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# Regaining Control Over the Environment: A Pan-Africanist Agenda

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## Why Focus on Environmental Issues?

In Africa, the environment has become of immediate concern with visions of impending doom pervading most of the academic and policy literature. In some quarters, the economic crisis of the 1980s has often been conceptualised as an agricultural crisis wherein inappropriate land husbandry methods and the prevalence of common property rights have resulted in land degradation. This view of the environment in Africa has become hegemonic, even though countervailing perspectives identify the adverse effects that development policies, from the colonial to the contemporary period, have had on African environments.

Since the 1960s, we have witnessed a gradual globalisation of environmental concerns which culminated in the June 1992 meeting of the United Nations Conference on the Environment and Development. Policy makers have become more sensitive to environmental issues and conservation strategies are now an essential part of most aid packages. However, attitudes towards resource use, land degradation and conservation have been dominated by Eurocentric priorities. Conventional conservation orthodoxy have applied universalist ideas about African environmental problems and solutions. Africans are shown to be the main culprit, with their irrational persistence in using traditional land use practices which according to western scientific thought can only be destructive.

This paper argues for a Pan-Africanist agenda that reasserts African control over the environment through the promotion of an alternative discourse and praxis which give prominence to indigenous knowledge; recognising the expert knowledge embedded in each African community and developing a more critical approach to new technology, carefully scrutinising them for possible environ-

mental impacts. A pan-Africanist agenda will also demand that African states begin to acknowledge the close links between societal transformation and environmental practice. So far, at the level of policy, little attention has been given to the close association between the deteriorating quality of the environment and the project of development whatever its ideological basis.

States are called upon to play a more active role in shaping the legislative and policy framework, giving due recognition to the importance of the environment to the survival of future generations.

## **The Dominance of the Over-Population Thesis**

Current approaches to environmental degradation in Africa, whether that of the state, the World Bank or other international organisations tend to adopt neo-Malthusian explanations for environmental crisis. Many subscribe to the views of Thomas Malthus (1756-1834) the 19th century English clergyman, who, in his *Essay on the Principle of Population* argues that unchecked population growth will outstrip the resource base and would check itself through famine or preventative measures such as fertility controls. Malthus was critical of the introduction of state relief in the form of the (poor laws) and portrayed the poor as being responsible for their own impoverishment. Malthusian ideas continue to be vigorously promoted by those who believe that the standard of living achieved by people in industrialised societies could not be replicated in the Third World without severe consequences for the environment. Rather than argue for a reduction in Western consumption patterns, they point to the need to limit population growth in the Third World.

Population pressure as the main causal factor is the most prevalent thesis of land degradation. International organisations such as the World Bank persist in linking population with degradation. So the World Bank could assert that 'in many areas population pressure is pushing farmers onto marginal lands and causing deforestation, severe soil erosion, and declining productivity (World Bank 1989: 44), and in 1992 state growth increases the demand for good and services, and if practice remain unchanged, implies environmental damage (World Bank 1992:26). Such views are criticised by Williams (1992) as being ignorant of indigenous strategies to alter and adopt to changing social relations of production.

These views are fashioned on the classic colonial model which placed the blame on irrational African land users and overpopulation. The policy solution, as outlined in development discourse, is to incorporate Africans into the modern sector through widespread take-up of family planning and new agricultural technologies. The fact that many of these strategies have been tried and failed in the past, by the colonial authorities, has bypassed contemporary development experts.

Persistent food shortfalls on the continent and episodes of famine have strengthened the neo-Malthusian thesis which makes no acknowledgement of the inequalities in the distribution mechanisms and the inadequacy of the social and political systems to protect people's rights to basic needs.

Neo-Malthusian arguments tend to be based on studies that are macro in analysis, using national and continental data on population growth and food production, even though such data lack scientific rigour and in the case of food production are basically guesstimates. Alternative perspectives on the importance of population in intensifying production and thus stimulating development are often ignored and are criticised for being place specific. Yet, there is overriding evidence that the causal relationships are not that clear-cut and high population density does not correlate with land degradation or even declining productivity (Tiffen, Mortimore & Gichuki 1994).

Neo-Malthusian approaches refuse to contemplate the range of historical-structural variables which have detrimental ecological consequences. They ignore the process by which African peoples were incorporated into the world economy as producers of cheap raw materials for external markets, and the effects these have had on indigenous strategies of resource management. Furthermore, they avoid discussion on the structures that continue these unequal relationships and how they often manifest into wars with devastating human and environmental consequences.

## **Development and the Environment**

Ideally, development should refer to a process by which the quality of life is improved for all, reducing vulnerability and eventually freeing people from want. In societies where people are predominantly engaged in agriculture, it should refer to increasing productivity and freeing people from the vagaries of precarious environments. Thus the inevitable outcome of development is transformation in society/nature relationships. The actual ways in which these relationships are redefined will depend on the model of development being applied. Development and modernisation following extra-continental models of economic change have meant the destruction of the natural economy and the domination of nature. Throughout Africa, the application of such models of progress have resulted in devastating environmental consequences.

Through the years, development has meant land alienation, forced displacement and the creation of reserves; the sedentarisation of pastoral communities; the introduction and continued promotion of crops directed at an increasingly unreliable export market; commercial lumbering; promotion of ecologically unsuitable agricultural techniques such as monoculture and mechanisation. Even with the knowledge of their environmental effects, these policies are pursued for short-term maximisation of profits. Even the champion of the western capitalist

model has had to admit that past economic growth has been associated with severe degradation of the natural world (World Bank 1992:25).

With the link between environment and development becoming more apparent, especially the recognition that poverty can lead people to use their resources in an unsustainable manner, Western environmentalists coined the term 'sustainable development'. The concept was first used by the World Commission on Environment and Development in their global manifesto, *Our Common Future*, and was defined as development that meet the needs of the present without compromising the ability of future generations to meet their own needs (p.43). This definition is so ambiguous that it has multiple interpretations. Most of which are not expected to promote basic needs but seek to maintain a level of economic growth conducive to the well-being of inhabitants in Western societies.

In 1991, a World Bank report on sustainable development in Mozambique contended that: "the greatest environmental threats in Mozambique results from the pressure the displaced exerts on the natural resources in the safe areas and from poaching of wildlife in rebel-held territories" (Dejene & Olivares 1991). Although the guerrilla war had been a serious impediment to conservation and productive land use, the localised impact of displaced people, through fuelwood collection, cultivation and construction, is considered to be of greater concern. This population, poverty, environment nexus is reiterated and reinforced by donors, whether international bankers or non-governmental organisations, in their attempt to intervene in the reconstruction of African societies.

Sustainable development, it is argued, can be achieved through more efficient operation of the market where environmental externalities are incorporated into operating costs. This can only be done if the environment becomes commoditised. Values are attached to different aspects of the environment which can then be traded. Assessments can then be made of the differential monetary value between conservation and exploitation. The argument, according to Jacobs (1994), is that aspects of the environment that are undervalued can be used free of charge and will get over-used and degraded.

Commoditisation of the environment is problematic, because although the market is portrayed as ideologically-free and ethically neutral, people's relationship with the environment, the use they make and the non-monetary values they attach are culturally determined. Environmental economists, operating in Africa, are applying Western conceptualisations of the environment which they claim to be universal. Conservation issues in the West are markedly different from those in the Third World where according to Redclift (1994) "struggles over the environment are usually about basic needs, cultural identity and strategies to survive, rather than, [in the West], providing a safety valve from an increasingly congested, urban space, (p.5)."

For pan-Africanists development can only be sustainable if it disengages from any mode of production which promotes inequalities and ignores the rights of African peoples to a secure and satisfactory livelihood. We have a choice, either to disregard the Western ideologically-charged notion of sustainable development or to give it an Afro-centric meaning. In the short-term, the first option is not possible, because donors dictate the strategies of transformation in our societies. But in the move towards more autonomous development patterns, we need to subvert the application of sustainable development ideologies by re-defining the term according to our own needs and promote policies that puts it into practice.

During the 1980s, conventional models of development went into a period of crisis. African peoples sought new forms of social organisation that were more responsive to their needs. However, with the economies of most countries tightly policed by international money lending institutions, the World Bank and the International Monetary Fund, the blame was attributed to the actual mechanisms by which development reached the people rather than on the actual models themselves. The prescriptions found in the World Bank/International Monetary Fund policies have, as a component, the dualism of state versus market as the core of the problem. Thus ecological degradation and the resultant food insecurity are the outcome of an over-extended state which has mismanaged the economy through the application of misguided policies and the imperfect penetration of the market into African rural societies. The market is promoted as providing the best means for the allocation of natural resources. Competition, it is argued, will lead to more appropriate land management. According to proponents of this market fetishism, the problem is therefore not population per se, but the more equitable form of resource allocation such as communal land tenure.

What we have here is a neo-Malthusian demographic deterministic argument as an explanation and an increased domination of an economic deterministic model as a solution to the problem. Both of which falsely claim scientific objectivity and social neutrality.

## **Individual Versus Communal Property Rights**

The commoditisation of land is an essential part of the process of capitalist development. Regaining control over land has been a fundamental part of African peoples' struggle for liberation and self-determination. Likewise the drive towards individual property rights has met with resistance among Africans. The discourse has often been framed as a choice between the more modernised system of private ownership and the archaic one of customary land tenure.

Gareth Hardin's (1968) thesis of the tragedy of the commons, in its most crude form, has been universally applied to African agricultural systems. Hardin's

contention that resources held communally, where ownership is not clearly-defined and legally-sanctioned, are likely to be over-exploited as each person tries to maximise profits irrespective of the consequences, has provided pseudo-scientific justification for the claim that African land tenure systems are environmentally unfriendly. This thesis could not even be applied in Hardin's own country, the USA, where even with individual property rights, land degradation became a serious problem in the 1930s (Bassett 1994). One of the issues that is often lacking in this debate is the effect of the changing political economy of a region on the ability of communities to continue with their resource management strategies.

Again, there is clear empirical evidence that communal land systems represent the most suitable and sensitive form of land use arrangement, especially in ecologically marginal areas such as those inhabited by pastoralists. The benefits of the communal system are often overlooked in the drive to effect a capitalist transformation of African societies. In most parts of the continent, the debate is intense where there is pressure towards privatisation or where land reform is desperately needed to rectify the inequities of land appropriation and relieve the pressure from those confined in the reserves.

Certain assumptions about communal land systems have become accepted truisms in development discourse. Land in the communal sector is said to be degraded because of the pattern of land tenure and the activity of pastoralism. Communal agricultural systems are considered backward, traditional, and, therefore, unproductive. These so-called weaknesses of the customary land tenure sector are supposed to be manifested in the crisis in the social reproduction of African households. However, the effectiveness of customary land tenure in meeting the basic needs of the most marginal in a society was the reason behind the massive support for its retention in post-independence Namibia (Republic of Namibia 1991).

Nevertheless, the communal sector is often contrasted with the supposed vibrant commercial sector of capitalist production. Discussions on agricultural development envisage higher productivity as being only possible through the commoditisation of the rural economy, principally the privatisation of communal lands. The supposed logic is that communal land systems, not subjected to individual property rights, cannot be competitive and the imposition of market relations can only be done in commercial areas.

This debate is taking place in the newly-liberated countries of southern Africa. In the post-independence period we have witnessed the reactivation of the colonial discourse on the environment. In post-apartheid Namibia this discourse is often racialised and can be interpreted as one of the strategies bent on preserving white capital and white hegemony in the region. The history of the dominance of white capital in the region is one of displacement and marginalisation

for the African masses. In 1990 one government official was quoted in the *Financial Mail* as saying:

Ultimately we must convince blacks to move away from the communal system. Its a stumbling block to black commercial agriculture. Black farmers can't get loans for instance, because they don't own property. Similarly government employees living in communally owned areas can't take advantage of 100 percent housing loans because they don't own their own plots (quoted in Adams & Werner 1990).

In the debate about the ensuing long term reconstruction and development in southern Africa, what is clear is that 'the ideas of capitalist rationality and European superiority are now being repackaged to say that capitalism is equal to democracy and the market is the only rational choice' (Campbell 1992). This is probably more clearly stated in Mozambique and Angola where the market is seen to have triumphed over state-led socialism. Peet and Watts (1994) in their critique of rationality show how the use of universalising discourses creates myths of society — environment relationships. Discourses of modernity and environmental degradation serve to legitimise inequalities.

The social destruction and environmental consequences of recent civil wars and liberation struggles are being used effectively to maintain existing structures of inequalities; thus impeding the total reconstruction of African societies through new social organisations, levels of democracy and the planned use of resources for the majority of the population.

## Gender and the Environment

The current focus on women in development ties them into a nexus with poverty and the environment. One school of thought presents women as the main victims of land degradation because of their role in food production and in meeting household requirements for fuel and water. However, such perspectives simplify the division of labour within the household and the complex and dynamic relationship which men and women have with nature.

The assumption of women's affinity with nature allows for improved environmental practices to be linked to women's acceptance of family planning advice. Addressing women in such a manner is said to be empowering, liberating them from patriarchal control and poverty. Jackson (1993) shows how, in the discourse of policy makers such as the World Bank, the objectives of poverty alleviation, environmental problems and the reduction in population growth are seen as mutually supportive. Women are seen as the pivot around which processes of demographic and environmental change will take place.

However, such policies relating to the empowerment of women, rather than being liberatory, are likely to tie women closer into social relations that will dis-



empower them. In any case such policies conflict with those in other sectors, such as land tenure, where measures are not taken to promote equal opportunities and women are often marginalised and fail to acquire land titles.

## **Indigenous Knowledge**

Since the 19th century scramble for Africa, the African environment has been seen by policy makers and experts as something that has to be protected from the indigenous people. Colonialists held nothing but contempt for indigenous social institutions and methods of land management. According to a colonial agricultural officer and development expert:

"Farmers are well-known for their conservatism. The African agriculturalist is no exception and is very tenacious of the customs and methods practised by his forefathers...the poor farming methods and soil depleting practices prevalent among peasant farmers stem from ignorance, custom and lethargy....the main obstacle to overcome is the native lack of understanding of the need for the prevention of soil erosion" (Clayton 1964).

Environmental problems, whether they be deforestation, desertification or a reduction in wildlife, have all been attributed to inappropriate land husbandry. In the late 20th century the dominant conservation discourse has its antecedents in the colonial period where negative views of indigenous ecological science were held. However, the failure of modern technology to bring about a sustainable level of resource use has led to recent attempts to re-evaluate indigenous knowledge. Some experts have started to boast about the value of intercropping, multiple cropping, burning and other African methods of resource conservation. Even so, insufficient weight is given to indigenous knowledge mainly because of the link between the dissemination of Western scientific methods and the promotion of new agricultural technologies by multinationals. Furthermore, the prevalence of racism among donors and members of the academy prevents recognition of the validity of African science.

There is a real danger that the introduction of new, genetically-engineered species will lead to a loss in biodiversity in large areas of continent. In Rwanda, after the 1994 genocide, international organisations proclaimed that the seed banks, for the 250 known bean types in the country, had been lost (Pottier 1995). Evidence to the contrary suggest a more insidious strategy to promote hybrid seeds which will make Rwandans more reliant on imported fertilisers, pesticides etc., resulting in a loss of the diverse locally adapted seeds that have helped to sustain high levels of population density.

Locally grown species of agricultural crops are adapted to micro-level conditions and are carefully selected by the people to reduce the risk of variability in climate. The introduction of alien crops in the context of the green revolution

has made farmers more susceptible to subtle changes in weather and more dependent on external inputs of fertilisers and pesticides.

Another area of indigenous knowledge that is under threat is traditional medicine. The current search for new sources of medicines in tropical plants could lead to the commoditisation of the essential elements of traditional medicine. The skills of traditional doctors should now be recognised and developed by Africans before we lose control. Amanor (1994) refers to the writings of colonial biologists who were urging research into the properties of African herbal medicine. Such research by African institutions, backed by governments, is of immediate significance to counteract the current tendency of multinationals to patent genetic materials derived from tropical sources. This trend has now been legitimised under the recent Generalised Agreement on Tariffs and Trade (GATT, Uruguay round), and is bound to deprive Africans of their own resources.

## Toxic Waste Dumping

In recent years, Africans have become increasingly concerned about the dumping of toxic material on the continent and in areas inhabited by Africans in the diaspora. Even with the widespread knowledge that African states lack the technology and legislation for safe disposal of such waste, African governments, in pursuit of foreign exchange, are being encouraged to accept the West's industrial by-products. A comment by former vice-president of the World Bank, Lawrence Summers, aptly illustrates the necessity for African peoples to rally together.

"health impairing pollution should be done in the country with the lowest cost, which will be the country with the lowest wages. . . I think the economic logic behind dumping a load of toxic waste in the lowest wage country is impeccable and we should face up to that...I always thought that underpopulated countries in Africa are vastly under-polluted, their air quality is probably vastly inefficient compared to Los Angeles and Mexico city. . . Concern over an agent that causes a one in million chance of prostrate cancer is obviously going to be much higher in a country where people survive to get prostrate cancer than in a country where under-5 mortality is 200 per thousand" (Summer, 1991 Internal World Bank memo).

In the late 1980s numerous cases came to light where governments or individuals had reached agreements with Western industrialists or their agents to dispose of industrial by-products. The ecological consequences for the continent are so severe that in May 1988 the Organisation of African Unity passed a resolution against the importation of hazardous material and industrial wastes (O'Keefe 1988; Third World Network 1989; Perfecto 1992). African governments should be encouraged to abide by such resolutions.

Africans are also concerned about the use of out-dated drugs by international organisations. In the early 1990s an internationally-sponsored child immunisation campaign, using obsolete drugs, caused the death of several children in Uganda.

Even more serious is the detrimental effects of the increase use of pesticides in agricultural production. The promotion of high yielding varieties of crops (HYVs) to increase productivity has expanded the use of pesticides and herbicides. Toxic chemicals are widely promoted in African countries by transnational corporations. Chemicals banned in Western countries are sold to African farmers causing crop deformity, soil impoverishment and in the long-term land degradation. The use of toxic chemicals in traditional export crops such as cotton production is well-known, but knowledge about the danger associated with the chemicals used in the production of flowers for Western markets has not been disseminated. Recent reports indicate that land under flower production in countries such as Kenya will suffer severe degradation from toxicity. Again care needs to be taken in the introduction of non- traditional export crops.

## **The Need for Environmental Legislation**

Very few African states have environmental legislations, and if they do, they lack the technological capacity and political clout to enforce them. Those conservation legislation which exist are prohibitive and promote a western view of society/environment relationships. *They are more concerned with controlling the actions of the indigenous peoples and ignore the more detrimental impact that outsiders have had on the environment.*

From the 1890s, numerous gun and hunting laws were enacted to exclude Africans from hunting while European hunters decimated wildlife in certain parts of the continent. Mackenzie (1989) has shown how Europeans created a specific set of legal and moral criteria that specifically excluded Africans. Hunting for subsistence or trade goods was conceived as laziness - a term which was identified with the capacity to avoid wage labour. Such attitudes continue to inform Western perceptions of wildlife conservation and have prompted observers to suggest that the dominant paradigm is that Africans and nature do not belong together (Adams & O'shane 1992).

Conservation strategies, such as the creation of game parks, led to the displacement of Africans and their confinement into smaller spaces. The struggle of African peoples to regain access to their resources are often posed in terms of good and evil, where the conservationists are presented as good guys trying to prevent the wanton destruction by evil Africans. This authoritarianism embedded in the history of conservation in Africa has a legacy which continues to frame attitudes of rural communities towards any conservation initiative proposed (Grove 1990).

Environmental policymakers in Africa continue to promote Western conceptualisations of the environment because it enables them to acquire scarce resources and Western science gives them legitimacy when intervening in rural people's lives. Leach and Fairhead's (1994) research in the Guinea forest-savanna zone challenges conventional conservation orthodoxy by showing the baselessness of the dominant views and explanations of environmental change. Detailed case studies reveal that the forest is not contracting as is popularly assumed, but is in fact growing because of the resource management strategies of the local people. This information is ignored by external and indigenous policymakers who continue to sustain the colonial-derived external visions of environmental degradation. "The same basic analysis is perpetually reconstituted over and over again within prevailing institutional, financial and explanatory climates" (p.86). Similarly Amanor (1994) found that in Ghana case study materials were disregarded as the government ministry with the financial backing of international organisations launched a large unsuitable rehabilitation project. This caused him to lament: "present managerial frameworks may exacerbate degradation by adding layers of unwanted political control, bureaucracy, and ideology masquerading as science" (p.220).

It is about time that African policymakers broke away from the western canon and sought schooling in the rich indigenous sources of knowledge. African governments can lay the basis for this new form of knowledge production, but state intervention should not proceed in the way suggested by international money-lending institutions. The World Bank points to institutional reforms as the way to deal with Africa's problems: improved environmental management has become part of the Bank's program of reforms.

Since many problems of resource degradation stem from policy rather than market failure, it is in the overall thrust of government policy that publications and administrators must first take on this new planning paradigm (World Bank, *World Development Report* 1991.7):

In its 1992 World Development Report, the World Bank outlines how government might alter the policy framework to make it more responsive to environmental needs, but the direction of its argument is still top-down, with governments determining the basis of environmental change and applying solutions that are not sensitive to the specific needs of rural communities. On economic matters the Bank seeks a retreat of the state but calls for a more interventionist state on environmental matters.

In the post-colonial period, transnational corporations continue to act with impunity in relation to environmental matters. Almost nothing is being done by Western governments to enforce international codes breached by their transnational when operating in Africa. The United Nations Biological Diversity Convention signed at the 1992 Rio Conference should have resolved this, but it is unlikely to

be effective, judging by the refusal of President Bush of the USA to sign the treaty. Nevertheless, the devastating consequences of resource exploitation, such as oil and bauxite extraction, are well-known; yet few states feel capable of challenging the projects of transnational for fear of losing their custom and antagonising Western donors. International treaties are meaningless under contemporary economic relationships.

The onus is placed on national governments to define codes of practice and identify areas of protection. African states need to establish national and regional codes on hazardous material, the use of toxic chemicals and on environmental quality in general. At the same time many should be encouraged to recognise and enforce the international codes. Under the conditions outlined throughout this paper, introducing legislation will be fraught with difficulties. But states that are drawing up new constitutions should be encouraged to see the value of giving the environment constitutional protection. This has occurred in the newly-independent country of Namibia, where the state, realising that the future economic growth of the country is dependent on a fragile resource base, incorporated an article (95) in the national constitution on the sustainable utilisation of the natural resources. It is a timely policy statement and should be replicated all over the continent.

## **The Need for Research by Africans and African Institutions**

It is clear that until the source of knowledge production resides on the continent, inappropriate ideas and policies will continue to retard our development. There is a great necessity for a sustained attack on conventional environmental orthodoxy. This is only possible if we look inwards and most closely at the repository of knowledge within our own communities. Pan-Africanists need to promote the establishment of research institutions and empirical research by Africans which depart from Western philosophical traditions and embrace those embedded in our societies. There is a desperate need for institutions to monitor the environmental effects of development policies, particularly in the light of the current dominance of structural adjustment policies which seek the mass privatisation of African resources.

## **Social Movements**

African governments can no longer ignore the demands of African peoples for greater control over their environments. The failure of government is clearly manifested in the proliferation of environmental social movements and non-governmental organisations. Governments may be reluctant to challenge unilaterally transnational corporations, but the people appear to have no such qualms.

Local people have identified areas for environmental protection and have campaigned vigorously and successfully against development plans that are against their own survival. States, however, see such forms of autonomous organisation as threatening (Cheru, 1992).

International institutions have co-opted some of the agenda of these movements and advocate greater participatory approach in development and environmental issues. But few address the issues from the vantage point of the people. Their support is based either on a desire to by-pass the state or to enable the state to co-opt and extend its control over the local people. Although many social movements evolved in response to local issues, they tend to articulate forms of social organisation and resource utilisation that are more responsive to the needs of African societies. They thus exhibit a potential for mass organisation.

## Conclusion

African environments are under threat not from within but from without. Environmental policies to date are unresponsive to the needs of the people. They are informed by a science which negates African people's understanding of the environment, and takes place within a mode of production the very sustenance of which depends on the creation and maintenance of inequalities. True development can only succeed if it is people-centred, and that means greater democratisation and assertion of the human rights of African peoples. The take over of African economies by international institutions is now almost complete and may make the Pan-African challenge of a just society even more difficult to achieve. Sustainable development cannot be attained under current economic policies and the environment, irrespective of all the external directives, will continue to be destroyed. Two important consequences of the alienation that is taking place is the emergence of social movements and the retreat back to African sources of knowledge, in, for example, medicine, agriculture and arts. Thus the Pan-Africanist agenda is to search, find and build on these strategies of resistance because it is within them that the future of African people lies.

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