

Upshots and Unintended Consequences of Africa's Nuclear Energy Ambitions

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Earlier this month, cash-strapped Zimbabwe announced that it had signed a nuclear cooperation agreement with Russia to engage in uranium exploration and enrichment with a view to the possibility of generating nuclear energy in future. In so doing, it joined the ranks of developing countries that have recently expressed strong interest in pursuing nuclear power programmes. African countries in particular, from rapidly growing regional powerhouse Kenya to tiny Rwanda, appear to harbour some of the strongest interest among developing countries and seem especially eager to pursue nuclear power. On the sellers' side, the Russians and Chinese appear to be the most enthusiastic sellers judging by the relatively favourable terms under which they are prepared to enter into deals with developing countries to establish nuclear power programmes.

Media pundits and sundry commentators have offered no shortage of explanations for why countries are keen on nuclear power. According to the general consensus, increasing interest in nuclear power is being driven by one or a combination of supposedly self-evident factors. For developing countries, the appeal of nuclear power stems mainly from

- a) their need to expand energy output in order to facilitate socioeconomic development and
- b) the attractiveness of easy access to relatively unconditional finance offered by the Chinese.

As an added benefit for domestic policymakers, nuclear power affords them the opportunity to portray themselves as doing something to reduce global greenhouse gas emissions, given lower carbon emissions from nuclear electricity than from fossil fuel sources, and promote national development by exploiting an abundantly available natural resource i.e. uranium. For the Chinese and Russians, the prevailing view seems to be that their motivation is primarily commercial. In the case of the Russians, to sell their technology in order to earn foreign exchange revenues and thereby reduce their dependence on oil as a source of foreign exchange.

In the case of the Chinese, to invest and earn returns on the considerable financial reserves which they have built up through the trade surpluses they have consistently run with the rest of the world. A secondary consideration is argued to be the resumption of geopolitical rivalries between these rapidly emerging countries and the former colonial overlords of the West. In terms of this line of argument, the finance and nuclear expertise the Chinese and Russians are so keen on offering to developing countries represents an attempt by these two countries to woo African countries and gain influence in these markets and forms part of

their strategy to outmanoeuvre global geopolitical rivals. Indeed, if cynics are to be believed, the Chinese are 'neo-colonialists' and the cheap credit they offer is nothing but a ploy to secure dominance over African countries' affairs by usurping their fiscal independence through ensnaring them in a 'debt-trap'.

Speculation on the exact reasons therefor aside, there are a number of upshots and unintended consequences of these developments. Not so obvious, at first glance at least, as the supposed reasons why different stakeholders are interested in nuclear power, it is fairly easy to overlook the important ways in which they could affect Africa's developmental trajectory and the character of the societies Africans build in future.

Firstly, the nature of nuclear technology itself and countries' historical experiences therewith suggests that the nuclear industry is held to lower public standards of transparency and accountability and thus engenders greater levels of state secrecy. At the same time, ready access to funds in the form of no-strings attached loans that are earmarked for spending on bloated infrastructure projects affords vested interest groups with control over these funds the ability to dispense state largesse to favoured individuals or members of certain groups. This ability, in turn, grants them the power to purchase support, manipulate the political system and thereby maintain the status quo. This ultimately undermines democracy. Furthermore, due to the substantial upfront costs and long lead times associated with nuclear investments, it takes a considerable amount of time before nuclear investments pay themselves off.

By making significant investments in the nuclear sector, developing countries lock themselves into this technology for the foreseeable future thus preventing them from investing meaningfully in newer technologies in the rapidly growing renewable energy sector. As a result, they are likely to diminish their competitiveness in markets where African and other developing countries ought to enjoy a competitive advantage by virtue of their natural resource endowments and the relatively limited investments they have already made in energy infrastructure that would become obsolete in the event they invest heavily in renewable energy resources. This would leave developed countries and emerging powers to become global leaders in the development of the alternative energy resources that look set to fuel development in future much the same way as coal did the Industrial Revolution. Consequently, the global status quo is entrenched and Africa will remain locked into its current lowly position on the global hierarchy.

Based on the arguments above, it is contended that it might be prudent for observers and ordinary Africans, especially citizens of countries that are most eager to rush into nuclear power programmes, to ponder the less obvious but deep implications of their countries' nuclear plans. Paying greater attention to crafting a shared vision of the societies they would like to create in future and Africa's place in global affairs rather than obsessing over the reasons why nuclear power currently appeals to different actors in the industry so much would be a good place to start.

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