

This paper was made possible in part by a grant from the Carnegie Corporation of New York (Andrew Carnegie fellowship) and the David M. Rubenstein fellowship at the Brookings Institution. The statements made and views expressed are solely the responsibility of the author. An earlier version was published by Horizons. The author would like to express his sincere appreciation to the institutions and people who have made this work possible or provided improving feedback.

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Cover Photo: October 16, 2016 - WASHINGTON DC., IMF / World Bank Annual Meetings. "The Governance Gap: Why Does Half the World Distrust Government and What Can We Do About It?"
Brandon Payne / World Bank

BROOKINGS
1775 Massachusetts Ave., NW
Washington, DC 20036

Accountable Leadership: The Key to Africa's Successful Transformation

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Introduction

Despite half a century of political independence, Africa remains the continent facing some of the most complex economic, political, and social challenges in the globalized world. Notwithstanding some notable economic progress, success stories, and variations of results from one country to another, citizens' expectations are broadly unfulfilled. The results from consecutive Afrobarometer surveys are telling: In particular, there is high dissatisfaction of citizens towards their leadership. Numerous national development strategies (such as export-led growth, import-substitution industrialization, state-led development, market-oriented development), but also regional ones¹ (such as the Lagos Plan of Action for the Economic Development of Africa, the New Partnership for Africa's Development, and Agenda 2030 of the African Union), have thus far not improved the continent's competitiveness in a globalized world to a satisfactory level. During the anti-colonial struggle, self-determination and indigenous leadership were presented as the solutions to Africa's challenges. Unfortunately, Africa's "leadership" has far too often become a tool of disservice to the majority of Africans.

This essay addresses the "leadership" challenge, presents possible solutions, and discusses the role of young leaders in transformational leadership accountability for an economically, politically, and socially more competitive continent. Accountable leadership can positively transform Africa into an economically, politically, and socially competitive region in the globalized economy while fulfilling citizens' expectations. Accountability is explored here in five dimensions: personal, horizontal, peer, vertical, and diagonal.

¹ Signé, Landry. 2017. *Innovating in Development Strategies in Africa: International, Regional and National Actors*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.

The problem: Challenges to accountable leadership since independence

From the scramble for Africa at the time of the Berlin Conference of 1884–1885 until about 60 years ago, most African countries were under colonial rule, dominated by European colonizers, especially the British, French, Belgians, Portuguese, Germans, Spanish, and Italians. Despite variations between direct and indirect rule, and settler-based and exploitative colonies, colonial rule was politically oppressive, economically extractive and exploitative, and socially repressive and exclusive. Colonial administrations put in place a series of authoritarian institutions backed by security forces, disregarding local voices, and lacking popular legitimacy. They mostly aimed at controlling territory, dominating the population, exploiting resources, and protecting the interests of the ruling class and of the mother country.

Given the oppressive nature of colonial rule, anti-colonial movements evolved, ranging from armed to nonviolent resistances, which contributed to successful struggles for independence. Notable leaders of independence movements included Kwame Nkrumah in Ghana (Gold Coast), Julius Nyerere in Tanzania (Tanganyika), and Patrice Lumumba in Congo (now the Democratic Republic of the Congo), among others. The ideals of independence movements included political freedom, self-determination, dignity, liberty, justice, press freedom, freedom of expression, democratic principles, African unity, and solidarity, which would most likely contribute to rapid economic growth and social development and make Africa a “great power.”

Across Africa, when seeking independence, numerous leaders such as Kwame Nkrumah and Julius Nyerere promoted ideals such as political freedom, self-determination, human rights, democratic governance, continental integration, and economic and social development, among others. However, once in power, many of them did not uphold many of these values.

In addition, despite the initial adoption of institutions promoted by colonizers and intended to be democratic institutions promoted by colonizers during the transition to independence, according to Donald Gordon, “the real political inheritances of African states at independence were the authoritarian structures of the colonial state,” because these supposedly democratic arrangements were in fact “alien structures hastily superimposed over the deeply ingrained political legacies of imperial rules.” The ideals of the independence movements did not last long. After their countries gained political independence, it became a challenge for many African leaders to pursue their ideals. Many of the most courageous representatives as well as other strong defenders of democratic governance were assassinated, such as Lumumba in 1961 or Sylvanus Olympio of Togo in 1963.

Thus, a few years after achieving political independence, an uncourageous, exclusive, clientelist, self-interested, and authoritarian leadership style became the norm in many African countries. Some African leaders justified their leadership style on the basis of the requirements for building new nations.²

² Gazibo, Mamadou. 2010. *Introduction à la politique africaine*. Montréal: Presses de l'Université de Montréal.

Consequently, numerous states were economically mismanaged, socially challenged, and politically oppressive. In addition, excessive dependence on the fluctuating price of commodities exacerbated extreme poverty and severe inequality. Economic freedoms, political rights and civil liberties, and Human Development Index levels were inert, while a damaging *winner-take-all* mentality plagued the continent.

Throughout Africa, rent-seeking elites used corruption and patronage to sustain their respective networks and dominate other groups. Mumbutu Sese Seko, who remained in power for over three decades in Zaire (now the Democratic Republic of the Congo), is a classic illustration of that history: In order to ensure the survival of his rule, he weakened the state and its institutions, created a one-party state, and organized a patronage system where his government appointees were renowned for stealing and extracting government resources with no ill consequences. He is allegedly responsible for an estimated theft of \$5 billion during his tenure. He was finally ousted from power by a rebellion supported by neighboring countries such as Burundi and Uganda.

Another striking example is General Sani Abacha of Nigeria, who is reportedly responsible for a theft of \$2 billion to \$5 billion, as well as for killing his political opponents and defenders of human rights in Nigeria. Such economic behavior and political oppression bear no resemblance to the peace, human rights, and democratic ideals promoted by independence movements fighting for decolonization.

Despite the interventions of international financial institutions to promote good governance and austerity and the 1990s wave of democratization that swept the continent after the fall of the Berlin Wall, leadership has remained one of Africa's biggest challenges. In fact, unaccountable and neopatrimonial leadership remains the norm, even in African new democracies. Most countries, whether democratic or authoritarian, still struggle to fulfill citizens' basic needs, such as security, health, and education.

The role of accountability

One of the biggest challenges to high-impact leadership in Africa is accountability in its many forms. Most African postcolonial leaders have demonstrated weak personal accountability as they failed to deliver economic prosperity and to fulfill citizens' basic needs. Since elections have not always been democratic (free, fair, regular, transparent, and meaningful), there has been weak vertical accountability to allow citizens to truly sanction their rulers. Vertical accountability typically refers to the inclusive and competitive mechanism of selection of governments through free, fair, transparent, regular, and meaningful elections, within an acceptable level of political liberties and civil rights. In the countries where vertical accountability is high, horizontal accountability is often weak because of excessive domination by the executive branch over other institutions—such as the legislature, judiciary, and anti-corruption units—which are supposed to carry out oversight and implement sanctions. Simply put, as I defined in a recent article, “horizontal accountability is the ability of government institutions to check abuses by other

branches of government and a system in which government institutions are independent and no agency or branch becomes too powerful compared to the others. Some may refer to this system as one with ‘checks and balances.’” Leaders or members of these institutions do not effectively exercise their constitutional rights or obligations. Finally, barriers to participation and a lack of resources are problematic for civil society organizations trying to hold leaders accountable (diagonal accountability).

To illustrate that point, I compare countries with the highest and lowest levels of accountability with their respective governance and economic performance. I use indicators from the World Bank (voice and accountability,³ government effectiveness,⁴ political stability and absence of violence⁵ from the World-wide Governance Indicators) and the United Nations Development Program (the Human Development Index⁶). By averaging the voice and accountability indicator (Figures 1 and 2) from the World Bank from 1996 to 2016, I find 10 outperformers (Mauritius, Cape Verde, South Africa, Botswana, Namibia, Ghana, São Tomé and Príncipe, Benin, Seychelles, and Senegal) and 10 underperformers (Chad, Rwanda, Zimbabwe, Swaziland, South Sudan, Democratic Republic of the Congo, Sudan, and Equatorial Guinea). Then I compare the performance of these two groups, contrasting them with indicators such as the level of political stability and the absence of violence and terrorism, government effectiveness, and the Human Development Index.

Seven out of 10 of the outperformers for voice and accountability are also among the most stable countries of Africa, with positive scores on political stability, and the absence of violence and terrorism (Figure 1). All 10 of the underperformers for voice and accountability have a negative score for political stability (Figure 2).

For government effectiveness, the only six positive results in Africa, when averaging their performance from 1996 to 2016, are countries outperforming with respect to voice and accountability (Figure 3). All of the other countries have negative scores, and the underperformers in terms of government effectiveness are also the ones with poor accountability (Figure 4).

³ The World Bank considers that “voice and accountability captures perceptions of the extent to which a country’s citizens are able to participate in selecting their government, as well as freedom of expression, freedom of association, and a free media.” Available online: <http://info.worldbank.org/governance/wgi/#doc>

⁴ From the World Bank: “government effectiveness captures perceptions of the quality of public services, the quality of the civil service and the degree of its independence from political pressures, the quality of policy formulation and implementation, and the credibility of the government’s commitment to such policies.” Available online: <http://info.worldbank.org/governance/wgi/#doc>

⁵ The World Bank considers that “political stability and absence of violence/terrorism measures perceptions of the likelihood of political instability and/or politically-motivated violence, including terrorism.” Available online: <http://info.worldbank.org/governance/wgi/#doc>

⁶ The United Nations Development Program defines the Human Development Index (HDI) as “a summary measure of average achievement in key dimensions of human development: a long and healthy life, being knowledgeable and have a decent standard of living.” <http://hdr.undp.org/en/content/human-development-index-hdi>

Figure 1: Outperformers - Voice & Accountability

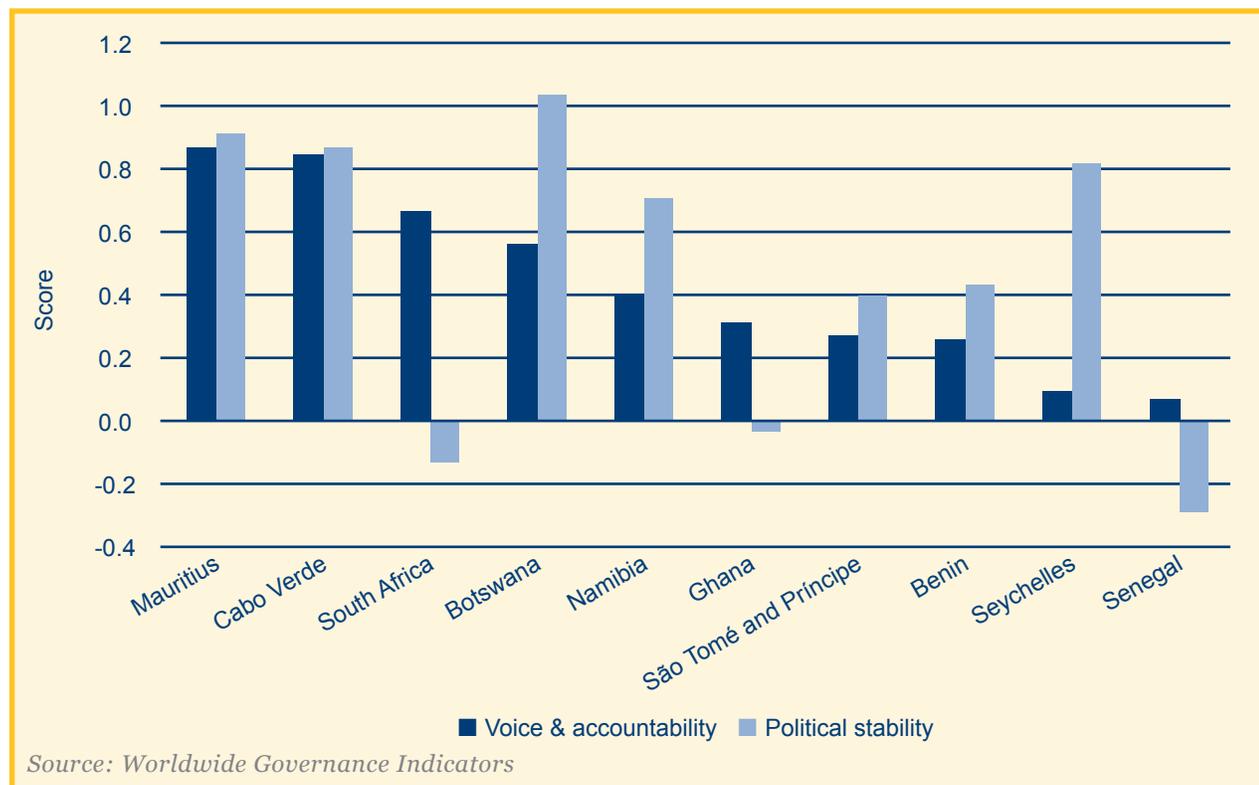


Figure 2: Underperformers - Voice & Accountability

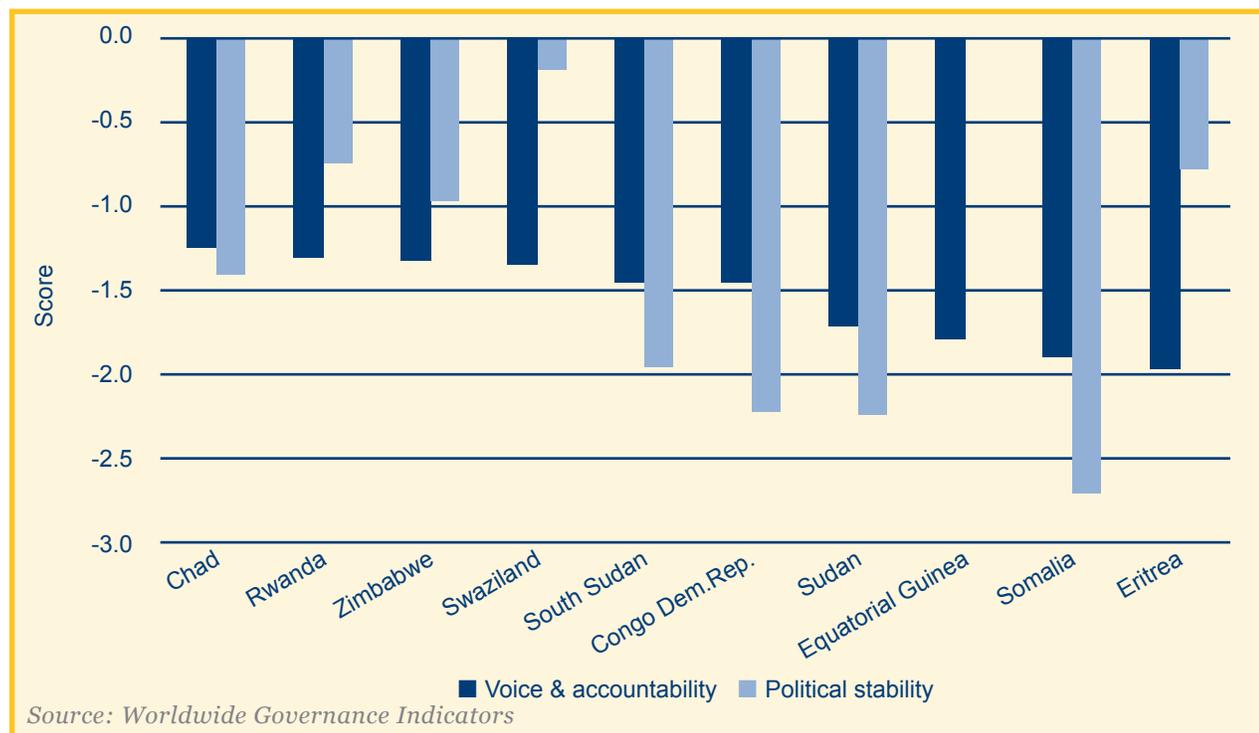


Figure 3: Outperformers - Government Effectiveness

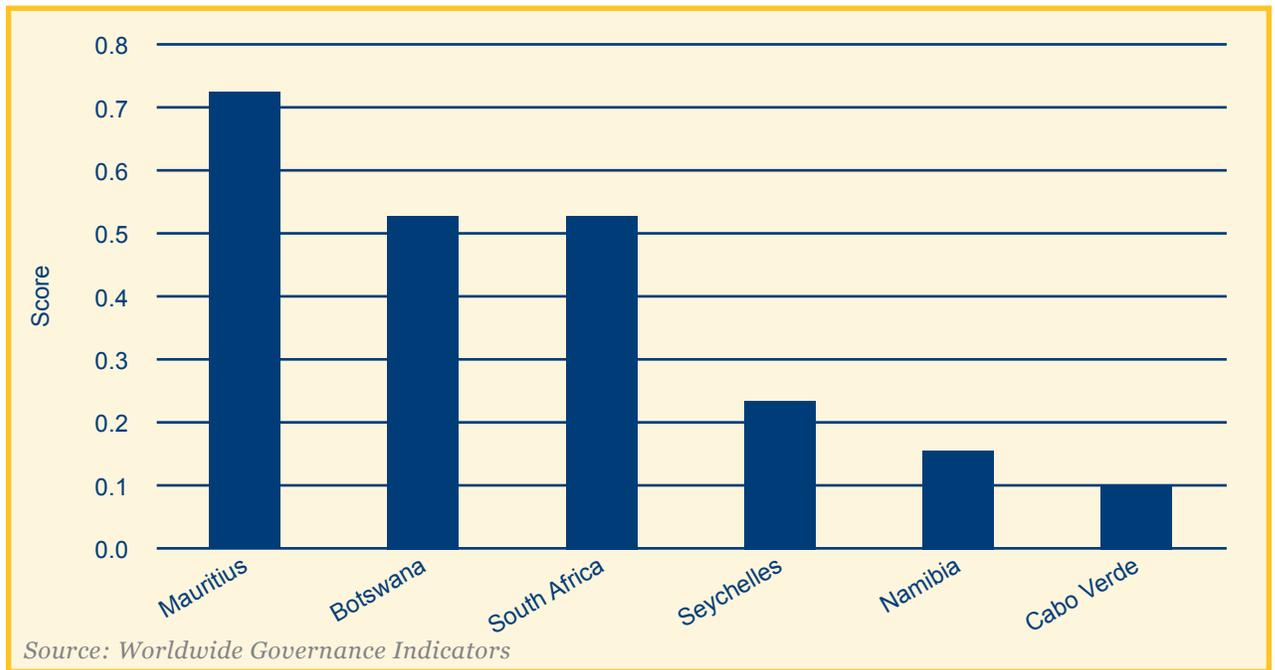
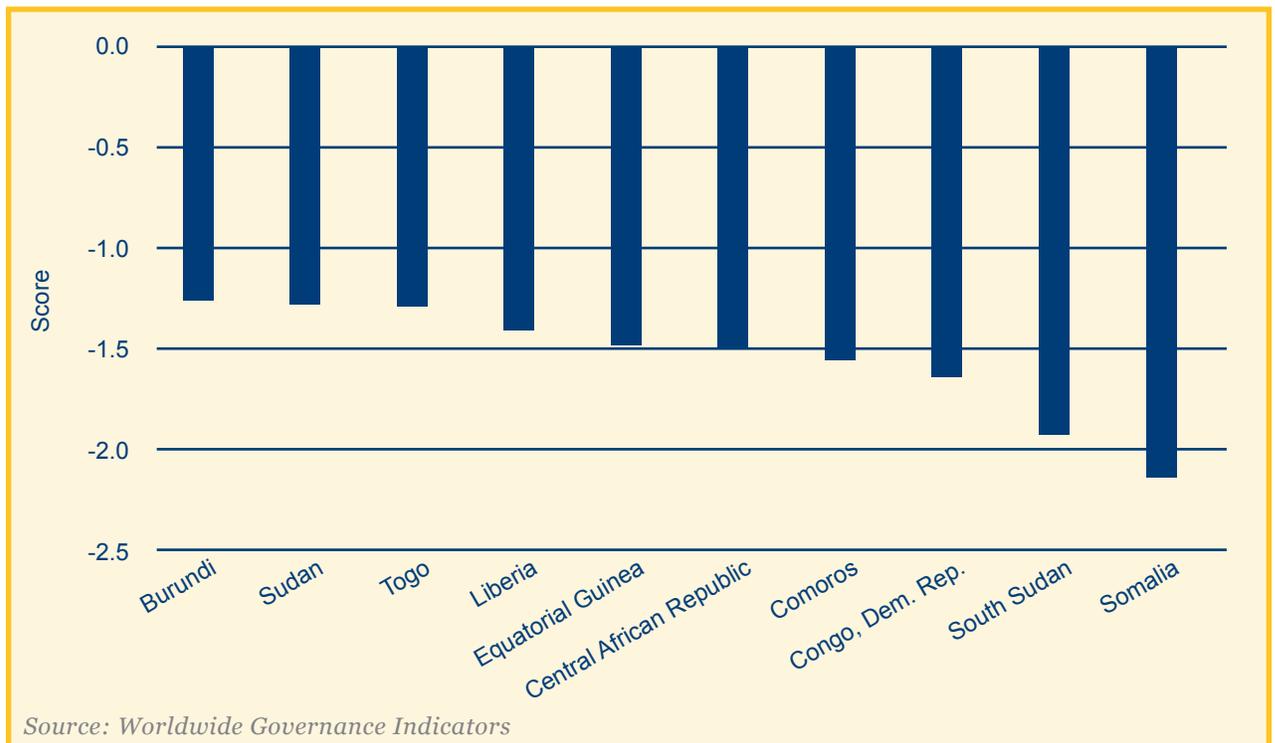
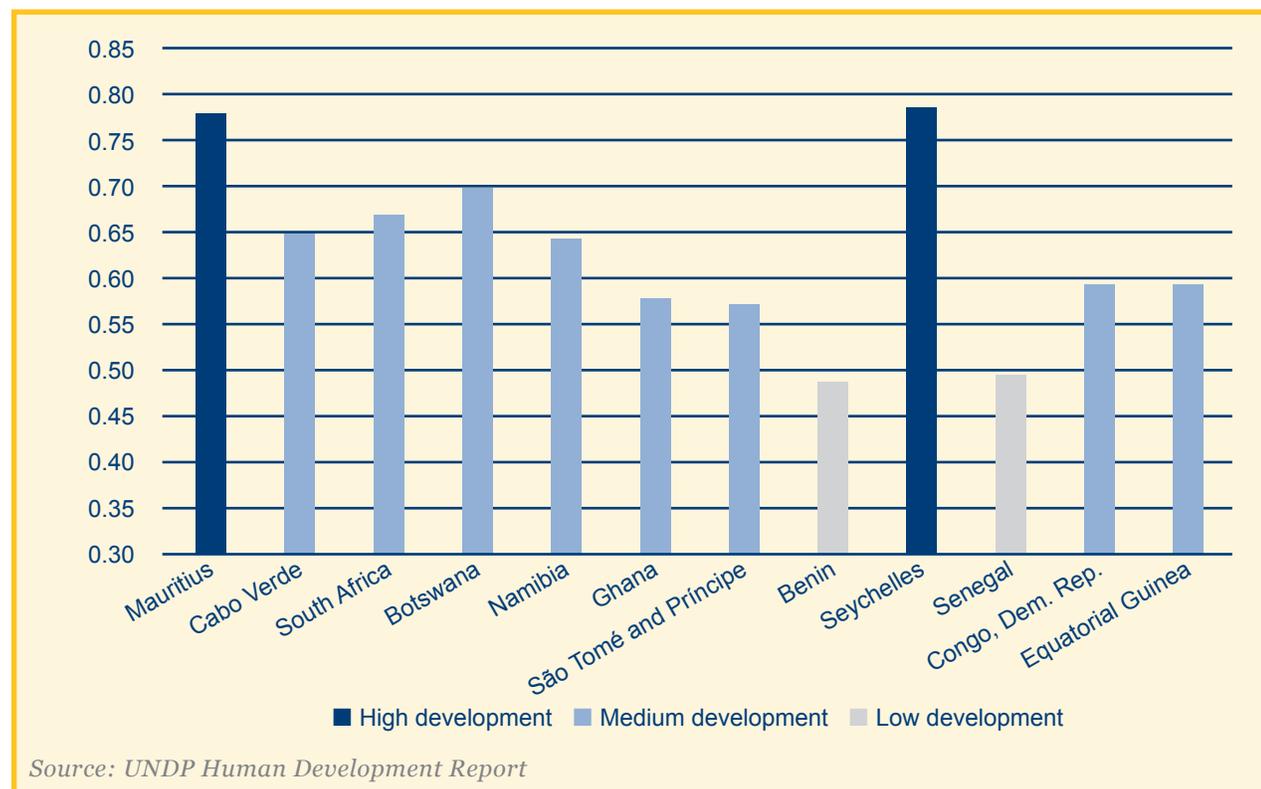


Figure 4: Underperformers - Government Effectiveness



Finally, most of the outperformers for voice and accountability are also continental outperformers for the Human Development Index, with a Human Development Index score in 2016 considered as high (Seychelles and Mauritius) or medium (Botswana, Cape Verde, Ghana, Namibia, São Tomé and Príncipe, and South Africa). Only Benin and Mali have low human development indices. In contrast, most of the underperformers on accountability also underperform in the Human Development Index.

Figure 5: Human Development Score



Similar results are found when using many other political, economic, and social indicators. For example, Steven Radelet, former adviser to Hillary Clinton and Ellen Johnson Sirleaf, in his book *Emerging Africa* (2010), identifies the “rise of more democratic and accountable governments” as one of five crucial features of the 17 African countries he classified as “emerging.” In a paper written for Stanford University’s Center on Democracy, Development, and the Rule of Law, I found that “uninterrupted democratic regimes [more accountable governments] have more economic freedoms; higher literacy rates; better life expectancy at birth; higher gross domestic product and gross national income per capita growth rate than other regimes, with statistically significant results compare to uninterrupted democracies, except for income.”⁷ Accountability makes a huge difference for Africa’s transformation. I would like to outline aspects of this proposition in what follows.

⁷ Signé, Landry. 2013. “The Tortuous Path of Democratization and the Return of Authoritarianism in Africa.” *Stanford University’s Center on Democracy, Development, and the Rule of Law Working Paper* 147.

Personal accountability

One part of the solution to leadership in Africa is personal accountability, which includes responsibility, integrity, and ethics. Dr. Thomas Bivins defines personal accountability here:

[Personal] accountability applies only to individuals, and is both a personal promise and obligation, to yourself and to others, to deliver specific, defined results. Being accountable within an organization means you agree to be operationally defined as the sole agent for an outcome, regardless of the often-inadequate level of authority or control that you have been formally assigned by the organization.⁸

Far too often, African leaders deceive their citizens by not upholding their commitment to deliver the most basic public goods and services. In the absence of results, they typically blame international and domestic actors and circumstances. Internationally, they point to their state's asymmetric position in the international system and the domination of Western countries, as well as international institutions such as the International Monetary Fund and the World Bank—among others—as responsible for their failure.⁹ Domestically, they claim that the opposition, lack of national cohesion, ethnic divisions, or the incompetency of their own colleagues in charge of implementing the projects are reasons for failure.¹⁰ They rarely assume responsibility for results, and the notion of personal accountability seems absent from their explanation. As Bivins says:

Unaccountable people are into excuses, blaming others, putting things off, doing the minimum, acting confused, and playing helpless. They pretend ignorance while hiding behind doors, computers, paperwork, jargon, and other people. They say things like “I didn’t know,” “I wasn’t there,” “I don’t have time,” “It’s not my job,” “That’s just the way I am,” “Nobody told me,” “It isn’t really hurting anyone,” and “I’m just following orders.” Additional reasons include: “I was told to do it,” “It was my job,” “Everybody’s doing it,” “My actions won’t make any difference,” “It’s not my problem,” or “No one else knew.”

Increasing the level of personal accountability—so that Africans see themselves as responsible for the output—would be a giant step towards improving leadership in Africa. Excuses should be banned from the vocabulary.

⁸ Bivins, Thomas H. 2006. “Responsibility and Accountability,” in Kathy R. Fitzpatrick and Carolyn Bronstein. *Ethics in public Relations: Responsible Advocacy*. New York: Sage.

⁹ For example, in the Lagos Plan of Action, African leaders attributed the origins of the economic crisis in the late 1970 to exogenous factors such as the role of international partners.

¹⁰ For example, Benin’s President Patrice Talon explained the low level of development of his country by numerous factors, including the “desert of incompetency” of his civil servants. http://www.lemonde.fr/afrique/article/2016/04/27/en-visite-a-paris-patrice-talon-suscite-l-indignation-a-cotonou_4909834_3212.html

Horizontal and peer accountability

Horizontal accountability was first defined by the late political scientist Guillermo O'Donnell in *Horizontal Accountability in New Democracies* (1999) as:

[T]he existence of state agencies that are legally enabled and empowered, and factually willing and able, to take actions that span from routine oversight to criminal sanctions or impeachment in relation to actions or omissions by other agents or agencies of the state that may be qualified as unlawful.

Recent definitions, including that of political scientist Mainwaring Scott, go beyond legal questions to include moral transgressions. The Ombudsman and Truth and Reconciliation Commissions are used to illustrate that horizontal accountability is not limited to direct, legally sanctioning powers.

When a political leader fails in terms of personal accountability, solid mechanisms of horizontal accountability may help mitigate failure. High-quality horizontal accountability requires the ability of different agents to transparently and independently carry out their oversight functions.

Leaders managing institutions of horizontal accountability (including but not limited to executive, legislature, judiciary, national elections commissions, general auditing commissions, and anti-corruption commissions) need to exert action. Active (following) or passive (ignoring) acts of wrongdoing, even when the law grants access to oversight, are inadmissible. Transparency of information, acts, and sanctions are the first deeds of courage for anyone aiming to improve horizontal accountability and leadership in Africa.

Horizontal accountability can be expanded to the conception of peer accountability.¹¹ People at the same level of responsibility should hold each other accountable for their actions. If peers hold their fellow leaders accountable for results and implement sanctions in the case of failure or excuses, even leaders with limited personal accountability will be more likely to produce better results, since the absence of the latter will have a direct impact on their respective lives.

In the absence of personal accountability, a well-crafted and courageously implemented mechanism of horizontal accountability is probably the best tool for improving Africa's leadership.

However, horizontal accountability can be difficult to implement. Indeed, one of the biggest challenges of horizontal accountability affecting political leadership in Africa is lack of courage to act independently despite possible retaliation. In addition, people at the head of institutions supposed to exercise oversight and provide sanctions are often part of the same clientelist and extractive network devoted to defending

¹¹ At the head-of-state level, a peer could be the head of state of another country. At the ministerial level, a peer could be another member of the government of the same country.

their self-interests rather than working for the greater good. This brings us to additional mechanisms that should be put into place to ensure the renewal of leadership when personal and horizontal accountability fail: vertical and diagonal accountability.

Vertical accountability

As noted above, when some leaders fail their country by deceptive behaviors and actors in charge or horizontal accountability also fail to correct them, it is vitally important for citizens to have a mechanism to hold leaders accountable: voting.

Vertical accountability is the mechanism that allows citizens to select their leaders. A free, fair, transparent, regular, and meaningful electoral process should be the sole means to select government. Through democratic elections, citizens can evaluate and replace poorly performing leaders both from the executive and legislative (and judicial, in some cases such as in the United States)—nationally and locally—to make public officials “agents of the people rather than rulers of the people,” as put by Larry Diamond.¹²

From the 1960s until the wave of democratization in the 1990s, most of Africa’s leaders remained in power for decades, unless ousted by a coup d’état. Since the wave of democratization, accountability has increased in many African countries. More than half of the continent’s leaders and their teams, however, still manage to remain in power—despite poor performance. Despite the spread of elections to the vast majority of African countries, only a limited number can claim to have truly democratic electoral processes.

Many African countries have a good level of vertical accountability, such as Cape Verde, Mauritius, South Africa, São Tomé and Príncipe, Botswana, Benin, Seychelles, and Ghana. Some of the under-performers in terms of vertical accountability include Equatorial Guinea, Eritrea, Somalia, Swaziland, Sudan, Angola, Chad, Ethiopia, Togo, Mauritania, Rwanda, Uganda, and Zimbabwe. Almost all the countries that have a low level of vertical accountability also have a low level of horizontal accountability. However, some countries with high vertical accountability also have a low level of horizontal accountability. For example, despite a very high level of vertical accountability in Liberia, the excessive domination of the executive and a weak legislature and judiciary have limited the ability of institutions of horizontal accountability to truly exercise efficient oversight on each other.¹³

¹² Diamond, Larry. 2008. *The Spirit of Democracy: The Struggle to Build Free Societies Throughout the World*. New York: Henry Holt.

¹³ Signé, Landry and Koffi Khora. 2015. “Horizontal Accountability and the Challenges for Democratic Consolidation in Africa: Evidence from Liberia.” *Democratization*. Available online: <http://www.tandfonline.com/doi/full/10.1080/13510347.2015.1081896>

Diagonal accountability

Civil society organizations are often called institutions of diagonal accountability because they can play a key role in connecting and improving both vertical and horizontal accountability. Leaders from civil society organizations, media, and business organizations are important because they contribute to society in several ways, such as educating citizens, denouncing wrongdoing, and providing innovative policy, societal, and business solutions. Most importantly, they empower citizens, contribute to a well-informed, participatory, and capable middle class, and help ensure a more broadly involved citizenry. An acceptable level of political rights and civil liberties is therefore extremely important to ensure that leaders are accountable to citizens who can sanction leaders through their votes.

Young African leaders: Shaping a more prosperous future with accountable leadership

Accountability requires a tremendous level of courage. A more inclusive, courageous, and transformational leadership is required in Africa to move the continent forward. No matter whether a country is democratic or authoritarian, improving the quality of political leadership in Africa requires accountability in its five key dimensions: personal, horizontal, peer, vertical, and diagonal.

Young African leaders have a key role to play. They should first take on accountability for the ethical success of their organization, village, city, country, sub-region, and continent. Poor performance should not be justified with excuses. Young leaders should build the strongest institutions of horizontal accountability for themselves, and educate people around about the importance of accountability for a successful continent.

Moreover, young leaders should implement mechanisms for horizontal and peer accountability in institutions. It is extremely important not just personally to have a checks and balances system among peers, but also to ensure that such mechanisms are institutionalized locally, nationally, regionally, and continentally to ensure that leaders and managers are accountable.

This requires being extremely courageous, as a power asymmetry exists between the current leaders and the rising generation of leaders. In order to improve horizontal accountability, the young generation of Africa leaders should run for official positions and be involved with educational and watchdog NGOs, with innovative think tanks, with transformational businesses, and so on. They should be members of a vibrant and participatory civil society and be devoted citizens. Finally, they should support their peers with high personal accountability who are running for office, and fully participate in the mechanism of vertical accountability by voting, being involved in politics, funding relevant campaigns and causes, denouncing unethical practices in governance and business, and fully participating in the life of their country and continent.

From a socio-economic perspective, some of the initiatives they should develop include accelerating the successful implementation of the sustainable development goals; industrializing their economy; creating innovative technical solutions to local and global problems; modernizing agriculture; developing global value chains; generating economic and social opportunities; solving health and education challenges; accelerating rural development; advancing art and culture; developing smart cities; strengthening the abilities of enterprises to promote business-friendly reforms; strengthening entrepreneurship; advancing economic freedom; and becoming successful entrepreneurs. The priority here should be to build a strong and entrepreneurial human capital that takes responsibility for its own destiny.

From a governance and institutional perspective, they could develop initiatives promoting inclusive political engagement; building strong and accountable institutions; strengthening the participation of women and youth; promoting human rights; facilitating access to justice; ensuring resilience and inclusion; promoting access to information and technology; advancing civic education; strengthening transparency and accountability; eradicating corruption; engaging youth with heads of state and government, cabinet ministers, parliamentarians, judges, and journalists; increasing security and fighting extremism; increasing involvement in decisionmaking processes at the highest levels, whether executive, legislative, or judiciary; favoring intergenerational dialogue for mutual understanding, learning, and respect; better representing their country and continent internationally; and integrating the continent successfully. The priority here should be to be vigorously and formally represented in decisionmaking processes and institutions, *having a seat at the table instead of being on menu*.

Many programs¹⁴ already exist and some are making a difference, but much more needs to be done. Young leaders should take full ownership of and responsibility for the future of their country and continent, and build it without delay to the level of their ambitions and expectations, assuming that they are committed to build a better world. No more excuses!

Africa can claim the competitive place it deserves and become more competitive economically, politically, and socially in the 21st century's globalized economy. The young generation of leaders can develop and use high-impact, accountable leadership to help transform the continent. Each one should be fully accountable for the results. The time for excuses is over: The future of Africa will be brighter if everyone takes responsibility.

¹⁴ For example, Africa 2.0 is an African civil society organization created in 2010 to mobilize emerging and established leaders to find and implement original solutions that will accelerate Africa's development.

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