

Failing governance is destroying Africa

19 September 2017

Expert



Prince Michael of Liechtenstein

Region:
West Africa



Instead of viewing Africa's large families as a social and economic problem, the international community should start treating them as part of the solution (source: dpa)

Migration from Africa to Europe is now a hot issue. Hundreds of thousands of migrants from the sub-Saharan region want to reach Europe across the Mediterranean. What to do about this has put Europe's leaders at a loss.

In terms of geography, Asia, Europe and Africa are all the same continent. For millennia, the Mediterranean has constituted a single cultural area, encompassing Southern Europe, North Africa and the Middle East. The dividing line between this area and sub-Saharan Africa was not the sea but the Sahara Desert. Modern transport and political turmoil in North Africa have erased this barrier.

During the 19th century, the European powers expanded out of their coastal trading stations to colonize all of sub-Saharan Africa. During this relatively brief colonial period, European administrative structures were established in the area, as well as rudimentary European educational systems. After World War II, hasty decolonization started. Almost every colony in the region (except for Portugal's, which followed a decade later) was rushed into independence during a very short span in the late 1950s and early 1960s.

“Africa's newly independent countries were given systems that conformed to European ideals of democracy

The problem was that while colonial rule had passed, colonial borders remained. The new states' boundaries were not delineated along linguistic, cultural, social or ethnic lines, but drawn in European capitals to conform with the 19th-century balance of power. These frontiers cut right through tribal and religious affiliations and local economies, artificially conjoining territories that were in fact very different.

Wrong sort

Upon decolonization, Africa's newly independent countries were given systems of government that conformed to European ideals of democracy. As their experience over the past half-century has shown, this simply did not work. Archduke Otto von Habsburg wisely observed at the time that Europe was destroying Africa because it supported the wrong sort of government.

It follows that what Africa needs now is to settle its affairs according to its own culture and traditions, not by following purely Western standards.

At the end of August, French President Emmanuel Macron hosted a mini-summit on migration in Paris with German Chancellor Angela Merkel, the prime ministers of Italy and Spain, and leaders from Niger, Chad and the United Nations-recognized Libyan government. Certain ideas were raised for easing the demographic and migration pressure from Africa to Europe. They will certainly not solve the problem, but could make for a beginning. These issues were also discussed at the July G20 summit in Hamburg.

Family feud

At the G20 summit, President Macron was asked by a West African journalist why there was no Marshall Plan for Africa. Mr. Macron said truthfully that money alone will not solve the problem. But his answer veered badly off course and slipped into a patronizing tone when he said one of Africa's biggest problems is that in some countries, women give birth to "seven or eight children."

First, this is an exaggeration. But most important, Mr. Macron showed his ignorance of children's importance in African cultures. With this remark, the French president attacked the last element in African societies that still works: the family structure.

“Large families supply the social cohesion, services and security that African governments cannot

At the root of African poverty is not demography but failing artificial states, which are supported by the international community and the United Nations. Their governance follows European models, which do not sufficiently recognize traditional African social structures. In consequence, these states fail to perform even their most basic functions. Large families are the structures that supply the social cohesion, services and security that African governments cannot.

This state of affairs poses an opportunity, if only Europe would recognize it. Just as high birth rates help strengthen the African family as a social unit, they also expand the workforce and fuel economic growth. Lower birth rates, on the other hand, should be seen as a result of prosperity, not a precondition for it.

The lesson here is that Europeans need to understand Africa before they start arrogantly meddling in its affairs. Unless there is real understanding, no effective assistance is possible and excessive and uncontrollable migration will continue.

Europe itself does not know how to deal with the migrants. Imposing quotas on different countries does not help, and it is not the role of the larger European countries to force such quotas on their smaller neighbors.

Whatever solutions are found, they do not lie in Europe. Only by understanding Africa can Europe help it achieve prosperity, and thus resolve the migration problem.