THE LONG HORIZON: THINKING IN GENERATIONS, NOT ELECTION CYCLES

On the Urgency of Long-Term Thinking in a World That Rewards Short-Term Thinking

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The Future Is Already Present in Our Decisions

Every generation inherits a world shaped by decisions it did not make.

It receives institutions established before its time, infrastructure constructed through earlier investments, knowledge accumulated through the efforts of others, and social conditions influenced by choices whose consequences may extend across decades.

It also inherits failures: neglected schools, deteriorating public services, environmental damage, accumulated debt, weakened institutions, and opportunities lost through hesitation or mismanagement.

These inheritances remind us of a fundamental truth: the consequences of public decisions rarely end with those who make them.

Yet contemporary political and economic life often rewards immediate visibility more than enduring achievement. Governments face electoral deadlines. Public administrations respond to annual budgets. Enterprises pursue short-term performance. Citizens, confronting pressing difficulties, understandably demand improvements they can experience without delay.

These pressures are real. They cannot simply be dismissed in the name of an uncertain future.

But when immediate considerations become the principal measure of public action, societies risk sacrificing the foundations of their own development.

A government may postpone necessary maintenance because its benefits are less visible than a new construction project. A country may consume exceptional resource revenues without creating productive assets for the future. An administration may abandon a valuable reform because it originated under a previous leadership.

Such decisions may offer short-term political advantages while imposing long-term economic and social costs.

The central challenge is therefore not to choose between the present and the future. It is to govern the present without compromising the future.

For Africa, where demographic change, urbanization, technological transformation, environmental pressures, and institutional development will continue reshaping societies for generations, this responsibility is particularly consequential.

The future cannot remain an abstract destination invoked in political speeches. It must become a serious consideration in the decisions made today.

When Political Time and Development Time Diverge

Political institutions operate within relatively short periods of authority. Elections, government appointments, legislative mandates, and budgetary cycles establish necessary frameworks for public responsibility.

Development, however, often unfolds according to a different timetable.

A child entering primary school today may not complete advanced education for many years. The benefits of scientific research can emerge long after its initial financing. Transport networks, energy systems, hospitals, and universities require decades of maintenance, improvement, and adaptation.

The transformation of an agricultural economy into a more diversified productive system cannot be achieved through a single administrative program.

Nor can the rebuilding of public confidence in institutions be accomplished by decree.

These processes involve cumulative investments, institutional learning, and sustained cooperation among generations.

The difference between political time and development time creates a recurring tension.

Political leaders are expected to demonstrate results within limited mandates, while some of the most important responsibilities of leadership concern outcomes that may not become fully visible until much later.

This tension is not unique to Africa. It is a challenge faced by political systems throughout the world.

But its consequences can be particularly severe where infrastructure deficits remain substantial, economic transformation is incomplete, administrative capacity is uneven, and growing populations require expanding opportunities.

The temptation is to favor projects that can be announced, inaugurated, or presented as immediate evidence of accomplishment.

Visible achievements are not inherently superficial. Roads, hospitals, water systems, and schools can be indispensable.

The difficulty arises when visibility becomes more important than usefulness, or when announcing a project becomes more politically rewarding than ensuring its continued operation.

A completed building is not necessarily a functioning institution. A signed agreement is not necessarily an implemented policy. A national strategy is not necessarily evidence of sustained national commitment.

The true measure of public action must therefore extend beyond its immediate appearance.

It should include whether an initiative addresses a genuine need, whether its financing is sustainable, whether the responsible institutions possess the capacity to implement it, and whether its benefits can endure beyond the mandate of its sponsors.

The responsibility of leadership is not merely to produce results during a period of authority.

It is also to leave behind the conditions through which progress can continue.

The Hidden Cost of Beginning Again

One of the most damaging forms of institutional weakness is the repeated interruption of initiatives whose value extends beyond political change.

New administrations naturally bring different priorities. Democratic choice would lose much of its meaning if public policies could never be reconsidered.

Reassessment is legitimate. Correction is sometimes essential.

Yet there is a distinction between improving what has been inherited and treating every transition as an obligation to begin again.

When programs are abandoned primarily because they are associated with previous leadership, public resources can be wasted, institutional knowledge lost, and citizens deprived of benefits that might otherwise have materialized.

The effects reach beyond the immediate project.

Professionals become uncertain about the stability of their responsibilities. Investors hesitate to commit resources to long-term activities. Communities lose confidence in public promises. Administrative institutions devote time to repeated reorganizations rather than improving performance.

The difficulty becomes even more serious when the departure of individual leaders results in the disappearance of technical expertise, institutional records, or established procedures.

A public institution should not have to rediscover its responsibilities whenever its leadership changes.

Institutional continuity does not mean preserving every policy unchanged.

Some initiatives prove ineffective. Others become financially unsustainable or cease to reflect public needs. Circumstances evolve, and responsible government must adapt.

But adaptation should be guided by evidence, transparent assessment, and the public interest rather than by the desire to erase the achievements of predecessors.

A mature political system should allow successive governments to disagree over methods while preserving a commitment to certain enduring national responsibilities.

Quality education, reliable healthcare, essential infrastructure, scientific development, public security under the rule of law, and the integrity of institutions are not the property of any political administration.

They concern the continuity of society itself.

A nation progresses more securely when each generation of leadership builds upon what works, corrects what fails, and transmits stronger foundations to those who follow.

Development as an Intergenerational Responsibility

The idea of long-term development rests upon an ethical principle: people who are not yet able to participate in today's decisions will nevertheless live with their consequences.

Future generations cannot vote in present elections, attend today's budget hearings, or directly contest investments whose costs they may eventually bear.

Their interests must therefore be considered through the judgment and responsibility of those who govern, produce, consume, and make public choices in the present.

This responsibility is neither sentimental nor abstract.

It appears in decisions about public debt, the exploitation of natural resources, environmental protection, education, institutional integrity, and the maintenance of public assets.

Borrowing may be justified when it finances productive investments that strengthen future economic and social capacity.

It becomes more problematic when obligations are transferred forward without creating corresponding benefits or a credible capacity to repay.

Natural-resource extraction may support current development, but exhaustible resources cannot be consumed indefinitely.

Their revenues should contribute, wherever feasible, to forms of wealth that can endure: knowledge, public infrastructure, productive enterprises, environmental restoration, and competent institutions.

Environmental protection presents an equally important obligation.

Forests, water systems, fertile soils, coastlines, and ecological balances are not merely resources available for immediate use. They are conditions upon which future livelihoods, health, and economic opportunities may depend.

The consequences of degradation can persist long after the activities that caused it have ended.

Climate adaptation also requires long-term thinking. Decisions about urban expansion, water management, agricultural resilience, and settlement patterns may shape exposure to environmental risks for decades.

The same principle applies to human development.

Neglecting early childhood, foundational education, or preventive healthcare may generate disadvantages that are difficult and costly to reverse.

These considerations suggest that every major public decision should face an additional question:

What will remain for those who come after us?

This question should not be confused with a demand that today's population accept unlimited sacrifices for an unspecified future.

A society cannot responsibly postpone essential improvements in living conditions while promising distant prosperity.

The needs of present generations are legitimate, particularly where poverty, insecurity, and inadequate public services persist.

Intergenerational responsibility requires balancing those needs with the obligation not to undermine the possibilities of those who follow.

It is a discipline of fairness across time.

Africa's Demographic Future Demands Decisions Today

Africa's demographic transformation gives particular urgency to the long horizon.

In many countries, population growth and the increasing number of young people entering education, employment, and public life are placing sustained demands on institutions and economic systems.

The scale and timing of these changes vary across countries and regions. Africa cannot be understood through a single demographic trajectory.

Nevertheless, the broader challenge is unmistakable: societies must prepare for future needs before those needs become crises.

A child born today will require healthcare, education, safe living conditions, and eventually opportunities for economic and civic participation.

The quality of those opportunities will depend substantially on decisions being made long before that child enters adulthood.

Expanding enrollment without strengthening learning risks producing educational systems that are larger but insufficiently effective.

Allowing cities to grow without adequate planning can generate costly problems in housing, transportation, sanitation, employment, and public health.

Failing to develop productive opportunities for younger generations may deepen frustration even where educational access has improved.

Demographic change, therefore, cannot be addressed only when its consequences become immediately visible.

It requires the anticipation of needs, the development of capabilities, and the preparation of institutions able to respond to evolving circumstances.

This is not simply a matter of predicting population numbers or preparing infrastructure inventories.

It is a question of the society that Africa's rising generations will inherit.

Will they enter economies capable of offering productive opportunities? Will their cities be organized for human well-being? Will their institutions command public confidence? Will their education prepare them to create knowledge and respond to challenges that cannot yet be fully known?

No government can answer such questions through a single national plan.

But governments, institutions, enterprises, and communities can establish the foundations upon which better answers become possible.

Long-term demographic preparation is not an optional exercise in forecasting.

It is a present responsibility toward people whose future is already being shaped.

Democracy and the Discipline of Continuity

Thinking beyond election cycles must never become an argument for weakening democracy or insulating public policy from accountability.

Elections are essential instruments through which citizens can judge leaders, reconsider priorities, and authorize changes in political direction.

The problem is not that governments change.

The problem arises when legitimate political change is accompanied by unnecessary institutional destruction, or when the pursuit of electoral advantage overwhelms commitments that should endure beyond individual mandates.

Democratic accountability and long-term planning need not be opposing principles.

Indeed, they can reinforce each other.

Clear long-term objectives allow citizens to examine whether successive administrations are making credible progress toward agreed national purposes.

Transparent indicators reveal whether promises are becoming measurable improvements.

Independent evaluation makes it possible to distinguish effective policies from unsuccessful ones.

Public debate can test both the legitimacy of long-term goals and the fairness of the means chosen to pursue them.

The challenge is to establish durable commitments without turning them into untouchable doctrines.

A national development strategy should be capable of surviving electoral transitions, but it must also remain open to scrutiny, correction, and democratic revision.

Continuity should protect the public interest, not the political preferences of those who first formulated a policy.

This requires a distinction between the enduring objectives of society and the changing instruments used to pursue them.

A nation may maintain its commitment to universal access to essential healthcare while revising financing arrangements, delivery systems, or administrative responsibilities.

It may preserve the objective of educational excellence while updating curricula, teaching methods, and institutional structures.

It may sustain an industrial development strategy while replacing incentives that prove ineffective.

The objective remains stable enough to guide long-term investment, while the methods remain adaptable enough to respond to evidence.

For this reason, broad consultation matters.

Long-term priorities are more likely to endure when their formulation includes meaningful participation from public institutions, political representatives, researchers, professional organizations, enterprises, communities, and citizens.

Consensus does not require unanimity.

It requires sufficient agreement on the direction of national development to make continuity possible despite legitimate disagreement over particular policies.

A strong democracy should possess both the freedom to change its leaders and the institutional maturity to preserve what serves the nation.

Building Institutions That Remember and Learn

Long-term thinking becomes credible only when it is translated into institutional practice.

A society's capacity to plan depends partly on the quality of the knowledge available to its decision-makers.

Governments need reliable demographic information, economic data, environmental assessments, educational indicators, and evaluations of public programs.

They also need institutions capable of interpreting this information and using it responsibly.

Plans constructed without adequate evidence may reflect ambition but provide little guidance for implementation.

Equally important is institutional memory.

Public administrations should preserve documentation, record the reasoning behind major decisions, evaluate results, and transmit knowledge across changes in personnel and leadership.

Such practices may appear routine, but their cumulative importance is considerable.

When records disappear, mistakes may be repeated.

When evaluations are neglected, unsuccessful programs may continue without correction.

When professional expertise is disregarded, institutional capability can decline despite repeated investment.

Long-term planning also requires the ability to imagine different futures.

Economic shocks, technological breakthroughs, environmental changes, population movements, and geopolitical developments can alter the conditions under which decisions are made.

Responsible planning cannot eliminate uncertainty.

It can, however, prepare institutions to recognize emerging risks, compare plausible scenarios, and adjust their actions before problems become unmanageable.

Universities, research institutes, statistical institutions, and independent policy organizations should contribute to this capacity.

Their value lies not only in producing studies, but in strengthening society's ability to examine assumptions, understand consequences, and make decisions informed by evidence.

The quality of public leadership should include a willingness to listen to such knowledge, especially when it challenges politically convenient expectations.

Institutions that learn are better equipped to preserve continuity without becoming rigid.

Their strength lies in the combination of memory and adaptability.

Making the Long Horizon Practical

Long-term thinking must not remain a noble principle disconnected from public administration.

It requires practical arrangements that connect future objectives with present responsibilities.

National priorities should be translated into realistic medium-term programs, annual budgets, accountable institutions, and measurable outcomes.

A thirty-year ambition becomes meaningful only when governments can explain what must be accomplished during the next three years, what resources will be required, and how progress will be assessed.

The maintenance of existing assets should receive as much attention as the announcement of new investments.

A road, hospital, university, or energy installation is not a completed public responsibility simply because construction has ended.

Its lasting value depends upon staffing, maintenance, financing, and the ability to adapt to future needs.

Public finances should also be examined through the obligations they create over time.

Debt commitments, recurrent expenditure, public guarantees, and major contracts can influence the choices available to governments long after the original decision-makers have departed.

Transparent assessment should therefore consider not only immediate affordability but future costs and risks.

Major reforms should include arrangements for institutional learning.

Periodic evaluation, public reporting, independent scrutiny, and corrective mechanisms should be understood as normal elements of responsible implementation rather than exceptional responses to failure.

Long-term development also depends on partnerships that extend beyond government.

Enterprises require predictable conditions to make productive investments. Educational and scientific institutions need continuity to cultivate knowledge. Communities require confidence that public commitments will not disappear whenever administrative responsibilities change.

Regional cooperation deserves the same discipline.

Cross-border infrastructure, shared energy systems, scientific collaboration, trade integration, and environmental management often require sustained commitments among countries whose political calendars do not coincide.

Such cooperation succeeds when institutional arrangements are strong enough to outlast changes in individual leadership.

Above all, the long horizon requires a different understanding of success.

Leaders should be judged not only by projects they announce or inaugurate, but also by the quality of the institutions they leave behind, the obligations they manage responsibly, and the opportunities they create for those who will govern and live after them.

The most significant achievements are sometimes those whose full benefits will become visible only after their architects have left public life.

The Inheritance We Choose to Leave

Every generation is temporary, but the consequences of its actions may endure.

We inherit what previous generations built, protected, neglected, or failed to understand. We then make choices that shape the circumstances of people who may never know our names.

This reality imposes a responsibility greater than the pursuit of immediate success.

Africa's future cannot be secured through political declarations alone, nor through the multiplication of projects disconnected from enduring national purposes.

It requires institutions capable of continuity, leadership willing to look beyond personal tenure, and societies prepared to invest in outcomes whose benefits may extend far into the future.

It also requires the courage to make necessary decisions in the present.

Long-term thinking must never become an excuse for postponing reform, tolerating injustice, or asking citizens to wait indefinitely for improvements that should already be underway.

The future is built through what is done now, but with an awareness of what today's decisions will make possible—or impossible—tomorrow.

A generation worthy of its responsibilities must therefore do more than preserve what it has inherited.

It must repair what has been damaged, improve what remains inadequate, create what does not yet exist, and transmit institutions and possibilities stronger than those it received.

Political mandates will end. Economic circumstances will change. Technologies will evolve. Individual leaders will eventually be replaced by others.

But the need for knowledge, justice, competent institutions, productive opportunity, and human dignity will remain.

The true measure of leadership is consequently not only what it accomplishes while exercising authority, but what society remains capable of accomplishing after that authority has passed.

We do not build only for the years we will live. We build for the generations that will inherit the consequences of our choices.

The long horizon begins with accepting that responsibility.

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