

## Sub-Saharan Africa: Implosion or Take-Off?

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To those who have been watching Africa since independence, including many of the nearly 1 billion Africans, it is a continent of significant shortfall, if not of lost hope. If the two main dimensions of independence are self-rule and self-development, Africa has slid downward on both dimensions over the last half century, not only in the substance of its governance and development but also in the procedures that maintain such matters in its own hands. Yet, although Africa has the largest number of collapsed states and a larger number of failing states, further implosion is not the dominant scenario (Zartman, 1995; Rotberg, 2003). More trouble spots – Guinea, Nigeria, Cameroun, Sudan (not just Darfur), Chad, Zimbabwe, always both Congo, perhaps even South Africa – are likely, though no new Somalias (Rice and Patrick, 2008; Baker, 2008). But not many new take-offs either. What is more likely is the continuation of a transitional system that Walter Bagehot termed “democratic autocracy.”<sup>1</sup> The challenging questions are: Transition to what and when? Can the current trends be reversed, and if so, how? But before seeking to answer these questions, it is necessary to identify reasons for this shortfall.

### Development and Democracy

The welfare of the African people, individually and by national groups, has not improved since independence. The crudest of measures, Africa per capita GNP, rose until the mid-1970s, held stable for a decade, and has been dropping since then to its original level (World Bank, 1989; 2006). General production (and notably oil-exporting countries) followed a similar pattern, rising annually in the first decade of independence and trailing off to zero in the third; middle-income countries did better than the average, dropping by three-fourths in the second decade but then rising by

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1. Cited in Barzun (2002: 292). Bagehot was originally referring to Napoleon III.

three-fourths in the third. Agricultural production followed the trend at a lower level. Daily calorie supply per capita also remained constant over the same period, while per capita food production decreased. Birthrates have remained constant, while death rates have dropped by one-third, so population growth rates have increased by 20% and population has quadrupled.

Africa has been subject to a striking number of Malthusian solutions to its development pressures. The War of the Zairean Succession since 1995 is estimated to account, directly and indirectly, for some 5 million deaths. The Rwandan genocide accounted for 800,000 deaths; the Darfur genocide, for 300,000 (to date). HIV/AIDS-related deaths in 2001 numbered at least 1.4 million out of about 2 million worldwide and in 2007 at least 1.6 million (UNAIDS/WHO, 2007: 1 and 7). Regular Sahelian meningitis outbreaks take a toll of 25,000 or more every decade or so (Robert, 2008). Global climate change will affect Africa badly and northern and southern Africa dangerously (IPCC, 2007); principal food crops seriously diminished by global warming in the coming two decades include groundnuts, yams, and maize in West Africa, groundnuts, sorghum, and wheat in the Sahel, millet and sorgum in Central Africa, cowpeas, beans, and sugarcane in East Africa, and wheat, sorghum, sugarcane, soybeans, and, heavily, maize in Southern Africa (Lobell et al., 2008).

Some indicators have improved, to be sure. The population per physician has dropped by one-third and per nurse by half. Primary school enrolment has increased by 40% (doubled in low income countries) so that net enrolment is now 65%, and in secondary education it has increased five-fold to 30% gross enrolment of its age group (World Bank, 2006). Indeed, the previous figures could be cited as indicating that production increases have at least kept pace with the serious population growth, but that is merely to say that welfare has stood still. Again, these figures and others like them vary considerably by country and by period. Yet constant successes – outside of the sempiternal exception of Botswana – are hard to find, and the best grades are earned by the oil states (Gabon, Congo-Brazzaville, Nigeria, and Angola), although those grades need to be qualified by an absence of broad distribution and productive investment.

The matter of democracy is not merely an ideal or ideological goal but a particularly poignant story in Africa terms. Africa fought for independence – that is, self-government or government of oneself by oneself for oneself – and shook loose colonial rule beginning 50 years ago. The effort has been truncated and sidetracked. It has progressed through two incomplete phases. In the first, independence typically brought to

power a nationalist movement turned single party, a political organization that claimed to incarnate the nation and ruled it in its name. The party was necessarily an elite organization; the masses played at best an instrumental role, with slogging foot soldiers never in charge (Zolberg, 1966). Typically, the party, unable to resolve questions of succession to the “historic leader,” was replaced by military rule, making the coup a succession mechanism. The military generally ruled for itself, and in the worst cases turned into a time-at-the-trough succession, where younger (including noncommissioned) officers took turns at a short time in office to pocket what remained in the treasury (Zartman, 1996). In the 1970s and 1980s, half of the African states were militarily ruled in some form, the ten states of Southern Africa being the major exception.

With the end of the Cold War and the negotiated change in South Africa, this situation called for a response and the introduction of the second phase of democratization. It took its most striking form in the extraordinary events of the mid-1990s, when civil society took hold of its sovereignty in 12 states of West and Central Africa and held a Sovereign National Conference (CNS) to put government back into the hands of the governed. An equal number of other states, plus Southern Africa, introduced an electoral system as a means of choosing the governors, so that by the turn of the century many African states had elected governments (Boadi, 2004; Bratton and Van de Walle, 1997). Freedom House (2008) lists 17 “electoral democracies,” eight of which (Senegal, Mali, Ghana, Benin, Namibia, Botswana, South Africa, Lesotho) are classified as “free” and the rest joining the 22 other states that are classified as “partially free”; 14 states are classified as “not free.”<sup>2</sup> Thus, in many of these cases, elections hide a dominant party system (they are multiparty for show), and even in the half dozen cases where alternance has occurred (not the ultimate test of democracy, to be sure), the newcomers have tended to assume the same characteristics of corruption, kleptocracy, and unaccountability that had prevailed among their predecessors. In both phases, half-steps have been taken towards fully accountable self-government, only to become bogged down midstream. Yet at least Africa has developed the habit of regular contested elections, limited presidential terms, and functioning parties. In sum, Africa has actually made more progress on the road of democratization than on that of development (Lumumba-Kasongo, 2005).

**Africa has made more progress on the road of democratization than on that of development**

2. Island states were not counted.

Some have suggested that in the absence of self-development and self-government, profit-making and decision-making have passed into – or remained in – the hands of foreigners. To some extent this is undeniable (Leonard and Straus, 2003). The terms of trade for Africa's two elements of comparative advantage – raw materials and unskilled labor – started at a Korean-War high as golden eggs of the colonial goose, but they have fallen over the past half century, and African labor has not only priced itself but also “unskilled itself” out of the Chinese-dominated market. The petrodollar boom of the 1970s led international finance institutions (IFIs) and developed states to offer loans and then debt to Africa, so that by the turn of the century Africa was paying out more in debt payments than it was taking in in foreign aid. The cry has arisen for debt forgiveness, but in economics as in politics the absence of accountability holds no guarantee against a repetition of another round of unproductive indebtedness.

Africa's issues do not receive prime attention in international fora. So far, G8 summits in the 2000s, which promised specific attention to African issues, have been vague (Atwood, Browne, and Lyman, 2004), and climate change, which the international community has spent more energy talking about than acting upon, is more than likely to exacerbate desertification in the north and the south of the continent. African internal wars receive external attention, including from the UN Security Council, only when they become long and intense, and remedial action only comes slowly. There is nothing to indicate that African governments' decisions are out of their hands, as the *dependencistas* once claimed, but the fact is that Africa is an events-taker, not an events-maker, except as regards internal conflict. The danger from the outside is not control but neglect; the danger from the inside is the need for outside attention.

### **Causes and Effects**

The reasons for this situation are more controversial, and largely depend on the analytical perspective one chooses. Explanations can come in economic, institutional, social, cultural, and political terms, many of them reducing the effect to the cause.<sup>3</sup>

#### *The Economic Explanations*

*Economic* explanations exemplify the problem, as Africa continues to look for its comparative advantage and its appropriate system of production (Ndulu et al., 2008; Ferguson, 2007). While terms of trade for most African

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3. See Clark (2008) for a particularly good use of a similar analytical framework.

raw materials have dropped, Africa has come on line as a major oil producer; and although rates for oil and gas fell repeatedly (notably in the mid-1980s and mid-1990s) after the highs of the mid-1970s, they are on a phenomenal rise in the mid-2000s. In any case, up or down, oil and gas production should provide a new injection into at least selected African economies, and yet nowhere does it bring a corresponding improvement in human development indicators. Worse than HIV/AIDS, the Dutch Disease of neglect and inflation has been ravaging African oil economies, depriving them of the benefits that oil rents should bring. Something must lie between economic inputs and outputs to distort what should be a direct relation.

### **The Dutch Disease of neglect and inflation has been ravaging African oil economies**

Africa has gone through a succession of economic systems as well, each necessitated by the failure of its predecessor. Newly independent governments discovered that the state held the only sizeable resources and it alone was capable of mobilizing them for public benefit. This, plus the growing ideology of African socialism, led to the widespread installation of centrally organized economies. But instead of mobilizing and motivating production, they became the milk cow of the elite and its supporting urban sectors, a sure cure for unemployment and a sure cause for rural neglect. Soon both the golden eggs and the geese that laid them became scarce. Production turned to important substitution in an effort to mirror political with economic independence; protected domestic production and foundling industries only raised prices and further indebted subsidizing governments. When, in the 1990s, foreign supports and legitimization for centralized economies collapsed and the IFIs began to remind governments that they could not spend money they did not have, economic competition and privatization became the focus of the new system, not only for production but also for employment. As a result, both welfare and employment fell.

While the original state-centralized and protectionist option arguably made sense under the circumstances, it was necessarily a temporary measure that soon outlived its value and undermined itself. But in the process it had the worse effect of training African labor and leaders alike to expect featherbedding and state dole, rather than increased productivity, as the basis of wages and employment. Thus, labor unions have become among the most conservative political forces in African politics, acting to protect bloated civil "service" jobs rather than economic reform. It may well be that herein lies the cause, that the previous economic choice and situation trained the countries in the wrong direction, away

from increased productivity, fiscal responsibility, and competitiveness. The same tentative conclusion will appear again at the end of other lines of reasoning.

### *The Institutionalization*

*Institutionalization* is currently viewed as the key to development (North, 1990). It would be wrong to think of Africa as un-institutionalized. It abounds in institutions, both traditional and modern. The tribal system of justice and welfare is the result of long, gradual development, supplying systems of identity, community, authority, and solidarity. Its foundations have been shaken but not tumbled by the inroads made by modernization, much to the promotion of instability when modern institutions have not replaced the weakened structures. The resilience, not the absence, of traditional institutions has often been seen as the cause of Africa's reluctance to enter the modern world of development and democracy, as *la politique du ventre* described by Jean-François Bayart (1989) and Goren Hyden (1983), with its kinship obligations and leveling effects. Certainly the predominance of these social institutions has been demonstrated in the political field when multipartism is introduced and candidates and their organizations run to their nearest kin for support. The merger of traditional and modern institutions is also seen in the pervasive position of the chief or Big Man, perpetuated since the historic figure of independence, analyzed by Michael Schatzberg (2002; Jackson and Rosberg, 1982; Lamine, 1979). In another field, institutions of conflict management, such as reconciliation and compensation practices and land ownership adjudication, have been extremely effective when notions of community have not been destroyed by modern intrusions (Zartman, 2001).

On the modern side, other institutions are present – electoral and party institutions for selecting governments, constitutions for establishing rules of selection and of governance, economic institutions from *tontines* to superbanks, modern legal systems and judicial structures, and so on. They may not be the right institutions, though institution theory is a bit vague and confused on the difference between right and wrong. The institutions are not powerless; an interesting case concerns the number of parliaments – Zambia, Nigeria, and Malawi – that have refused the request of the chief to allow an additional term through a constitutional change. In general, legislatures are an institution where gradual empowerment can occur, bringing participation and accountability into prominence. Other exceptional examples might be cited. However, a counter-case concerns the continental reaction to Robert Mugabe's extended campaign of national torture and starvation and the viciously stolen election; the

institution of sovereignty and of presidential electoral manipulation is a sacrosanct element in the system in democratic autocracy. Institutions protect what one wants, even contradictorily, and Africa can cite their presence, not their lack.

### *The Social Explanations*

*Social* explanations can refer to the class structure or its absence in Africa. During the Cold War, the class warriors were never quite able to fit Africa into their preordained schema, and they left unconvinced of Africa's readiness for true socialism, let alone communism. Like any society, Africa has its elite and its masses, and many countries have a developing middle class, mostly from the state sector (including teachers) but many from the private sector. The elite are neither a true aristocracy nor true feudal lords, but a comprador combination of political and economic elite, separate but with great overlap. "*Enrichissez-vous*," enjoined Félix Houphouët-Boigny, referring to the private sector, but in most countries the injunction applies above all to the public sector. The economic middle class is far too dependent on the political upper class to be able to press it towards greater growth and welfare, and the political elite are clever in their efforts to buy off the entrepreneurs. Governments have embraced the IFIs' call for privatization by treating privatized parastatals as a golf course for political associates, former military, and supportive businessmen (Bauer and Taylor, 2005). Workers and peasants, each in their way, are also subject to elite/government neglect and controls and are unable to serve as the spearhead or shaft of a movement of revolt, let alone revolution. Only when the state trembles and controls relax are the *lumpenbourgeoisie* – the high-school and even college dropouts smoking pot in an empty lot – able to constitute an aimless rebellion and complete the overthrow of the weakened state, as with the Revolutionary United Front (RUF) of Sierra Leone or the politico-tribal militias of the two Congos or, in North Africa, the *hittistes* ("wall-leaners") of Algeria (Kandeh, 2005).

**"*Enrichissez-vous*,"  
enjoined Félix  
Houphouët-Boigny**

As a result the super-bourgeoisie specializes in conspicuous consumption rather than expanded production, in political control rather than political reform, in personal accounting rather than accountability. This "class" system evolved as the result of the country's evolution over the independent half-century, both the effect and in turn the cause. As such it has perpetuated this evolution to the present, too much a part of it to be identified as its exogenous cause. More serious, it carries within it and its evolution no seeds for its own transition or transformation. If African

societies are doing badly, some people in them are doing very well, and those who are not are in no position to change the imbalance, at least in the foreseeable future. As is clear from the experience of those countries (Senegal, Benin, Sierra Leone, Mauritania, Zambia, Congo-Brazzaville briefly, Ivory Coast, South Africa, Madagascar, Niger, and Kenya) that have experienced alternance through elections, when an electoral revolt takes place it merely brings in similar leaders with similar practices, and the political-economic elite closes ranks to exclude reform and development (accountability is often leveled against the previous incumbent, making alternance less likely the next time).

### *The Cultural Explanations*

*Cultural* explanations are often in vogue, but when used broadly and generically they tend to be racist and tautological: Africans cannot achieve development and democracy because they are Africans, and to be African means to be undeveloped and undemocratic. While it is true that *la politique du ventre* works against individualistic free enterprise and the Protestant ethic, it could also be put to use to uplift whole families and provide supportive solidarity, as in Southeast Asia. It is also true that socio-sexual mores bear prime responsibility for the pervasiveness of HIV/AIDS on the continent, but that is scarcely relevant to other aspects of development and democracy. Thus, attempts at cultural explanations tend to pick up isolated traits and generalize them beyond credence and usefulness.

However, political culture, a more malleable field of learned norms and patterns of behavior, is a relevant area of analysis, particularly where political experience concerns the transition from foreign rule to purported self-rule. Elite values, political habits, and trained expectations, and their resonance in the public – from adoption and insistence to rejection and alienation – are the foundation of democratization and the motor of development (Villalon and Von Doepp, 2005). The distinction between the aforementioned “culture” and these elements is the learning and shaping dynamic in the second that is often assumed to be absent in the first.

### *The Political Explanations*

*Political* explanations seem particularly well suited to political phenomena, combining elements of the foregoing partial explanations. As noted, African states achieved independence through a combination of two forces on the African side: a nationalist father figure and a nationalist movement

turned single party. Colonialism set up local societies for this development by preaching parliamentary government and development, and liberty, equality, and fraternity in a civilizing mission, and then applying these values selectively to the colonizing populations and denying their full application to local populations (Cooper, 2002). Colonial powers then withdrew, in most cases weakened by the Second World War and delegitimized by wartime and postwar value changes; where they did not withdraw as a result of legislative acts and elections, they were forced to do so by anti-colonial uprisings.

The process left a truncated exercise of democracy, as the chief and his party took over in the name of the people, assuming that they incarnated the nation. Current beliefs at the time were anchored in the inevitability of a developmental take-off, the only question being the angle of ascent (Rostow, 1963). Single-party governments fell as a consequence of their inability to deliver on the promise of development and to effectuate succession to the historic leader. The military took care of the second and continued the first, thereby removing any possibility of democratic accountability; only Southern Africa, having received independence later than the rest, avoided the military phase and stayed with the single party and historic leader. Within the international bipolar system, the informal Congo Convention of the early 1960s instituted an understanding among the great powers that Africa was to be an unaligned part of the Free World, politically neutral but economically part of the West. This tacit agreement held until the late 1970s, when Soviet and Cuban troops were sent to Southwest Africa and the Horn of Africa to engage in proxy wars and support selected "socialist" systems.

The collapse of the bipolar system at the end of the 1980s removed all the supports of this situation. In place of centralized political and economic legitimacy, the victory of the West installed competitive notions of politics and economics; they called for democratic opposition and questioned incumbent infallibility, as well as for free enterprise and questioned fiscal irresponsibility. But only the negative half of these effects were felt in Africa: state authority in economics and politics was weakened, but free enterprise in politics and economy was not effectively liberated. Where free enterprise in politics spawned opposition parties, they reached into a readily available tribal constituency and became safety valves for the single-turned-dominant party. Where it did take place in the economy, the efforts were immediately co-opted by the dominant politico-economic elite – where they remain today, feeding the status quo. Initiative serves the system, or it is not permitted.

However, the collapse of the bipolar system had another, even more deleterious effect. In many areas, domestic order collapsed at the same time as the system of world order. Previous systems of world order – colonial and then bipolar – served to hold down local conflicts, primarily within and between traditional nations, turning a limited number of them into systemic conflicts, between colonial and then between Cold War protagonists. When the most recent system dissolved, systemic restraints were removed, at the same time as domestic systems of order – states – were weakened. Local leaders and populations fell back on the basic units of identity and solidarity that remained, the traditional nations or tribes. At the same time, an internal tension had been building; nationalist movements had been working to weld the traditional nations into which their population had been divided into a modern nation-state that they claimed to incarnate. In time, these efforts left traditional nations unsatisfied and offended, and created a reaction of renewed tribal identity.

When the state emerged from the bipolar era weakened, it often attempted to compensate for its weakness by tightening control. All these developments have given rise to revived or extended ethnic conflicts, which further tear apart the fabric of state and society, with enormous losses of life and productivity. Frequently, rebellions that begin as a response to real grievances gradually become hooked on the means of support for their conflict – drugs, diamonds, timber, oil – turning means into ends and prolonging the conflicts (Arnson and Zartman, 2005; Collier et al., 2003). Proximate causes vary – protests against joblessness in Sierra Leone, against despoiled resources in Nigeria and Sudan, against farmers and herders in Kivus and Darfur, against exclusion from power in Rwanda, Burundi, and, earlier, Liberia, against religious and political repression in southern Sudan and northern Nigeria, against government neglect in Casamance and northern Niger, against foreign job competition in South Africa, and so on.

Some of these and other conflicts have reached a temporary truce, permitting the parties to move toward joint security, cooperation, and resilience. But such settlements as reached by victory, as in Rwanda, or accommodation, as in Sudan, are only temporary truces awaiting implementation and consolidation, no matter how firm the promises in the document. Evidence shows that states emerging from conflict within the preceding half-decade have a nearly 50% chance of finding themselves in conflict again (Collier et al., 2003: 83).

**States emerging from conflict within the past 5 years have a nearly 50% chance of finding themselves in conflict again**

Some settlements, as in Liberia and Mozambique, are examples of gradual and hopefully permanent change, real transition out of conflict (Hampson, 1996; Rotberg and Albaugh, 1999; Ali and Matthews, 2005). Whether these will lead to successful takeoff into development and democracy, once the conflict itself is eliminated, is still a question for the future, but it is certain that security and satisfaction of proximate grievances are the necessary, even if not sufficient, openings for broader reform.

### **Reform and Revival**

While an understanding of the reasons for Africa's shortfalls is necessary for the generation of antidotes, the section of this review devoted to remedies is humbly and tantalizingly shorter than that devoted to causes. All the solutions have been proposed and many have been tried. Many of the proposals are wide of the mark. It is certain, for example, that simply pouring in more money, as Jeffrey Sachs recommends, is a rathole proposition; similarly, a Marshall Plan for Africa ignores the fact that the real Marshall Plan was for reconstruction, not development from scratch.

On the other hand, reforms cannot be imposed from outside; they need to come from within, although they also often need support and assistance from abroad. For example, rather than the IFIs' rushing to support states that have not yet overcome their own internal conflicts or external powers' providing aid for states deemed strategic, support for effective governance and focused on low-level, indigenous activities, as in the US Millennium Challenge Agreements, is a more helpful strategy.

The needs are direct, almost simplistic; the means to meet them, elusive. Africa needs its ethical revolution, in which the ethos of survival is replaced with an ethos of responsibility. It needs to instill in itself the notion that it – and not outsiders – is responsible for its destiny, that that responsibility is shared by electors and elected, that public service is just that, not public privilege (or if the latter, privilege earned), and that the maintenance of health and the spread of disease are matters of personal responsibility to the collectivity. This can only come from within Africa, and the disappointing performance of key leaders in South Africa and Nigeria, Africa's giants and role models, marks a missed opportunity. Pieces of this need can be fashioned by sectoral standards. In the field of business relations, for example, bribes and kickbacks are prohibited by US law but coordination of anticorruption practices needs to be globalized to be effective, much as the Sullivan Principles did with regard to apartheid in South Africa.

On the institutional level, Africa and its foreign supporters need to focus on state-building – not nation-building, a purely domestic evolution which only comes when there are political institutions to plug into, and not capitol-building, which neglects the deep interior while developing the seat of government and those who sit in it (Kieh, 2007). State-building is not the opposite of local development; it is the precondition for it: the two go hand in hand. Donors, developers, and peacekeepers need to keep this in mind, as much as do rulers and representatives.

In a leap of levels, Africa also needs an agricultural revolution. A continent that once fed Europe can come again to feed itself and its growing population only with the development of new strains of food plants, such as were provided for Asia by the Green Revolution. This can only come from outside, but with cooperation from the research institutes that do exist on the continent and for whom collaboration would mark both contribution and training.<sup>4</sup>

As for conflicts, mainly internal, the deficiency of the relevant international organizations – the UN Security Council and the African Union – and above all their members is more easily diagnosed than remedied. African states cannot move to tackle the challenges of democratization and development until they have eliminated the debilitating internal conflicts that tend to arise from deprivation and discrimination, shortfalls in democratization and development. The European notion of subsidiarity applies; African conflicts are first and foremost an African responsibility. The introduction of troops is a heavy hammer with which to hit the nail, but when they are needed, appropriate numbers, mandates, and coordination are crucial. But intervention needs a purpose. As already noted in the case of Zimbabwe, AU members first need to stand up to their colleagues in Sudan and Ivory Coast, among others, (again) reminding them that they are responsible for the well-being of their own citizens and that gang warfare is not conduct appropriate to a state.

On the next level of appeal, external troops should not be necessary, but external pressures, legitimized by AU expressions of proper conduct, against offending governments need to be clear and forthcoming. At the same time, mediators are needed, either from within Africa or from outside, more often working together, as in the joint efforts that produced the 2005 Comprehensive Peace Agreement in Sudan, the 1999 Lusaka

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4. For example, Reynolds et al. (2007). The “et al.” does not include any Africans. On the other hand, Sinha (2007) reports on a wholly African initiative.

Agreement in Congo, and the 1992 Mozambique agreement. All of these are reminders that a signed peace agreement is only the first step, not to be regarded simply as a measure to lift the burden of the conflict without going on to resolve the underlying issues and implementing that resolution over subsequent years (Zartman, 2005). States that need outside interference to mediate their conflicts probably also need outside interference to implement their resolution, even if they do not welcome it.

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African countries are far from take-off. At best, they may be able to get into a higher gear and move a bit faster into a transition towards greater development and democracy. Undeniably, some of the machinery is working, and one may hope that the time of total breakdowns is past. For the dignity of humanity and the security of states, the outside world needs to respond to the needs where it can, giving Africans an example of responsibility that will both help and inspire. At the moment, the outsiders too are falling short of the challenge.

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