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# **Power: The Curse Haunting So-Called Developing Nations**

José Cossa

I will begin this discourse by means of the following analogy:

We, as a family, are in the process of replacing windows in our house and the only way we can afford to do this is by replacing them one-by-one. Our neighbors are in the process of rebuilding their house and they have the financial means to demolish the old and build an entirely new house. Our projects start at the same time and our neighbor's house is rebuilt in a matter of months; we, however, can only afford to replace one window per month since we only get paid a monthly salary on which we depend to pay bills and invest in projects such as the window-replacement project we are currently undertaking. One day, our neighbors who have been following the slow progression of our work, but ones whose history of greed and self-centeredness has been known to us for generations, come by and ask why it is that we opted to replace the windows one-by-one. We answer that it is not an option, but it is what we can afford; otherwise, we would replace all of them at once. They offer to lend us the money to finish our project so we can have this done at once and avoid the situation of getting to a point in which while the last windows are being replaced, the first ones are breaking again.

Such is the nature of the cross-roads that so-called developing nations must face. Africa is no exception to this fate. The critical aspect of these cross-roads is that whatever Africans decide at this point will have serious repercussions in the future. In our case, if we decide to take the money that our neighbors are offering, we have to realize the potential repercussions of the complex power dynamics inherent in such a seemingly generous gift from neighbors whose questionable history of greed and self-centeredness has been known to us for generations. If we decide to not take the money and to continue our project of replacing the windows one-by-one, we preserve our dignity and total ownership of the project, and our children can enjoy the house for generations upon generations without carrying the load of our ill-informed, gullible, greedy, and ego-centric decision. It is a matter of choice, but it is a choice contingent

on our understanding of power dynamics and the potential cursing effects of power.

In light of this analogy and my work pertaining to power dynamics in international negotiations over policy,<sup>1</sup> I herein advance the argument that the fate of so-called developing nations seems intrinsically bound to the dictations of so-called<sup>2</sup> developed nations, and the economic philosophies praised by the West have only strengthened the intricacies of domination under the guise of potential escape from poverty and dependency. The complexity of the Western stronghold takes captive those whose birth and upbringing are touched by some form of African influence—from Alexander Hamilton to current economic strategists of non-Western descent operating within Western economic frameworks. To circumvent the intricate logic of Western modernity is a challenge that seems unbeatable, especially when non-Westerners are unable to advance their local economic theories to successfully surpass in acceptance those of their counterpart Western theorists. Perhaps because the economic world is not configured in their favor; perhaps because they lack the sophistication to negate the assumption that such a configuration is not the best option for all and to create an alternative that is acceptable to all, even if by some sort of forcefulness as it has been the case in advancing Western theories (e.g., through mercantilism).

Amidst this apparent fate, so-called developing nations seem to have accepted their dependency as inescapable and have continued to rely on Western perceptions, theories, and models of development. This extends to the very conceptualization of themselves as legally established nations when such conceptualization only fits the mold of Western conception and legality of nation, a situation that has posed several hindrances in the attempt of the aforementioned nations to attain their full independence. At the heart of this predicament faced by these nations is the issue of *power dynamics*. The intricacy of power dynamics is often undecipherable by those on whom power is exercised; when at least perceived as manifest in a given interaction, power seems too complex to counter, and it appears as though there is no alternative to the *status quo*.

In the context of international relations and negotiations, institutions and other entities negotiate and make decisions that

impact millions of lives and often for an extensive period of time. At times, these decisions are hard to reverse even though the negotiations are imbalanced and favorable to one party over another—I have argued in the foundational work to this discourse<sup>3</sup> that to speak of balanced power dynamics in negotiations is a conception that seems to not sit well with our ontological (reality) and axiological (values) predispositions and our *modus operandi*. In situations when we cannot figure out a solution, we often create entities to arbitrate our deadlocks; such is the case of international regimes (broadly, international conventions and organizations).

Moreover, I have argued that International regimes have played a very important role in defining the course of world economy and thus influencing sectors with which they interact.<sup>4</sup> However, theorists generally agree that, along with the power granted to regimes as preservers and stabilizers of global or international economy, there is the underlying problem of compliance.<sup>5</sup> The imposition and compliance issues raise some very critical questions that are often overlooked when dealing with the dilemma faced by so-called developing nations. For instance, are the aforementioned nations in a position to refuse negotiation terms proposed, often taking the form of imposition, by so-called developed nations? The answer to this question is *no*. Needless to say, history has provided us with countless examples of unfairness in negotiations; if such were not the case the world would not be in a state of power disparity as it is today. Do consequences in such negotiation terms carry more weight than the ethical principles used to justify their existence? The answer to this question is both *yes* and *no* because the consequences for not complying with negotiation terms are intrinsically linked to the ethics on which such agreements are founded.<sup>6</sup>

We have seen throughout history how the terms established by powerful countries—or a group of powerful countries—have determined the course of global affairs and mapped the world into groups of dependees and dependents, with an occasional allusion to a group as “emerging countries”—perhaps as a means to give hope to the dependent that one day they, too, can be granted the status of emerging—and another group as “frontier countries,” to characterize those who are below “emerging countries” but above the rest of the so-called developing world. It is, in part, this

false hope presented to so-called developing nations that fuels their dependency and fosters compliance, since the lack of compliance leads to some kind of chastisement and presumably would impede them from graduating to the “frontier countries” category and then to the “emerging countries” category. The magnitude of this false hope might be best perceivable for Africa by the fact that, out of 54 countries, only South Africa and Egypt fall under “emerging countries.” These countries need to maintain their compliance with the rules, lest they forfeit their status and depreciate to “frontier countries,” joining Kenya, Nigeria, Morocco, Mauritius, and Tunisia.<sup>7</sup>

One way to address the imposition, compliance, unfairness, and the disequilibrated power dynamics in negotiation is to address the problem from its roots by unveiling the essence of the game and empowering the disadvantaged parties for better positioning when negotiating. To this end, I have developed a pentamerous instrument comprised of categories of power (see Table 1): hermeneutical, informational, manipulative, monetary, and regulatory.

*Table 1: Summary Definition of the Five Qualities of Power*

<b>Qualities of Power</b>	<b>Definition</b>
<b>Hermeneutical</b>	Interpreter’s proximity to the authorial intent of a given text
<b>Informational</b>	The ability to generate and disseminate what is considered true and valuable information at a given time
<b>Manipulative</b>	The ability to persuade another to adopt a perception and behavior that benefits the persuader
<b>Monetary</b>	The influence one exerts on another through the ability to provide monetary rewards or incentives
<b>Regulatory</b>	The ability to make rules or give directives that are perceived as binding

Source: José Cossa, *Power, Politics, and Higher Education in Southern Africa: International Regimes, Local Governments, and Educational Autonomy* (Amherst, NY: Cambria Press, 2008),107.

The core of my argument is that so-called developing nations would benefit from a deep understanding of power dynamics on the negotiation table. An understanding of power dynamics provides, among many other benefits, insight into the nuanced forms of power that operate in the global arena and into the conflicting pressures that are put on so-called developing countries. It also

contributes to discourses on peace and conflict as well as international relations by providing another framework from which to examine terms in international negotiations, and helps to scrutinize the establishment of peace agreements by engaging issues of fairness and participatory equity in relation to the extent and kind of power each party brings to the agreement and is allowed to exert. The success of equitable political participation of so-called developing countries depends largely on their success in positioning themselves as essential at the negotiating table.

### Notes

<sup>1</sup> José Cossa, *Power, Politics, and Higher Education in Southern Africa: International Regimes, Local Governments, and Educational Autonomy* (Amherst, NY: Cambria Press, 2008).

<sup>2</sup> The descriptor “so-called” is an indication that I do not subscribe to the nomenclature “developing” and “developed” nations, thus using such descriptor as a disclaimer.

<sup>3</sup> Ibid.

<sup>4</sup> Ibid., 27.

<sup>5</sup> For other works on power dynamics see Robert Gilpin, *Global Political Economy: Understanding the International Economic Order* (Princeton, New Jersey: Princeton University, 2001); and, Robert Keohane, *After Hegemony: Cooperation and Discord in the World Political Economy* (Princeton, New Jersey: Princeton University, 1984).

<sup>6</sup> José Cossa, *Power, Politics, and Higher Education in Southern Africa: International Regimes, Local Governments, and Educational Autonomy*. (Amherst, NY: Cambria Press, 2008).

<sup>7</sup> Consult Morgan Stanley Capital Information (MSCI) for reference to the Emerging Markets and Frontier Markets Indices ([http://www.msci.com/products/indexes/tools/index\\_country\\_membership/](http://www.msci.com/products/indexes/tools/index_country_membership/)). [http://www.msci.com/products/indexes/tools/index\\_country\\_membership/](http://www.msci.com/products/indexes/tools/index_country_membership/). Retrieved November 11, 2014.

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