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Africa's Potemkin deception

It has been more than 200 years since Prince Grigori Potemkin is supposed to have created mock villages in the Crimea to persuade Catherine the Great her empire was thriving. Although the techniques are different now, the tactic is still in use. The victim is Africa, and the perpetrators and benefactors are those who claim to be the continent's friends.

Behind a façade of bogus statistics, misleading language and misguided concepts lies sub-Saharan Africa, crippled by debt, disease and disaster. Wishful and self-serving thinking by western governments, aid donors and charity givers conceals both the depth of the region's crisis and the ineffectual nature of policies intended to reverse its decline.

Africa's "Potemkin deception" begins with statistics.

It is accepted, for example, that Nigeria is the continent's most populous nation. But there could be anything from 120m to 140m Nigerians. The last reliable census was conducted by British colonialists some 50 years ago. Post-independence counts have been distorted by rivalry between the Christian south and the Muslim north, and tension over distribution of the country's oil wealth among the states: allocation is based partly on a state's population.

If we do not know something as fundamental as the number of Nigerians, who account for one in six Africans (or five, or seven) and we guess at their birth rate, every statistic about Nigeria cited by its development partners is not a fact, but an assumption, based on trends with questionable foundations.

And if this is the case with Nigeria, can we believe World Bank figures, often based on decades-old extrapolations, on Mali or Malawi or Mozambique, whether about radio sets per 1,000 households or literacy rates?

Language compounds the problem and abets the deception. We have words for participants in conflict, but none for the consequences of poverty. So we read about terrorists, or guerrillas, or freedom fighters, depending on the writer's sympathies.

But we have no words for schools that lack books, clinics without medicine, roads with no bridges and civil services that have collapsed.

Yet communiqués and policy statements from Africa's western partners are too often based on assumptions that these words mean the same thing to a reader on Wall Street and a nomad in Mali.

With the help of such misunderstandings, or deceptions, the policies that emerge along with claims of their success gain a credibility they do not deserve. To demand elections without a census, to be run by a civil service that does not function, in a country that has never known good governance does not make sense. Yet this is what western governments urge Congo to undertake within a couple of years.

One reason western policymakers have been able to get away with applying such misdirected pressure is the Potemkin factor.

They use statistics that are treated as facts, yet are no better than broad and often misleading assumptions, to sell schemes that are insupportable – all wrapped in an unwarranted belief that Africa is slowly, albeit erratically, "getting better".

> Statistics no better than assumptions are used to sell insupportable schemes, all wrapped in an unwarranted belief that Africa is somehow 'getting better'

I would be contradicting my own argument to claim as a certainty that the region is slowly, albeit erratically, getting worse. I cannot use the statistics I deride, the sources of which I doubt, even if many of them bear out my case. Nor is my personal anecdotal evidence any more persuasive than that of the Afro-optimists.

The gap between us Afro-realists and Afro-optimists could well be explained by the "cocoon factor". Things in Africa have deteriorated, I believe, but the conditions under which journalists, diplomats and aid officials do their jobs have certainly improved. Planes are more comfortable, computers and satellite phones make communications easier, four-wheel-drive vehicles are more reliable, hotels more attuned to our needs. If you observe Africa from within this cocoon, it may well seem a better place.

There is, of course, more to it than that.

The difference between me and my fellow sceptics, on one hand, and the spokespeople for western governments and aid agencies on the other, is that if we pessimists are wrong, we merely end up with egg on our face. But we have no failed policies or vested interests to defend, no constituents to answer to.

For overseas aid ministers and others of their ilk, the stakes are much, much higher. If they are mistaken in their optimism, they have some awkward questions to answer: they will be called on by their constituents and Oxfam supporters alike to explain why they have got Africa so wrong, for so long.

Two decades after Africa's crisis was recognised, and multi-billions of aid dollars later, the Potemkin façade is crumbling.

The writer was Africa editor of the Financial Times from 1984 to 2002