

Obstacles to African Development [Glantz]

MICHAEL GLANTZ Interview "Obstacles To African Development"

keywords: Africa, development, politics, drought, famine, NCAR, Glantz, African aid, environment

The following is an interview with Michael Glantz, political scientist at the National Center for Atmospheric Research. This interview was conducted by Erica Buchholz and Jeannette McDonald, undergraduate students at the University of Colorado, December 1991. It was performed as part of an honors course entitled Economics for a Sustainable Future.

BIOGRAPHICAL INFORMATION:

Michael Glantz is a political scientist employed at NCAR (National Center for Atmospheric Research). He received his bachelors degree in engineering at the University of Pennsylvania in 1961, which was followed by graduate studies at the University of Pennsylvania in political science. After a sojourn into industry, Glantz returned to the University of Pennsylvania and received his doctorate in political science in 1971.

Glantz's initial research focus was on "Foreign Involvement in Revolution." He centered his doctorate thesis around this issue but his concentration in this area was short-lived. He tired of focusing on "people against people" and shifted his attention toward the effects of the five year, Saharan drought in Africa. This area of study interested Glantz because the drought situation positioned "society against nature." That is, climatic conditions forced societies to derive political policies and structures around the crises evolving from drought. His initial interest on drought in Africa laid the foundations for his extensive research and knowledge on development problems in Africa. Glantz has written two books on African development and drought. His editorials appear frequently in the Boulder newspaper, The Daily Camera.

Glantz currently heads up the "Environmental and Societal Impacts Group" at NCAR. Glantz's group acts as mediators between the scientists conducting climatic research and the development groups NCAR has targeted. As NCAR scientists produce reports on the impact of atmospheric changes for developing countries, Glantz and others study the social, political, and economic implications of the scientific information for development strategies. Glantz's research extends beyond Africa to other, underdeveloped, areas of the world such as Vietnam and Brazil. In our interview, his knowledge on development, particularly in Africa, seemed inexhaustible. His ideas and opinions for development incorporate all factors of development (economic, environmental, political, social and climatic), and are some of the most pragmatic we have uncovered in our undergraduate research on Africa.

INTERVIEW QUESTIONS

Q: As a starting point for the interview what can you tell us about the causal effect drought has on political systems in Africa?

A: What I soon learned in my research was that people used drought and other natural disasters to get back at other people. What happened, in Ethiopia for example, the drought was in the northern parts of the country where rebel groups had formed to separate from the central government of Hali Selase. When the drought hit rebel areas (areas sympathizing with the cause of the rebels), he said (Selase), "Screw it, I just wont feed them." When 200,000- 400,000 people died, and this became public, he was overthrown. It was a drought related coup. So drought, politics and the environment

are all intertwined. In the early 70's there were four drought related coups in Africa.

Q: Where were the coups? Were they all in Ethiopia?

A: No, no they weren't all in Ethiopia. Let's see, 71' was Ethiopia, one was in Burtina-Fassa, maybe the other was in Sudan. I just don't remember where all four of them were--but there were four drought related-not just coups in Africa in that decade.

Q: What do you think the biggest obstacle to development is if you could isolate one characteristic of developing Africa? Is it the hunger, the political strife or environmental stress? Can you even pinpoint one thing?

A: To look for a single cause, to reduce everything to one cause, would probably be erroneous. Political reductionism, environmental reductionism. corruption reductionism, economic reductionism is wrong. There is no silver bullet, smoking gun here--It's a mix of things. In 1984, Time magazine has an issue devoted to Africa with a woman on the cover. Her head was shaped liked Africa, and on the cover it said, "Coups, corruption and conflict,." This was written in 1984, which was in the middle of one of the biggest drought episodes in Africa, so at the time it(drought) wasn't even mentioned in the article. If I could have added a fourth word to the title, I would have said, "Coups, Corruption, Conflict and Climate." If the title included all these words, you would probably have a set of all the problems Africa faces. Then there are different degrees of these problems you have to consider--some countries are hit harder than others. I think you can find a set of factors plaguing Africa, and I think it varies by region and by country.

Q: To what extent do these problems arise from the disparity existing between the rural and urban sectors in Africa?

A: Well, there are a lot of articles that write about the urban bias in some countries. I think it is probably pretty true--there is an urban bias. They keep the prices down in the city--Why? A, I would say your family lives in the city. B, the city is where your political power comes from. A lot of African politics are capital city politics, so when there is activity in the country, it is in the capital. The coups take place in the capital, there isn't much indigenous revolution. So, the rural/urban split is there--there is a problem in the rural vs. urban areas. There is a greater flow of people from rural to urban areas. In Ethiopia, for example, many people think its easier to get food outside of a dumpster, in the back of a hotel, than it is to get it out of the countryside when you have three droughts in a decade.

Q: Is this problem being compounded by population growth?

A: Population comes into it. It's not just numbers of people, it's populations and resource. So, It's resource per capita that's your problem. In the Sahell in West Africa, the density of population is one or two per square kilometer, while in Holland it may be 1,500 or 2,000 per square kilometer--but they can handle it. So, it's not just a numbers problem.

Q: Right, it's just how many people the area itself can handle?

A: Yes, it gets back to the concept of carrying capacity perhaps. Now, it doesn't have to be the area, California is probably living way beyond it's carrying capacity, in a strict sense, because it doesn't have many natural resources. Southern California is a desert climate, but they have money to by water. They are trying to buy water form Alaska. They want an 80 million dollar pipeline to carry water down from Alaska. So is this living within your carrying capacity? Is this sustainable development? Not really--the rich will buy their sustainability at the price of the poor.

Q: And the poor don't have this option? They need to sell?

A: Right, we have this luxury on the environment. We can look into the future 30 years and say, 'Oh, we might have a deforestation problem in thirty years?' Well I'll plant a tree for my kid on campus somewhere. But in West Africa and arid areas the nomads walk along, you know they have this drought and no food, and they see a tree. He cuts it down and pushes it over so his cattle can eat. You know that's easier than putting the cow up to the tree. Then we will say, "Oh you shouldn't do that, it's bad for the environment." Then he says, "If I don't do this, then I'm not here next year." So, there is a perspective that's missing in a lot of our Western, or American view of time--the time/environment connection. We have time. They don't. There is also a space/environment connection. We like space, green area. In Calcutta, India, four feet is a lot of space. Here, we want the lawn, the greenbelt. So we have a cultural bias in the way we look at space and time. This is why we have these conflicts over what we think they ought to do, and what they have to do.

Q: What do you think the most severe environmental problem is in Africa right now. Is there one that is more prevalent than the other?

A: Everything is bad. Desertification is bad. Deforestation is bad. It depends on how you define deforestation. But when you deforest a slope of a hill in a wet area, you are basically turning the land out, unleashing erosion, loss of soil fertility and long term productivity. So, deforestation is as bad in some countries as desertification is in others. There is a horseshoe, when looking at a map of Africa, created by countries with food shortages. These are the arid and semi-arid areas. It is rainfall variability that is the problem. So some kind of land use I can use in a wet area, as soon as that's moved out of this area, and moves to the more arid lands, it becomes more harmful to the environment to pursue his farming or developmental activities in this new area. Again, everything is related. If a man cuts down a bush for firewood to cook his evening meal, it could lead to soil erosion, it could lead to desertification or severe degradation. The smoke from the fire could lead to carbon dioxide accumulation and global warming. So, you can't isolate the worst environmental problem. It's like saying which is worse? Cyanide or arsenic? While they are both bad, it's a question of what's causing you to take them.

Q: How would you answer that question in relation to Africa?

A: The answer to this question as it applies to the situation in Africa is a lack of certain kinds of resources. Energy resources is one of them, as are water resources. Underlying all this, again, is a population connection. It is a population of people and resources. People are trying to get food and the governments are trying to get foreign exchange. So there is this conflict like guns and butter. During the worst droughts in the Sahell and Ethiopia when large numbers of people are dying, those countries are still exporting certain crops. Some are exporting sugar, food, crops, because governments need money to buy something-like limousines. You see there is a lot of corruption. they are saying lets not buy the sugar, or fund plans for irrigation, let's grow some food and sell it on the market for profit.

Q: Is government corruption the sole reason why people in countries suffering from famine, such as Ethiopia, never receive the aid given by other countries?

A: Well there is that problem, and there is also the problem of circulation. Some of the aid never gets out of the cities. Some of the aid is sold off once it reaches the countries. Now people say, "We don't want to give aid to Ethiopia because it will go to the army or the government." But I figure, even if only 10% gets through, what the hell is the difference? It's better than nothing. The last people to starve will be the government and the army. So anything you hold back just squeezes the people more--unless you come up with mechanisms for controlling distribution.

Q: What about water resources. Is hydroelectric power a feasible option for circulating water to these drought ridden countries. I know the steep gradient in most of Africa's rivers makes the rivers difficult to navigate and has prohibited the development of hydroelectric power in the past. Has any

progress been made in this area? What about irrigation?

A: I only have a general knowledge of hydropower. There is this idea of creating a bread basket for a region with water resource construction and development. They tried to do this with a dam on the Nile in Egypt. Now we are hearing about the dam they are constructing on the Euphrates in Turkey that is supposed to make it a bread basket area. Ethiopia is supposed to become a bread basket when they develop the low land water systems in this area. I haven't seen any of these efforts work out. They all fail. They start off as big schemes and somehow they never work. Usually when they do dam construction, it is usually at the expense of someone. They will build a dam somewhere that will flood areas and the local, African inhabitants will have to relocate and move. They usually get no benefit. It's kind of like the Navaho in the west. On the Navaho reservation, the coal is mined to produce energy in Los Angeles. They live in huts, they work on the line producing coal for the city when they don't even have electricity.

Q: Have you witnessed any aid/development programs that have been successful? Most of the information we have read suggests that many aid programs merely exacerbate the problem rather than solve it.

A: There are certain assumptions that are made. The question is what is really the purpose of aid? Why does the United States give away food and money to these countries? Well, its been shown that something like 80% of the aid given to Africa comes back to the U.S. That means we give a billion dollars in food aid and 800 million is spent here. We buy the food from the farmer, we pay to store it here, we ship it on a U.S. boat and, eventually, some if it gets there. So, a lot of what seems like aid really isn't. If you look at some of the top recipients of U.S. aid, probably Liberia, Kenya, Nigeria- they are all countries we consider strategic.

Q: Does the U.S., when giving aid, favor certain political systems, such as authoritarian, over others? Is it a democratic system?

A: I don't think it's so much democratic. It's more of a communist/anti-communist thing. Then you have African socialism, where do you put that? African Nationalists? We take sides in some wars over there, and that is where you might see a relationship between aid and political systems.

Q: What about institutions like the World Bank and IMF? Do you think they adhere to a certain "Political Model" when giving aid to countries? I've read articles stating that they favor authoritarian regimes.

A: You have to understand my perspective. I'm kind of a cynical- optimist. I hope things get better, but I'm not surprised when you tell me they screwed up. If I was really just a pessimist, I would just say, "Forget it, I'm not doing this anymore." The World Bank has funded a lot of projects that have failed. They are kind of biased toward big projects. I don't even think they consider things that are around the orders of hundreds of thousands dollars--they think in terms of billions of dollars. Sometimes, they employ high technology at the expense of the indigenous people. This can be seen in Brazil with the creation of the road in the Amazon.

Q: Why do you think so many of these projects fail?

A: Well, the World Bank didn't organize an environmental unit until 1988. I never thought they staffed it well. It's really kind of stupid.

Q: Do you think the environmental addition was more for publicity and show?

A: It depends. It may be a show thing. My group here is a show thing in a way. But my idea is to turn a tokenism into a commitment. So maybe the new head of the World Bank, with his new ideas,

will be able to pull it off. I don't know. A lot of these people are high tech. They have a lot of money to spend. So, they have to spend it on big projects.

Q: Do you think people have exaggerated the effects of the debt burden? If it were somehow alleviated, would Africa's potential for development really increase?

A: It helps. But I don't foresee too much successful development in Africa. I just think that when you get rid of the debt burden, which is one of those lint balls on the legs of Africa, I think corruption has to be dealt with. I think maybe militarism has to be dealt with. I think environmental protection and health have to be dealt with. I think there is always something that has to be dealt with. It would give them a breather. But I don't really think anyone thinks they are ever going to get their money back. People are already starting to write it off, to realize the debt as a loss. The thing is, what's the primary goal of these organizations? Is the real goal of the World Bank development? Or is it to get more countries to buy high-tech? Is AID's job to help countries that are allies, as opposed to really saving people?

Q: Are the local governments really concerned about environmental stress or other developmental problems?

A: Let me give you an example. There is this woman in Kenya named Wangari Mathi, and she organized women to plant trees. So, this male dominated society and government said, "Let's kill her, we are going to prevent her from planting trees." Actually, it wasn't the tree planting they were opposed to. It was the organization of women. Anything that is organized is a potential political party, it's a potential voting block. Therefore, there were several attempts on her life. I wrote about this actually in an article called, "Eco- Martyrs." (This article was in the Colorado Daily). It's about how the third world countries are killing their environmentalists.

Q: Because they (the governments) want to develop?

A: Because they want to develop. They are saying, "My city is polluted, the air is as bad as Los Angeles, so I'm as developed as Los Angeles." If you oppose deforestation, your opposing this development. These people disappear. This already happened to Chico Mendez in Brazil. It is seen in the Karen Silkwood mysteries in the U.S. Wangari Mathi has been threatened but it's not too late to save her. I tried to get Time magazine to publish an article about her in the back of the publication to try and protect her.

Q: How has development and environmental degradation affected women's rights in Africa?

A: Well, in the middle of their growing season, Africans are their hungriest. They have eaten all their food, and nothing has come in yet. Then they get their crops and they get married and they have their bride prices and it's business as usual. But if there is a drought, they are screwed. The men say they can't be there to plant, because they have to sell their labor to buy seeds, so the family can plant. Then they move land, the women have to pick up and move and everyone's screwed. It's a cycle. When outsiders tried to make life easier for the women by introducing longer hoses for farming, the men opposed it.

Q: Why?

A: Because what would women do with the other part of their time? Some of these societies are polygamous. So while she's there doing her farming, he's with another family doing something else. So they oppose some of these kinds of changes that are actually labor saving devices.

Q: Don't many of the men in these societies oppose implementation of birth control and other methods of family planning in their societies for these reasons?

A: Well we do it here so I guess they can do it there. I know Ethiopians who say, "I don't want any more children, the last one was an accident, but we (U.S.) can't give too much aid for family planning systems.

Q: Why can't we? What's stopping us?

A: Because the government. Because Bush and Reagan are against any form of birth control--abortions or anything. Actually, in the packet of articles I gave you there is an article that I titled, "If the environment could vote, it would be pro-choice." The reason is there are too many people pressing the resources. What it is saying is, "You can have more people, but you have to do something about how you manage the resources. You know it's not just open ended. If you oppose abortion or whatever--fine. But, once they are born, don't leave the kids on the streets. In Ethiopia the streets are filled with kids, begging for pens-Bic pens. They can't go to school, because they have nothing to write with.

Q: Don't you find it ironic that we, in this country, preach to the Africans about population control and birth control when we probably use at least twice as many resources as they do?

A: Yes, every individual born in developing countries uses much less resources than we do, but then they also have much less resources than we do. A baby born here today will use 50 times more energy than a baby born in most African countries. They think we are rich over here. they say, "You are basically spoiling the atmosphere to get rich, now we want to get rich. You are telling us we can't, because it will over fill this atmosphere. Why don't you cut back?"

Q: In regards to crop improvement--Do you think techniques such as plant tissue cultures or alley farming have been helpful in increasing sustainability and productivity of crops?

A: You know, it's just not so glamorous to improve production on good soil. So, you let them over cultivate, not let the land lie fallow--so were destroying productive land. We are trying to figure out how to make non-productive land grow more. Well, they would already start with a lot more if they managed the good stuff better. You know what I mean? It's kind of crazy- Well, we are going to destroy this land so yields go down, soil fertility goes down-- but let's bring in irrigation, which also has its problems. There has got to be some rationality here in this production thing. I did hear for the first time that in 1991, so far the Ethiopian's have not requested any food aid. So, maybe the Marxist government fell, and maybe now people are producing.

Q: Does the government take a real interest in the production by the rural people, or do they have plantations of their own?

A: Both. They come near the rural population by giving them quotas, like in Ethiopia, to control the economies. They are expected to grow something to either eat or sell. The government gives them a price--a low price. They make the money, because they sell what they bought from the rural farmers at a low price, on the international market for a big price. So the farmers say, "So why in the hell should I work hard--I'm only getting a little bit anyway."

Q: That correlates with most of the information we have read. The rural farmers tend to farm at only a subsistence level right? Anything more conflicts with their culture, with their other priorities?

A: Right. They send kids out for hours to search for water. Or the women will finish with their farming duties and spend five hours looking for firewood. So, they can't just focus on farming alone. They have to eat, to survive. They are not stupid people--really. They aren't educated in the same sense we are, but they are not stupid. If they could get more they would do more. But when they can't get more, it doesn't make a difference. If you have enough kids, you might get a little more. They might not care about them, but it doesn't mean they don't exploit them. They need the food

to make the city happy, they need something to sell to keep the city happy. Then you have this problem in Nigeria, for example, of imports with international corporations and companies. They have this campaign to get people to buy white bread-- "Eat White Bread." Why? Well some guy in the Nigerian government said, "Well, you sell white bread? White bread is something the white people eat in the Northern Hemisphere." You see, it's kind of a status thing. But actually, we, in the U.S., are going away from white bread and moving more towards grainy bread. The Nigerians are going away from their traditional grainy bread to white bread. As they get richer, they go to these new things, like white bread, which is less nutritious. Not only that, they realize importing it costs money, so they decide to grow it. But, it doesn't grow there--so they have more failure with crops. So, you have got the role of corporations getting involved and this leads to the demise of Africans and their products.

Q: It must be very frustrating to work in development when so many factors are working against your goals. If you could propose your own plan for development, do you have any ideas as to what it would be?

A: I once proposed an idea, it kind of smells like colonialism, but it's not meant to be like colonialism at all. Really if you look at it the right way, it could work. The idea is this: "Why not get the ten richest countries in the world to adopt one of each of the 20 poorest countries. By the year 2,000 see which country was able to develop better, one of the poorest countries--to bring them up to a threshold where they can take care of themselves." See, it sounds very colonial, but in fact it wasn't meant to be. We need to focus and pick one country to devote all our time, money and effort to. We are giving a little to many countries and not enough to substantially help just one. I once also said, if you really want to stop corruption in Africa, I have a plan. The plan is this: "Why not boycott Switzerland? This is where the money goes. The unnumbered bank accounts. Go boycott them. They are letting the crooks put their money there.

Q: What do you think about debt for nature? This concept hasn't really taken hold in Africa, with the exception of Mozambique. Some people are critical of this concept. Do you think it would be effective and helpful, in Africa?

A: Debt for nature, debt for nature, debt for nature. It's nice in theory. But, you know what happens? They go to Kenya and they sell a guy's debt. They say, "you owe a hundred dollars." Kenya says, "I don't have a hundred dollars." They say, "O.K.," Then they go to some company and say, "Give us 20 cents for every dollar." They don't say to Kenya, "you can buy this back for twenty cents," they say, "you must pay the whole thing." Yet they will sell it to another party for less. Well that's a screw. They can buy themselves out for that discount, but they don't give the discount to other indebted country.

Q: O.K. In conclusion to this interview, where do you see Africa in the future? What are their chances for successful development? What will the U.S.'s involvement in this country be like in the future?

A: My fear was that....Have you ever heard of triage? Well, the triage concept was big in the seventies, because during World War I there were not many doctors in the battlefield. To compensate, they would divide the wounded into three parts---the walking wounded, the wounded that were probably going to die no matter what you did, and the group in the middle-if you gave them some help they might live. My feeling is that Africa is being triaged and it's being put in the third group. It this attitude like, "We have put in billions of dollars and it's going nowhere. Eastern Europe is now there for business. The Soviet Union is breaking apart. Environmental problems are bad everywhere. There are new problems and interests to worry about." So, there are a lot of factors floating up, and I think Africa is floating back to the bottom. My fear is that we are triaging Africa. We are saying, "We've tried, let's put our resources into places that are having success. I think Africa will go through a period of neglect-- they'll get some money, some help, like they've done in the past,

they may even start to really democratize--then you would think we would really help. However, the U.S. really isn't even doing that much for Eastern Europe. It's like, "Well what can we get out of them?" My feeling is that we don't think we can get anything out of Africa any more. The cold war is over, strategically it is no longer important. I think that is the dilemma Africa will face in the future. Maybe, during that period, they will have to come to terms with their own problems. Hopefully, they will start to get themselves organized. In the meantime, their environment is going downhill, droughts have plagued these countries since most of them have gained their independence. It would have been difficult even for a colonial power to maintain those countries. So getting independence and just learning how to run countries, in addition to dealing with the environment is bewildering. So, I'm not very optimistic for Africa's future.

Date: Sat, 4 Sep 93 10:04:33 -0700
Subject: glantz_michael.africa_dec91

Editor: [Ali B. Ali-Dinar](#)

[Previous Menu](#)

[Home Page](#)

[What's New](#)

[Search](#)

[Country Specific](#)