

Arno J. van Niekerk<sup>1</sup>

## Investigating the marginalisation of Africa: evidence and explanations

### *Abstract*

Amidst much speculation about Africa's marginalisation, the controversial 'blame game' continues – swathing this important issue with unnecessary ambiguity. This is a concern because not nearly enough progress is, vis-à-vis other emerging economies, made to close the gap between Africa and the First World. The trap of getting entangled in a squabble of finger pointing has become too enticing while not enough is done to examine the merit of the actual underlying causes. The aim of this paper is two-fold: (1) to examine evidence of Africa's marginalisation; and (2) to investigate both sides of the debate by exploring some of the main explanations offered on why Africa has been marginalised from mainstream global economic activity. This investigation is vital because of the need to advance the debate towards a greater focus on workable alternatives for more effective cooperation between Africa and the rest of the world, which would help bridge the divide and rid the continent of marginalisation.

**JEL code: F5**

**Keywords:** Africa, marginalisation, globalisation, underdevelopment and debate

### **1.1 Introduction<sup>2</sup>**

In the period following the end of the Cold War it is becoming ever more apparent that the major powers have largely withdrawn from Third World concerns, thus confirming the fears of many Africans that the end of the bipolar confrontation could reinforce Africa's marginalisation and isolation in the world economy. Whereas Africa was intensely tied into global processes and structures, initially by colonial intervention and later by Cold War ideological linkages, it has now become predominantly dislodged from this earlier chain of interdependency (Deng, 1993:33). In fact, it is argued that the September 11 attacks and their aftermath drove home to Africa its marginalisation and its lesser global significance in a new era largely dominated by concerns over global terrorism and instability in the Middle East (Nnaemeka, 2003:601). What has become clear is that it is essentially the way in which contemporary globalisation and global economic governance is developing and moving forward that has made these two processes main catalysts through which Africa's current marginalisation is intensifying.

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<sup>1</sup> Department of Economics, University of the Free State, Bloemfontein [niekerka.ekw@mail.uovs.ac.za](mailto:niekerka.ekw@mail.uovs.ac.za)

<sup>2</sup> Note that this paper is still under construction and should therefore be seen as a work in progress.

At this point it would be appropriate to first clarify what exactly is meant by the marginalisation of Africa. The study identifies it as the continent's continuous omission from full-scale participation in the global system and the structures of global economic governance for reasons pertaining to both: Africa's failure to properly integrate itself into the global economy; and its deliberate/unintentional exclusion from mainstream global economic activity as well as restricted involvement in processes governing the world economy. Hence, marginalisation mainly characterises the present period of globalisation (its third wave) and Africa. The crux of the concern here is not only Africa's marginality to the rest of the world, but the marginalisation of Africans in the development of Africa. The paper examines evidence of Africa's marginalisation as well as divergent (i.e. internal and external) explanations of the phenomenon. The intention with the latter is to call attention to how opportunities for Africa to participate meaningfully in the global economy are negatively affected, while the former identifies the nature of Africa's marginalisation. The aim of the study is to explore and document the different ways in which African marginalisation is occurring within the global system and to emphasise that the reasons/explanations behind it is part of an intense debate, which is often mistakenly exaggerated at the cost of actually implementing real solutions for the reversal of marginalisation. In effect, the study is a comprehensive account of Africa's underdevelopment, which is seen as being both a cause and an effect of the continent's marginalisation.

### **1.2 Evidence of marginalisation and sources of Africa's underdevelopment**

In contrast to all other economies that have become more integrated into the global economy, Africa's economies have become more inward-looking as the continent's shares of world trade, investment and production have declined reprehensibly. Although Africa's marginalisation is not homogenous, generally (or continentally) it has become clear that its factor advantages in the global economy – cheap unskilled labour and inputs for primary production – are no longer an acceptable basis for economic competitiveness (Stren & Halfani, 2001:473). Africa lacks the capacity and infrastructure to compete economically and has become “completely marginalised”. Consequently, unlike other regions, Africa's export volumes have, on average, grown less rapidly than GDP, while it has almost completely bypassed the vast increase in global foreign direct investment (FDI) (Collier, 1995:541). Hence, evidence on the

extent of Africa's marginalisation is quite staggering. With the growth in its volume of exports being lower than that of other regions, Africa's share of world exports has fallen gradually. For instance, between 1970 and 1980, Africa's exports grew at 2.8% per annum versus 3.6% for South Asia. Comparative figures for 1980-92 were -2.4% versus 6.8%, which indicates how Africa is falling behind. In being highly concentrated, the share of primary commodities in Africa's exports did not change much over time with it being 83% in 1970 and 76% in 1992. According to Luiz (2006:626), sub-Saharan Africa (SSA), in particular, has, between 1950 and 1999, performed consistently below the world average and that of developed countries in terms of export growth. Since the 1970s, the region has even fallen behind that of developing countries too.

In investment terms, Africa's marginalisation is perhaps even worse. Although there has been a marked increase in direct private investment into developing countries, to over \$200 billion per annum, Africa's share decreased to insignificant proportions. Not only is SSA currently receiving less than 1% of this flow, but even the level – in real terms of inflows – is falling. UNCTAD (2001:35-36) further estimates that for each dollar of net capital inflow to SSA from the rest of the world, about 25 cents went back as net interest payments and profit remittances abroad, more than 30 cents leaked into capital outflows and reserve build-up, while 51 cents made up for terms of trade losses. This suggests a net transfer of real resources from SSA to the rest of the world (Luiz, 2006:628). Although worldwide FDI inflows grew spectacularly between 1980 and 1999, from \$55 billion to over \$860 billion, SSA's share, on average, remained well below 1%, which is in stark contrast to the developing countries' share that rose from 15% to 24% over this period. Thus, as a demonstration of marginalisation, real per capita inflows of FDI into SSA were in 2000 less than a third of the level reached in 1980. Overall, Africa has experienced a net capital flight and has lost attractiveness as a market for FDI, even in comparison with other developing regions. Hence, with world trade and investment being fundamental components of globalisation, the impact of globalisation on Africa's economic development has largely been negative.

Africa has an inheritance of not only relatively small markets and scale of production, but also lower stocks of human capital, which is resulting in it not being in a position

to make use of opportunities for manufactured export growth. Compared to Asian industrialisation, Africa is facing a growing cost disadvantage that is not even offset by its cheaper labour as labour costs make up a small share of total production costs (Collier, 1995:547). As a result, the continent's share of world output has declined to negligible proportions. This also give substance to the perception that not only is Africa being marginalised within the global system, it is also facing marginalisation within the Third World.

From 1960 to 1998 the regions of East and South Asia and the Pacific experienced improvements in per capita income ratios relative to the OECD economies – from around a ninth and a tenth of that of high income OECD countries, to a third and a half of their per capita income. The region that was the most notable exception was Africa, and particularly SSA, which experienced a drastic worsening with per capita income declining from a ninth of that of OECD economies to an eighteenth by 1998 (UNDP, 2001:16). Currently, more than 20 African countries have a per capita income less than that in 1975, with life expectancy in many countries less than 40 years (Gibson, 2004:3). In fact, with half of the continent's population living on 65c a day, average per capita income is now lower than in the 1960s as African countries now hold the 27 lowest places on the human development index (HDI). Africa, in general, has therefore gained little from contemporary globalisation. Accordingly, an area of particular concern is the plunder caused by debt and debt-servicing that has overwhelmed the continent. Edoho (1997:13-14) argues that, since 1982, Africa's debt service ratios have risen more rapidly than any other continent.

With technological advance generally seen as a key driving force in the economic growth process, the 'digital divide' between Africa and the developed world (and many of the developing countries in other regions) has become one of the most telling realities of the continent's marginalisation (Fagerberg, 1994:1171). According to Lim (1994:836), when comparing the relative contributions of technological progress and factors of production to growth in real per capita GDP in developed countries between 1960 and 1985, 75% of it was due to technology. For developing countries this figure was 14% and for Africa the contribution of technological progress was a disquieting 0%. This explains why Africa finds itself increasingly unable to fully participate in the new global economy. While few would deny the positive effects of technology on

people's quality of life, it mainly is the fact that technology creation is both the cause and the result of continued investments made in human capital creation and research development that makes technology such a mainstay in the new, modern-day economy. Information and telecommunication technology, in particular, has become an important indicator of a country's ability to integrate itself into this new economy. With telecommunications currently the fastest growing sector in the world economy, Africa only accounts for less than 1% of this market (Coyle, 2001:45). Thus, in the context of Giddens's (2000:92) definition of globalisation "as the intensification of worldwide social relations which link distant localities", Africa indeed remains marginal to the technological network that links 'the global'.

As regards global economic governance, the IMF, World Bank and the WTO are dominated by the major economic powerhouses, i.e. the G8. Varma (2002:15) maintains that the system for allocating IMF shares works to marginalise developing countries from effectively participating in decision-making processes relating to how the global economy is governed. For example, 43 African countries are represented by two Executive Directors on the IMF Board, accounting for less than 5% of the votes. By contrast, the US has 17,5% of the voting share, giving it veto power. This is also reflected in the IMF's other governing bodies. Although having a membership of 182 countries, the World Bank's voting structure is highly in favour of the richest countries: the US has 15% of the votes, Japan 11%, Germany 7%, Great Britain 5% and France 4%, with each having an individual Executive Director on the Executive Board. Conversely, the 47 SSA member countries have a combined total of only 7% of votes and two Executive Directors to represent it. Thus, although developed countries only account for 17% of the votes in the UN, they account for over 61% of the votes in the World Bank and IMF. Even the WTO, which is seemingly a more egalitarian forum for African countries to make their voices heard, offering a 'one country, one vote' structure, is dominated by the advanced economies as we know that not all votes are equal. In Luiz's (2006:638) view, "industrialised countries are able to dictate the agenda and the outcomes because they are better organised and have more resources which give them more voice".

Perhaps the only area that can be considered as an exception as far as marginalisation is concerned is the substantial amounts of aid inflows from the West and attention to

aid programmes in Africa. In fact, aid and migrant's remittances now constitute African economies' main form of participation in the global economy (Collier, 1995:543). Doubling from the 1970s to the 1990s, net official transfers to Africa accounted for 9.3% of the continent's GNP as opposed to 2.1% of South Asia's. A concern, however, is that aid often creates policy uncertainty (especially for potential foreign investors) because of conditionalities that are usually attached, thus increasing the risk of underinvestment, policy-failures and volatile economic conditions.

### **1.3 Debating the reasons behind Africa's marginalisation**

The reasons behind Africa's marginalisation have long been one of the most contentious issues in discussions about the evolution of the world economy. Seen as the primary cause of the widening gap between Africa and the rest of the world (now also including most of the developing countries), marginalisation is ever more taking centre stage in the quest for re-integrating the continent into the global economy. A key first step in this quest is to carefully examine the various explanations put forward by the dominant points of view. Hence, the object of this section is to underline some of the main arguments, firstly, on the African side of the debate, and secondly, on the side of the debate that comprises of views from mostly outside of Africa.

#### **1.3.1 Explanations on the African side**

Ever since its birth, capitalism – a world market and system of value production that underpins the current global system – has been a globalising system in which political power has played a central role in gaining advantages, exploiting inequalities, and crushing competition. Its strongly inegalitarian nature started to manifest when the industrial revolution in the North was tied up with the exploitation of Black bodies and when the triangular trade between Africa, Europe and the Americas became a very unequal exchange of unequals. With the latter still characterising trade between Africa and the North, even at this late stage of globalisation, Africa has, according to Gibson (2004:5), “become marginal and marginalised partly through its centrality and integrality to the birth and development of modern capitalism”. Although colonial rule and the slave trade cast a dark shadow over the continent's history as it was intensely shaped by it, it should not be forgotten that Africa had many vibrant economies before colonisation. As early as the ninth century Africa was integrated into a non-capitalist world system through trade along its East Coast to North Africa, the Middle East, and

the Mediterranean, India and China. However, all this changed ever since militarised mercantilistic explorations by the Portuguese in the late 15<sup>th</sup> and early 16<sup>th</sup> century led to the obliteration of many of the integrated cities of the East Coast of Africa, which eventually culminated into full-scale European colonisation in the 19<sup>th</sup> century. Lasting for almost 400 years, the slave trade and its debilitating effects as regards Africa's underdevelopment (i.e. the early stages of its marginalisation) explains why the people of Africa is said to have such long memories. Whether justified or not, it also explains something about why many Africans see contemporary globalisation as simply the latest form of capitalist penetration into Africa, which again, is resulting in the continent becoming further marginalised within the global system.

Neo-liberal globalisation is at times even seen as a new form of colonisation and slavery, given African nations' indebtedness and the disciplining of its producers and consumers due to it being forced to open up its economies to market forces through particularly IMF and World Bank conditionality, which is centred on structural adjustment, privatisation and liberalisation. In fact, the development-friendly regime of the 30 years following the Second World War was already, shortly after the world crisis of 1974-5, officially liquidated. Subsequently, the Third World countries were, as Arrighi (2002:23) argues, "invited to play by the rules of an altogether different game – that is, to open up their national economies to the cold winds of intensifying world-market competition". Evidently, Africa's economic significance to the global economy gradually elapsed as the continent continually found itself excluded from mainstream global economic activity, which is primarily dominated by the TRIAD<sup>3</sup>.

While the issue of insufficient representation and voting power in the IMF, World Bank and WTO is a serious concern for African leaders and intellectuals, a perhaps even greater concern is the lack of sufficient African participation in the planning of their Structural Adjustment Programmes (SAP's) and policy prescriptions. There can be no denying that these three bodies have had a profound effect on Africa's development path (with various degrees of success) through their policies of conditionality (Luiz, 2006:638). Mainly designed in Washington by people in the industrialised world, these plans and policies are then imposed on people living in the

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<sup>3</sup> The TRIAD, consisting of the USA, Europe and Japan, represents the rich North that currently still dominate the global economy through intensifying cross-border trade, capital and production flows.

Third World with on-the-ground conditions vastly different than that often understood by the developed world. In being largely viewed as “cure-all” policies, these SAP’s, according to Gibson (2004:1), have had – particularly in Africa – much worse effects than the “disease” that preceded it. Therefore, by excluding Africa’s voice even from the programme design process, the continent is further marginalised by the very institutions it has to resort to for financial and technical assistance.

Shatz (2002:61) argues that African studies now generally accept that Africa’s 20-odd years of experience with structural adjustment has been a ruinous failure. The failure of World Bank and IMF policies in Africa has moved the continent from “crisis” to “tragedy” (Leys, 1994:46). For instance, for the majority of people on the continent the delivery of basic services now comes at a price that they can not afford anymore. Most African countries’ HDI-values have stagnated and even declined since the 1980s (Gibson, 2004:2). Education, health, security, and the basic determinants of welfare – with its roots in anti-colonial and labour struggles in Africa – can no longer, under the strictures of current prescriptions for structural adjustment, be met. The central structural adjustment policy of privatisation has not only put basic resources, such as electricity and water, out of the reach of the multitude, public transport and health care once subsidised by the state, has now also become too expensive, resulting in many people not being able to go to work and health conditions deteriorating in a situation of increasing poverty. In addition, as Choussudovsky (1997:153) argues, good governance – the so-called ‘logical result’ of structural adjustment and democratisation – has meant that people’s lives and political life are dictated from the outside, undermining national independence.

Varma (2002:11) argues that with regards to the least developed nations, particularly those in Africa, the benefits of trade liberalisation have yet to be seen as they continue to be marginalised from the international trading system and have experienced a decline in their share of world trade. Additionally, the rapid weakening of Africa’s terms of trade is another important explanation of its marginalisation, where it has been a victim of conditions outside its direct control. Although the continent experienced an improvement in its terms of trade during the commodity price booms of the 1970s, a reversal took place since the 1980s (Luiz, 2006:626). SSA’s terms of trade index, for instance, declined from 141 in 1980 to 93 in 1997 (1990 = 100),

compared to the rise of 90 to 103 for developed market economies (UNCTAD, 2001:38). This deterioration took place in the wake of extreme volatility, which was four times the volatility experienced by the industrial countries.

### **1.3.2 Explanations from outside of Africa**

Predominantly a 'Northern' or 'First World' perspective, the views presented here take a rather critical stance as to why Africa finds itself marginalised from most of the rest of the world, identifying the continent itself as the main culprit for it being underdevelopment. As part of Africa's decolonisation process, before the 1980s, domestic policies hostile to foreign-owned firms, the private sector, the export sector and foreign capital were seen as part of the continent's Africanisation process. The subsequent retreat of the foreign-controlled private sector led to sharp reductions in capital inflows (reducing the incentive to expand businesses through investment) as well as the shrinkage of production and export volumes (Collier, 1995:543). Furthermore, during and after the 1980s, the reversal of government policies through SAP-reforms largely failed because these policy reforms have not gone far enough. And, the continuation of policy discrepancies such as higher rates of corporate taxation and policy disparities such as the neglect of infrastructure for the productive sector further restrained African economies from becoming more efficient. Reform has thus been insufficient because although the gap between Africa and the industrialised economies narrowed somewhat, it still remained due to Africa not being able to compete with economies that place a higher value on export success and foreign investment inflows. Hence, it is mainly Africa's poor economic performance and the exploitative practices of African elites that should carry the blame for structural adjustment not reaping the benefits that it should have.

A serious concern, particularly as regards foreign investment interest, is Africa's high risk environment, which is responsible for a large part of the blame regarding the continent's marginalisation. This is a constraint on Africa's economies that not only makes them more volatile and unpredictable than other regions, but also more vulnerable. The risk of doing business on the continent is too high, mainly because of common risks that are unusually high (Collier, 1995:548). Some of the most prominent of these risks include:

- Erratic policy changes. Although all governments occasionally make adjustments to their economic policies, these changes are predictable because a policy rule is being followed. In Africa, however, many policy changes generate risk because of the policy rule itself being subject to change. Economic reforms of particularly the late 1980s and 1990s (mainly due to donor conditionality), for instance, constitute such a rule change.
- Poor governance. African countries have suffered severely from political instability and ravaging dictatorships which have, in most cases, led to large-scale economic mismanagement. Based on a system of patronage and personal accumulation, governance in many African countries were (and are, e.g. Zimbabwe) characterised by a lacking capacity of the state and its ability to provide a political environment conducive to economic growth and development. As a result, governance in Africa has in many cases been unaccountable, non-transparent and undemocratic. Corruption has become rife in Africa, undermining development. On the Corruption Index of Transparency International (CIIT), developing countries are scoring worse than the industrialised countries, with Africa ranking at the bottom of the list (Luiz, 2006:633). In not only being a disincentive for foreign investment, corruption also raises transaction costs, increases uncertainty and insecurity, and emasculates government actions. Poor governance can also be attributed to the prevalence of civil war and conflict many African countries have been plagued with. Importantly, Easterly and Levine (1997:1205) assert that ethnic fractionalisation and conflicts, for a large part, help account for Africa's growth tragedy and underdevelopment.
- Economic shocks arising from drastic changes in the terms of trade and climatic disasters. Due to Africa's high dependence on a few primary commodities for export, its economies are more susceptible to dramatic movements in world prices. Even trade restrictions effectively increase exposure to external shocks, thus limiting options to counteract. Then, the devastating effects of a whole host of droughts and floods over the years all over Africa have left scars that have taken many of its economies exceptionally long to recover from.
- Weakening of agencies of restraint. Contract enforcement is an important means through which private agents bind themselves in dealings with other private agents and is the foundation of reliable business relations. However, in

Africa, both civil legal systems and audit systems has very often been less than incontrovertible. Their deterioration has led to opportunistic private returns that make legal titles to ownership of assets in many cases highly contestable. Weak agencies of restraint has both a direct and an indirect impact on Africa's marginalisation: directly, weak judiciaries and accountancy practices result in a rudimentary financial system, often supplying only trade credit; and indirectly, they make the high risk environment even riskier through weak systems of policing and military defense forces and through weak central bank management, resulting in macroeconomic policies that are prone to abrupt changes.

Then, Africa is marginalising itself from the global economy by not doing enough as regards technological catch-up. Although being an excellent platform from which to launch initiatives to close the gap between itself and the developed world, it is not doing enough (in terms of broad-scale) human capacity building and investment in the technology sector. Disturbingly, this has the potential to become the cause of the continent's ultimate marginalisation (Luiz, 2006:637). Even being able to follow and keep pace with technological progress elsewhere by utilising what is on offer in your production processes, for instance, has significant value and could prevent the gap from widening. But worryingly, as a player on the world stage, Africa is currently not even in a position to be a follower because it is not in the game.

#### **1.4 Conclusion**

The paper has demonstrated that Africa is facing marginalisation in a wide number of areas and that there exists the real danger of this problem escalating to such an extent that it may prove to be irreversible, particularly if no drastic action are taken without delay. In fact, according to Collier (1995:556), "Africa is currently more marginalised within the world economy than at any time in the past half century". While it is necessary to debate the reasons behind Africa's marginalisation, the problem is that the process of attempting to de-marginalise Africa has stagnated at this very point. There is currently too much emphasis on debating the various explanations rather than collectively working towards viable alternatives for reversing the continent's marginalisation in the context of the reality of globalisation. Instead, 'Afropessimism' has been pervasive. The harsh reality is that, in the end, the responsibility rests on African shoulders to give the world a reason to become more optimistic about

the continent's future and to prove that it has the capacity to make a contribution to the new global economy – as a valuable, integrated partner.

Although some of the explanations (on both sides) might seem arbitrary, they nevertheless, together with the other explanations, constitute valuable insight into the underlying causes of Africa's marginalisation. Explanations that appear exceptionally valid and that toward which more attention should be directed by both Africa and the rest of the world in terms of reversing marginalisation include:

- addressing the weaknesses of capitalism, making it a more equitable system that also gives a chance of inclusion into the global economy to countries that are less competitive;
- attending to grave inequalities in voting power evident in the decision-making structures of the institutions of global economic governance;
- redesigning reform efforts in Africa, both in terms of a more inclusive planning process, and in terms of the proper execution of reform initiatives;
- drastically improving the continent's high risk environment by eradicating corruption and poor governance, and strengthening agencies of restraint to create better conditions for the attraction of foreign investment.

A major concern for Africa is its limited ability to participate in and affect the process of globalisation – the very process that primarily determines who are included and who are excluded from the global system and a process that has an extreme effect, either positive or negative, on all economies around the world. Although globalisation has the potential to support the continent's economic recovery, it is essential that the conditions under which Africa participates in this process need to be fundamentally changed (Gibb *et al*, 2002:21). More specifically, Africa should have a much greater say in the design of reform policies, it should stop being marginalised by a world trading system that is heavily in favour of the rich countries, and it should be allowed to have a more meaningful influence in the decision-making processes of global economic governance through increased voting power (because of the large amount of people it represents).

It is important and necessary that the present 'crisis' in Africa be seen as a, what Gramsci (1971:47) calls, "an interregnum", a turning point. The need to catapult itself

out of underdevelopment and onto a sustainable path of de-marginalisation should become Africa's single most important focus. The continent cannot afford to linger on this issue and should thus collectively, either through regional initiatives and/or through the African Union (AU), take drastic action to put itself on the global economic map. While the New Partnership for Africa's Development (NEPAD) and the whole African Renaissance initiative are the right steps in this direction, more should be done to speed up Africa's re-integration into the world economy. As China, India, South-East Asia and Latin America have fairly recently demonstrated, it is possible to recover from serious handicaps.

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