

## POVERTY IN AFRICA: ROOT CAUSES AND SOLUTIONS

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**ABSTRACT.** Poverty characterizes Africa. This is obvious from the literature, especially the World Bank reports. This characterization continues despite the fact that Africa is rich and has a lot of resources. How a continent full of resources is always referred to as the poorest in the world is puzzling. In this paper, the authors maintain that poverty in Africa originated with the colonization and modern state. Based on the available literature, the authors contend that the manner in which states were formed, the impact of their arbitrarily drawn boundaries and the effect of their fragmentation opened the way for poverty to enter and engulf the continent. In addition, colonialism orchestrated several ways of exploitation and expropriation of African resources by Europeans. Over and above these, former colonial powers continued to aggravate poverty and backwardness through plundering and stealing African resources in the name of multinational corporations. Notwithstanding, the landscape can be reversed once Africans detach themselves from foreign domination, neocolonialism and commit themselves to the African Union Agenda 2063.

**Keywords:** Poverty, Africa, State formation, Modernization theory, Dependency theory

### 1. INTRODUCTION

Poverty in Africa does not predate the formation of contemporary states. State formation whether in Europe or elsewhere has been either a product of war, conquest or absorption of smaller communities (Machiavelli, 1981; Southhall, 1974). Though colonialism crafted the boundaries of most of the modern or contemporary countries, the idea is not a new phenomenon. On the one hand, the root causes of poverty in Africa can hardly be examined without scrutinizing the role played by colonialism. It is in this regard that it is argued that the explanations of the causes proffered by the World Bank (1996) are merely symptoms and not the root causes. The origin of poverty in Africa started with interactions between Africans and Europeans. Before the latter imposed arbitrary boundaries separating their neighbouring colonies, African traditional states had frontiers. There were tribal wars in Africa as was also the case in Europe before modern states were formed (Machiavelli, 1981; Southhall, 1974; Jackson, 2010).

In other words, African state formation predate colonialism. States were a product of either peaceful means or conquest (Southhall, 1974:154). History demonstrate that the states of Ethiopia and Egypt existed centuries before the advent of European colonialism and Ethiopia which was never a colony remained as proof that African modern states were not all European creation. The pyramids in Egypt still baffle the minds of modern architects to this day, yet these African achievements are of antiquity (Scientific American, 1851). On the other hand, Africa was never characterized as poor, until the dawn of colonialism. This fact is bolstered by history, which reveals that the king of Mali, Mansa Musa of ancient Africa, was rich and used to move around with a lot of gold and convoy long before the advent of colonialism (Morcos, 1972, p. 223). We also know that Ethiopia, Zimbabwe, Ghana, among others, were historically not poor (Acemoglu & Robinson, 2001, p. 22). As far back as 400 BC Ethiopia was already developed. Similarly, the ancient states of Kongo

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(consisting of a large part of modern Democratic Republic of Congo and Angola) already knew about the plow for agriculture in the 1400s and could never be said to be backward (Acemoglu & Robinson, 2001, p. 32). Hence, the fate of Africa, its contemporary misfortune, its state of poverty and backwardness are rooted in the period of European slavery trade, imperialism, legitimate trade, colonialism and neocolonialism (Saul, 2011).

In spite of the development that was obvious before the advent of colonialism, Africa's misery, poverty, and backwardness continues to be at the centre of every contemporary economic discourse. The World Bank report illustrates that Africa is one of the poorest continents of the world where extreme poverty keeps exacerbating instead of declining (Muller-Jung, 2018). This poverty is said to exist when one earns less than \$1.90 (United States dollar) per day. At least 413 million Africans are said to be living under extreme poverty (Muller-Jung, 2018). Most surprisingly, the World Bank's report associates poverty in Africa with the civil wars and conflicts in Somalia, South Sudan, Central African Republic and the absence of the rule of law in these same countries (Muller-Jung, 2018). The report also alludes to the rapid population growth in Africa. Whatever, the report fails to consider the fact that China's population had been rapidly growing before the one-child policy was introduced and the growth has not rendered China poor (Howden & Zhou, 2015). Over and above all, these claims fail to account for the prevailing poverty in the African countries enjoying relative peace. The literature fails to proffer convincing explanations of how modern state formation orchestrated by European colonialism led to poverty in Africa (World Bank, 1996; Roser & Ortiz-Ospina, 2017).

## 2.METHODOLOGY

The aim of this paper is to examine the causes and solutions of Africa's backwardness, poverty and sluggish development with respect to state formation which was masterminded by Europeans. This will help us gauge the possibility of Africa to achieve poverty reduction goals enshrined under the African Union (AU) Agenda 2063, as depicted in subsequent sections. Based on available literature, the paper first evaluates diverse explanations given by the various schools of thought, mainly modernization and dependency theory respectively, together with their proposed solutions to tackle Africa's economic problems. Our analysis, of the situation will form the base for a critical explanation of the prospects of Africans overcoming their challenges. We shall end by drawing conclusions and making recommendations for future success.

**Agenda 2063 on poverty alleviation:** The first aspiration of the African Union Agenda 2063 is to create a prosperous continent based on inclusive growth as well as sustainable development. Africans, through the Agenda, emphasize their determination to eradicate poverty in just one generation and construct mutually shared prosperity through an economic and social transformation of their continent. This, among other strategies, will be achieved through enhanced investment in productive capacities such as assets and skills of nationals, by improving their incomes, creating jobs and providing them with basic needs (African Union Commission, 2015).

**Poverty:** The term poverty denotes social differences between human beings with regard to possession. It is defined as the condition or state of having little or no goods, money, or other means of support (Gupta, 1984). Poverty exists when some individuals in a particular society are not able to attain a degree of material well-being considered to constitute what the society deems a minimum standard (Ravillion, 1992, p. 4). Saying that one needs to attain a certain level of well-being, which is defined by a certain society implies that

poverty is relative and measurable. The person deemed poor in one country or society may be seen as rich in the other, depending on how each defines poverty. Ravillion (1992) makes it clear that there are different levels of acquiring resources which define one's status in terms of poverty.

Poverty is also defined in terms of income. In this sense, it refers to a situation where an individual does not have the money to satisfy his/her basic needs simply because such a person is either unemployed or underemployed (Baylis, Smith, & Owens, 2011). Though conceptions of poverty differ, most of them underscore the necessity for food, clean water, sanitation and shelter. What is remarkably astonishing is that scholars and policymakers differ in terms of how poverty can be alleviated. Others have viewed poverty as characterizing developing countries, Africa in particular (World Bank, 2019). They propose ways in which the so-called 'Third world' countries can be helped by developed countries to eradicate poverty (Kaiser, 2018; Baylis, Smith, & Owens, 2011).

According to the World Bank Report (1996), poverty has to be understood as the lack of basic needs such as food, health care, education, shelter, inter alia which are required for a meaningful life. The World Bank also defines poverty in terms of income (World Bank, 1996). The changes in average income contribute to one's status so that when his or her income falls below or rises above the set threshold he or she is regarded as poor and vice versa. When monetary terms are used to define poverty, a certain group of people in society who are incapable of purchasing any specified item that is referred to as basic will consequently be deemed poor.

The World Bank does not define poverty, but suggests indicators of poverty. It revised the international poverty line in 2015 that was set at \$1 per day to \$1.90 per day (Roser & Ortiz-Ospina, 2017). This measurement is solely based on the monetary value of an individual's daily consumption. Though there is a serious challenge in this type of measurement because of different currencies, the dollar is easily convertible to local currencies. Another challenge is that the purchasing power of each currency is different and prices of goods and services change seasonally. Nevertheless, the purchasing power parity is adjusted to cater for some of these challenges (Roser & Ortiz-Ospina, 2017). Apart from that, this measurement is for extreme poverty. In this regard, Roser and Ortiz-Ospina (2017) claim that the determinant measure is extremely low. It means that anyone whose living condition is below \$1.90 per day is regarded as extremely poor. There are still problems related to measuring poverty, especially in Africa where people depend more on farming than income from other walks of life for their daily survival. This, notwithstanding, is out of the ambit of this paper to examine the challenges of measuring poverty in Africa. This paper adopts, for analytical purpose, the approach of the World Bank of defining poverty in terms of having \$1.90 per day. The World Bank asserts that out of the world's 28 poorest countries, 27 are found in Sub-Saharan Africa (Patel, 2018).

The Bank (1996, p. 5) goes further to unearth a number of causes of poverty in Sub-Saharan Africa. One of the causes, is inadequate access to employment. Another is the inadequacy of physical assets such as capital, land and minimal access to loans by the poor. The third cause is low access to means which support rural agriculture in regions that are regarded as poor. The fourth cause is poor access to markets by the poor who have goods and services to trade. The fifth is the human capital which is not well endowed due to inadequate access to education and other facilities. The sixth claim is that poverty is caused by the failure to protect natural resource endowments from destruction. The seventh is the argument that poverty results from the inability to access assistance by those who are victims of transitory poverty due to natural

disasters and wars. Last but not least, the poor are poor in Africa because they do not adequately participate in designing development programs (World Bank, 1996, pp. 5-6).

**Modernization theory and poverty in Africa: Causes and solutions:** In a similar manner, scholars claim to understand the causes of poverty in Africa. In the 1950s and 1960s when countries were gaining independence, the modernization theory became a plausible school of thought that explicated the source of poverty, backwardness and sluggish growth in Africa (Matunhu, 2011). This school of thought claimed to have both explanations and solutions to the problems. The proponents of the school posited that traditions are the impediments that pull African states backwards. According to them, the solution to the problems was not only easy but also straight forward: Africans have to replace their traditional values and institutions with modern ones. For Africans to do this successfully, they needed to follow a path to modernity which was first trodden by the developed countries. This meant that poverty alleviation is path-dependent. It is in this regard that WW Rostow outlined the stages to development which African countries needed to follow (Rostow, 1959). It is also in this line that Max Weber's bureaucracy was transferred, together with technology, to the African continent (Olowu, 1988, p. 215). Recruitment had to be based on merit and agriculture had to be technological by moving away from the labour-intensive to the use of machinery. It was then that Africans started using fertilizers instead of animal manure; it was then that they began to prefer genetically modified products instead of natural seeds because they were dubbed modern (Ellis & Biggs, 2002).

The separation of powers of governance was another solution. The legislature, executive and judiciary in the country had to be separated. Whereas African society had a council of elders, *khotla* (courtyard) as it is called in Lesotho and Botswana, which apparently conflated the legislative and judiciary activities, modernization called for the dismantling of such African institutions (Southall, 1974; Mako, 1997; Phohlo, 2011; Acemoglu, Johnson & Robinson, 2001). Subsequently bureaucracy introduced hierarchy in the systems that mostly used a horizontal form of rule in spite of the fact that chiefs were heads of the community (Phohlo, 2011). The top-down approach in decision-making became more preferable to the bottom-up approach that was once concomitant in the African traditional system.

Whereas Africa's institutions depended on communal labour and barter system, they were challenged to employ trained bureaucrats based on merits (Shizha & Abdi, 2014). They had to dismantle their 'ubuntu' (an African system founded on humanity and communal principles), which allowed them to work together with their family members, friends and community members and substitute it with technocrats, recruited on the basis of qualification (Rahaman, Yeazdani & Mahmud, 2017). Reverting to one's own circle of friends and community, when distributing jobs and benefits was now called nepotism. The Western system was clearly incompatible with African traditional practices. The two systems were inimical and the adoption of modernization required total dismantling of the African system (Olowu, 1988; Shizha & Abdi, 2014).

It was the white man's mission to modernize Africa (Rahaman, Yeazdani & Mahmud, 2017). This is why the former colonial powers inspired the change of dressing, leadership system, modes of planting, modes of transport and change of beliefs. The Christian missionaries came to a 'dark continent' to shed light on the lost nations through their churches, schools and hospitals (Smith & Lalitha, 2014). This was probably because the traditional healers who claimed to cause a lightning could not heal diseases and the education passed on from parent to child was not done well. The argument was that

African states could not alleviate poverty on their own and needed foreign intervention to succeed.

The Structural Adjustment Programmes (SAPs) were brought in to modernize and alleviate poverty in Africa. SAPs were an initiative of the International Monetary Fund (IMF) introduced in the 1980s and 1990s (Kaiser, 2018). The policy inspired a very disproportionate cut on social spending and the state's expenditure on infrastructure was reduced. The misery of African people and suffering heightened. The health sector deteriorated. The SAPs exacerbated the debt of countries as some were now left without means of generating revenue because of privatization policies (Kaiser, 2018). Unemployment resulted from early compulsory retirements and downsizing of public institutions soared and eventually compounded poverty in Africa. Thus the solutions proposed by the modernization school in alleviating poverty failed. Not only that, the theory also offered no explanation to the African state formation challenges and repercussions.

**Critical assessment of modernization theory:** The failure of modernization in Africa led to several criticisms. To begin with, the theory erroneously assumed that African countries were at the same starting point as Western and European countries once were before becoming modernized. It failed to be realistic and knowledgeable about the African continent and the realities Africans were going through. The assumption was that African countries were primitive and needed to prepare for take-off to modernization, mature in the process and eventually enjoy a stage of high mass consumption (Rostow, 1959; Matunhu, 2011). However, African countries were not where Europeans once were. The former and not the latter underwent a long period of international slave trade, colonialism and imperialism which no European country experienced and few even had an idea about such developments (Acemoglu & Robinson, 2001, p. 28). State formation in Europe was also a product of war fatigue which compelled some belligerent communities to negotiate peacefully and merge. In Africa, on the other hand, before the level of war fatigue, Europeans were already there to merge communities into states according to their discretions (Machiavelli, 1981; Southhall, 1974).

The theory is flawed because it mistakenly assumes that the way out of poverty is doing well after the slave trade, displacement and colonization but neocolonialism still continues (Rostow, 1959). African countries were doing well after the aforementioned plight slave trade, displacement and colonialism but neocolonialism and SAPS caused them to go stagnate and retrograde (Murray, 1976). Africans began to progress again after independence but neocolonialism that disrupted development and sovereignty continued in various forms including the SAPs which caused more poverty (Kaiser, 2018). It is, therefore, a mistake to assume that poverty alleviation and development are unidirectional.

The modernization theory over-simplifies ways of reducing poverty. This is probably why the West believed that once their developed systems could be replicated in Africa, all the ills of underdevelopment would come to an end. Though Senegal became the seat of French economic activity in the West Africa and Cameroon became French-assimilated avoiding nationalizing its indigenous languages, these two countries are still ravaged by poverty (Gardinier, 1980). In addition, modernization mistakenly assumed that African societies were primitive and traditional. This perspective fails to consider the fact that Africa has its own unique characteristics which do not necessarily need to be the same with those of the West in order to achieve development and end poverty. The failure of modernization theory, therefore, inspired a different argumentation.

**Dependency theory and poverty in Africa; Causes and Solutions:** In reaction to modernization school of thought, Andre Gunder Frank observes that the theory of modernization is misleading because it shuns revealing the true nature of the relationship between Africa and developed countries (Gunder, 1967; Jackson, 2010). Claiming that Europeans came to modernize Africa is a distortion of facts. Colonialism from the onset was an exploitative system that expropriated resources from African countries to enrich the European countries (Rodney, 1972).

On the contrary, the challenges of state formation and poverty in Africa should be searched within this relationship between Africa and former colonizers (Jackson, 2010). During decolonization, Europeans left Africans in dire poverty with dysfunctional administrations (Southall, 1974). Some African countries like Botswana, Eswatini did not have a university at independence hence they had to share one with Lesotho (Mokopakgosi, 2013; Acemoglu, Jognson & Robinson, 2001). Europeans did not adequately prepare Africans for democracy and development. This compelled Africans to begin to rely on foreign aid. Thus the international institutions such as the IMF, World Trade Organization (WTO), World Bank, and other organizations found their way into the continent and should be looked at with suspicion (Rahaman, Yeazdani & Mahmud, 2017).

It is in this sense that Kwame Nkrumah observed that decolonization was a new form of colonisation dubbed neocolonialism (Rahaman, Yeazdani & Mahmud, 2017). Nkrumah saw it as the final stage of imperialism where the perpetrators had power without responsibility while the victims suffered exploitation without redress (Rodney, 1972). To this day, Africans suffer domination by the some European countries that colonized them and are now indirectly exploiting them. For example, France has continued to control resources of former colonies and has imposed their currency among other things (Rahaman, Yeazdani & Mahmud, 2017). In brief, the independence Africans obtained was political, not economic, and according to Nkrumah, political independence without economic freedom is vain and liberty from poverty will never come (Rahaman, Yeazdani & Mahmud, 2017).

Other scholars observed that imperialists arbitrarily partitioned Africa using divide and rule strategies to deprive it of the least economic and political clout it could ever have (Southall, 1974). They used the cities to exploit the rural areas and expropriate African resources (Matunhu, 2011). Poverty was thus caused by the exploitative relationship between African states and their former colonial powers. Thus the modernization school of thought has failed to explain that Africa is continually dominated both economically and politically by the Europeans who had colonized the continent.

In this light, dependency relationships between the inhabitants in urban centres and the periphery are the source of poverty, backwardness and slow development in African states. Equally important, the inability of Africans to combat poverty was compounded by Europeans who interrupted the natural process of state formation and imposed theirs. The period of the slave trade referred to earlier was only the beginning of the misery and poverty that were coming to Africa (Southall, 1974). The slave trade deprived Africa of a huge population that constituted its labour force, men and women who had their own families; many among them were killed during the period, some thrown into the sea and others simply executed by slavers. By the 1800s, at least 10,000,000 Africans had been shipped out of the continent as slaves (Acemoglu & Robinson, 2001, p. 29). The period was inhumane and disastrous for Africa. When the slave trade ceased to be lucrative for the Europeans, they abolished it (Acemoglu & Robinson, 2001; Saul, 2011).

The abolition of the slave trade led to the so-called period of legitimate trade or commerce (Acemoglu & Robinson, 2001, p. 30). This period coincided with the advent of explorers and missionaries who came to venture into inner Africa. It was then that Christianity, in particular, started pervading across Africa. Western and foreign ideas and values started spreading and being implemented in Africa. From the African way of dressing, marriage, governance, to the way of planting, nothing was left intact. This was modernization (Rostow, 1959). Explorers started establishing deceitful and fraudulent friendship in their quest to acquire territories (Gashaw, 2017). When the new trade took roots, not the Africans but the Europeans determined the prices of primary goods imported from the continent. Not only that, but they also determined who Africans could trade with and thus took complete control of trade (Saul, 2011).

During, the scramble for Africa, European imperialists mapped out and occupied all strategic locations (Jackson, 2010). According to Saul (2011), they held the Berlin Conference (1884-1885) to agree about how to officially and peacefully partition the continent while respecting earlier spheres of influence, only Ethiopia and Liberia were not occupied (Gashaw, 2017; Rahaman, Yeazdani, & Mahmud, 2017). They segmented the continent into colonies that did not share a common heritage, ethnicity, common language, and characteristics. They arbitrarily drew the borders that divided homogeneous groups making many conglomerations of heterogynous groups (Clapham, 2012).

In spite of the different administrative approaches of Britain and France, they both, in the end, changed the African system of rulership. They replaced whatsoever existed with the so-called Western systems of rule. There was still one rationale for this- modernization. The two systems used a “divide and rule” principle, which divided, for instance, ethnic Somalia into French Somaliland, Italian Somalia and British Somalia; Basotho were divided into those in South Africa and those in Lesotho; the Lou-Nuer and the Jiakany-Nuer are same ethnic groups divided between Ethiopia and South Sudan (Gashaw, 2017). In this way, the African way of governance was disrupted, perverted and destroyed. These events significantly contributed to Africa’s poverty in one way or another. Yet there are still prospects to transform the status quo.

**Prospects for African poverty alleviation- appraisal of AU Agenda 2063:**

Before analysing prospects for Africa to alleviate poverty, it’s worth reexamining the reality of Africa’s poverty. According to Gupta (1984), poverty signifies the condition or state of having little or no goods, money, or other means of support. Conversely, Africa has money and resources hence Africa is not poor. At least \$203billion leave the continent yearly with an approximation of \$68billion leaving in the form of dodged taxes. For this reason, at least 6.1 % of Africa’s gross domestic product (GDP) comprise illicit financial flows orchestrated by multinational corporations (MNCs) and other actors (Aljazeera, 2017). Hence, Africa is not poor, but it is impoverished by those who steal from her and manipulate her trading activities (Aljazeera, 2017; Acemoglu & Robinson, 2001). Moreover, at least 30billion or more leaves the continent in the form of repatriated profits. In addition, at least 29billion is stolen in illegal logging, fishing and other activities (Aljazeera, 2017). For analytical purposes, one can say Africa is poor because it does not have access to and does not control its own resources. Notwithstanding, Africa is not poor; it is rather impoverished.

In this light, there is something amiss with the African Union 2063 Agenda. Shared prosperity cannot be guaranteed when foreigners are allowed to steal the continent’s resources. As long as the MNCs are allowed to evade tax, the

talk of job creation in Africa will either be minimal or mere political propaganda. Thus incomes of average Africans will never improve except at the cost of downsizing of the public sector. Some of the aspirations maybe realizable, but their success will not be as significant as it is supposed to as long as the real problem is not addressed.

Notwithstanding, the commitment of African leaders to Agenda 2063 cannot be minimized. Many moves show that the determination to alleviate poverty have been made. In relation to investment in productive capacities (improving skills of the nationals), African leaders have launched the Pan African University campuses across the continent. The campuses have created jobs and many families are now able to meet their basic needs (African Union Commission, 2019).

African states still have the opportunity to improve their control of MNCs and other foreigners who expropriate and steal the continent's vital resources. The African Union (AU) was also set up to regain the political and economic clout that colonialism deprived the continent (African Union Commission, 2019; Southhall, 1974). Since colonialism compelled Africans to depend on the West, the African Union still has to review its ties with the former colonial powers (Southhall, 1974). Lastly, since the SAPs and Bretton Woods have contributed to poverty in Africa, the AU reevaluate the programs proposed and spearheaded by outside powers (Kaiser, 2018).

It is in this sense that one asserts that the Agenda is realizable and prospects for Africa to alleviate poverty are promising. With the development of the Agenda 2063, Africa is not only one step in the right direction but has made a remarkable leap to end poverty, backwardness and misery of Africa and Africans. So long as the determination manifested through the creation of the Pan African University, inter alia, is maintained then the aspirations enshrined in the Agenda 2063 will be realized. Political will and commitment have to run abreast with some of the developments the continent is making so as to maintain the necessary pace.

## **CONCLUSIONS AND RECOMMENDATIONS**

The formation of modern states in Africa did not take the direction desired by Africans. Africans were not represented at the Berlin Conference of 1884-1885 to make their input in the partition of the continent. The outcome was a partition that produced independent states devoid of economic and political clout. The process provided the colonial powers opportunity to immensely exploit the continent of its resources. Africa was fragmented and weakened to the extent that even after independence the former colonial powers and their MNCs continue to steal, exploit and export resources without fear or favour. Despite the obviousness of the events that caused poverty, the modernization school of thought continues to claim that Africans are backward and poor because of their attachment to institutions and traditions of old ways of doing things. It is in this regard that we raised the arguments put forward by the dependency school of thought to illustrate the root causes of poverty in Africa. Furthermore, we have highlighted and debunked the claims in the reports that Africa is condemned to be poor. Though the World Bank accepts that Africa is poor, it shuns the reports that show that prospects for alleviation are promising. Some of the negative reports claim that Sub-Saharan Africa has always been one of the poorest regions of the world and accounts for at least half of the extreme poor and 82% of them live in rural areas (World Bank, 1996; World Bank, 2019; Roser & Ortiz-Ospina, 2017). Yet there are other reports demonstrating that though Africa represents at least 70% of the world's poorest population, for the first time since the continent embarked on the Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs) poverty is declining among 367

people per day, this means that by the end of 2020 at least, poverty will decline among 1 million people in Africa, according to the reports (Hamel; Tong & Martin, 2019).

These promising reports like SDGs combine with the aim of the Agenda 2063 to show that Africa is very likely to alleviate its manmade poverty. There are still a few reforms that the African Union has to consider, which if implanted and implemented effectively, some of the aspirations of Agenda 2063 will be realized. It requires political and economic commitment accompanied by an unbending determination for the continent to bring about the needed social and political transformation. For Africa to alleviate poverty successfully, the continent has to revisit the issues around state formation that led to impoverishment. First, the African Union Commission has to reevaluate the ties between Africa and former colonial powers and curtail the influence of the latter. Second, the African heads of state should always evaluate the policies developed or inspired by former colonial powers which they claim are for development of the continent. Third, the AU has to improve its capacity to control foreign direct investment and transactions of MNCs so as to preclude further exploitation and expropriation of resources by foreign actors. Last but not least, African leaders should maintain their determination and commitment to the aspirations enshrined by the Agenda 2063.

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