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1

Introduction

Social Networks & Economic Ungovernance in Africa

1. An Informal Economy Paradox

The town of Aba in south-eastern Nigeria is famous for two things: a dynamic informal manufacturing sector, and an infamous vigilante group known as the Bakassi Boys. Propelled by embedded entrepreneurial practices of the local Igbo ethnic group, Aba has become an icon of informal economy-led growth, reflected in the term ‘Aba-made’ – a popular Nigerian expression for cheap manufactured goods. In the town’s burgeoning shoe and garment clusters, complex supply, subcontracting and credit networks, animated by relations of kinship and community, turn out a wide range of high fashion goods, ranging from the latest ladies’ sandals and handbags to designer jeans, suits and undergarments. Despite their local origins, these goods often sport high street labels, including GAP, St. Michael’s and Tommy Hilfiger, or stamps reading ‘made in Italy’ or ‘London, Paris, Rome’. In the weeks before major festivals such as Christmas or the Muslim Eid, Aba’s shoe and garment clusters are transformed into hubs of international trade. The town bustles with traders from across Nigeria and as far as Ghana, Côte d’Ivoire and the Democratic Republic of the Congo, who wind their way among the thousands of makeshift workshops to purchase consignments of goods for export to low income consumers across West, Central and Southern Africa. By the year 2000, the informal shoe and garment clusters in Aba had a combined annual turnover of nearly 200 million US dollars and employed some 50 thousand producers, workers and apprentices, all without the assistance of the state.

This dynamic interdependence between local producers and traders from across Africa, Muslim as well as Christian, was shattered in early 2000 by a violent ethnic riot led by a local vigilante group known as the Bakassi Boys. The Bakassi Boys were themselves a product of Aba’s small enterprise clusters, originally formed by the town’s informal shoe

producers to maintain order and protect property rights in the face of crippling levels of local insecurity and an inefficient and corrupt police force. Extortion rackets and armed robbery had become so rampant that they were frightening away visiting traders and threatening the livelihoods of informal producers. Despite its brutal methods, the vigilante group proved highly successful in restoring security in Aba, to the relief of citizens and visiting traders alike. But on 28 February 2000, in the wake of ethnic riots in the north of Nigeria, the Bakassi Boys led an attack on Hausa and other northern migrants in Aba. In two days of slaughter, over three hundred northern Nigerian migrants and sojourners were killed, property in the Hausa quarters was burnt, and thousands of Hausa and other Muslim migrants were forced to flee their homes. Although peace was restored after a few days, the vigilante group had shattered the harmonious business environment that it was supposed to protect. In the shoe and garment clusters, the Aba riots severely disrupted business during the critical sales period attached to the upcoming Eid festival, and frightened away northern Nigerian customers for up to a year afterwards.

Why did such a dynamic centre of informal enterprise degenerate into ethnic and religious violence? How did popular initiatives to protect property rights end up intensifying risk and undermining the conditions for economic growth? The disturbing tale of these two Nigerian enterprise clusters raises the wider question of why, across Africa, social networks have tended to exacerbate the regulatory problems of weak and corrupt states, when social networks in other parts of the world are associated with flexibility and economic efficiency in the face of contemporary economic uncertainty. The successes of Asian 'network capitalism' and Europe's densely networked enterprise clusters have promoted a view of networks as a novel form of economic governance uniquely suited to the challenges of liberalization and globalization (Hamilton 1996:215; Pyke & Sengenberger 1992; Castells 1996; Powell 1991). Even in developing countries, where states and markets are weak, social networks and ethnic 'embeddedness' are said to provide an informal mechanism of economic coordination capable of filling gaps in state provision (Schmitz & Nadvi 1999; Stiglitz 2000). While communal ties were once viewed as fetters on economic development, a burgeoning literature on social networks, social capital, and informal institutions now argues that, in contexts of state and market failure, 'social ties of immigrant, ethnic, and other bounded communities can, under specified conditions, furnish the resources for firms to prosper in a modern setting' (Granovetter 1995:130).

Yet in Africa, the regulatory performance of social networks has been uneven. Opinions are divided about their ability to cope with the demands of economic restructuring. On the one hand, geographers and anthropologists have argued that social networks have been more effective than states in leading African economies into the 21st century (MacGaffey 1991; Hansen & Vaa 2004; Igué & Soulé 1992). Attention is

drawn to Africa's vast ethnic trading networks and dynamic informal sectors which provide livelihoods, housing, and access to goods and services in the face of crumbling official economies. A profusion of empirical research details Africa's informal success stories, ranging from popular livelihood and 'Sungusungu' security networks in Tanzania (Tripp 1997; Paciotti & Mulder 2004), to global Somali remittance networks (Lindley 2005; Little 2003), and the ethnically embedded informal import networks of Nigeria and Niger that ease the plight of structurally adjusting West African consumers by bringing in cheap consumer goods, used clothing and used cars (Beuving 2006; Grégoire 1992; Hashim & Meagher 1999). Stereotypes of traditionalism and underdevelopment give way to notions of competitive indigenous structures with an 'aptitude for development in a global macro-economic environment' (Grégoire & Labazée 1993:15). Instead of obstructing reform, Africa's rich array of popular associations and enterprise networks are celebrated as a force for economic development and economic restructuring from below.

Others have been less sanguine about the developmental potential of African network governance. In recent years, the proliferation of social networks in African societies has been associated less with growth than with economic decline and social disorder. The renowned network sociologist, Manuel Castells (1996:134) describes Africa as a 'black hole' in the network society: 'because tribal and ethnic networks were the safest bet for people's support, the fight to control the state...was organized around ethnic cleavages, reviving centuries-old hatred and prejudice.' Enthusiastic accounts of ethnic enterprise and transnational trading networks in such centres of informal activity as Nigeria and the DR Congo have given way to dark tales of 'shadow economies', ethnic militias, and the smuggling of drugs, arms and conflict diamonds (Reno 2000; Duffield 2001; Roitman 2004). Instead of re-energizing economic activity and filling the institutional gaps left by failing states, social networks in African societies are seen as harbingers of 'the coming anarchy' (Kaplan 1994), and the 'criminalization of the state' (Bayart et al. 1999). A growing number of development specialists argue that Africa's informal economies do not contribute to growth and economic restructuring so much as entrench the cycles of greed, violence and poverty that trap African societies in 'the bottom billion' (Collier 2007).

Explanations of why African social networks have performed so poorly in the era of liberalization and 'network capitalism' have tended to locate the problem in Africa's dysfunctional formal or informal institutions. This has fostered highly essentialist views of African social networks, which are portrayed either as 'social capital', deploying traditional solidarities against the ravages of corrupt states and global marginalization, or as 'social liabilities', regulated by clientalism and parochial divisions. In these analyses, there is little appreciation of the variations among social networks within or between different African

societies, or of the ways in which ruthless liberalization, poverty and state withdrawal have affected the regulatory capacities of African popular networks. This book will cast new light on processes of network development and network failure through an account of the triumphs and travails of two remarkably dynamic enterprise clusters in the informal manufacturing hub of south-eastern Nigeria. Moving beyond notions of primordial values and path dependence, it will explore the interplay of culture, agency and power in shaping the complex trajectories of informal economic governance in contemporary Africa.

In the process, this book will explore how the growing reliance on non-state forms of economic organization to fill regulatory gaps often creates new vulnerabilities. While political science research on 'identity politics' has signalled the risks of ethnic mobilization for political stability, proponents of 'social capital' and embeddedness have been extolling the virtues of identity based forms of economic organization. Strong ties of kinship and community are celebrated as a means of lowering transaction costs and solving collective action problems without the intervention of the state. Yet the promotion of 'identity economics' as a non-state solution to regulatory challenges tends to ignore the vulnerability of popular organizational initiatives to survivalist pressures and political capture, particularly in the context of ethnically divided societies. With a view to moving beyond debates about whether African social networks are motors of community based development or cliental predation, this account of Nigerian informal enterprise reveals how an environment of rapid liberalization, institutional decay and political opportunism can lead complex and vibrant social networks towards dysfunctional outcomes, turning 'identity economics' into part of the problem rather than part of the solution.

2. Economic Informality in Nigeria

There are a number of reasons for choosing Nigeria as a site for examining the governance implications of Africa's expanding informal economies. Not only is Nigeria the most populous country in Africa, with a population of over 140 million people: it boasts the continent's largest and most dynamic informal economy. World Bank analysts estimate Nigeria's informal economy at 58% of GNP, marginally outstripped only by Zimbabwe and Tanzania, but with an economy over five times as large (Schneider 2002). All of Nigeria's three major ethnic groups – the Hausa, the Yoruba and the Igbo – and some of the 300 or more minority groups, have well developed ethnic trading networks that serve to fill the growing gaps in the country's ailing formal economy through the development of local as well as global connections. Nigeria is also of growing strategic importance with regard to contemporary trends in global oil supplies. Long a major oil exporter to the United States, and particularly prized for

its high quality 'Bonny light' petroleum, Nigeria has become increasingly important as Western countries reorient oil supply networks towards the West African Gulf of Guinea in response to growing conflicts with the Middle East (Soares de Oliveira 2007). Understanding how expanding economic informality influences processes of economic governance has implications for global as well as national and regional economic stability.

So far, Nigerian trajectories of informal economic governance are not encouraging. For all its entrepreneurial vitality, Nigeria is increasingly regarded as more of a threat to global economic security than a solution. According to the journalist Karl Maier (2000: xviii), 'To most outsiders, the very name Nigeria conjures up images of chaos and confusion, military coups, repression, drug trafficking, and business fraud', turning the country into 'a giant, heaving multiethnic symbol of the archetypal Third World basket case' (ibid.: xxi). Since the introduction of economic restructuring policies in 1986, and the transition to democracy in 1999, the country has been drifting towards economic and infrastructural collapse, and has been plagued by bloody ethnic and religious conflicts. The country's unstoppable informal economy has gained global significance less through its developmental accomplishments, than through the rise of narcotics trading networks and internet fraud, conventionally known in Nigeria as '419' (Smith 2006; Ellis 2009). Petroleum extraction is increasingly threatened by the rebel activity in the Niger Delta, where environmental degradation has destroyed local livelihoods, and disaffected youth turn to sabotaging pipelines, kidnapping and vigilantism as protest and alternative livelihood strategies (Okonta & Douglas 2003; Omeje 2006; Ukiwo 2007; Nwajiaku 2005; Peel 2009). The imposition of Shari'a law in several states in the Muslim north of Nigeria has added to the spiral of instability, as well as drawing Nigeria into the sights of the global 'war on terror'. Expressing a growing sense of alarm in the international community, a recent article in *The Times* of London (1 August 2009) entitled 'Nigeria on the brink' suggests, 'What happens in Nigeria matters not only to Africa: it affects the huge diaspora in Britain, distorts the oil market, drives international criminality and opens the gates to extremism and terrorism.'

Yet, in the Igbo areas of Nigeria, perched at the edge of the Niger Delta, the challenges of economic restructuring appear to have stimulated a more constructive trajectory. Far from erupting into chaos and lawlessness in the face of weakening states and rapid liberalization, the Igbo heartland of Nigeria has been most famous for the rise of dynamic enterprise clusters, particularly in the towns of Nnewi and Aba (Forrest 1994; Brautigam 1997; 2003). Dramatic references to Igbo involvement in the international narcotics trade have tended to obscure the much wider involvement of Igbo informal business networks in legal trade and production activities. As Deborah Brautigam notes in her well known study of the area, the Igbo are one of the few African informal business groups to have made the transition from trade to manufacturing. In the

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