for justice and emancipation. Intellectuals who do not engage, soon deteriorate. We have actively sought to enable alliances, coalitions and campaigns to use Pambazuka News as a tool for advancing their causes. Perhaps the one that we are most well known for has been our support for the campaign for the ratification and domestication of the African Union Protocol on the Rights of Women in Africa: Pambazuka News has published numerous special issues that were produced in printed form for distribution at AU Summits; run online petitions – even enabling people to sign these using text messaging from mobile phones. The campaign led by SOAWR succeeded in getting 15 countries to ratify the protocol in the space of 18 months – the fastest ratification of any international instrument in Africa.

The key for Pambazuka News was to be able to provide a platform that spoke truth to power, that connected people to a consciousness of their own oppressions and the commonalities of those oppressions.

Pambazuka News has put paid to the myth that there is no intellectual capacity in Africa, that Africans cannot produce coherent alternatives to the crass, monolithic and ideologically dogmatic neoliberal policies that dominate the mainstream media. We have help contribute to the interchange of ideas, transcontinental expression of solidarity, pan African unity in

action such as those we carried out around the stolen elections in Kenya and today in Zimbabwe.

The reality is that Pambazuka News has taken on a life of its own. It has become the tool of a wide network of African activists, intellectuals, thinkers, bloggers, writers, musicians and poets. We have given birth to other networks, other newsletters and other websites reflecting the thousand flowers blooming across the region.

But our success is limited. The reality is that only 6% of Africa's people have access to the internet. As we have been principally an electronic medium, we are reaching only a select few of the 'haves'. Yet Africa is populated with vast communities of the disenfranchised. Their voice is not being heard through the pages of Pambazuka News. This is a serious limitation of our publication, and a serious limitation in the efforts to build a progressive pan African movement.

In the next three years we want to transform the reach and engagement of Pambazuka News. Our biggest challenge is to overcome the deeply engrained processes of marginalisation which prevent so many people across Africa – women, farmers, workers, those living in urban informal settlements and in remote rural areas – from influencing the policies that affect their lives. We need to find ways of involving those beyond our existing constituency, creating opportunities through which they can engage in active citizenship.

Print edition

Around 80% of our subscribers already print Pambazuka News before reading it. A print edition will engage new constituencies, particularly urban workers and young people, give our existing readers more options, and ensure a longer shelf-life for articles. We will pilot this in Kenya and the East African market, but in the long run aspire to achieve continental distribution.

Monthly radio programme

Radio has the widest reach into areas few other media penetrate. We plan to produce a monthly radio programme, in collaboration with Contact FM in Rwanda, which will be hosted by Pambazuka News and broadcast over several East African radio stations.

Further language editions

The most important of which is Arabic, but also Swahili and other regional languages.

Pambazuka News cannot be everything to everyone. There are more demands made on us that we have the capacity to meet. But so long as we can continue to provide a platform that can nurture creative and committed thinking of the engaged intellectual, we believe that a movement will arise that can transform the future of the continent to build a world that will bring out the creative talents of all our people. If Pambazuka News can contribute even in a small way to the struggle for emancipation, then we will have lived a life worth leading.