Development and Change

Published on behalf of the Institute of Social Studies, The Hague

Assessment

The Ironies of Progress and Plunder: A Review of the *Africa Progress Report 2014*

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Africa Progress Panel, *Africa Progress Report 2014. Grain Fish Money: Financing Africa's Green and Blue Revolutions*. Geneva: Africa Progress Panel, 2014. 183 pp. Downloadable PDF: http://www.africaprogresspanel.org/wp-content/uploads/2014/05/APP_APR2014_24june.pdf

INTRODUCTION

Since 2007, the Africa Progress Panel (APP) has reported on and monitored the African continent's progress towards equitable and sustainable development. Its annual flagship publication is the Africa Progress Report (APR), the 2014 version of which is entitled *Grain Fish Money: Financing Africa's Green and Blue Revolutions*. As the title suggests, the focus of the report is on food, agricultural and fisheries production. These form the 'heart' of the envisaged 'transformative breakthrough' in Africa's progress, according to the APR, and hence 'African farmers must be at the centre of the transformation that we envisage' (pp. 20, 54). The report makes much of this and argues that, although the APP has 'cautioned against exaggerated optimism' in the past, 'the foundations needed to support a transformative breakthrough are now in place' due to the 'progress' the continent has made (p. 20).

But what exactly is meant by 'transformative breakthrough'? And what is meant by 'progress'? The APP does not give clear definitions of these crucial terms but instead presents several numerical indicators in various charts under the header 'our progress' (p. 22). Numbers and statistics, of course, 'have been fundamental in ordering societies and supporting power structures' (Fioramonti, 2014: 12), and the question I want to raise in this

Thanks to Murat Arsel for the invitation to write this review and to the editorial board of *Development and Change* for thoughtful comments and suggestions on an earlier draft.

Development and Change 00(0): 1–12. DOI: 10.1111/dech.12170

assessment is whether the APP employs them to challenge those entrenched global power structures that have so often harmed rather than helped Africa (Bond, 2006; Büscher, 2012; Carmody, 2011; Ferguson, 2006). At first glance, this question must be answered with both 'no' and 'yes'. No, because the numbers in the charts refer to familiar and general indices around economic growth, governance, costs of doing business, education, health and agriculture.[1] While these numbers and graphs indicate many things, they do not say whether or which global (and local) power structures that have thus far functioned to the disadvantage of the African continent need to be, or will be, transformed. They merely indicate a 'decade of growth' in certain statistics.

At the same time, the report argues — often explicitly — that this growth and these indicators do not mean that Africa is necessarily better off. It argues that 'the rising tide of economic growth has failed to lift many out of poverty' (p. 20), and under the heading 'Despite progress . . . ', it highlights several graphs showing how statistics like Africa's share of global child mortality, children out of school, tertiary education enrolment and global GDP have gotten worse. The panel argues that in order for the poor to actually benefit from economic growth, several things are necessary, and these form the report's five policy recommendations: 1) growth must be inclusive and equitable, and serve to eradicate poverty; 2) 'African governments, the private sector and the global community must work together to invest in Africa's unique green revolution'; 3) 'the profit must be taken out of the plunder' of fisheries, forests and other renewable resources, and this must be guaranteed through multilateral systems developed by the international community; 4) African governments must develop and provide infrastructure and 'inclusive finance'; and 5) domestic resource mobilization through tax and finance must become fairer and more transparent (pp. 17–19).

So what to make of this? Will these recommendations transform 'growth' that benefits the few into 'inclusive growth' that benefits the poorest of the poor? Are they sufficient to guarantee the 'transformative breakthrough' towards Africa's equitable and sustainable development envisaged by the APP? In this assessment I will argue that in the APP's conceptualizations of transformation and development, progress and plunder are two sides of the same coin, and that if the recommendations of the report are taken to heart, they will stimulate plunder as much as progress. Or rather, they will stimulate and legitimate plunder as an inherent part of the kind of 'progress' that the panel envisions for the continent. The reason for this is that the report does not challenge or mediate but indeed stimulates the 'ingrained global power structures' mentioned above. By this I mean those of contemporary neoliberal capitalism, which makes it highly likely that the

1. Interestingly, the report also adds one less familiar graph, namely on 'African representation at the finals' of the World Cup soccer — now apparently also considered to be indicative of 'progress'.

APR would reinforce rather than alleviate the 'contradiction between the promotion of capitalist processes and concern to improve the condition of the dispossessed' that result from these processes (Li, 2007: 31). Elsewhere, I have argued that this supreme irony goes hand in hand with several other ironies and contradictions in the daily practices and discourses of (capitalist) progress (Büscher, 2015). This, I will show, is also true for the *Africa Progress Report 2014*.

After further introducing the report in the following section, I outline some of the main contradictions in the report, after which I will conclude by coming back to the central argument around progress and plunder.

'TRANSFORMATION' AND 'DEVELOPMENT' IN GRAIN, FISH AND MONEY

The *Africa Progress Report 2014* is a serious, 177-page analysis of general development dynamics and statistics in Africa, as well as a specific analysis of the role of agriculture, fisheries, food and forests in Africa's developmental and growth trajectory. It consists of an introduction and five major chapters. Chapter one gives an overview of growth statistics, factors and challenges in relation to developmental indicators; chapters two and three position the role and potentialities of agricultural, fisheries and timber sectors in this story; chapter four shows what financial and other infrastructural 'bridges' need to be built in order to ensure 'green and blue revolutions'; chapter five provides concrete 'policy recommendations' based on all this. The starting premise of the report is that there are two 'stories' to tell around the recent boom in growth the continent has been experiencing (p. 20). The first is the positive story around the boom itself: the high growth figures in many countries, the rise in foreign direct investment, the development and uptake of new technologies and related 'improvements in macro-economic policy' and 'measures of social well-being' (ibid.). The second story is that 'the rising tide of economic growth has failed to lift many out of poverty' and that hunger, violence and dependence on food imports are still prevalent in Africa (ibid.). The resulting main problem, according to the report, is that — despite stating on the same page that 'the foundations needed to support a transformative breakthrough are now in place' — some conditions for 'truly transformative economic growth' are not yet in place in Africa. As the APR 2014 argues, it is therefore 'true' transformation that is really needed for Africa's development: 'transformation in opportunity and a growth pathway that benefits all, not just some, leading to the eradication of poverty' (p. 21). This is where agriculture, fish, food and forests come in.

Following previous African Progress Reports, it seemed about time for one about agriculture, food, fisheries and forests. Previous reports dealt with leadership (2009), social benefits (2010), partnerships (2011), jobs (2012) and extractives (2013). Yet according to the APR 2014, sub-Saharan Africa 'is a region of smallholder farmers'. Whereas some people mistakenly see that as a 'source of weakness and inefficiency', the APP sees it 'as a strength and potential source of growth' (p. 15). The report argues: 'Agriculture is the mainstay of most African economies. The vast majority of the region's poor lives and works in rural areas, most of them as smallholder farmers. Unlocking the productive potential of agriculture would enable Africa's farmers to strengthen their contribution to growth and to share more equitably in the benefits' (p. 47).

In other words, if one wishes to promote 'processes of growth', one cannot exclude the 'base', which in Africa is agriculture and the people living from the land. This is obviously a familiar argument. As Woodhouse (2003: 1705) argued over a decade ago, 'an enduring theme in diagnoses of the causes of the recurring crisis of rural poverty in sub-Saharan Africa is the failure of the rural resource base (land, water, forests, or pasture) to sustain rural livelihoods'. The APR 2014, however, takes this 'enduring theme' one (major) step further to argue that a transformed rural resource base is important not only to sustain rural livelihoods, but also for overall economic growth and development in Africa as a whole. This, I believe, is the central argument of the report and indeed why the APP argues that 'African farmers must be at the centre of the transformation that we envisage' (pp. 20, 54). As a consequence, it becomes even more important to be clear about what the report means with 'transformation' and 'progress'.

The APR conceptualizes 'transformation' and 'progress' exclusively in capitalist terms. Formulated more strongly: ultimately, the report and the panel make a case for deepening and strengthening capitalism in Africa. While the report does not say it in these terms, the authors make it absolutely clear that people should not be 'mistaken' about that goal. So when the APR talks about the importance of smallholder agriculture, it argues: 'this is not a matter, as is sometimes mistakenly assumed, of strengthening "subsistence farming", but of creating opportunities for smallholder farmers to generate a surplus, add more and more value to their produce, and develop as entrepreneurs' (p. 54; see also p. 62, Box 5). This surplus value production, in turn, needs to lead to economic diversification, new technologies, rising productivity in agriculture, industrialization and 'adding value' for and through the market (pp. 33–35). The report approvingly quotes Donald Kaberuka of the African Development Bank as saying 'we could be the next manufacturing hub but there are some investments to be made. We need to increase our efforts on aviation, deregulation, open the border and let people circulate so that when business people come they have the market in front of them' (p. 34). In short: surplus value must be added to production, and through industrialization, circulation and markets, presented to capitalists ('business people'), so that they can invest, own and profit. In all, a typical capitalist storyline if ever there was one.

Yet, as Lefebvre (1991: 336) argued, 'the mobilization of space for the purposes of its production makes harsh demands', whereby 'the process begins . . . with the land, which must first be wrenched away from the traditional form of property'. Seemingly following up on this, Kofi Annan, in his *Foreword* to the APR, argues that 'the unacceptable reality is that too many African farmers still use methods handed from generation to generation, working their lands or grazing their animals much as their ancestors have done for millennia' (p. 11). Having always been proud of his African roots, it might strike one as profoundly strange that Annan has such disdain for the 'methods handed from generation to generation'. It does make sense, though, if the APR's conceptualizations of 'transformation' and 'progress' are essentially about promoting capitalist processes. So while we regularly find the report cheering African farmers as some of the most 'resilient and innovative' (p. 15), the qualities for which they are lauded are not cultural, social or traditional — rather, they are credited for their entrepreneurial skills (pp. 54, 60). African farmers, in other words, are capitalists-in-the-making; they just do not realize it yet. The report thus neatly follows Meiskins Wood's (2002: 4) argument that for many capitalists, 'capitalism seems always to be there, somewhere; and it only needs to be released from its chains'. This is how African farmers are viewed in the report: as capitalist entrepreneurs whose innate capitalist skills need to be 'unlocked' by 'appropriate' or 'responsible' government policies.

This is not surprising if one considers the members of the panel. According to the APR, the panel 'consists of ten distinguished individuals who advocate for equitable and sustainable development for Africa' (p. 6). What apparently gives them the edge in terms of defining Africa's progress is that 'the respected experience and prominence of Panel members, in the public and private sector, gives them a formidable capability to access a wide cross-section of society including at the highest levels in Africa and across the globe' (ibid.). The members are: Kofi Annan, former United Nations Secretary General (1997–2006); Michel Camdessus, former IMF managing director (1987–2000); Peter Eigen, former World Bank staff member and founder of Transparency International; Bob Geldof, singer and businessman and, together with singer and activist Bono, one of the most well-known development celebrities (Brockington, 2014); Graça Machel, widow of former President Samora Machel (Mozambique) and former President Nelson Mandela (South Africa); Strive Masiyiwa, founder and chairman of global telecommunications group Econet Wireless; Olusegun Obasanjo, former President of Nigeria; Lindah Mohohlo, Governor of the Bank of Botswana since 1999 and former special appointee for the IMF; Robert Rubin, ex-Goldman Sachs banker and former US Treasury Secretary under Clinton (1995–99); and Tidjane Thiam, Ivorian businessman, CEO of 'international financial services group' Prudential.

According to Caroline Kende-Robb, the APP executive director, 'The panel isn't linked to any institution, it is independent'.[2] But if one looks at the panel, it is clear that its members are anything but 'independent'; it in fact consists of some of the staunchest defenders and implementers of the harshest forms of neoliberalism. Ex-IMF director Michel Camdessus, for example, responded to the Mexican 'peso crisis' of 1994 by heartily supporting further neoliberal disciplining and surveillance of IMF member states (Soederberg, 2004: 54–5), while ex-Goldman Sachs banker and former US treasury secretary Robert Rubin is the ideological embodiment of the way in which 'the American political system is dominated by its major corporations and financial services firms' (Prasch, 2005: 283). He was, moreover, one of the key architects of deregulation of the financial constructs and derivatives that eventually led to the financial crisis, something for which former US president Clinton later apologized.[3] Similarly, Strive Masiyiwa is not only a telecommunications businessman, but also co-founder of GrowAfrica, which 'works to increase private-sector investment in African agriculture'.[4] These and the other elites on the panel may indeed have access to the highest policy levels, but whether their opinions on how the rural poor should live their lives should be privileged is doubtful.

The claim that the APP is not linked to 'any institution' is also deceptive. The referencing in the report is predominantly to standard neoliberal sources such as the World Bank, IMF, UN agencies, and firms such as Ernst and Young. Through this dependence on one type of literature, the APR reproduces the neoliberal logic, assumptions and ideological focus of those sources, which makes it difficult to see precisely how the APP differs from the institutions that published these references. Indeed, if one compares the APR and some of the reports produced by the World Bank, IMF, UN agencies or donors, it is difficult to see where the discourse differs when it comes to the core assumptions of the arguments made.

All of this throws a different light on the central story told by the APR that 'there has been a lot of growth but little structural transformation' and, hence, 'to sustain growth, Africa needs economic transformation' (p. 33). Two points are crucial. First, the structural transformation envisaged by the APR is fundamentally the same capitalist transformation that has been attempted in Africa for many decades. It is therefore not a *different* type of transformation but rather an attempt to better implement the same recipes in a new context, where 'Africa has an advantage in labour costs' (as compared to China) (p. 34), and by targeting — again — the 'base' of the primary resource sectors. Second, this transformation based on a project

2. http://africaprogresspanel.org/caroline-kende-robb-discusses-the-app-with-geneva-website/ (accessed 31 July 2014).
3. http://abcnews.go.com/blogs/politics/2010/04/clinton-rubin-and-summers-gave-me-wrong-advice-on-derivatives-and-i-was-wrong-to-take-it/ (accessed 1 August 2014).
4. http://growafrica.com/about (accessed 1 August 2014).

of deepening and strengthening capitalism in Africa comes at a heavy price, including dispossession and structural inequality; this has been true for a long time in the continent (Bond, 2006; Büscher, 2012, 2015; Harvey, 2006; Le Billon, 2012; Li, 2007; Mbembe, 2001; see Shrivastava and Kothari, 2012, for a comparable analysis for India). To a certain extent, the APP acknowledges this through its demand that 'the profit should be taken out of the plunder' (p. 18). Yet to fully acknowledge it would require accepting that progress and plunder under capitalism are one and the same thing; the one is inextricably tied up with the other. This would of course be one step too far for the APP, which, I argue, leads to several major contradictions in the report.

THE IRONIES OF PROGRESS AND PLUNDER

The basic desire of the APP to stimulate older processes of capitalist transformation in Africa leads to several major contradictions — some ironic, some not. These not only characterize what the APR 2014 is all about but also present strong challenges to its perceived (or hoped-for) legitimacy as a vehicle for Africa's 'equitable and sustainable development'. The first contradiction concerns how the APP and APR relate to, represent and speak for 'Africa'. I have already questioned the role of several of the APP's elite members and their association with neoliberal institutions. One member of the APP is Bob Geldof, well-known musician and long-time celebrity development activist, particularly in relation to Africa. His presence further reinforces the central irony of the APP's members, well captured by Chouliaraki (2013: 176) who argues that 'the power of celebrity activism is premised upon the very divide between utter destitution and extreme wealth that such activism brings into focus'. The elitism and celebrity power of the APP also makes them examples of the success, wealth and power against which others, in this case African smallholders, are compared. The authority bestowed on them to advise Africa on how to develop therefore seems to derive from the kind of (capitalist) progress they literally embody.

This trend is, of course, not new. The powerful have long told the less powerful how to develop, or how to develop relations to land, nature and food (production). What is interesting about the APP, however, is that it is now (mostly) Africans who tell other Africans that it is unacceptable for them still to be working their lands and grazing their animals as their ancestors have done. This is problematic in and of itself, but especially so in the light of how the APR consistently talks about the need for 'uniquely African green and blue revolutions'. As in the case of the concepts of transformation and progress, precisely what the 'uniquely African' character of these revolutions is never becomes clear. One could equally argue that they might seem uniquely 'unAfrican', if generations of African traditions are so readily discarded. More generally, the report often states that Asian or other green revolutions cannot be copied; but when it comes to the 'structural transformation' required in Africa, most recommendations mentioned seem to come straight from neoliberal textbooks that have been applied the world over.

This contradiction is arguably the starkest in the report and casts doubt on the legitimacy of the APP and the authority of the APR to define progress and transformation for Africa. It is, however, accompanied by several other contradictions typical of neoliberal development discourses more generally. A second example concerns the relation between legal and illegal, or formal and informal, especially when it comes to the 'plundering' of fisheries and forests. The report calls for all actors to better monitor what is legal/formal or not, and then to improve regulation and enforcement to gain insight into economic flows. Part of this neat idea of progress is that economic activities and their supposed development spin-offs can be formalized, rendered accountable and taxed. Yet, as Nordstrom (2004) has shown, the illegal, informal and 'extra-state' are not aberrations from what would otherwise be a 'formal' economy geared towards the development of its people. In fact, she argues that 'clear distinctions between legal and illegal, state and non-state, or local and international, are often impossible to make' (Nordstrom, 2004: 221) and that 'extra-state trade is centrally linked to development' (ibid.: 216) and political and economic power. These fundamental issues, Nordstrom also shows, are very often simply ignored by United Nations, World Bank or other international or national development agencies because they are not 'mandated' to deal with or trained to study them (ibid.: 232). Although these issues are not ignored in the APR, there is a disconnect in the report between what is acknowledged and the solutions proposed for them, as the latter still maintain that the legal and illegal can be separated.

A third contradiction concerns the continuous emphasis on joint action, consensus and the need for all actors and stakeholders to come together to solve problems whilst at the same time promoting a system that is geared towards cut-throat competitiveness and rational-choice individualism. In other words, the report does not show or explain how or why actors would 'come together' to solve Africa's problems. Rather, the APR skims over the fact that many actors might actually have conflicting interests, which, in reality, are played out in rather crude power politics. One exception is on p. 51: 'admittedly, taking public subsidies away from the politically powerful is more than a technical operation'. The report then continues by arguing: 'it takes coalition building and carefully formulated strategies for transition' and requires 'political leaders to make tough choices' (ibid.). This sounds straightforward enough, but isn't in practice, especially when many powerful actors continuously and very actively lobby political leaders to take certain decisions or leave particular issues untouched.

This leads to a fourth important contradiction in the report, namely that although 'all actors' must come together to solve problems, the problems confronted are often ultimately the fault of African governments. For example: 'African governments are failing to protect valuable national forests and fisheries. Powerful vested interests, domestic and foreign, are *essentially being licensed to plunder*' (p. 154, emphasis added). The report does acknowledge that many governments do not have the capacity and that other actors also have a responsibility, but it completely ignores the role of structural adjustments imposed by the IMF and World Bank in the 1980s and 1990s, which led to an enormous loss of government capacity and 'acting power' (Mbembe, 2001). Whether this omission can be attributed to the fact that several APP members were directly responsible for structural adjustment policies would be speculation, but it certainly casts the lack of attention to the negative effects of structural adjustment in an ironic light.

A last contradiction discussed here concerns the problem already mentioned above, of how the report presents numbers. In line with the general literature around statistics in Africa (Jerven, 2013), the report introduces a major caveat, namely that 'the coverage and quality of the data available is inadequate. It provides at best a blurred and speculative picture of underlying trends' (p. 41). Nevertheless, this acknowledged 'large data deficit', most of the time, does not stop the report's authors from presenting numbers as the truth, particularly in the many eye-catching 'info-graphics'. Moreover, some numbers are given preference and emphasis over others, especially those by which progress is measured. These are apparently robust enough to make arguments such as the following: 'in the absence of a flourishing agriculture sector, the majority of Africans will be cut adrift from the rising tide of prosperity' (p. 54). So while the report also presents declining numbers under the heading 'despite progress' and generally acknowledges that there are major development issues, the few numbers that are going up — based on inadequate statistics that provide a 'blurred and speculative picture' — are apparently sufficient to state that there is a 'rising tide of prosperity'.

CONCLUSION

Given that a short review article cannot do justice to every detail of a 177-page report, this critique is not meant to imply that there is nothing useful in the report. For example, naming 'illegal, unreported and unregulated' fishing (by large-scale fishers) as a 'transnational crime' and eliminating subsidies for these activities makes sense and should be taken seriously (p. 158). Other examples can be mentioned, but here I have targeted the report as a whole and what it stands for, particularly in relation to the type of 'progress' through which the African Progress Panel wants Africa to be 'transformed'. From this perspective, the APR 2014 is one of the many — literally thousands — reports, articles, 'flagship publications', communiqués, etc. generated by similar neoliberal-minded institutions, groups, panels, academics, international, governmental or non-governmental organizations that aim to fix Africa by 'socially engineering' it into capitalist modernity (cf. Mbembe, 2001: 7).

Africa, the report often mentions, is not properly 'governed', hence 'governments' must take the lead in developing Africa and ensure that the benefits of growth are shared by all. Translated into more straightforward language, this means that Africa is too chaotic, and not yet sufficiently ordered and regulated for capitalism to flourish (cf. Baumann, 2004: 30). It is for this reason that the report devotes a long and final chapter to 'building the bridges Africa needs', namely financial systems, social and economic infrastructure and domestic tax and accountability systems. These are central ordering systems without which capitalism cannot properly function. Once these are in place, so the report seems to argue, capitalism can finally work its transformative magic: growth can be sustained and shared to the benefit of all, productivity can be enhanced, the plunder can be taken out of the profit and farmers can start producing food for the rest of the world instead of merely for themselves, and so reap the US$ 35 billion reward that lies waiting for them.

This, of course, is a mirage. It is a powerful mirage, one that animates many development reports, documents and projects, but it won't work. I say this not because I am pessimistic, negative or have all the alternatives ready for implementation. It won't work simply because APR — like many similar reports — is blatantly one-sided and constrained within the boundaries of the only story in town, that of neoliberal capitalism (cf. Saith, 2006), which is inherently uneven in how it operates across geographical, social, political, economic and other terrains (Harvey, 2006). Not just uneven, it is inherently contradictory, with 'foundational', 'moving' and 'dangerous' contradictions responsible for the continuous 'crises of capitalist accumulation' 'and the social misery that derives from them' (Harvey, 2014: 10). As I have tried to show, many inherent contradictions can also be found in the APR 2014. These contradictions reinforce the broader point that the importance of the report lies not only in what it says, but also in the context in which these things are said: the global context of a capitalism trying to recover from yet another major crisis and seeking new sources of profit accumulation. Africa is vital as the last continent yet to be fully opened to the workings of capitalist value production, hence the anxiety of the APP to ensure that Africa goes through an 'economic transformation', especially at the base: agriculture, farmers and the resource sectors.

Here I come to the core of my critique, and I want to be clear on this. I am *not* arguing that the APP members deliberately condone plunder. What I *am* arguing is that they of all people should know that capitalism is founded on plunder and that it is not an aberration from, but part and parcel of the very system they legitimate, stimulate and cloak in the jacket of 'progress'. This was evident, historically, when Africa was mostly adversely integrated into colonial capitalism. It is also evident from looking at contemporary neoliberal capitalism where capital does not benefit everyone equally in Africa but 'hops instead, efficiently connecting the enclaved points in the network while excluding (with equal efficiency) the spaces that lie between the points' (Ferguson, 2006: 47). Plunder, broadly defined as the crude exploitation of human and non-human resources, has always characterized capitalist progress, and not just in Africa. If Africa wants to become a more effective player in the global capitalist economy, it must be ready to accept plunder, as also argued by Mbembe (2001: 57):

> Africa must face up to the challenge of the competitiveness of its economies on the world level. This challenge cannot be victoriously met in the current world economy without an increase in productivity — that is, in the last analysis, without putting in place effective ways of constructing inequality and organizing social exclusion. But, as was clearly seen during the colonial period, the relations between violence, production of inequality, and accumulation are extraordinarily complex.

Perhaps, as Horkheimer and Adorno (2002: 28) have argued, 'the curse of irresistible progress is irresistible regression'. The members of the APP (should) know this and the fact that they still produce a report so one-sided and blinkered makes one rather pessimistic. Yet — contrary to Annan's position — where we can learn to revive hope is from the knowledge handed down from generations to generations in Africa. This is not meant as a populist trope intended to appeal to strong cultural or social sentiments in Africa or beyond. Rather, it is about an attitude, encompassing both respect for other ways of being, learning and doing outside of typical capitalist forms of transformation and progress, and an attempt to encourage truly 'out-of-the-box' thinking, towards other, non-capitalist ideas of transformation and progress.

Perhaps, then, it is time, especially for elites and outsiders, to stop telling Africans, especially smallholders and vulnerable populations, how to change and transform in order to make 'progress'. Perhaps it is time, again especially for elites and outsiders, to start learning from Africa's generations how we can begin to confront and tackle the many deep-seated social pathologies within 'the developed world' and the countless social and environmental injustices it perpetrates, in order to come to visions and practices of transformation and progress in which plunder and progress are not two sides of the same coin.

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