

Chapter 1

What is the Opposite of a Knowledge Society?

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ABSTRACT

This chapter offers a critical examination of the “collaborative development model” (UNESCO, 2005) or the Knowledge Societies discourse. By comparing international indicators and flagship publications of the Knowledge Economy and the Knowledge Society, the author uncovers a paradox: How can an idea centered on knowledge, sharing, and openness further cement global and local inequalities? By employing Southern/decolonizing theory, the author suggests a response from the Global South that allows for a more complex, symphonic, and inclusive development paradigm, compared to the Western ideas of linear stages of development. Three core aspects of Knowledge Societies are highlighted: The value of sharing, financing of education, and knowledge-on-knowledge. The author contends that fully embracing the concept of Knowledge Societies entails much more than country level indexing and benchmarking; it means opening up the world in terms of trade, mobility, and data, employing new technology in cross border collaborations and acknowledging our humanity’s interconnectedness or ubuntu.

INTRODUCTION

The idea that knowledge is crucial for long term societal prosperity now enjoys broad support (WorldBank, 1998; OECD, 2004; UNESCO, 2005; UN DESA, 2005; UNESCO, 2010). Some academics even suggest knowledge is the most important factor for production than labor and capital (Drucker 1998 as cited in Britz et al. 2006). Consequently the world is in the process of shifting from an industrial development para-

digm towards a discourse of “knowledge societies.” Global institutions such as the World Bank and the United Nations (with its subdivisions UNESCO and UNDESA) have since 2005 in flagship events and publications promoting this on the global agenda. These documents prepared for the global discourse serve as this chapter’s main input. Further, theorizing this paradigm shift includes: formulating the values of the discourse, devising methods of measurement and making recommendations towards the implementation of

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the “knowledge society.” These themes will also inform the structure of this paper. I will argue that the discourse on Knowledge Societies lacks critical examination regarding its usefulness and relevance to the Global South. Furthermore, the concept of Knowledge Societies presents a paradox as it tries to emphasize how countries will be *more connected* through shared knowledge or collaborative public property, but rather the Global South is at risk of becoming *more marginalized* in some cases by the emphasis on individual countries’ education and infrastructure.

However first, we have a meeting in Ghana’s capital, Accra:

It is a cloudy day in June. About 40 young people have gathered in the posh conference room of an Accra hotel overlooking the ocean to, according to the event flyer from organization “Preparation for Life” to “explore worldwide educational opportunities.” Two of them are cousins Ama and Kofi. They sit in a waiting area flipping through colorful brochures from universities in the UK, USA, Canada, Australia, New Zealand and Dubai.

18-year-old Ama has recently graduated from senior secondary school and is looking for an undergraduate program in a country that will allow her to stay and work when she is done with her degree. Her first choice is Canada and then New Zealand. Her cousin Kofi is a second year student of Cape Coast University, a public university in Ghana, and says he is traveling to be able to learn more about actuarial science, a topic that is not taught in Ghana. He is looking for a university that will allow him to transfer from Ghana and give him a scholarship for a graduate degree. Surprisingly, Ama is equally determined as her older cousin of her subject; she will study food science. Clutching a university catalogue she says dreamily, “I really want to go there...” When I quiz her on why, food science is after all a course in several Ghanaian universities, she finds it hard to answer what the longing is about.

Finally she says: “They are a developed country, here we are still developing...If I go there, I will get skills. You’ll get a new idea and bring it back here...also I want change, see something different.” Kofi says: “It is not so much about leaving, it’s about the opportunities you will get over there” and smiles hopefully. (Author’s field notes)

When the best and brightest of the youth move because they (only) see opportunities elsewhere, what does it indicate? Is the meeting with Kofi and Ama illustrating the “hopeless continent,” a phrase coined by the Economist magazine in 2000, where the brightest leave to go to a knowledge society or should we see Kofi and Ama as future knowledge workers in “Africa rising” (Economist, 2011) hoping to create one?

Allow me to digress with a quick reminder of those magazine covers. On the first cover, we see a sad and detached man dressed in what seems to be tattered army apparel staring past us. On his shoulder rests his Kalashnikov weapon, which is turned away from his numbed gaze, aimlessly? Behind him is some greenish glass façade as if to remind us of a hopeful past, now being overshadowed by war and strife. The image is framed by a pitch-black matte of the African continent, as to emphasize the gravity of the situation. Over it looms the heading, “The hopeless continent.” 11 years later, the imagery could not be more different. On this cover, mostly light blue in color with a gradient suggesting an imminent sunrise, a child is admiring a rainbow like kite shaped like the African continent rising to the sky. The earth is red and far away in the horizon we see some trees suggesting a vast savannah full of possibilities. In energetic red, “Africa rising” is printed. The relevance of these magazine covers describing the African continent and its transformation over the last decade to the issue at hand are twofold.

First, however general, the Economist magazine covers are describing a shift, both in political and economic terms. *But what kind of shift?* Africa is rising like a kite, in economic growth

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