

Of highways and byways - how people have used resources to divide Africa

Highways have always fascinated me. Partly because of how the same road could take you from squatter camps and dilapidation to high living and polished neighborhoods and in part because of how wide they can be. In Harare, where I grew up, they rarely spanned more than two lanes, yet because so many other roads in the city were so narrow these two-lane highways were considered to be remarkably wide. Later when I had the opportunity to see the sprawling metropolis of Johannesburg I saw just how wide a highway could be, sometimes spanning up to six lanes with cars whizzing by at speeds that seemed barely legal. I could handle crossing the highway in Harare, but definitely not Johannesburg. In Harare it was a fairly straightforward experience of waiting for at least one lane to be clear before venturing onto the tarmac. Usually there weren't any pavements for pedestrians alongside the road even though there were almost always people walking next to the highway creating little dusty paths of their own - a reflection of just who the highway was made for. Urban developments such as these were not made with everyone in mind. To not have the means to own or drive a car in Harare and many cities like it, was to live on the sidelines of a society that seemed to routinely forget a number of its denizens.

Who is development for? There seems to be a growing trend for African states to boast of improved GDP and maybe even improved infant and mother mortality, yet a nation is not made up only of statistics, but people. How then can it be, that despite the actual lived experiences of people on the ground, experts in distant lands can speak confidently about the lives of people they do not know, saying things such as 'Africa is rising' or falling for that matter? Development it seems, is as much a metric to appease the powerful in nations with a lot of money as it is a means for pulling a people out of poverty. It is uncanny how much of the lived experiences of the average African has been impacted by the people that have treated Africa like a 'playground for outsiders'* whether at the Berlin conference of 1884 or Davos in the 21st century.

And what is the lived experience of the average African, you ask? Well the question is flawed and the resource of storytelling have divided the peoples of this place from the dignity of a nuanced story. Africa is too vast and too diverse and the people of this place too colorful and dynamic to be averaged out. There is a highly problematic tendency to speak of Africans en masse as though we all have the same overburdened but deeply committed mother who has been abandoned by our good-for-nothing father as we try our best to make ends meet in our collective hut waiting for someone to save us or inspire us to save ourselves. Things are not all bad nor are they marching on unabated to great heights but rather in the face of economic meltdown or mega-boom life is going on. When protests were unfolding throughout the city of Durban in 2015 during the Fees Must Fall movement, I was student at the time but was busy recording voice overs for an up and coming media company that would go on to employ a number of those same protesting students one day - life was going on. In 1994 when the now-infamous Rwandan genocide was taking place under the blind eye of the world, South Africa was going through the formalities of dismantling Apartheid. Today, Rwanda has become a very different nation and South Africa has not. These are all stories of Africans of which there can be no average, no simplified version for donors and tourists that does justice to the reality.

How then, can these divides be bridged? How do you cross a six lane highway? I am afraid I never did learn that one. I avoided highways in Johannesburg and decided to spend my days on roads that could accommodate me, roads that had pavements even though such roads often had security cameras that inherently saw me as an outsider, even a threat. And so it has been with many of us Africans who have found ourselves faced with harsh economic and social environments, we have simply moved elsewhere. Even if it means being a foreigner with no real civic life and a constant home-sickness, some of the divides of home have been too difficult to bridge; a highway too exhausting to cross. Others have prescribed private business, social enterprise and entrepreneurship as a panacea for all of Africa's ailments as though all that was lacking was individual flare and agency to figure out how to dodge cars and leap across the highway. And while private business has changed the lives of millions in Africa it has failed to ask the question – why have a six-lane highway that served so few to begin with? Why do we have economic structures that normalize hardship? Why do you need to empower the youth? After all, who were our parents building for all along? Entrepreneurship is not for everyone, what happens to those for whom it never works? There are no easy answers to these questions and maybe the point was not to have them but to simply raise them, to diagnose them and to triage. I am not sure if we will go deep enough in our lifetime to the roots of these divides for they run generations deep. However, we can at least start to dig and at least show the generations to follow that we too saw that gap was wide and did our best to narrow it.

And how to narrow it? By asking questions about why economic inequality is resistant to social change in ways that even political inequality have been shaken by. It is not enough to run social programs that help the poor simply make do and be a little more comfortable with their lot in this life. The reasons for their poverty need to be interrogated as do the reasons for the fantastic wealth of a few otherwise we stand the risk of calling ourselves change agents when all we have done is rearrange furniture. At the same time, there needs to be an understanding that there are many paths to increasing the personal agency of the disenfranchised and we may not know the best ones. Better than a program may be a relationship, better than a policy may be a conversation. To bridge divides, we must understand why we are divided in the first place, maybe then we will have a chance of crossing them together.