

Transcending Boundaries: Increasing political trust and good governance in sub-Saharan Africa

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The notion of trust is subjective. It can only be reflected in the eye of the beholder. When it comes to governance of a country, trust becomes even more complex since the beholder is the entire population of that country.

Despite this complexity, we can define national trust as a 'citizen's confidence in their government to do what is right and fair'. Therefore, it depends on what the citizens *believe* to be right and fair, and how closely this corresponds with belief in the policies and decisions of the government. It is critically important for citizens to have political trust in the government and its institutions in order to consolidate economic, social and political development in Sub-Saharan Africa (SSA).

Measuring trust

In the Economics Intelligence Unit's latest [Democracy Index](#) no SSA country was categorised as a 'full democracy'. The majority were designated 'hybrid regimes' and 'authoritarian regimes', while only six countries (Botswana, Cape Verde, South Africa, Lesotho, Zambia and Ghana) were categorised 'flawed democracies'. According to Freedom House's [latest report](#), only 12% of the SSA population live in free societies. The [Economic Freedom Index](#) also shows that most of these countries are either 'mostly unfree' or 'repressed'.

The methodology of these might not be ideal for measuring trust - especially taking into account their focus on the traditional liberal aspects of democracy like civil liberties, election and political participation - but they do manage to capture the overall low level of confidence and political culture in the region.

Why trust matters

Simply speaking, political trust matters because it is the foundation upon which legitimate and sustainable government is founded. This is especially true in regions where lack of trust is a major contributing factor in governments resorting to coercion to enforce rules and regulations. Enforcement through coercion not only has a political cost, but is also financially expensive. On the contrary, trust makes citizens more likely to stick to rules and regulations and comply with reforms. If a government wants to be effective, it should seek and acquire the confidence and trust of its citizens. In SSA markets, political trust is fundamental because:

1. In SSA, the government does not only regulate markets but also acts as an investor. Citizens rely heavily on the government for delivery of services such as distribution of basic resources like water, electricity, sanitation infrastructure,

land, and housing. Moreover, the quality of these public services is fundamental to a country's development.

The ideal of '*marketisation of the state*' is far too simplistic to apply to SSA. The private sector does not address the service concerns of the citizens, and the government remains the ultimate organ to do so. Citizens' trust highly depends on their experience of the delivery of basic services.

2. Government and market reforms need citizen support to successfully consolidate economic growth. Policies to build export-oriented and industrial based economies only work if they are supported by citizens and investors with confidence in their government. The people of the region have a very low confidence in their government.

Most SSA economies are agriculture based, and public opinion on agricultural market liberalisation is still divided. In the past, liberalisation's success has been limited by a lack of domestic macroeconomic reforms. Hence, ongoing reforms should not only promise that the future is bright, but also ensure that lessons learned from the past are addressed through a holistic reform programme.

3. Citizen's expectations are increasing. The '[Africa rising](#)' narrative has resulted in higher confidence in governments' ability to deliver. However, if expectations are higher than the government's actual performance, it will lower the level of trust of the population.

So what can be done to build vital trust in governments in SSA? I see two clear pathways to achieving this.

Peace Reforms

Despite the falling number of wars in SSA, security and stability remains one of the biggest challenges. Apart from ongoing civil wars, the region has been characterised by multiple coups, resulting in unsustainable policies and irreparable economic destructions. SSA is still the least favoured for returns on investment.

The peace reforms should be different depending on the level of threat to stability in each country. In the most fragile countries with history of civil war and high vulnerability of disintegration, reforms need to be comprehensive and aimed at rebuilding not only political trust but also social trust.

In other countries in the region (I believe most of them fall here), peace reform needs to assess and understand occasional violent tendencies, including political vulnerabilities. If the region is to be transformed into the economic power house it is

striving to be, investors must be convinced that peace reforms address the root causes of conflict, such as administrative grievances and ethnic tensions.

Fighting corruption

Corruption remains the biggest threat to African economic transformation. The latest [Corruption Perspective Index](#) indicates that levels of corruption in the region are staggering, and with it comes a strong correlation with distrust towards institutions. From an economic standpoint, no investor wants to pay bribes and go through unnecessary licensing and regulatory barriers. The recent [Mo Ibrahim Governance Index](#) found that the quality of governance in a third of countries in the region is deteriorating with steady decline in terms of sustainable economic opportunity and safety and rule of law. This is very uncomfortable news for the people of the region who are exhausted by chronic government failure since independence.

I believe there is a ground for optimism in this regard. Most of the countries in the region have established ombudsman offices and anti-corruption commissions, and the public management reforms taking place should be commended.

However, these accountability mechanisms will only have a meaningful deterrence effect if they are truly independent and have the necessary resources to function properly. The autonomy and politicisation of these organisations have made them vulnerable to criticism. Instead of building trust, the question has turned to whether or not they can be trusted.

To truly gain the trust of their populations, the governments of SSA need to understand that reforms against corruption are not threats to their power, but rather a pathway to truly legitimate and sustainable power. One thing about trust is that if you have it, you should not abuse it because it is the easiest thing to lose and the hardest thing to regain. And in order to achieve economic transformation and stability in the region, trust should be the first priority.