Jürgen Habermas' Theory of Communicative Action and the Quest for Peace Building in Africa

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Abstract

The quest for peace building and the appropriate means of attaining it is a perennial subject of thought. The importance of peace in any society cannot be over emphasis. For there to be a development in any society, peace is sacrosanct and the consequence of the absence of peace in any society usually lead to a state of unrest, just as we have in many African countries today. Jürgen Habermas puts forward the ideas of 'communicative action'. In his theory of communicative action, Habermas introduces the concept of 'crisis'. For Habermas, crisis comes when modern society fails to meet individual needs and when institutions in society manipulate individuals. He explains that people interact to respond to this crisis and he calls this interaction "communicative action". Habermas asserts that rationality must be dialogical or 'communicative' where participants advance arguments and counterarguments. He also argues that communicative rationality is the consensus-bringing force of argumentative speech. Only the force of the better argument reaches consensual decisions, so that, at the end of deliberative process, all concerned are convinced by the position reached and accept them as reasonable. Could this be applicable to Africa situation, because an attempt to understand the impact of peace on our societies in Africa had become a phenomenal mirage? The trust of this work will be to examine impact of peace building on Africa, as we interrogate through the prism of Jurgen Habermas' theory of communicative action.

Keywords: Africa, Communicative, Consensual, philosophical, speculation.

Introduction

The quest for what constitutes peace building and the authentic means of attaining it have been a subject of intense philosophical speculation right from immemorial time. There were expectations that the new millennium would usher in a peace dividend for Africa, but the reality has been more complex. All available **60**

evidence shows that many countries in Africa are involved in armed conflict and some are passing through a crisis situation which may explode into full armed conflict. Nigeria is an example of a country passing through a crisis situation that may eventually result in serious armed conflict. The reality of the absence of peace in Africa and the fecundity of philosophy at solving the problem which had started right from the ancient era in philosophy parlance responsible for the present attempt to remedy the situation through the work of Jurgen Habermas' theory of communicative action. Communicative action can be understood as a circular process in which the actor is two things in one: an initiator, who masters situations through actions for which he is accountable, and a product of the transitions surrounding him, of groups whose cohesion is based on solidarity to which he belongs, and of processes of socialisation in which he is reared 1

Jürgen Habermas' Theory on Communicative Action

Jürgen Habermas proposed the concepts of "communicative action" and "consensus through debate and argumentation" in *Between Facts and Norms: Contributions to a Discourse Theory of Law and democracy.* Habermas defines communicative action as the establishment of social interactions between two or more social actors with the goal of mutual understanding and agreement. According to him, this involves a call to action using everyday language, such as saying or writing. The simplest acts might be gestures with meaning, such as shaking hands or greeting someone. These gestures serve to initiate or maintain a dialogue between two or more people. Habermas "identified three types of communicative action: transferring of information, establishing relations with others and enabling for self-expression.

Habermas J 1981. Moral Consciousness and Communicative Action. MCCA. http://www.msu.edu/user/robins11/habermas/main.htm/. (1981) Accessed August 2022.

Communicative action is cognitive, interactive and expressive. It takes place between individuals or groups".²

Communication between individuals is the most crucial component of the structure of the society. It is impossible to comprehend society without first comprehending individual communication. Habermas analyzes the growth and attendant conflict, in modern society. He utilized communicative action to provide the critical features of his opinion about society. He introduces the concept of crisis in his communicative action theory. Crisis occurs, according to him, when modern society fails to meet individual needs. He argues that people engage one another in response to crisis. This is "communicative action", communicative action in this sense is the one type of action that Habermas says uses all the human ways of thinking, and language. This combination will allow stakeholders to understand and agree with one another and to make plans for common action. The act of coming together and agreeing (communicative action) takes the place of revolution as a mode of change. It calls not only for dialogue, but for space for safe and free expression. Building consensus and understanding difference through dialogue is at the heart of nurturing a culture of communication and participation among citizen who are stakeholder in the affairs of the state.

On Rational communication, according to Habermas,³ rationality must be dialogical or 'communicative. Participants advance arguments and counter arguments. When he claims that communicative rationality is the power that brings argumentative speech to a consensus, he is straightforward in his justification of communicative reason. He claims that only the strength of the better argument can lead to consensus conclusions and that at the end of the deliberative process, all parties involved are convinced of the position reached and decision taken accepting them as

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Habermas J. Communication and the Evolution of Society. (Trans. T MacCarthy). (London: Heinemann, 1976), Pg. 299.

See Elster J. Deliberative Democracy. (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1998).

rational.

Habermas position is supported by Johnson, Pete, and Du Plessis⁴ through the claim that language is a tool of rational communication. The focus on how language is utilized to promote mutual understanding through speech actions, or linguistic communication in which the speaker performs an action. Participants according to Habermas can only arrive at the truth, when language enables mutual comprehension through effective communicative action.

Truthfulness arises, according to Habermas "with regard to the general pragmatic functions of the establishment of interpersonal relations on the one hand, and the portrayal of facts on the other". To put it another way, truth emerges when both interpersonal relationships and agreed-upon facts are conveyed. Habermas' notion of rational debate and democratic procedure is based on his belief in the possibility of truth through communicative action. For Habermas if there are no public dialogues in which fundamental concerns and demands are mutually shared then the democratic process and as such, the legitimacy of the political system, will fail, according to Habermas.

Effective communication is at the heart of this approach to democracy. The "public sphere," according to Habermas, is a discursive place where citizens participate and act through discourse and debate. Politics is a public dialogue guided by reason and legitimizing procedures. Roederer and Moelendorf agree with Habermas that rationality is essential for establishing a procedural model of politics in order for democratic participation to be successful. Democratic deliberation, according to Habermas, constitutes communicative reason. He claims that, whereas strategic action coordinates social interaction through

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Johnson D, Pete S & Du Plessis M. Jurisprudence: A South African Perspective.
(Durban: LexisnexisButterworths, 2001), Pg. 235.
Habermas J. Communication and the Evolution of Society, Pg. 299.

Roederer C & Moellendorf D. *Jurisprudence*. (Lansdowne: Juta & Company, 2004), Pg. 430.

external influence or force, communicative reason does so through 'consent,' which entails arriving at an agreement that is justifiable solely on the basis of the relevant parties' generalisable interests through argumentative communication.⁷

On Argumentative Communication, according to Habermas, participation must always lead to agreement. He contends that consensus should be exposed to discussion and reflection through argumentative communication. To put it another way, he believes that agreement should not be a precondition for discussion, but rather should reflect the democratic discourse of informed thought and reflection in response to the needs of an engaged populace.⁸ Habermas argues that people's rights to participate in deliberation are legally protected, and that no one is to be excluded. For him, the success of communicative action depends on the institutionalization of the corresponding procedures and circumstances that would allow citizens to debate in informal public forums rather than on a collectively acting citizenry. In the deliberative process, Habermas argues that everyone should have "an equal opportunity to be heard." Elster, 10 who believes that deliberation refers either to a particular type of discussion — one that involves the careful and serious weighing of reasons for and against some proposition— or to an inferior process by which an individual weighs reasons for and against courses of action, supports Habermas' concept of deliberation. Elster 11 also stressed that such deliberative democracy theorists like Habermas are engaged in encourage public deliberation (a specific type of conversation) — rather than just private or 'interior' deliberation. To explain this, Habermas recognizes that a discourse theoretic interpretation insists on the fact that democratic will-formation draws its legitimizing force from both communicative

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Habermas J. Communication and the Evolution of Society, Pg. 299. Habermas J. Communication and the Evolution of Society, Pg. 299.

Habermas J. Communication and the Evolution of Society, Pg. 147.

Elster, J. Deliberative Democracy. Pg. 63. Elster, J. Deliberative Democracy. Pg. 63.

presuppositions that allow better arguments to come into play in various forms of deliberation and procedures that ensure fair bargaining processes.¹²

The positive aspects of modernity, according to Habermas, are expressions of reason (rationality), such as the acknowledgement of human rights and the establishment of general rules. This means that, in a deliberative democracy, public reasoning is at the heart of political legitimacy. This concept of justification through public reasoning can be reflected in an idealized procedure of political debate, built to capture the communicative ideals of freedom, equality, and reasoning. This means that public reasoning is at the heart of political legitimacy in a deliberative democracy. This concept of public thinking might be mirrored in an idealized technique of political debate, which is designed to encapsulate the communication principles of freedom, equality, and rationality.

These viewpoints are consistent with African peace building efforts, which call for both discussion and unrestricted expression. The right to freedom of expression, freedom of association, and freedom of the person are among the other basic liberties enshrined in Africa's peace building efforts. The key to cultivating a culture of communication and participation in decision-making is to reach consensus through discourse. However, given the African scenario, it appears to be unrealistic.

The African Situation

Due to the failure to radically reform the inherited post-colonial state, society, and politics, peace building in Africa has had minimal success. The neocolonial environment hampered the development of long-term peace. This is because, Africans' long history of structural violence, which manifests itself in intra- and inter-state warfare, necessitate the need for a more basic peace

Habermas J. Communication and the Evolution of Society, Pg. 24.
 Johnson, D. Pete S & Du Plessis M. Jurisprudence: A South African Perspective. (Durban: LexisnexisButterworths, 2001), Pg. 235.

than is currently been observed in international arena. To achieve complete decolonial peace; it is necessary for transition to a peace paradigm that encourages the continuous decolonisation of the African state and society.

Furthermore, their peace building efforts have a fundamental flaw because they were established through violent processes of conquest, colonisation, and dominance; they envision peace without decommissioning colonialist and its underlying logics and its support for perpetual and repeated violence. The consequences is been experienced in all most all the countries in Africa today, because the structural violence still persist. The peace building efforts could not be achieved.

More so, the concept of African solutions to African problems loses all relevance, because majority of the problems facing Africa were not African creations. To find a suitable solution to African problems there will be the need to decommissioning of the colonial institutions that underlay African problems, many of which are inherently global. For example, African ongoing struggle is not solely about what African political players do or do not do, but also about African's continuous connections with their former colonial masters, which persist despite independence of many African countries. The entire idea of the African striving to gain independence involves a rebellion against colonial structures that reinforce colonial circumstances of dependency, violence, divisions, illusions, and other aspects in the conflict. For Africa to have a complete reformed society, Africa need to make significant progress toward a decolonial peace in which the colonial condition had altered.

Ali Mazrui considers Africa today to be plagued by the Berlin curse, referring to the 1884–5 European partitioning of Africa into unviable nations, which buried the paradigm of violence at the very root of African statehood, a paradigm Africa is still grappling with. ¹⁴ This resulted in what Ngugi wa Thiong'o refers to as "deep

Mazuri, A. "Toward Shared Values" in *A World Federation of Cultures: An African Perspective*. (New York: The Free Press, 1990), Pg. 23.

disintegration," which has thwarted long-term efforts at unity, peace, and development.¹⁵ This, according to him, is partly due to the fact that the new African elite were raised in the same Euro-North American modernity that shaped the current African situation. As a result, efforts at peace, development, and emancipation at various levels in Africa have only provided short relief rather than long-term answers.

Another noticeable problem is politics of identity which is prone to unequal distribution of wealth which most time aggravate political crisis. One section of the country providing about 90% of the annual total revenue of a country and the other parts are contributing insignificant percentages. The contributing sections were and still remained undeveloped, while all other parts remain constantly developing and beautifying every day. This situation is generating a lot of crisis in many countries in Africa today. This has been responsible for the militias' activities in the Niger Delta in Nigeria. This situation is worrisome. Should the purpose of one ethnic, social, political and economic group be done at the ruins of others? Will it not be of mere service to the country development, if all others ethnic groups are develop as well, more so when the bulk of the revenue come from the region. According to Ajah¹⁶ national integration in many African countries after independence was and still is not a choice rather it is a necessity.

The role of elite in many African countries also affected her political system. Adesiyan and Segun¹⁷ corroborated the above when they averred that those elites are willing to violate the rules of democratic gain and overstep normal bound of authority. Higley claimed that; elite are "persons who, by virtue of their

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Literature (2009), Pg. 32.
Ajah.M. "Nigeria's Stability Impacts Positively on Africa". Daily Trust, (15,9. 2006), Pg. 12.

^{15.} Wa Thiong'on Decolonising the Mind: The Politics of Language in Africa Literature (2009) Pg 32

Adesiyan, V.A. and Segun, O. "A Review of the Dynamics of Elite Recruitment, Granting Elite and its Implications on Nigeria Political Space". *International Journal of Development Studies*, 7. 21. (2013), Pg. 23.

strategic locations in large or otherwise pivotal organizations and movements, are able to affect political outcomes regularly and substantially". This theory explains the power dynamics and social relations surrounding the acquisition and preservation of state power within the democratic framework. It reveals the fundamental characters and realities of representative democracy, where the country is structure into powerless majority and powerful minority. The powerful minority are the elite that control the state power while the powerless majorities are governed by the elites. In every society elites are considered to have the capacity to possess organizational competence and vast political knowledge necessary for steering the political statecraft in a democratic dispensation but they represent a negation of the key democratic principle of mass ownership of the governance process. This has made it almost impossible for the enthronement of democracy in many African states.

Furthermore, the reliance on former colonial powers and other external forces for financial and technical resources jeopardizes peace building efforts. The African saying that "borrowed waters do not quench one's thirst" emphasizes the pan-African ideal of self-reliance. As a result, relying on outside funding for peace building violates the fundamental aim of the effort. The attempt is based on African renaissance and decolonization ideas; however, these objectives cannot be realized while Western countries have free reign to influence what Africa thinks and does in this regard. The failure to fund its programs in general, as well as the inability of many of its member nations to fund their regular budgets, is a major threat to Africa's second decolonisation and its goal of completing the continent's incomplete liberation process. This resource dilemma reveals a basic flaw in the post-colonial African situation, and it plays a significant role in the post-colonial realities of shattered expectations, deferred dreams, and illusions of transformation. Because of the excessive reliance on rich European Union money and other external donors, peace building is not sustainable and cannot be termed truly sovereign and African.

Leadership deficit is another important dilemma of African. Babangida Aliyu¹⁸ opines that leadership deficit has over the years exposed many countries in Africa to high-level of corruption, bad governance, political instability and a cyclical legitimacy crisis. In an ideal society, leaders are expected to be role models. But the problem with many African leaders has remained the issue of bad leadership. Our leaders lack discipline and the citizens are following suit. Many African leaders have always been known for not obeying the constitution, since the constitution itself lacks merit. The colonialists have already set in place a bad example of governance, but Africa lack good leadership that will confront this dilemma and thus take Africa out of its debilitating condition.¹⁹

Leadership is observed to be the most critical, such that many depict the continent as "a faraway place where good people go hungry, bad people run government, and chaos and anarchy are the norm". 20 More so, it has been rightly observed that under "the various oppressive authoritarian regimes which Africa countries have had the misfortune to chafe under for the greater part of its post-colonial history, Africans have been treated to a bastardization of constitutionalism and growing impotence of the judiciary in the face of countless acts of impunity, executive lawlessness and economic brigandage by praetorian guards that had imposed themselves on the political landscape of the nation". ²¹ The dearth of good leadership in postcolonial Africa is inversely proportional to the widespread poverty, not only of ideas about running the societies and states, but also the

Aliyu Babangida, M. "Nigeria's Unity and Regional Socio-Political Groups: Influence and Impact of the Northern State's Governors' Forum". Chatham House, London. (2012), Pg. 43.

Afolayan, A. "Poverty as Statecraft: Preliminary Reflections on African Leadership". *Lumina*, 20, 1. (2009), Pg. 1.

Thomson. A. *An Introduction to African Politics*. 2nd Edition, (London: Particular 2009).

Routledge, 2002), Pg. 1.

Oyebode, A. "The Challenges of Building a Virile Democratic Nation in Critical Issues on Sustainable Democracy and Development: Nigerian Perspective". *Leadership Watch*, (2005), Pg. 49-61.

impoverishment of the populace.²² Consequently, national development has been slow and the political environment uncertain, the enthronement of constitutional democratic governance remained a mirage, peace building fails continuously.

More so, structural conflict is a serious social unrest that forces the existing system to radically change or modify to accommodate the alienated and dissatisfied ones. With particular reference to Nigeria, Obiora C. Okafor²³ argues that the structural crisis is experienced in the persistent social conflicts that have continued to threaten national harmony in relation to the challenges of unfair distribution of resources and some of the factors such as poverty, corruption, ethno-religious upheavals, political instability and boundary disputes, to mention but a few that encourage and exacerbate conflicts in the country. For Johan Galtung, 24 the kernel of the concept is that conflicts are structured into the society like" ...political and economic exclusion, injustice, poverty, disease, exploitation, inequity etc., as sources of conflict". They are entrenched in the structure of the society and can lead to adverse consequences because they are politically and economically repressive in form of exclusionary and discriminatory policies against certain groups.²⁵

Okafor contends that Nigeria is faced with extremely serious structural crisis as evident in the intensity of the conflicts and conflagrations that have attended the country's postindependence social interactions. These are manifested in the form of perceived lack of true federalism and regional autonomy; resource control; the national revenue allocation formula; the establishment of the state police forces; the institution of sharia

Afolayan, A. "Poverty as Statecraft: Preliminary Reflections on African Leadership", Pg. 5.
Okafor, O.C. "Convention Refugee hood, Early Warning Signs, and the Structural Crisis of Legitimate Statehood in Contemporary Nigeria". Buffalo Human Rights Law Review, 9, 6. (2003), Pg. 6.
Galtung, J. Cultural Violence. Journal of Peace Research, 27. (1990: 3).
Ademola, F.S. (2006) "Theories of Social Conflict" in Best, S.G., (Ed.), Introduction to Afolayan, A Poverty as Statecraft: Preliminary Reflections on African Leadership. Lumina, 20, Pg. 1 African Leadership. Lumina, 20, Pg. 1.

criminal law in some states; and the calls for a national conference as evidence of the existence of structural conflicts in the country. ²⁶

Institutional rebuilding, leadership development, citizenship enhancement, and economic revitalization should all be part of the process. On a practical level, the components of conflict resolution and peace building must be viewed as the beginning of the post-conflict reconstruction and development process. The term "post-conflict" does not imply that interventions begin after the war has finished, but rather that the focus of intervention is determined by what occurs after all agreements have been completely implemented.

The Relevance of Habermas' Theory of Communicative Action for Africa

Habermas' argument will be about how to enhance democratic involvement and decision-making without inhibiting sociocultural differences in the context of peace building. To put it another way, his debate will center on how to democratically reflect difference without sanctioning unfairness and intolerance among stakeholders. For African states, the discussant's preferences will be modified by active interchange of ideas, which includes not just stating thoughts, but also listening, because discussants can be convinced and their thinking transformed through the act of interacting and listening. This combination will enable debaters to comprehend and agree with one another, as well as to devise plans for joint action to help Africans. With reference to Habermas' notion of discursive democracy for governance, his account could be particularly useful, because all discussants must engage in thought and reflection to persuade one another of their points of view, particularly during meetings for the sake of a better argument.

Adopting Habermas' concept of consensus through debate and reasoning could help to include all participants. Discussants

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Okafor, O.C. "Convention Refugee hood, Early Warning Signs, and the Structural Crisis of Legitimate Statehood in Contemporary Nigeria", Pg. 6.

on peace building could benefit from Habermas viewpoints in the sense that they could focus on how to promote peace building in Africa without infringing on socio-cultural differences, which appear to be obstructing development in Africa's governance structure at the moment. The concept of communicative action, according to Habermas, is a sort of action in which all human modes of thinking, as well as language, are employed. This combination could enable all participants to comprehend and agree with one another, as well as establish strategies for the common benefit on the topic at hand. This is exactly what the governance structure requires, as discussants must think and act rationally in order to develop superior arguments.

Discussants would be able to freely communicate opinions using this method. They would not only express their thoughts, but also listen to the viewpoints of others. Participants may be convinced and their thinking modified as a result of the act of interacting and listening. Consensus-building for peace would be achieved via deliberation and reasoning involving all participants. Peace building in Africa could be achieved through the ability of discussants to forward arguments and counter arguments. Deliberative arguments could allow participants, to freely express their viewpoints and discuss issues that are important to their society's common good.

What method of debate or discussion will be used to enable the development of an acceptable choice in which all participants' perspectives on African peace building are heard? Any attempt to control decisions at this time will make cooperation on peace building impossible, because democracy allows for diversity and differences of opinion. Deliberation is widely understood to mean that claims for or against collective decisions must be justified to one another in such a way that, given the opportunity to consider, these individuals can accept the decision reached. The question is: what are the dialogue conditions that will allow participants to reach a decision not by determining which preferences have the most numerical support, but by determining which proposals are

supported by the best reason, as opposed to determining which preferences have the most numerical support?

Political inclusion is one of the prerequisites of discussion that must be met in order for participants to arrive at rational judgments. On this basis, a democratic decision is only legitimate if people who will be affected are included in the discussion and decision-making process. This is because if individuals are not included in decisions that affect their life, they will be considered as tools if they are expected to follow rules and policies or alter their activities in accordance with decisions made without their input. To borrow Wiredu's terms, inclusion refers to the smoothing of edges or the sorting out of discrepancies to arrive at what Ali Mazrui refers to as shared images.²⁷ When inclusiveness is achieved as a political goal, it enables the clear expression of viewpoints pertinent to the issues for which they seek answers. Apart from the foregoing, democracy also has a component that expresses political equality.

As a normative ideal, those who are impacted by political actions should not only be involved in the discussion and decision-making process, but should be included on an equal footing. Everyone has an equal opportunity to speak up, question established ideals, and be open to criticism. In the midst of the week's suppression, such an opportunity cannot exist. This means that in a democratic setting, there is no such thing as a privileged viewpoint. In other words, "conversation cannot be reduced to an act of one side depositing concept in another," as Paulo Freire²⁸ puts it. Dialogue is a state of responsible persons acting in a free arena. It is an act that denounces the relationship of dominance.

In addition to the foregoing, communication as a shared task of overcoming differences is impossible to achieve without humility. This is to suggest that if a party believes it is superior to others, or that it has a monopoly on information or truth, it is

Mazuri, A. "Toward Shared Values" A World Federation of Cultures: An African Perspective, Pg. 399.
Paulo Freire. *Cultural Action and Conscientization*, Pg. 61.

engaging in dominance. "How can there be discourse if I am tortured and worried by the prospect of being displaced, or if I am close to- and even insulted by the input of others".29 To put it another way, in a dialogue, we must tolerate each other's points of view. As a result, there are "neither absolute ignoramuses nor perfect sages" in a discussion environment; "they are merely people who are seeking, collectively, to learn more than they presently know". 30 In other words, "What is required for dialogue...is openness to various points of view, a willingness to investigate, and empathy for the relative truth of each point of view". However, a discussion among positions will eventually reveal that many desperate ideas are in fact interconnected, not by reference to an absolute, comprehensive image, but by the fact that debate participants will have certain shared worries.³¹

More so, communication necessitates a high level of trust in one another. There can be no communication without the initial belief in our ability to overcome our differences. Simply said, communication requires faith in one another; the dialogical man believes in other men even before meeting them face to face. 32 This is an achievement that isn't possible in a domineering environment.

To put it another way, the viability of discussion is determined not by the patience and persuasiveness of the dialoguers, but rather by the reality that no single individual or organization continuously places anyone or any group in a minority position. Having faith in one another means being willing to change our minds or interests because we've been convinced that our initial viewpoints or ideas are no longer relevant to the larger issues at

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Ebijuwa, T. "Consensus as a Valid Political ideal". *Africa: Journal of Contemporary Issues*. Vol.1, .No1. (2003), Pg. 21.
Ebijuwa, T. "Consensus as a Valid Political Ideal", Pg. 21.
Manuskhani, R. "Wisdom in a Postmodern Age" *Filosofia: International Journal of Philosophy, De* La Salle University, Manila, (2002), Pg. 189.
Manuskhani, R. "Wisdom in a Postmodern Age" Pg. 190.

hand. Those who follow this line of thinking "are willing to submit to the epistemic habits of change required to demand people's commitment to a life of continuous inquiry". 33

Conclusion

In this paper, I have argued that Habermas' argument of 'communicative action' and 'consensus' would hinge on how to encourage democratic involvement and decision-making in peace building in Africa. Habermas' method, with his concept of discursive democracy, may be useful if African leaders choose to engage in deliberation and reflection for inclusive governance. As an alternative, this paper has recommended communicative action, which is based on democratic ideas. This option is based on the premise that if an interchange of viewpoints should be unrestricted, then no individual or group of individuals can legally exclude others from debating on issues that they care about.

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