

A New Analysis and New Vision for the Organization and Program of the Association of Concerned Africa Scholars in 1992

Introduction

An urgent and pressing need for Africa at this critical juncture in its history is for an articulate and powerful voice in the United States seeking a larger, more compassionate, and serious focus on Africa in U.S. foreign policy. There is a clear and pressing need now for U.S. support for the present and future of this sub-continent from which so much of U.S. peoples, culture, heritage, and products have been drawn.

This paper calls on U.S. Africanist scholars to mobilize more effectively as part of a broader constituency for these ends. The Association of Concerned Africa Scholars (ACAS) offers a new plan and directions to the U.S. Africanist community as part of a larger strategy of developing a more effective U.S. scholarly constituency for a more supportive U.S. foreign policy toward Africa. These directions and plans have emerged from discussions among many ACAS members and particularly the ACAS Board. First, we review the new situation of Africa in a changed global system and then some of the history of ACAS to affect U.S. policy. Next, we suggest some initiatives: specifically, a broadening and deepening of attention of U.S. Africanist scholars beyond Southern Africa to the entire continent and an enlarged and re-positioned ACAS organization to respond to the new situation.

A. The Marginalization of Africa in the U.S. Consciousness

The demise of the Cold War has freed Africa dramatically from Big Power rivalries as the engine of external interests in the continent. The Eastern European powers have turned to their own crises, and the wealthier West has become immensely disinterested in Africa. Africa is seen as full of problems, debilitated by the AIDS epidemic, short of attractive investment opportunities, and inconsequential as a purchaser of Western goods. Most African countries, in common with many Third World economies, are besieged with debt, further collapse of commodity prices (especially relative to power to purchase goods of the industrial North), devaluation, inflation, unemployment, some bad political leadership, political upheaval, erosion of environment and infrastructure, food shortages, massive health problems (cholera, HIV, and the resurgent six WHO-targeted tropical diseases), and other destabilizing structural weaknesses.

These burgeoning crises are occurring in the context of major structural reorganization of the global system, its economy, polity, and military power. Because of the relaxing of East-West tensions, most of the nations of the South, and both repressive leaders and progressive movements within them can no longer automatically use the Cold War polarities to gain access to aid and support from the big powers of the North. Simultaneously, the materialist ideologies of "development" through "the benign guidance of the market" are seeking to be proven in Eastern Europe and the Pacific Rim, where they are no more likely to achieve broad success than that have in Africa, Latin America, and South Asia. In Africa,

pressures from the U.S., IMF, World Bank, and other Western nations are felt more stringently in the states made fragile and dependent by their declining power, leading a large number of African states to accede to the economic dictates of the World Bank and the IMF, but this has yet to produce any significant foreign assistance or serious attention to the crises facing most nations. The halcyon "liberal" days of *Camelot*, of significant political attention to and foreign assistance for the Third World, and of the Marshall Plan are no more.

Even though the continent has dropped from the attention of the global powers amidst this international reorientation, we are understanding that Africa actually is deserving of more, not less, attention. In the 1990s, we have comprehended more than ever before the depth of human heritage and culture that is owed to Africa, especially in the culture of the U.S. and the Americas. We also are more attentive to the many products from Africa which enrich the consumption and quality of life of America.

At the same time, much of Africa, even amidst economic crisis, is offering internal change and political transformations in many nations, with democratic elections, new leadership, and multi-party rule. Yet, it is not clear that the economic and political support from the industrial powers for this new generation of democratic leaders will allow them to maintain the fragile holds on power they have achieved. These transformations open new possibilities of calling on the U.S. state to truly support the democratic principles it pleads in Africa as was not possible under the Cold War ethos.

And Africa in the 1990s has more educated humanpower at every level for solving African problems with African experts, including scientists with advanced training. Yet, most decision-makers in the wealthier nations remain unimpressed and disinterested. Indeed, structural adjustment programs and the rising dominance of international financial agencies threatens to eliminate indigenous research capacities. At no time is locally-sensitive social research more needed, for even as we realize our historical and material linkage with Africa, the continent is overwhelmed by the worst crises in its history - in economics, health, and drought with famine.

In such a climate and even in a time of food and economic crisis, it is not surprising that total U.S. economic assistance for the 47 nations of Sub-Saharan Africa only barely exceeds that of Nicaragua and Panama together and totals less than one-tenth of the combined assistance to Israel and Egypt. Even urgently needed humanitarian aid for drought-beset Southern Africa has been woefully inadequate.

Among diverse U.S. publics - mass and elite - interest in Africa has dropped. The interest of U.S. politicians has been eroded by Nelson Mandela's release from prison, the broad perception that apartheid is about finished, and the seemingly endless parade of new African problems. Indeed, the issues facing South Africa are changing, where focus on national liberation is being replaced by the issues confronting the rest of the continent, such as democracy, ethnicity, the design of a "development" to recover from a colonial or settler past, and forging new links with the rest of Africa.

The attention of the corporate and investment communities have shifted to new opportunities in the Pacific and Europe as U.S. investments and trade with Africa declined since the 1970s. The U.S. foreign policy-making elites, likewise, are riveted to global competition among the economic powers and the transformations of the Eastern Bloc. Across North America, we see a new re-focusing in North America on domestic economic and social issues, including some international concerns primarily of the environment, human rights, and "democracy."

For masses in the U.S., attention is focused on declining job and economic opportunities. The concentration of wealth in the North that Africans face is matched by the greatest concentration of wealth in U.S. history inside the United States. For those caught in impoverishment or facing the prospect of downward mobility in this wealthy nation yet caught in the myths of national chauvinism, Africa and aid for its problems are largely irrelevant, while energy and attention are consumed by the struggle to survive amidst U.S. ethnic, racial, and class politics.

In the domain of popular culture, there are important new efforts - especially in centers of African and African-American studies - to give new attention to Africa's complex histories and cultures. However, in much of the mass "viewing market" we find continuing gross disinterest in Africa translates into poor reporting in the public and scholarly media, and an inadequate Western market for good educational and media materials on the continent, small enrollments in many college classes concerning Africa, and the continuing dissemination of gross racial and social stereotypes of the peoples and cultures of Africa. Images of starving African refugees continue to flow into U.S. living rooms, leading most to conclude that Africa is but a caricature of endless problems, bad government, and incompetence.

Perhaps most disturbing of all is that U.S. friends of Africa achieved an astonishing victory alongside the South African peoples - of national sanctions against apartheid - but now have laid down their arms and retreated from Africa's broader struggles. For 30 years, key African-American, student/faculty, church, labor, and liberal groups mobilized against apartheid, achieving one of the most remarkable changes in U.S. foreign policy of the century - building through local and statewide actions the divestiture and sanctions movement that overwhelmed the President, Congress, and the State Department with the Comprehensive Anti-Apartheid Act of 1986.

As Africa's problems soared in the 1990s, the key U.S. friends and constituencies who historically focused and organized on the struggle against racism in Southern Africa thus far have failed to shift their attention and to mount any effective action on the pressing problems elsewhere in the continent. Instead, they seem to have retired from the fray and "gone home" to family and work. Africa's friends have become demobilized on a broad front - in the Congress, among churches and unions, on the campuses, and even among some Africa-focused associations and NGOs. The national organizations with which activist scholars have cooperated and been linked in legislative and pressure campaigns (Washington Office on Africa, American Committee on Africa, TransAfrica, and others) are suffering

financially and organizationally in varying degrees in the post-Mandela release period. Simultaneously, while many major funders have focused even more of their resources for Africa-related projects of organizations inside Africa, they offer little support for initiatives to build a constituency with a greater voice for Africa in the U.S.

Distracted by pressing domestic issues of jobs, housing, health, education, and racism on which few victories are being won, even the traditional friends of Africa in the Congress and the Congressional Black Caucus have failed to mobilize effectively on Africa's behalf, including on emergency humanitarian assistance. The surprisingly strong and successful mobilizations of U.S. progressives and African-Americans in the anti-apartheid struggle has not translated to effective support for economic assistance for Africa (emergency or longer-term). Even African countries that have adopted Western structural adjustment, population control, and democracy reforms are receiving miniscule levels of foreign assistance. Many Africanists have long been critical or at least ambivalent about the motivations and impacts of U.S. economic and military assistance.

Even most U.S. academic specialists on Africa, who demonstrably have strong sympathies with the countries and people they know and who decry the broad disinterest in Africa, have not raised a clear and present voice either for increased U.S. linkages with the continent or for a humanitarian response to the food, health, and economic crises which the external powers and the "natural workings" of the global economy have helped to create. Rather, in spite of their studies of an economically impoverished and fragile continent irrevocably caught in a marginal position in the global system, most academic Africanists remain isolated, racially-divided in political action, professionally dispassionate, and focused on their personal interests in occupational productivity, advancement, and professional prestige.

As a result of this complex juxtaposition of African, global, and U.S. forces, we find that the constituency concerned with U.S. policy toward Africa in this critical new period is small, disorganized, disunited, and largely ineffective. Clearly, a new assessment and plan of action is needed for any friends of Africa seeking more attention to Africa and a more supportive U.S. policy in the 1990s.

B. Some New Possibilities for Africanist Scholars in 1992 and Beyond

1. New Visions, New Goals, New Politics

Clearly, the changed situation in Africa, the U.S., and the global system require a revision and refocusing of Africanist scholars, especially by the membership of ACAS. The end of the Cold War and the rise of global environment issues radically changes the parameters for considering Africa in U.S. foreign policy. While Africa could simply become more marginal, the new context offers new opportunities for concerned Africanist scholars to seek a U.S. foreign policy more responsive to pressing African needs and interests and even to the long-term, globally interdependent interests of North Americans. Therefore, a major task in 1992 is to struggle to understand the new situation and to redirect ACAS as one

instrument of change. A first list of the long- and near-term goals of activist scholars and an invigorated ACAS could include the following:

- o support for just and stable terms of economic exchange between Africa and the industrial nations
- o support for sustainable forms of majority rule and democracy in Africa
- o support for appropriate development that gives primacy to the needs of children, women, and the socially and economically displaced
- o continued attention to achieving non-racial democracy in South Africa as well as peace and reconstruction in Angola, Mozambique, Namibia, and the damaged SADCC states
- o more attention to the increasing erosion of academic institutions and the academic capabilities and work of our colleagues in African universities under the assault of structural adjustment programs
- o support for individual African colleagues under attack by repressive regimes
- o increased U.S. attention (research and assistance) to the health crises in Africa (public health, HIV, malaria, infant death, etc.) and the background nutrition problems in Africa
- o debt relief and investment capital for appropriate development work which serves the needs and interests of the common peoples of Africa
- o partnership with Africa to achieve environmental sustainability, based on an integrated social and economic development that does not harm the planet
- o proactively building linkages and coalitions with African peoples, especially African academic colleagues who are working for progressive change in economy, government, and society at all levels of their societies
- o as a means of affecting U.S. policy, collaborating with a broad spectrum of North Americans to build a more permanent, enduring, and effective constituency in support of all African peoples and oriented especially toward the Congress and U.S. foreign policy-makers. To accomplish this, ACAS must address its relationship to its relationship to the wider U.S. constituency for Africa and especially with African-American constituencies.

2. The Record of ACAS in its Fourteen Year History, 1977-92

Since its inception, ACAS has sought to give voice to the call of Africanist scholars

who sought a clear re-orientation of U.S. policy that gave more priority to the interests of the peoples of the continent and to longer-term U.S. interests there. Specifically, ACAS acted through:

- 1) Providing information to Congress and the Administration to affect legislation, including testimony in Congress, mobilizing particular constituencies of members of Congress on key committees (e.g. Select Intelligence Committees concerning Angola), and frequent legislative alerts and telephone campaigns.
- 2) The *ACAS Bulletin*, offering commentary, information, and action-relevant articles, status summaries of key legislation, and news of the anti-apartheid movement.
- 3) Regular panels on key topics on Southern Africa, human rights, repression against African scholars, other struggles across the continent, and the potential uses of defense and intelligence agency funding in African studies at annual meetings of the African Studies Association (ASA), sometimes including liberation movement representatives.
- 4) Several conferences and books on action-relevant issues and problems.
- 5) Providing indirect support for individual Africanists working on their campuses, Africanist programs and administrators seeking to be supportive of political change, and even administrators inside government arguing for more progressive policies toward Africa and challenging representatives of repressive U.S. policies.

3. A Strategic Action Plan for an Enlarged and More Effective ACAS in 1992 and Beyond

We suggest it is time to radically increase the scale, organization, and activism of ACAS. In light of the growing crises of Africa and the radically altered global parameters, we propose to dramatically increase the capacity of ACAS and its program and to recruit an enlarged membership in order to achieve a greater impact on U.S. policy-making in Washington. Believing we need an altered ACAS for the new global and African situation, we are planning to respond more purposively for the changed domestic and global situation.

To be effective, ACAS needs a larger and stronger organization. It has always been bedeviled both by lack of infrastructure to coordinate its willing membership in mobilizing against policy or articulating with U.S. policy-makers. Therefore, we plan to enlarge the organization and activity of ACAS based on a full- or half-time paid executive secretary to give ACAS a seriousness and capacity not previously achieved.

To achieve this increased level of organization and activity, ACAS will need to:

- o Fund a half-time National ACAS Executive Secretary (ES) founded on an increased commitment from and expansion of its membership, and, if possible,

supported with outside grants. The ES will not solve the problem of inactive scholars; however, an ES in Washington will be the channel to a) identify opportunities for scholarly influence, b) mobilize Africanists who have relevant knowledge for focus in a timely way on particular policies and policy-makers in Congress, the Administration, and relevant NGOs, c) organize seminars and colloquia on issues of current policy, possibly in conjunction with other actors in Washington, d) raise funds for specific programs, and e) build collaboration with other public interest lobbies attending to Africa.

- o Coordinate ACAS activities more closely with pro-Africa organizations in Washington, including the Washington Office on Africa (WOA), American Committee on Africa (ACOA), and TransAfrica (TA), and locate the ES adjacent to the policy-making structures in Washington, D.C. In Washington, the ES can share in the flow of information and discussion of strategies with other activist organizations, into which they can seek to incorporate ACAS scholars.
- o Place the ES in the offices of the African Policy Information Center (APIC), formerly the Washington Office on Africa Educational Fund, or another relevant organization. We suggest APIC because of a) its historic primacy in attending to African issues in the Congress, b) its strategic location in Washington adjacent to the Congress and many Africa-related NGOs (e.g. Africa Development Foundation, Bread for the World, Overseas Development Council, Development Gap, and other members of the Southern Africa Working Group), c) its historical collaboration and consonance with ACAS policies and activities, and d) its new broadened focus on Africa beyond Southern Africa. The ES would be autonomous, governed by ACAS and cooperating with, but not on the staff of, the host organization.
- o Solicit funding from ACAS members - new and old - and foundations, consult with the Washington-based organizations about enlarged collaboration and shared office space, define the tasks of and recruit a paid executive secretary, assist the new ES during the first year of operation, work to enlarge the membership and its giving, and explore other potential funding sources to make the organization more effective. Already at the November 1991 ACAS Annual Meeting during the African Studies Association conference in St. Louis, an initial pledge of more than \$10,000 was made by only 32 ACAS members toward this new ACAS. Now we seek to fund this expansion by seeking 100 or more ACAS members who will pledge \$300 each per year for an initial three-year period, providing a quintupling of the present budget to \$30,000 in order to support a half-time ES salary of \$20,000 plus \$10,000 for an office and communications. We are seeking \$30,000 foundation matching funding to enlarge the ES to a full-time position and an enlarged office. Member pledges obtained in summer and fall 1992 would not be activated until a sufficient total is pledged or granted to make possible at least a half-time ES with office support.

The ACAS membership, officers, and board already have embarked on this transformation with a commitment to build, some new political action, a dozen new Issue Working Groups seeking to break new ground in ACAS policy advocacy, a half-time ES in 1992, a series of conversations with potential sister organizations, and a May Board Planning Consultation in Washington and a one-day ACAS Conference in November 1992.

We invite the wider Africanist community to join us in this major transformation of ACAS at this critical juncture in history as the most responsible position available in light of the new period of history in which we and Africa are enmeshed. At its founding in 1977, we stated that ACAS was being created to activate scholars to use their academic skills to analyze U.S. policy toward Africa, to mobilize public critical commentary, and to provide scholarly legitimacy for the criticism and the alternative policies. Those aims, we think, are even more urgent today in a radically altered global context that offers new potential for ACAS and, thereby we hope, for the peoples of Africa.

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