

# **What is 'New' in the New Partnership for African Development (NEPAD)? Revisiting Liberalization and Democratization in Southern Africa**

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This paper examines the New Partnership for African Development (NEPAD) in the context of recent debates in Southern Africa. If the nexus between liberalization and democratization is the lynchpin of NEPAD, then how new and how different is NEPAD from similar initiatives in recent years, including debates about structural adjustment, the African Renaissance, and the New Africa Initiative?

The question of structural adjustment programmes (SAPs), as advocated by the International Monetary Fund (IMF) and the World Bank, and whether Southern Africa has reached a "post-adjustment" period is key to understanding the evolution of economic debates on the African continent. One of the most problematic aspects of the advocates of the liberalization model is with regard to the marriage of the propagation of democracy to foreign economic and political penetration. The debate on structural adjustment in Africa has outlined this concern most clearly. The advocates of liberal market reform throughout Africa have faced a sustained challenge on the implications of allowing an unfettered 'market mechanism' to operate in highly dependent and vulnerable economies. The sphere of economics throughout the 1980s and 1990s has been characterized by both enforced constraint and market failure, which has led to the movement towards a post-adjustment discourse in Africa and in the international financial institutions.

The current transnational neoliberal economic offensive to open African markets seeks to claim, in the face of strong internal opposition, that Africa is being prepared for democracy. This is particularly true in Southern Africa. Are countries, then, being designated as choiceless democracies? In other words, who are the agents of market reform, and who are they responsible to? The hostility with which international financial institutions have approached the question of state intervention in Africa has been the subject of much discussion, particularly with respect to the economic, social and political effects of structural adjustment on the continent. In Southern Africa this has been exemplified over the debate in South Africa over GEAR, and the varied debates over structural adjustment programmes particularly in Zimbabwe, Zambia, Mozambique, Tanzania and Malawi.

The centrality of this economic argument has been challenged from a pragmatic perspective, after over two decades of liberal market reform throughout much of Africa. The belief in the mythical market to alleviate the African economic condition, therefore, is open to empirical contestation. There is no firm consensus on the effects of liberal market reforms in Africa, but a powerful and growing African perspective argues that these reforms have not only failed to improve the African condition, but they have actually worsened it. The importance of this perspective as a criticism of the liberal paradigm can not be overstated, because if true the liberal assumption in international relations of open markets offering opportunities for mutual gain will of necessity be open to question. If NEPAD seeks to extend the liberalization argument in the African realm, what lessons can we learn from these debates in developing 'partnerships' with the West?

