

## GLOBALIZATION AND AFRICA'S ECONOMIC DEVELOPMENT: WHAT ROLE FOR PUBLIC RELATIONS?

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*“There is a tide in the affairs of men,  
Which, taken at the flood, leads on to fortune;  
Omitted, all the voyage of their life  
Is bound in shallows and in miseries.”  
– Shakespeare*

### INTRODUCTION

There is nothing better than a profound quotation at the start of a paper to focus the mind of a reader. In this case, there is a delicious irony in the above words that come from *Julius Caesar* the play about a global figure in his time. This was a globalization based, like many of its subsequent manifestations, on military, political or economic conquest. But it was globalization, creating massive trade flows, establishing and imposing legislative, judicial and commercial standards and creating significant economic development.

Any economist will tell you that globalization is not new. In many ways, the world economy was more integrated in the late 19th century than it is today. When it comes to development and the obstacles to development, arguments seem to be more influenced by the politics of history and development strategies that have gone in and out of fashion as the weight of mainstream economic theory shifted. Developing countries were trapped in a vicious circle of dependency, of supplying low-cost goods, services and raw materials to the developed world and a continuation of low-skilled, low-paid, low-growth or no growth cycle.



Import Substitution Industrialization (ISI) became Africa's response to its poor trading terms and, as we all know, this remotely controlled economic development approach did not work. So, the 1980s saw moves that pressed for deregulation and for economies to open themselves up to the forces of international competition, thereby creating efficient and competitive industries. In that way, international capital markets would allocate investment efficiently on the basis of accurate price signals. But by the 1990s international capital flows had only just recovered to the levels they achieved at the start of the 20th century.

So much for economic theory. It is just too easy to blame the present on the past. Arguments between the value of endogenous growth theories and exogenous constraints are not the natural red meat of public relations practice. Globalization, as we know it, as we experience it, as the driver of world development, is what Professor Avinash Persaud describes as “openness to the world – openness to world suppliers, world markets, world best practices”.

This is a form of globalization that is starting to deliver, or has delivered, the promises talked about in the 1990s. What is different about it is that there has been an explosion of technology that has enabled information, ideas and aspirations to transcend national borders and boundaries. At the same time, these same technologies enable money, people, products and services to move from continent to continent and country to country at ever increasing speeds and volumes. More importantly, this time, and for the very first time, the process of globalization now appears irreversible. At least that is the word of President Bill Clinton in his last speech in the UK as President of America (and who am I to disagree with this statesman who, more than any other saw globalization as the transforming economic force of the 21st century!). In conformity with his goodwill towards Africa, Clinton acknowledges that it should be perfectly possible for the developed world to mobilize the resources to eradicate poverty in the developing world. His words: “If the wealthiest countries ended our agricultural subsidies, leveling the playing field for the world's farmers, that alone could increase the income of developing countries by \$20 billion a year.” It is not as simple as it sounds. Thus, Clinton admits, “I live in a low tariff country that protects its agriculture”. This is hardly a surprising admission from a politician who won his first election by reminding everyone that it was the economy that gets politicians elected, not warm words on international stages.



His point was and is a larger one and a powerful argument against the anti-globalization protestors who suggest that poor countries should somehow be saved from development by keeping their doors closed to trade. According to Clinton “that is a recipe for continuing their poverty, not erasing it. More open markets would give the world's poorest nations more chances to grow and prosper.” But the questions of how to open those markets to African products and stimulate long term stable investment rather than the short term, high priced volatile debt capital for our countries remains unanswered. We can answer questions about a role for public relations in economic development and globalization .

Just over 12 months ago another President, John Kufuor of Ghana, made it clear to public relations practitioners in Africa that Africa needed to manage its image globally. “People outside Africa are not well informed about a lot of things that happen on the continent,” he said. But most people who are usually outside Africa can say categorically that they see, and receive a great deal of information about what is happening in Africa. It is Africa's problem that the information we receive makes us believe that we are well informed about what is going on in Africa.

Any of us – all of us – involved in public relations practice as a profession, know only too well that public relations is a two-way process. Every public relations programme depends just as much on knowing what messages our audiences received, as on managing the quality and appropriateness of the messages we target at them. It should come as no surprise to know that, until just over ten years ago, the UK Government had no effective system for knowing what was being said about it in the media outside the UK, especially Europe and the rest of the world. At least now, the UK Government can hear each morning and afternoon what is being said about it in the media around the world even if like the USA they chose not to listen.

Do globalization and Africa's development have a role for public relations? President Kufuor thinks they do, and the report of his views on the role public relations can play, are worth contemplating. His charge:



- Take account of the various regional groupings the AU and NEPAD in particular;
- Be mindful of how you position the continent in the world;
- Enhance good governance and promote development programmes;
- Take account of the issues of the continent and, through them;
- Enhance the self confidence of the African.
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He has set out what could be taken as the bullet points for actions that could be incorporated into our public relations work as well as into the action plans of regional, national and local public relations associations across Africa.

My Presidential Address in Accra in 1999 argued that the greatest management challenge that public relations faced in the 21st century was the management of expectations. Public relations had become so identified with success that it was in danger of being seen as the magic bullet, the black art that could make perceptions fact. It only takes the small child's voice to point out that the emperor has no clothes on and the fact becomes the reality so fast that no amount of media coverage or spin doctoring can disguise it.

#### GLOBALIZATION AND AFRICA'S ECONOMIC DEVELOPMENT: WHAT ROLE FOR PUBLIC RELATIONS PRACTITIONERS

Public relations alone cannot make people outside Africa well informed about those things that Africa thinks they need to know to understand Africa. Neither could FAPRA, nor any other organization, manage Africa's image so that it reflects Africa the way its leaders would like. I have no doubt that next year, 20 years after Bob Geldof and Band Aid raised awareness of the tragedies of poverty in Africa, his Africa Commission will prompt calls from outside and inside Africa for a massive injection of funds into a “brand for Africa” campaign. It is difficult to believe that any programme of that kind would do any more than make a lot of well paid lobbyists and admen even better paid.

Africa, like Europe, doesn't really exist. A Welshman is British and a European but is a Welshman first. In the “Global Paradox” John Naisbitt argues that the bigger the world



economy, the more powerful its smallest players. He points out that:

- More languages are spoken in Africa than on any other continent – 200 languages spoken in Zaire alone;
- There are 40 or more ethnic groups in Gabon, in Kenya and Uganda; and
- Only 10 per cent of the countries in the world are ethnically homogeneous.

Are these the ingredients that can sustain a strong brand or a national brand? Part of the paradox of globalization is that just as increased globalization makes individual countries, states and towns more important, it also calls for accountability to global standards. There is no escape from scrutiny or accountability in a world where information and communication ignores national borders.

In 1985, I sat with my wife listening to the Band Aid concert on a local bus radio as we went through Senegal picking up and dropping off passengers as we travelled to Dakar. There was no escaping the message, there was no more powerful demonstration of how the new rules of accountability worldwide are grounded in our expectations of individual conduct and behaviour. So what role is there for public relations in a globalized world where the individual and each nation state assumes increasing power but where we are judged against global standards for our economic, environmental, political, social, and business actions.

First – if public relations itself has to be credible, it needs to be able to set an example that identifies how Africa can respond to the need to adopt and adapt global standards in the way that it works, dispenses justice, manages the environment, regulates good governance, promotes enterprise, manages its economies, respects human rights and democracy. When it comes to global standards, public relations professionals in Africa have a good story to tell. The codes of conduct embrace and reflect global standards for public relations practice. The training programmes for developing personal professional skills, applying best practice techniques and developing intellectual property for public relations and public information programmes are benchmarked to global standards.



Next, because professional PR practice in Africa can be confident that it has the global standards to be credible, it can start the process that is part of the stock in trade of public relations, creating the understanding that is necessary between Africa and the people outside Africa.

President Kufuor and others focus their attention on reputation and image, but what image, which image? Self-image – how we see ourselves and would like to be seen, or the reflected image – the way others see us? Few of us would undertake a public relations programme without conducting some sort of research to establish what the target audience thinks, knows and wants in terms of information if we want to change attitudes.

There is a mountain of research, country image studies that identify very accurately what the people of one country think about another. According to one study I saw recently, Russians believe that Britain makes good engineering products, is a good country to do business with, is a nice place to live in, not so good to visit, and has attractive men. Studies of this sort provide the information essential for promoting tourism, inward investment and trade at a sector-by-sector level. But I know from experience that national governments would rather listen to diplomats than use the information that every commercial organization relies on for success on a global scale.

It may be just coincidence that the list of the eight specific functions of the Nigerian Ministry of Information includes “conduct[ing] research, surveys and studies which will enhance better understanding of the relevance, impact and approach to public information and their implications for public policies and programmes”. It does not say whether this research is conducted inside Nigeria or among those key target audiences for Nigeria outside Africa, but at least the need for proper research is recognized.

For public relations in Africa to start to address the image of Africa on a country-by-country basis, then each country needs to follow the Nigerian example and use research – a country image study of the attitudes of the people outside Africa to inform public policy in Africa.



Research is properly seen as essential to any public relations programme, particularly those designed to assist the economic development of any African country. Research on attitudes, expectations, aspirations and understanding should inform planning and monitoring performance and achievement. It can and should help us refine messages and provide the right pictures and words.

Globalization means that we are judged not just by what we say but also by what we do. And because we are judged by what we do, there are some global practical operational standards that public relations in and for Africa can address. These include the need to:

- Develop consistent coherent messages that relate to your economic development strategy and audience needs, and are delivered through every communication channel;
- Establish sources of information that are available round the clock and are able to respond to meet the needs of the audience rather than the wishes of government;
- Advise national leaders on how to act in public and respond to the global media (punctuality is the mark of Princes);
- Tailor information to meet the needs of particular audiences, particular media rather than internal political or managerial vanities;
- Provide public spokespeople who can communicate to international and foreign media in a way that is appropriate for the media and their audiences;
- Recognize and use the advantages for message management that time zones can offer;
- Use public relations programmes to demonstrate solutions rather than continuously identifying problems.

Bob Geldof and his Africa Commission intended 2005 to be African year. The UK government showed commitment to the Geldof initiative and Britain is in a unique position to make things happen. It holds the Chairmanship of the G8 and the Presidency of the European Union for half the year. That happy coincidence only creates the opportunity for public relations in Africa to establish a role for itself in promoting Africa's development in a globalized world.



This could be the ideal time for FAPRA to encourage each of its individual member associations to establish a task force to develop a national public relations plan for their country. Taken individually and collectively, those programmes could start to address the issues of Africa's image abroad and enable people outside Africa to be well informed about a lot of things, good things that happen on the continent.

At the start of the year, a survey by *The Economist* concluded that rich countries could help Africa by removing the tariffs and subsidies that throttle trade. But, making Africa smile was a problem for Africa itself. The global standards of public relations practice can only be of real value if they are adapted and applied in an African context – Globalization and Africa's economic development – is there a role for public relations? Of course there is.

