

HUMAN PROSPERITY: THE LAST ITEM ON THE AGENDA

Odds about prosperity

I went to the Central African Republic (CAR) to see for myself why such a scandalously resource rich country wouldn't prosper in anything else than cyclic conflicts and massive human rights violations. "What is wrong with this country?" I kept asking myself during my almost a year long stay in Bangui, the capital city. As I struggled in "making sense of the Central African Republic"¹, I came to realize there is absolutely nothing wrong with the land, the resources, the borders, the country, etc. However something is definitely wrong with the people living in and interested in CAR. The *people's* potential is not developed to properly handle the resources. So the *people* struggle with transparent and fair management and the *people* are fighting over natural resources. The *people* of CAR isn't building sustainable prosperity. However, prosperity doesn't exist on its own and certainly not only in diamond, gold, oil, uranium and wood which are found in extraordinary proportions in CAR. Besides, raw materials don't turn into riches by themselves. Only human beings, through their expertise and know-how can perform that transformation and create something valued only by humans. People build prosperity. Although its original meaning had more to do with "well-being" or "doing well", the dominant understanding of prosperity is usually associated with a lot of money nowadays². Can we talk of human prosperity in a world which rather financial prosperity? If prosperity is essentially man-made then how come human potential is neglected in wealth building? Can technology favor human prosperity?

Human potential, the neglected part of prosperity

People's potential is yet to be realized because of a lack of investment in capacity development on one hand, motivation and poor management on the other hand. Until people are engaged with as the only wealth, human prosperity will remain vain words.

All eyes on profits

Why can't people realize their potential in our governments, businesses or extractive firms today? Because it's not their potential leaders and investors are after, but rather, economic growth, unfortunately. This derives from the distorted definition of prosperity stated above. If prosperity is considered a stage of financial success, then all interests will be placed on its financial and material sources. In the Central African region, for

¹ Tatiana Caryannis, Louisa Lombard (eds.), *Making Sense of the Central African Republic*, London, Zed Books, 2015.

² Cambridge Dictionary defines prosperity as *the state of being successful and having a lot of money*.

instance, leaders, in their offices, are more likely to dream about means to increase their country's Gross Domestic Product (GDP) thus economic growth. As a matter of fact, each of the ten countries of the Economic Community of Central African States has different economic development programs (Cameroon's "Vision 2035", Gabon's "Vision 2025", Equatorial Guinea's "Vision 2020", to name but those ones). They all have in common industrialization and quick economic transformation although they also seek to improve the general living conditions of their populations. Since all interests are placed in economic diversification, infrastructure modernization and industrialization, only financial indicators will be taken into account. The GDP reflects the financially narrowed definition of wealth measured by consumption, investment, net exports, etc. This displays a paradoxical tendency to invest more in what is created and less in who creates. In such context where primary interests lie in profits, people's potential will be secondary, at best.

Few capable hands

Because prosperity is narrowed to accumulated material riches, human beings tend to be neglected in its building. Oddly enough, African countries, people and organizations will invest more in extracting and refining resources from the soil than equipping their young people with the know-how and capacity to manage those very resources. For instance, Cameroon and its financial partners expect to invest huge amounts of money in a set of hydro electric power projects³ like the *Makay Project* to generate 350 megawatts (mw) (one billion US dollars), the *Nachtigal hydro electric dam*, 420 mw (one billion Euros); and *Edea Electric power plant project*, 150-300 mw (279 123 000 US dollars). At the same time, fewer amount of the budget is allocated to increase or upgrade the number of specialized institutes to train Cameroonians for such key infrastructures. For example Cameroon's 2017 national budget gives the biggest share to civil engineering (805 967 billions US dollars) whereas secondary school education receives (556 501 billions US dollars)⁴. The same is observed in Niger. This West-African country is the world's 4th uranium producer. In addition, uranium makes close to 5% of Niger's national budget. Nevertheless Niger's public expenditure on higher education, in terms of GDP percentage, was 1, 5 % only in 2009⁵. This mainly consisted of salary payment, scholarships, etc. Even though there is a general awareness of the importance of human capacity development, few are the investments to boost higher specialized technical education for economic growth. Beside investments, motivation is another missing lighter of people's potential.

3 Le Quotidien de l'Economie, no.01329, 04/07/17, C. Happi, p.1.

4 Law no. 2016/018 of 14 Dec. 2016 on the Finance Act of the Republic of Cameroon for the 2017 financial year.

5 Statistical Yearbook of Higher Education in Niger 2009-2010: http://www.stat-niger.org/statistique/file/Annuaire_Statistiques/MESSRT/Annuaire%20MESSRT%202009-2010.pdf (last visited on 13/07/17).

Potential unleashing work places wanted

“I am still there because I need money”. “I choose public service for income security”. Every time I told myself similar sentences or heard them from friends and acquaintances, even if the business we were in was flourishing, we were not doing so well. Some would acknowledge they could do more for the business. But most would admit that they can’t and haven’t yet because, they simply were not allowed to. Motivation comes in many ways. It can be challenge, recognition, opportunities or simply the sense of belonging... in addition of financial remuneration, of course. Yet motivation is key in realizing people’s potential and sometimes that goes hand in hand with the type of workplaces.

Most work places don’t fuel human potential because they don’t give chances to. There simply is no challenge. No opportunities for one to show or discover what they are made of. The stages of my young professional career where I can’t seem to find one single achievement are those where I was directed in every single task. However, once I was in charge or at least had little autonomy, I was able to accomplish even what I never imagined I could. From those stages up to now I can name several achievements. For example, as junior communication officer at the African Union Commission, I helped with the graphic design, the editing and proof reading of key policy document like the Post-Conflict Reconstruction and development Policy. I handled the French and English communications (press release, communication artwork, social media) of the first ever African Solidarity Conference to support post-conflict countries. The list grew with similar other occupations and comforted the idea that most people’s potential is buried not only under the lack of motivation but also under poor management.

Creating teams and opportunities to free up human potential

A close friend complained about needing an approval for almost everything from ordering stationeries to planning an event and described how disempowering that was. Freeing up the potential of people like my close friend will require trust, delegation, challenge and team spirit in most of which management has a great role to play. Indeed, Peter Drucker says that “*the new tasks demand that the manager of tomorrow [...] lead not only through knowledge, competence and skill but through vision, courage, responsibility and integrity.*”⁶ That key principle influenced me profoundly in my own young management style. As the Chair African Union Club of the International Relations Institute of Cameroon (IRIC), I proposed a roadmap I believed in. Those interested in the project worked on it and owned it. We were not paid. So motivation and participation were tight to non-material interests. Therefore, financial threat was not an option

⁶ Peter Drucker, “The Manager of Tomorrow”, p.24 in Henry C. Thole and Charles C. Gibbons (eds.), *Business Action In A Changing World*, Chicago, Public Administration Service, 1956, pp.17-24.

because members of the Club could walk away anytime. The Club ended up and still stands head and shoulders above other IRIC's associations in terms of membership, dynamism and activities. During my term, I made sure I was not only some remote chairperson to the members. I made sure we became a team. The Club worked on delegation. "Can you do this? Then we trust you with it and expect this result by this deadline." Club members were in charge and could see what their efforts yielded both in the club life but also in their academic life. When my team mates and I were in charge, motivated, trusted, we moved mountains. We did 90% of our roadmap activities. We organized 03 conferences, 02 TV programs, 01 study trip to south Cameroon and weekly debates on regional integration. Some of my team members admitted that they doubted we could make it. One even said that they were surprised they successfully handled the logistics of a trip. But they were inspired by the passion, courage and engagement they saw in me.

Although prosperity lies not with the riches down the soil but with the people, the current dominant understanding of prosperity emphasizes its financial aspect. Consequently, people's potential is underexploited. Nowadays, more and more businesses tend to turn to costless assets like cognitive technologies to spur prosperity.

Technology, a source for human prosperity?

Is the insertion in the job market of artificial intelligence (AI) the way forward for human prosperity when 70% of African youths are still unemployed⁷? If technology is detached from human potential it will build the prosperity of a few whereas social friendly technology could actually improve aspects of human prosperity.

Technology and prosperity of a few

Technology, in its current understanding, as a mean to cut costs and increase profits, can hardly spawn prosperity, except that of a minority. The very minority, that acquired the resources to learn, develop and run it.

Indeed, robots and other sorts of AI are forms of technologies only mastered by those who could afford the top universities where they are taught, the perseverance as well as the (self) sponsorship needed to develop those projects. Those people are way too rare in our societies. For example, in Cameroon, my country, most young fresh graduates Cameroonians would first and foremost look for ways to secure financial income. Who

⁷ International Labour Organization, 2016 World Employment and Social Outlook, (2016),

has 13 years to spend doing a single activity with no visible and regular income especially with all the other social pressures (food, housing, marriage, family...)? Olivier Madiba, the inventor of *Aurion* did. He created the first ever African video game after spending 13 years developing it. Whatever the dividends generated by *Aurion*, the main benefits go first to him and members of *Kiro'o games*, his company (19 staffs) and to a certain extent, members of their families. So if few people have the resources to develop technology, then in the current profit-oriented view of prosperity, most of the profits generated by that technology will go those very few. That minority will get richer while the majority grows poorer. This is already pretty much the cases, except that, for now, people have other sources of income. The moment technology threatens the sources of income left, conceiving it as a factor of prosperity becomes complex.

Technology and jobs of many

Developing a technology to increase prosperity by cutting costs and replace “expensive” human labour will drastically propel the already on-going job suppression precisely because its current design is cost efficient oriented and not social oriented.

I experienced the urge to spend less and earn more when I worked on my start-up project to lead the Cameroonian mushroom market. I had mixed feelings when I was developing the business plan and marketing strategy. When I looked at how much I would have to pay as salaries, I would feel such a pain and the urge to find ways to reduce it “smartly”. Whenever I tried to reduce it “smartly” I always stopped when I told myself: needed I that job, I would have surely asked for more. Senior business people deal with such choices on a regular basis but more and more decide to go the extra mile and replace human labour all together. Indeed, a Forrester report⁸ estimates that in the United States of America, 7% of jobs will be eliminated by robots by 2021 especially in customer service and transportation (truck and taxi driving). Whereas beyond the professional achievement, jobs have a social function and even structure the society. So much is attached to them: our income, our identity, our food, our houses, our social status, the stability of dependents, etc.). Jobs that are worthwhile and satisfying are also part of the definition of prosperity to many people. So anything that may stop us from working is a threat not only to the income but to all that is attached to our jobs. If technology eliminates jobs where will people get the money to afford it?

In consequence, developing technology as it is now will not only eliminate jobs but also radically affect social structure and functions. It will surely spur prosperity but of a minority unless it is combined with human potential and aligned with social structures and values.

For a human centered and social friendly technology

⁸ <https://www.forrester.com/Robots+AI+Will+Replace+7+Of+US+Jobs+By+2025/-/E-PRE9246>

For technology to provide solutions that are meaningful to communities and economies, it needs to look at increasing social benefits.

In some cases, replacing human labour by technology is not suitable. It is particularly the case of most African countries experiencing a population boom. It seems strange to think of automated industries where millions of young people could and only want to be employed. Even at the policy level, it will be untimely to discuss the role of cognitive technologies for development at the very moment the African Union closed a Summit on “Harnessing the Demographic dividend through investment in the Youth” (July, 3-4, 2017). This stresses the importance of people’s potential in technology development and reminds us that, for Peter Drucker, the objective of a company is not to make profit but rather to create value to the customer. Therefore, technology should be developed in a manner that responds to humans needs. It should be an answer to what they value and the existing issues. Few signs of technology at the service of people, with people and for people are already visible. For instance, in my country, Arthur Zang invented the *Cardiopad* which is a touchscreen tablet for remote electrocardiogram examinations. Knowing that the ratio is 30 cardiologists per 20 million inhabitants, this tablet makes heart care more accessible to Cameroonians especially those in the rural areas. Although *Himore Medical*, Zang’s company employs only five people, the technology it designs benefits millions of Cameroonians without suppressing cardiologists’ jobs. It actually created additional (few) ones.

Hence, cognitive technologies should reconcile with human potential. They should improve lives not disrupt it. They should be social friendly and align with what is value to humans (one of Drucker’s questions). Most importantly, cognitive technologies can create *additional jobs*. Only if technology looks at maximizing social rather than economic benefits, will it start changing people’s lives.

Towards shared efforts for human prosperity?

A proverb from my village says that no one can possibly eat all the products of their farm alone. Some of those products would have been taken away by birds, passers-by or even would have fallen off during transportation, before it is eaten, shared with family or sold. It is just the same about prosperity. Prosperity is essentially shared. No matter how it comes. In addition, prosperity is the outcome of human labour. So the human potential is its biggest driver and final aim. However, the financial understanding of wealth induces material riches’ accumulation practices. In the quest of increased profits, few are the investments in human potential. Even more, the latter is regarded as a mere resource that is replaceable by faster and cost efficient assets: robots,

automated engines and artificial intelligence. Because that technology is not yet designed in a way that takes into account the social function and value in every aspect of life, it is almost impossible for it not to eliminate jobs. Thus, it will hardly fuel prosperity, except that of a few among billions of people. Moreover, developing automated assets in contexts like African countries where people actually can and want a job appears unsuitable. A technology driven prosperity that deprives people from the basic pyramidal needs is threatening. On the contrary, a social friendly and human centered technology being developed towards humans well being can remarkably change lives, create inclusive prosperity. Human prosperity requires a paradigm shift far from money. In this respect, Oxfam's Humankind Index and UN development index are alternative wealth measurement tools to explore. It is our responsibility to get closer to it, not only that of the developers, the business men, the state. While state actors play a great role in creating the necessary conditions to favour human prosperity, it is important not to forget our own share in this process. We are the prosperity we want.

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