

The Environmental Problems and Politics of Power

Review on the African Elite

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Much has already been written about the world economic order and its impact on the world's environment and on the developing countries' possibilities to take care of the environmental problems they are facing. As the democracy issue is being raised also another aspect enters into the discussion. This is the role of the internal political and social structures of the developing countries in respect to their environmental problems. The basis of this viewpoint is the assumption that regardless of the biophysical nature of the environmental problems, their causes are often social.

The aim of this article is to define some of the political and economic linkages that the environmental problems in Africa have by concentrating on the role of the African elite. The article summarizes some of the arguments put forward in earlier studies and illustrates them with examples from Kenya and Tanzania. Although choosing a single viewpoint to discuss a complex issue bears weaknesses, it is necessary in terms of outlining the article.

1.0 THE AFRICAN ELITE - WHO ARE THEY?

The word elite itself refers to any kind of group of people, which is separated from the others because of its superior condition or quality (in French: *élite* = to choose, in Latin *eligere* = to elect). For the selection of the elite, responsible may be God, nature or public esteem. (Girvetz 1967, 30.) The qualities and the type of competence required from an elite have varied during the historic times.

It is important to note that the roots of the elite-concept are Western and it has not originally been created to describe African societies. But this does not indicate that the concept is useless or it can not even be developed as a tool to describe the African situation. Some African politicians like the former president of Tanzania, Julius Nyerere, have denied the existence of social classes in the traditional African society. According to Nyerere, the roots of the African aristocracy can be traced outside the continent. He has doubted whether the word "class" has a synonym in the African languages. (Nyerere 1966, 103.) However, it is not a question of the word "class", but of social inequality. It seems obvious that there

has been differences between individuals in this respect long before the colonialism and independence struggles. The political elite in pre-colonial Africa had often considerably better standard of living than their subjects (Bates 1983, 40, 56). At least in many West-African kingdoms there existed sharp differences between the rulers and the subjects (Tordoff 1984, 87). In addition, the traditional position of women in many societies has maintained social inequalities. The women have often been unable to own land and they have been economically dependent on men. (See Harrison 1987, 61).

The social scientists have comparably slowly paid attention to the African ruling classes. From 1950's some references to the African middle-classes are found in connection of the nationalist assertion. (Sklar 1979, 533.) Although the term African elite has found its permanent place in the literature on Africa, it has not an unanimously agreed meaning among different writers. The elite can be referred to as the ruling class, the bourgeoisie, the bureaucratic bourgeoisie, the state bourgeoisie and so on. There are also popularized names for the elite, like the one used in East-Africa; Wabenzi - Mercedes Benz Tribe (See Timberlake 1985, 9, 12).

One way to analyse the definition of elite is by doing it in connection of the development theories. The theories emphasizing the importance of external factors of developing countries may discuss the developing countries' elite primarily as a part of the world economic order. For example in Samir Amin's definition, the elite of developing countries is strongly linked with the elite of the rich countries. According to Amin the worldwide expansion of capitalism increases the social inequality in the poor countries of the world. (Amin 1990, 156 and 157). The African elite has originated from the needs of colonialism. In order to facilitate trade a social group was formed among the Africans to act as a buffer between the Europeans and the local peasants and farm workers. (Torp & Gould 1980, 26). This new class was formed mainly from the chiefdoms. Later on the independence replaced it by the bourgeois classes and industrial forces. Amin describes the elite to be a privileged minority, which is culturally alienated from its own people. The elite benefits from the expansion of capitalism. Although the life together with the ruling capital is not conflict-free, it does not serve the interest of the elite to detach itself from the capitalist system. (Amin 1990, 71 and 72, 99.)

The trend of ideas, which is being represented for example by Michael Lipton, is notably different from that of Amin's because it abandons models of the dependency theory, explaining the underdevelopment by outside factors. According to Lipton the class division in developing countries is not defined by the conflict between capital and labour but by the difference between the urban classes and the rural classes. Lipton's work has, however, been criticized from many directions. Its most serious deficiency is, that it divides the population into two classes, the city dwellers and the inhabitants of countryside, and it does not elaborate the differences within these two groups. (See Baker & Claeson 1990, 11 and 12.)

The definitions of the African elite by Richard Sklar and Larry Diamond are more detailed than the one put forward by Lipton. Also Sklar and Diamond analyse the elite with the help of the internal factors of developing countries. The definitions are not necessarily in contradiction with the Amin's concept of elite, but they can be used to complement it.

According to Sklar, the formation of a dominating class is decisively influenced by the fusion of elites. The elites represent, each in their own sector, the different power sources of the society. However, they identify themselves more closely and in multitude of ways with each other than with the organizations or the institutions they represent. The characteristics of the elite are: valued work, high income, good education and the ownership or control of an enterprise. The most usual political way to strengthen the power of the ruling class has been the formation of an authoritarian state. (Sklar 1979, 537 and 538, 540, 543.)

Larry Diamond defines a class as a group, which has similar economic motives and opportunities. The class is dominant, when it owns or controls the biggest part of the productive assets, it has good consumption possibilities and it is sufficiently in control of the means of coercion and legitimation in order to politically preserve its socioeconomic pre-eminence. The class in question is unavoidably in leading positions in the institutions of society. It is also clear that the class possesses class consciousness and tends to shift its status to the next generations. According to Diamond, a state can act as a former of a dominant class in the following four ways: through legal employment and expenditures, with the help of development plans and strategies, by manipulating ethnic ties in order to inhibit lower class organization and by illegal accumulation of public wealth. (Diamond 1987, 569 and 570.)

It is hardly possible to find a definition for the African elite which would fully describe the elite anywhere in Africa. On the general level the elite can be described as a power holding group, which can be characterized mainly as urban, educated and in possess of social influence. In addition the elite often has the opportunity to make use of the foreign financial quarters as well as the means of legitimation and coercion for securing its own position. It seems, that the formation and action of the elite in Africa has been influenced by the expansion of international capitalism and more directly by the opportunities offered by the weak nation states for centralization of power. Because of the uniqueness of history and society of each nation state, the formation of local elite varies. Also the role of the elite in the economic life may differ greatly. For example after the independence in Tanzania the ruling class strengthened its position by a large nationalization programme whereas in neighbouring Kenya the state has often cooperated with the local and foreign capital to form joint ventures.

2.0 THE AFRICAN STATE AND THE ELITE POLITICS

People from different interest groups participated in the African independence struggles. The most notable groups were the religious societies, trade unions and the political parties. Because the political parties had the best preconditions for leading the strive for independence, the different interest groups momentarily united together for gaining independence. (See Tordoff 1984, 53, 62.)

Due to the unorganized nature of corporate organizations their members participated in the independence struggle as individuals and not as representatives of these groups. The situation benefited the educated elite, which could unite the disparate forces of social power and obtained the possibility to decide the course of the independence movement. At the same time the anti-colonialist block manifested obvious class-consciousness, which in turn decreased the movement's popular orientation. (Bangura 1991, 17 and 18.)

The state-directed development was the prevailing worldwide ideology at the time of independence. (Gulhati 1990, 1152.) Statism suited well the socialist world concept and the development ideologies held by the rulers of the newly independent states (see Diamond 1988, 7 and 8). Following these ideologies the African governments believed that with the revenues from the export products it would be possible to implement the national development programmes and to decrease dependency on the manufactured import goods (Nyang'oro 1989, 40.) Often the local business life was underdeveloped so the government's active role was seen to be an essential part in the economic development (Diamond 1987, 572). The government's task was to use the revenues from agriculture and primary production to develop import substitution industry. The development aid and the private foreign capital were to compensate for the lacking finance. (Bangura 1991, 18).

However, the submission of the economic questions under political and administrative instances led into bureaucratic irrationality. The state's economic sector was unorganized, anarchic and ineffective. (See Nyang'oro 1989, 135.)

Due to its central role in the development process, the government became a major wage employer in Africa. Because in many African countries political institutions have failed to develop and there are no other channels for social advancement, the role of state has increased in this respect. As the principal spender and distributor of public revenues the state offers through politics possibilities for increasing wealth. The government post is considered as a benefit, which can be used for accumulating private wealth. The swollen, clientelist state has furthered the increase of corruption and added ethnical conflicts at the same time when it has become the former of the ruling class. (See Diamond 1987, 573 and 574, 581; Diamond 1988, 20 and 21.)

The characteristics of the economic policy followed by African states can to certain extent be defended by the development thoughts prevailing in 1950's and 1960's. The economic policy in question has, however, been continued in Africa long after the theories supporting it have generally been abandoned. The

popularity of these ideas among the leaders of the African states added that they also fitted in well with the more personal political interests of the leaders (See Gulhati 1990, 1152 and 1153).

In 1960's there was a clear tendency in Africa of shifting away from political pluralism to centralization of power in the hands of one party. Often the political power was personalized in the leader of the national party who became the president of the country. (Tordoff 1984, 4 and 5.)

The one party system has sometimes been described to picture the consensus of African society (Tordoff 1984, 103). Although many of the parties which had gained power had a clear electoral victory behind them, it is slightly problematic to defend the one party-system by referring to electoral outcome. For example in Tanzania in the elections held in 1960 there were approximately 885 000 registered voters despite that the population of the country has been estimated to be about 8,9 million at the time (Mwakyembe 1986, 38).

On the other hand the authoritarian rule has sometimes been defended in Africa as a necessity so that the nation state building and economical embetterment would succeed (Bangura 1991, 19). This argument is based on the fact that in the beginning of the colonial times the European mother countries had arbitrarily divided Africa among themselves without considering the prevailing state systems or cultural groupings. Because the new African leaders did not possess much experience of governmental leadership on nation state level, one of their most important goals was achieving a legitimation in a divided society. (See Tordoff 1984, 79;Diamond 1988, 6, 8.) This partly explains why the general direction of the governments was to emphasize the national unity. In order to avoid ethnical clashes, the new leaders of Africa accepted the borders of colonial time, although these borders did not always follow the ethnical, religious or cultural historic lines of the region.

Seen in this light, the state's strong role in economic issues was a tempting alternative because through it the political instability could at least be slightly reduced. (See Herbst 1990, 951). The legitimation of authoritarian, state centered governments have rested on their promises to improve the public welfare. This is why the state expenditures on the fields of education, health and public services grew significantly. (Bangura 1991, 19 and 20).

3.0 THE ENVIRONMENTAL PROBLEMS RESULTING FROM THE STATE POLICIES OF THE AFRICAN ELITE

It has now appeared that the development programmes pursued by the colonial rulers, the experts and the post-colonial governments were not only in many ways economically unsuccessful but they often have had serious environmental impacts as well. (Anderson & Grove 1987, 2.)

3.1 ENVIRONMENTAL PROBLEMS AS CONSEQUENCES OF DEVELOPMENT

In African countries, like in other developing countries, the long term environmental programmes have competed with the short term priorities for scarce resources. This has also been reflected in the agricultural and forestry policies followed by the governments.

Much of the agricultural planning in Africa has been done without including environmental aspects to it (see Lofchie & Commins 1982, 25). The local elite has often, like the colonialists, looked down on the African agricultural traditions. Many African experts have been educated in Western universities. Because Western agriculture was clearly more productive than African, it seemed logical to use full-scale mechanization, chemical fertilizers and monocropping in Africa too. However, when Western agricultural methods were put in practice, the special character of the often fragile African soils and unpredictable climates were forgotten. (Harrison 1987, 57.)

Although agricultural production has been increased in many developing countries by using large-scale irrigation, chemicals and mechanization the results have not necessarily been ecologically on a sustainable basis (Isomäki 1988).

In their forestry policies too, the African governments have assumed the infrastructure and attitudes of the colonial regimes. In principle the importance of the forest reserves have been admitted but at the same time there has been a strive for maximal use of forest resources. (Atampugre 1991, 5). For example in Tanzania the payments ordered in the Forest Rules of Government for forest products have not covered the real value of a tree nor the costs required for replanting. The artificially low wood prices do not encourage the farmers to invest in tree growing because the revenues obtained from it are poor. In this way the Tanzanian government's policy can be seen to support consumption of timber and not conservation. (FINNIDA 1990, Appendix 3.)

The migration from rural areas to towns has increased the urban environmental problems. For example 70 % of Nairobi's population live in slums or in slum-like dwellings (DANIDA 1989, 51). The environmental legislation and administration affecting the living conditions both in the towns and the rural areas has remained under-developed. For example the use of many chemicals prohibited in Western countries is allowed in Africa. The working conditions of workers are very poor. The recommendations of International Labour Organization are not followed by the state nor by private entrepreneurs. Often the occupational health regulations are not even followed by the foreign employers. (Gutto 1991, 7.) Although for example both in Kenya and Tanzania there are inspectorates in charge of occupational health and security matters, neither the employers nor the employees take these matters seriously. In Kenya the protective clothes may be difficult to obtain, they may be expensive and the entire matter of working environment is not thought to be important (Karanja 1992). When the existing government organizations in charge of working conditions or environmental matters in general are weak, it is possible for the foreign consultants to blame the African

governments for the neglect of environmental aspects in the development projects, whether it is justified or not.

The upsurge of the environmental issues has placed demands on the actions of the developing countries' governments to adjust their policies to environmentally sound direction. Although the efforts of African countries in developing their environmental administration, programmes and legislation are acknowledged, the governments have been criticized for spending actually more time in talking than in concrete action. The shortage of money is the reason which is often given for the slow progress. Apart from looking at the situation merely as a question of lack of finance, it can also be analysed as part of the elite's economic policy for remaining in power.

3.2 OBSTACLES TO CHANGE: ENVIRONMENTAL IMPACTS OF THE ECONOMIC AND POLITICAL SYSTEM SUPPORTING THE AFRICAN ELITE

A prominent feature of the economic policy practiced by the African states has been the neglect of peasant farmers, sometimes even their exploitation (Gulhati 1990, 1152). Despite that rural development has often been emphasized in the development programmes of African governments, the resources directed towards agriculture have been very modest. This has been especially true when comparing the important role of agriculture in increasing the public revenues and the fact that the majority of the Africans live in the rural areas. In many African countries only less than 10 % of the government spending has been directed to agriculture, although it often may provide over 50 % of GDP. (FAO 1986.)

The economic policies of the African governments have often been described with the term urban bias. In urban bias the state allocates resources in favour of towns at the expense of small peasants. In practice this has meant income transfers from farmers to town dwellers. Maybe the most often referred example of this policy has been the role of state's agricultural boards. Their market monopolies have kept the producer prices low so that the people in towns could enjoy cheap food prices and that the industry could benefit from cheap raw-materials. But also other government action, such as the over-valuation of currency has been a way to ensure income transfers from rural areas to towns. (See Diamond 1987, 587; Lofchie 1989, 57 - 62.)

The urban bias and especially the cheap food policy connected to it have often been explained as being one of the most important conditions for the African rulers to remain in power. This is because the urban dwellers are often better organized, educated and politically more aware than the rural population and in this way a bigger threat to the politicians in power (Diamond 1987, 587). In this situation the unorganized inhabitants in slums have an advantage to peasants for they live closer to the decision makers and have better possibilities to protest against the government policy (Harrison 1987, 53).

The scarce resources directed to agricultural development have usually been spent in support of state farms, communities and large scale mechanized farming, which have not always proved to be viable or productive but have increased dependency on external aid. At the same time the support of the large scale farming has diverted resources from supporting traditional farmers, even though the overwhelming majority of the African population are small farmers. (See Asante 1986, 19 - 22; Harrison 1987, 84 and 85). For example in Tanzania 80 % from the funds received by agricultural development were directed to large scale farming in 1983. (Timberlake 1985, 75.) Sometimes the large-scale farmers have been favoured by the government pricing policy of agricultural products. For example in Kenya the estates have received 90 % of the coffee's world market price when the small holders have only received 66 %. (Bates 1983, 114.)

In addition to large-scale farming, the African governments have favoured cash crop growers. Although some of the cash crops like tobacco have direct negative environmental impacts, the biggest problems connected with cash crop growing are often indirect. (See Psychas & Malaska 1989, 107 and 108; Davies & Leach 1991, 47; Lofchie & Commins 1982, 17.) Like the large-scale farmers, the cash crop growers get far more help, advice and loans than the subsistence farmers. Often also the best farming lands are reserved for them. Because cash crops have produced less and less money, more fertilizers, pesticides and tools have been purchased with foreign currency to grow them. For example during the years 1978-79, 61 % of the loans given for agricultural inputs from the Tanzanian Rural Development Bank went to growing tobacco (See Timberlake 1985, 69 - 75; Psychas & Malaska 1989, 109 - 111.)

Thus, the agricultural policies followed by the African governments have actually been favouring minorities in the rural areas. The small peasants growing food crops and the pastoralists, who form the majority of population in the Sub-Saharan Africa, have been forced to be content with poorer soils and water reserves. Under the continuously growing population it is not possible to implement the traditionally long fallow periods. The increasing shifting cultivation, herding and firewood collection have increased the speed at which vegetation is lost and soils are deteriorating. From the environmental point of view the situation is especially serious in the dryland Africa. (See Lofchie & Commins 1982, 17; Harrison 1987, 41 and 42; Psychas & Malaska 1989, 109 - 111). The low prices for agricultural products do not leave cash for a farmer to invest in improving the soil quality or farming techniques. Also lack of government's finance and agricultural advice in general have hindered the living conditions of the people and deteriorated the environment in these areas. As the development of urban centers has proceeded it has been difficult to get capable people to work in the remote rural areas. Nomination to the rural area is often taken as a punishment or as a compulsory part of career development, which has to be completed as fast as possible. (See Harrison 1987, 64, 85.)

Although in Africa the unequal distribution of land is not as remarkable cause of environmental degradation as in other third world countries, the existing tenure

rights may add the problems in some cases. In Kenya, where the population growth rate is one of the highest in the world, the land speculation is estimated to have negative impacts on the environment. Only 17 % of the land is classified as being arable and from this approximately a third is not cultivated because it is held for speculation (DANIDA 1989, 10, 22).

The agricultural policies favouring minorities can be seen as a part of the elite's aim to strengthen political support in the case of rural opposition, which the programmes harming the majority of the rural areas could raise. In this way the inefficiency of agricultural policies can be productive, because they help the government to maintain in power. The competition for scarce resources would not work if the political forces would try to please the majority of the population. In order to prevent the uprising of peasants, it has been necessary to prohibit the competition between political parties. (Bates 1983, 116, 127 and 128, 131.)

It is not surprising that the African governments hesitate to spend scarce resources in solving environmental problems, which are actually connected to the government's policies of remaining in power. Like in the other developing countries, the environmental issues do not often require an immediate attention from the elite. Degradation of the environment rarely threatens the stability of political status quo in the same way as the food riots in towns do (See Davies & Leach 1991, 47).

Although the soil conservation measures and other environmental programmes are badly needed in many areas, they are not necessarily identical with the primary interests of the rulers. Firstly, these measures rarely bring private benefits to the developing countries' civil servants similarly as for example the issuing of import licenses do. In addition the conservation programmes often include actions which are harmful to the private interests of the elite. For example, successful conservation programmes may end up limiting the production of cash crops. This in turn has effects on the availability of foreign exchange which the elite is dependent on for obtaining luxury goods, foreign travels and education. It seems that the soil degradation is not going to decrease in developing countries unless it directly threatens the wealth of those in power. The dominant classes are able to protect themselves from the effects of increasing erosion and suffer the least from it in their daily lives. (See Blaikie 1985, 84 - 87, 147.)

Secondly, the implementation of a conservation programme is difficult. As the civil servants are often responsible for their failures, even a committed official may be reluctant to risk his career for the course of a such programme. (Blaikie 1985, 84 - 86). The difficulties of implementing a conservation programme may be resulting from that the interests of poor peasants and governments' civil servants are not similar on the conservation issues (See Anderson & Grove 1987, 3). There are many reasons why the local people may be against the government's environmental programmes. One of the reasons may be pure lack of trust in the government. For example the village forestry programmes in Africa have faced problems because the villagers have not been included in planning of the programmes and they are afraid of losing the revenues from the tree planting to

the officials. (See Timberlake 1985, 120 and 121; Harrison 1987, 175.) The same distrust towards government officials is sometimes found in the agricultural sector. The government policies have created insecurity among the peasants and they have been reluctant to invest in improving soil qualities (Harrison 1987, 59).

The unpopularity of a government's environmental programme may also be resulting from the lack of alternatives offered to the local people. This is because poverty and lack of resources increase violations of the environmental legislation. For example the finances and organizers of poaching often pay poor citizens to actually put the plans in practice. (See Gutto 1991, 5). In the same fashion, intruding into the local population's traditional rights on forests turns many previous forest users into pit-sawyers. (See Atampugre 1991, 6).

The opposition of the government's environmental programmes by local people may sometimes be connected with their unofficial goals. It is possible to implement political programmes alongside with the environmental ones. Governments may for example collect taxes from peasants for using natural resources or pastoralists may be pressurized to change their living patterns. (See Davies & Leach 1991, 48.) The environmental legislation can also be used to pursue political goals by granting exceptions to important groups in special situations. For example in Zanzibar some of the mangrove forests subjected to logging prohibitions were opened as a gesture of a good will before the 1990 elections.

4. CONCLUDING REMARKS

In this article the African elite and its politics of remaining in power have been discussed from the environmental point of view.

The concept of urban bias has been used to enlighten the background of the earlier economic policies, even though the uncontrolled migration from rural areas to towns offering more opportunities has continuously eroded the rural-urban income gap. It has been claimed that in many Sub-Saharan countries that gap has never been clear at all and that it has further narrowed during the time after 1970's. The old division between the favoured urban dwellers and forgotten farmers has changed into a gap between the poor and the rich (Jamal & Weeks 1988, 273 - 275, 289).

The environmental problems of the African countries are not only partially resulting from the economic policies followed by the governments, but solving the problems will in many ways endanger the political leadership of the elite. The African governments have already been for some time forced to restructure their economic policies. Cutting down the expenses of public sector and increasing the agricultural product prices, as part of the Structural Adjustment Programmes, may also effect the position of the elite in the future (See Herbst 1990, 951).

The first years of the 1990's have witnessed some political opening in Africa. From the point of view of the environment this may be seen as a positive change.

In the earlier times the government officials have not even been aware of all the environmental problems since the decisions have been made in top-down fashion, the freedom of press has been limited and the NGOs (NGO = non-governmental organization) have been weak. (See Harrison 1987, 63).

The role of the NGOs is an interesting one when thinking of the future of the environmental action in Africa. The African governments have long pictured the non-governmental organizations as groups opposing the government. Some changes have started to take place in connection of the shifting of development policies. At times the NGOs have become governments' tools in implementation of different kinds of programmes and plans. (Starke 1990, 78.) For example in Tanzania there are only few significant NGOs in addition to religious groups. The recent political climate favours growth of NGOs because they are able to help the government at the grassroots level (Bensted-Smith & Msangi 1989, 27).

On the other hand, the strengthening of the action of environmental NGOs may threaten the elite's political power. As the people mobilize behind the environmental issues there is also a danger that they will become politically active. The entangling of the economic and environmental crises increases this possibility in general. The experiences of the Kenyan Green Belt Movement are an example of the potential problems which the environmental NGOs may face in their home countries. The organization has been blamed for revolutionary activities and it has constantly experienced opposition from the Kenyan government.

The increasing activity of the environmental NGOs add the problems of defining the concept of the African elite. The concept is originally a difficult one because it is very hard to generalize the interests of the rulers in the environmental questions. As the environmental issues climb up in the agenda one may witness the birth of "the environmental elite" in Africa of which driving actors belong for instance to the university circles.

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