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Africa's PR problem

Why the concept of 'soft power' is a myth

African countries and the continent as a whole have been misrepresented for centuries. This can have a massive knock-on effect on the economy. However, contrary to what proponents of 'African soft power' suggest, polishing their global image will not give these countries more weight and influence in international negotiations. If they want to shape the international economic and political agenda, they must focus on the hard stuff, which means building their economic power.

The cost of Africa's PR problem

Most African countries continue to suffer from a bad reputation, as the dominant image of Africa abroad is the one of the 'Dark Continent' riddled with poverty, wars and disease. Desperate to improve their reputation on the world stage, several African countries have started hiring international PR firms at extortionate prices. They hope that a better image abroad will lead to more economic prosperity, by attracting tourists and investors, as well as more global influence that will allow them to shape the international agenda.

It is undeniable that a poor global reputation can have far-reaching economic consequences. The 2013–2016 Ebola outbreak in West Africa is a case in point. Only five African countries were directly affected by the epidemics. Yet, due to the intensive, at times hysterical, media coverage combined with a lack of a coordinated communication from unaffected African nations, Ebola damaged the entire African economy. Airlines suspended flights across the continent. Investors and businesses suspended investment and trips to most countries. And travel bookings to African countries thousands of kilometres from the outbreak fell by up to 70 per cent.

Believing that polishing your international image will give you more power to influence international negotiations is naïve at best and completely reckless at worst.

Soft power: a PR stunt?

The link between a country's reputation and its international influence is embodied by the concept of 'soft power' created by the American political scientist Joseph Nye and enthusiastically endorsed by the PR industry.

Nye defines soft power as a country's ability to achieve its foreign policy objectives through positive attraction and persuasion. In contrast, hard power is a country's ability to influence others by using coercive power, such as military force or economic sanctions. Nye identified the three pillars of soft power: culture, political values and foreign policy. More recently, a London-based PR firm, Portland Communications, launched the Soft Power 30 Index that builds upon these pillars to identify and measure more precisely a country's soft power resources.

This type of initiative has the merits of helping countries identify the resources they could use to appear more attractive to foreign public audiences. However, when it comes to relations between states, the concept of soft power should not be used as a policy tool.

The harsh reality of international relations

While reputation and attractiveness are powerful attributes in interpersonal relations, dynamics between states are much more complex. At state level, policy decisions are based on rational rather than emotional factors. When it comes to international relations, hard power, in the form of either military strength or economic might, is still essential. China's rising influence on the global stage is directly linked to fact that it is now the world's largest economy and the world's largest trading nation.

Furthermore, when countries have opposing interests in international negotiations, more often than not, the ones with hard power will get their way. Such dynamics were at play in the negotiations of the European Partnership Agreements (EPAs) between the European Union and its African, Caribbean and Pacific (ACP) partners. Initiated in 2002, the negotiating process of EPAs did not go smoothly.

The difficulty of the negotiations lies in the fact that the EU and African countries have conflicting interests and completely different visions of trade policy as a tool for development. In a nutshell, the EU benefits from the wide liberalisation of African markets to export its goods and access

raw materials with limited restrictions, while African countries have an interest in strategically protecting their markets to develop their local industries. As a result, several African countries, supported by local civil society groups, openly opposed EPAs. To speed up the process, the EU threatened to not only withdraw foreign aid, but also end the preferential access to European markets for existing export products from reluctant states. There was nothing soft about that.

The problematic Western-centric bias of soft power

According to Nye, a country can achieve greater soft power when its dominant culture and values are consistent with the broadly shared 'prevailing global norms' of 'liberalism, pluralism and autonomy' as well as 'democracy and human rights'.

There is nothing wrong with universal values like democracy and human rights. The problem arises when you equate those universal values with their Western interpretation and application. Since the end of the Cold War, we live in a unipolar world system where Western countries managed to impose their culture, economic and political models on the rest of the world. First by military force, and then by setting up a network of international organisations that reinforce the dominance of these values and practices. So obviously they will seem more attractive globally.

But this attractiveness does not mean that they are suitable or even desirable for the rest of the world. For instance, while democracy is a universal value, the Western-style electoral democratic system is not, and its forced imposition in other parts of the world without taking into account local dynamics has been a recipe for disaster. Just think about the current state of Afghanistan and Iraq. The same goes for most African countries where it has caused more division, violence and instability.

The way forward for African countries

All of this means that African countries should focus on the hard stuff, mainly their economic might, if they want to become more influential on the world stage. The key guiding principles to achieve this are unity and authenticity.

Unity is strength and Africa will have more influence on the world stage if it speaks as a single voice. The good news is that there is a growing consensus among African leaders that unity is the ultimate path forward. On the political side, President Paul Kagame has been leading the reform

process of the African Union (AU). Encouraging unity of purpose for Africa is a key aspect of his recommendations.

On the economic side, deepening African integration is the path towards achieving greater economic weight, and hence influence in international negotiations. Negotiations on the ambitious Continental Free Trade Area (CFTA) are progressing a pace. Composed of 54 African member states and a single market of more than 1 billion people (2 billion or more by 2050), the CFTA would not only constitute the largest free-trade area in the world; it will also boost the economic development and structural transformation of all African economies. Of course, there are many substantial hurdles to overcome in order to achieve 'strong and deep' African integration but the commitment is there and it will eventually pay off.

The secret for achieving any of these endeavours will depend on the ability of African countries to create economic, political and integration models adapted to their diverse and complex reality. Authenticity requires them to redefine themselves, their priorities and their objectives in the political and economic realms.

The example of China's rapid economic transformation is a good reminder that each country has its own sets of assets and challenges, and creating a development model adapted to its circumstances is key to its success. For instance, China's decision to adopt a state-led development model is linked to its hierarchical social structure and history of strong central state.

One of the reasons why most development programmes in Africa have failed is because, for decades, scholars have used Western ideas and reading grids to understand and explain African conditions. As Africa's challenges are unique, unlocking its full economic potential will also require a unique development model. Creating an African knowledge system, by investing in Africa-based research centres and think-tanks, is essential to develop these new African reading grids.



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Jessica is a communications consultant who is passionate about Africa and the role the continent has to play on the international scene. She started her career in a pan-African strategy and communications consulting firm in London. There, she advised clients in the financial, mining, international development, education and agricultural sectors. Then, she moved to Gabon where she worked on government communications for WPP Team Gabon. She holds an LLM in European and International Law from the Catholic University of Leuven (Belgium) and an MSc. in Global Politics from the London School of Economics (UK).