African Governance and Collaborative Learning: Confronting Predation, Poverty, and Conflict

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In this talk and related activities, I hope to inspire others to take up one of the greatest challenges of our era: narrowing the governance gap which is at the root of many of Africa’s development and security dilemmas. In view of the emergence of many fragile and failed states, a wave of innovative thinking and action is urgently needed. According to Roger Myerson, Nobel Laureate in Economics, “the key question in Africa is how can governance be improved”. Answers will only be found, I believe, through a process of collaborative learning and research. No single scholar or analyst can unravel the complex dimensions of this issue in Africa’s diverse contexts. The engagement of the Academy in meeting this challenge is vital. An invitation to review a strategy document on economic governance for 2019-2013 of a major African organization has added to the uniqueness of this moment.

After a brainstorming session for the Collaborative Learning Initiative (CLI) at the African Studies Association annual meeting in Atlanta in November 2018, Matthew Page, a former State Department official, wrote:

What sets this initiative apart is the commitment to deepening ties between African and non-African institutions and making them more seamless and routine. There is a need to make this case to US institutions - lobbying them to digitize and provide open access, creating relationships with African institutions, prioritizing partnerships and academic exchanges, and putting their resources behind these efforts. In other words, harnessing

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1 Talk delivered at Northwestern University, May 2, 2019, at a brainstorming event on a proposed Collaborative Learning Initiative on Governance and Development (CLI).
2 Personal communication.
3 The organization will be named when the strategy document is released in autumn 2019.
academic institutions own resources and pushing for a conceptual change in how they operate could yield huge long-term dividends.⁴

Pertinent remarks can be found in Richard DeMillo’s *Abelard to Apple: The Fate of American Colleges and Universities⁵*. He describes what usually happens during lectures in university classrooms. Much of the information transmitted, DeMillo says, can be found online. As innovation accelerates, “higher education won’t look the same.” What really matters, according to DeMillo, is what takes place outside formal instruction “in the learning community”.

There are moments when our lives are set on a particular course. Thanks to the videotaped interviews of former students made available on Arch Library, a glimpse is provided of experiences that influenced my scholarly and teaching career.⁶ The starting point is the Caribbean where I was born. W. Arthur Lewis, a native of St. Lucia, was a Nobel Laureate in economics and a longtime professor of Princeton University. His abiding concern was learning “how to bring prosperity to poor countries”.⁷ He theorized that excess rural labor can spark accelerated industrial growth, a process (structural transformation) that subsequently took place in China and other Asian countries. It has not, for the most part, occurred in Africa. What was said about Lewis resonates: “His dedication to a life of scholarship and public engagement reminds us what is possible when we bond the pursuit of knowledge to the search for pragmatic solutions.”⁸

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⁴ Personal communication.
⁵ Massachusetts Institute of Technology Press, 2011
⁶ https://arch.library.northwestern.edu/concern/parent/pz50gw30n/file_sets/tt44pn11b
⁸ Ibid.
Here are a few of my relevant bonding experiences.

I. 1963-1964
In the third year of my undergraduate studies at Dartmouth College, I initiated a student endeavor, the Negro Applications Encouragement Program. No such effort previously existed in the College. It contributed to a rapid increase in applications from African-Americans and spurred other similar programs.

II. Summer, 1967
I spent several weeks in Sunflower County, Mississippi, working with Mrs. Fannie Lou Hamer and the Mississippi Freedom Democratic Party (MFDP). Although I was by then a committed civil rights activist, the direct experience of black disempowerment and extreme poverty deepened my awareness of the profound challenges - beyond expanding black suffrage and removing overt racial barriers – to be overcome in the United States.⁹

III. September 1968
I traveled from Oxford, U.K., to Paris to examine archival collections and conduct interviews of former French colonial officers and scholars of Africa. My aim was to discover what had actually taken during the struggle for independence in Cameroon. Why, I sought to understand, were those individuals who opposed the nationalist movement in this country been the beneficiaries of the transfer of power from the French in 1960?¹⁰ Their successors have dominated Cameroon’s government and politics ever since.¹¹

IV. Summer, 1977
After eighteen months as a lecturer in political science in Nigeria, I spent several weeks in Oxford trying to understand why this country, so well endowed in people and natural

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⁹ Letters and other materials written during this summer will be made available in subsequent publications.
¹⁰ A thesis for the B.Phil. (now M.Phil.) degree in Politics at Oxford University in 1969 was the first outcome of these researches. It was followed by a D.Phil. dissertation in 1973 and many subsequent published articles and two books on Cameroon politics.
¹¹ Paul Biya is in his 37th year and seventh term as Cameroon’s second president. He had served as vice-president to the first, Ahmadu Ahidjo.
resources, was not pursuing a course of sustainable growth and shared development. None of the available analytical frameworks provided a satisfying answer. After writing and publishing the article, “Affluence and Underdevelopment: the Nigerian Experience”, I proceeded to construct my own analysis. It remains applicable four decades later. Nigeria is, as in 1976-1979, a resource-rich country whose development is severely warped. It is estimated today to have the largest number of poor people of any country in the world.

These pivotal moments are illustrative of a career shaped by confronting political and development problems and blending scholarship and policy action in the search for answers. Often, I have found that obvious and pressing questions are avoided, even in the Academy where scholars have the freedom and resources to pursue them. The words of Robert Caro, renowned biographer of Robert Moses and Lyndon Johnson, resonate: “If you have found out something about political power, you don’t just want one generation to know it, you want succeeding generations to know it”.

I have shared with thousands of students, and many more via publications and lectures, what I have learned about political power, how it is acquired, how it is used in positive or negative ways, and how the balance can be shifted from the latter to the former. Students respond positively to exercises in collaborative and immersive learning. It is collaborative because deep learning often requires an interactive process. I have benefited greatly from such interactions during my student days, notably at Dartmouth College and Oxford University. The process is also immersive because the closer we get to actual lives, to struggles taking place in multiple arenas, to myriad resolutions achieved and lost, is the more barriers between our perceptions and biases, and the factors that actually drive human behaviors, fall away.

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On April 24, 2019, I attended a pertinent symposium at the Robert Lurie Medical Research Center in Chicago. It featured the extraordinary work conducted in slum communities in Lagos, Nigeria, by the “Access to Health Program” directed by Northwestern Law Professor Juliet Sorensen. A related documentary was shown by Medill Professor Brent Huffman on the forceful eviction of slum dwellers in that city. What was demonstrated during this event was the unusual degree of learning that can take place when the process is collaborative and immersive. Following the presentations, I asked: How can such learning at the community level impact wider governance and institutional frameworks that necessitate these interventions?14

As Emeritus Professor, I no longer teach formally-scheduled classes. However, student researchers remain at the center of my work.15 There now exists a large network of former students, and longtime colleagues, who have engaged in collaborative and immersive learning regarding Africa. In recent years, student research assistants have been accorded access to this informal network. Whatever the country or topic being examined, the students can be put in contact with its members. These exchanges provoke heightened learning and understanding, including for the participating experts.16

I will now speak briefly to the themes mentioned in the title of this talk.

**Governance and Development**

In the keynote address at the inauguration of the Ibadan School of Government and Public Policy (ISGPP) in Nigeria in February 2016, I stated: “A focus on governance includes government authorities, as well as those outside the state sphere. Governance concerns how public goals are established, how they are pursued, and how the power to accomplish them is acquired, utilized, and held accountable. The bundle of these

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14 This is one of the questions to be taken up in an addendum to the strategy document on economic governance mentioned earlier.
15 I am currently overseeing independent studies on Côte d’Ivoire, Ethiopia, Ghana, and the radical British historian Thomas L. Hodgkin.
16 In my keynote address at the African Economic Conference in Addis Ababa in December 2017, I proposed the creation of a Network for the Study of Governance and Development (NSGD). Informally, such a network exists. It can now be fully activated. https://arch.library.northwestern.edu/concern/generic_works/fq977t89c
practices, and the norms that frame them, we call institutions.” The African Development Bank uses a similar definition: governance refers to “a set of institutions, processes, and behaviors that affect the manner in which power is exercised in the management of a country’s economic, financial, social, and natural resources.”

The term “governance” is in frequent use today. That was not the case just a few decades ago. Philippe Schmitter, the well-known political scientist, once queried me following a presentation at Stanford University. Why he asked, did I speak of “governance” and not “government”. I replied that the term applied to institutions of all forms, including the university where the seminar was being held, its departments and research centers.

I have written a great deal on issues of governance, especially since the creation in 1988 of the African Governance Program (AGP) under my direction at The Carter Center in Atlanta. Many pertinent papers and talks have been made available on Northwestern’s Arch Library. An important exercise of the Collaborative Learning Initiative will involve the collation and distillation of these documents, and the publication of materials designed for a wider readership.

In early spring 1988, during a conversation with former U.S. president Jimmy Carter and Rosalynn Carter, I was asked what I would be interested in doing if I were invited to join the Center as a Fellow. I replied: work on governance because it was the key issue in Africa. President Carter responded: “Why not come and do it here?” Peace and democracy initiatives absorbed much of the attention and energies of the AGP provoked by global upheavals in and after 1989. However, even where violent conflicts ended and/or democratic systems were installed, misgovernance persisted.

**Predation**

Larry Diamond of Stanford University, co-founder and co-editor of the *Journal of Democracy*, published an insightful article a decade ago: “The Democratic Rollback: The

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17 https://arch.library.northwestern.edu/concern/generic_works/vm40xr62q?locale=en
Rise of the Predatory State”. These two trends are linked. The global retreat of democracy is confirmed in a variety of surveys and discussed in many scholarly and other articles. We are aware also of this decline in the United States which, according to Freedom House, has dropped to 52nd among the 87 countries ranked as “Free”. The Economist Intelligence Index has similarly downgraded the U.S. from “Full” to “Flawed Democracy”. We study this global trend, therefore, while perched on its downward slope.

Of equal significance is the relentless rise of predatory governance. Prominent Nigerian scholars have wrestled with this phenomenon. As I stated during a recent conference on “Saharan Futures” at Northwestern, the globalization of financial structures has facilitated the transfer through multiple channels of “caravans of gold” out of Africa, draining the continent of financial resources needed to build and maintain roads, clinics, and schools, and mitigate climate change among a host of challenges. “Bleeding” is a word frequently used by Nigerian scholars and commentators to capture this debilitating process.

International financial networks facilitate substantial illicit transfers from Africa. It was recently shown how J.P. Morgan Chase was involved in the transfer of public funds, through a circuitous process, for the benefit of a Nigerian politician who had secured a license to lift petroleum offshore. Persistent alerts about the dubious nature of these transactions were unheeded. The involvement of Goldman Sachs officials in the mega-corruption that brought down an entrenched government in Malaysia has been widely reported. So also has the manipulation of international banking and other financial institutions by Paul Manafort and his associates who became ensnared in the Robert

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18 https://www.foreignaffairs.com/articles/2008-03-02/democratic-rollback
Mueller Special Counsel investigation. Members of a super-elite in Africa are steadily transferring ill-gotten wealth into high-end properties in overseas capitals.  

Most painful to read are exposés of what is called “state capture” in South Africa. Just a quarter-century after the end of apartheid, this country is wracked by predatory practices. Funds intended to bring electricity, schools, roads and other amenities to poor areas are systematically siphoned off. What a New York Times editorial stated about Sudan at the end of the 30-year rule of Omar Hassan al-Bashir is a coda for other African and less-developed nations: “countries with long histories of rampant and systemic corruption, often as a result of authoritarian government, face huge obstacles in eradicating the blight, since it infects the very institutions, political and judicial, that are needed to fight it.” Authority Stealing”, “State Capture”, “Kleptocracy”, “Tendocracy” – whichever designation is used – these practices constitute huge impediments to social and economic progress.

Poverty and Conflict
In an opinion piece published in September 2018 by Bill and Melinda Gates, they describe three interconnected trends: adverse demographics with populations increasing faster than the resources available to meet their needs; poverty rates that negate the “Africa Rising” growth narrative; and the erosion of what they call “basic systems”. They further emphasize the importance of devoting more attention to “the toughest cases”, many found in Africa. Without “basic systems”, clean water, reliable electricity, adequate transportation, and elementary healthcare and sanitation cannot be acquired. To meet these and other fundamental needs, core institutions must work as intended. My inaugural address at Northwestern in 2006 was therefore entitled “Misgovernance and the African Predicament: Can the Code Be Broken?” A dozen years later, the code remains intact.

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21 Matthew Page has been identifying such properties in a favorite destination for Nigerian illicit transfers: London.
22 Editorial, April 29, 2019
The illicit outflow of public resources from Africa (estimated to be several tens of billions annually) is matched by the flood of migrants fleeing lands that can no longer assure them, their children, and other family members a secure existence. In some countries, such as Ethiopia, internally displaced persons now number in the millions. At a recent conference at Northwestern, Isabella Alexander of Emory University described the harrowing conditions endured by the steady stream of migrants trying to reach the shores of Europe. As is known from experiences at the U.S. southern border, a key driver of these processes is the worsening life-situation for individuals and families in their home countries.

With regard to conflict and its link to poverty, the example of Nigeria can again be used. In a recent talk at Northwestern, it was stated by Olivier Walther that 38% of the conflicts recorded in Africa occur in Nigeria. I responded that this figure is roughly double Nigeria’s share of the continent’s population. With so many violent conflicts and banditry – along with severe clashes between herders and farmers across the Middle-Belt as cattle herds expand and climate change reduce acreage for foraging – life is becoming increasingly Hobbesian. Former U.S. ambassador John Campbell, in a recent talk in Chicago, said that, for most Nigerians, the level of development is less than it was at independence six decades ago. There is little assurance that these trends will be reversed in the foreseeable future.

**Collaborative Learning and African Dilemmas**

There is insufficient time to consider the number of African countries in which predation, poverty, and conflict form a vicious cycle, trapping hundreds of millions in situations of despair – Cameroon, Central African Republic, Democratic Republic of Congo, Ethiopia, Nigeria, Mali, Somalia, and South Sudan, to mention several prominent cases. What, it could be asked, does this all have to do with Northwestern or other institutions of higher learning?

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In a statement prepared for this exercise, and available on Arch Library, I cited an extended essay I wrote for *The Chronicle on Higher Education* in March 2003 - the very month before I joined Northwestern as John Evans Professor of Political Science and Director of the Program of African Studies. It is entitled, *Facing African Predicament: Academe Needs to Play a Stronger Role*. What has changed since then? There are many notable programs at Northwestern that invest significantly in Africa: the Program of African Studies, the Buffett Center for Global Studies, the Pritzker School of Law, the Feinberg School of Medicine, and the Institute for the Study of Islamic Thought in Africa. The Block Museum is currently featuring an extraordinary exhibit, “Caravans of Gold”, on the historic trade in gold and salt from the forest zones of West Africa to the Sahelian area and beyond. We also have the extraordinary Melville J. Herskovits Library in African Studies, one of the jewels of the university. Dozens of African undergraduate, graduate, and doctoral students are provided important study and research opportunities. What value can be added, therefore, to this institutional array by the proposed Collaborative Learning Initiative?

The Sankofa Bird, redesigned for our use, captures the work of the CLI. Student research assistants have been given the opportunity to delve into my archival collections and draw on written and oral commentaries for their independent and joint studies. Such efforts can continue but will necessarily be limited in the number of students who can benefit from this arrangement. This pilot effort can, however, be multiplied and researchers provided access to archival materials at different levels of inquiry.

As mentioned at the outset, while preparing this talk I received a request to review a comprehensive draft strategy on African governance and development from a major international organization. The final text of this strategy will be made widely available in a few months. Significant human and financial resources have been invested by this organization, along with its partners, to address the governance impediments to achieving sustainable growth and development in the continent.

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24 https://arch.library.northwestern.edu/concern/generic_works/pz50gw30n?locale=en
In addition to providing my responses to this strategy document, I will use this opportunity to explore the creation of a *Network for the Study of Governance and Development* (NSGD) advocated in my December 2017 Addis lecture. Participants will be invited to provide input to a concept paper on developmental governance around which a collaborative learning community (CLC) can be created. In association with African institutional partners and others, the “conceptual change” advocated by Mathew Page will be diligently explored.

May 2019