

GROWTH POLE STRATEGY AS A PANACEA FOR SUB-SAHARAN AFRICA'S REGIONAL DEVELOPMENT CHALLENGES: REFLECTIONS FROM CAMEROON AND NIGERIA¹

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Abstract

At the dawn of independence, most Sub-Saharan African (SSA) nations undertook a number of regional development policies to bridge the gap between and within regions. This culminated in the institution of development plans which sought to introduce growth poles where development impulses could trickle to other segments of society. The growth pole strategy which contributed immensely to address regional development challenges in some parts of Europe may not have received significant success in SSA due to a number of implied assumptions and realistic deficiencies which disarmed the efficacy of the concept. Experience within SSA shows that growth poles were characterized by a lack of propulsive industries. Using case studies from Cameroon and Nigeria, we trace the different growth pole strategies that have been adopted and their effectiveness in addressing regional development challenges. We conclude that tailor-made growth pole strategies are required for Sub-Saharan African (SSA) nations.

Keywords: Growth Pole, Sub-Saharan Africa, Regional Development, Cameroon, Nigeria

Introduction

Unequal development in any given community, region or nation remains a major problem to planners and developers of the societies in question (Ndongko, 1974). In this connection therefore, the problem of social and economic justice in ensuring the fair and balanced distribution of the fruits of socio-economic progress are crucial and challenging especially in terms of the different classes of the societal ladder in the regions in question (Kimengsi, 2011). It has been established that all places will not receive equal levels of development at once. Therefore governments have the challenge to ensure inclusive development in the midst of unbalanced growth by

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bringing lagging and leading regions closer in economic terms (Kimengsi, 2011; World Development Report, 2009). One of the ways through which governments have over the years sought to close the gap between economically viable and economically tottering areas is through the institution of the growth pole strategy. These efforts have been instituted taking into consideration the fact that sustainable development cannot be achieved without bridging the yawning chasm between leading and backward areas.

In the 1960s and 70s, growth poles were a popular regional development strategy, with national governments identifying and investing in centers that were considered as growth poles. This was done with the belief that it would ultimately reduce regional disparities in employment and incomes, facilitate decentralization, and support rapid industrialization (Ogunleye, 2011). Most nations of Sub Saharan Africa embarked on a number of regional development efforts at the dawn of independence. This culminated in the institution of a number of development plans. For instance, the 5-year development plan for Cameroon, and the 4-year development plan for Nigeria. Central among these plans was the need for growth poles where development impulses could trickle to the other segments of society (Kimengsi, 2011). Their development strategies therefore laid credence to the growth pole strategy of François Perroux which at that time was seen as an idea in good currency. The growth-pole strategy has been advocated to address regional-problem settings and policy concerns such as depressed-area revival, the encouragement of regional deconcentration, the modification of a national urban system, and the pursuit of interregional balance.

The growth-pole strategy typically involves the focusing of investment at a limited number of locations (usually as part of a deliberate effort to modify regional spatial structure), in an attempt to encourage economic activity thereby raising levels of welfare within a region. By the mid- 1960s, the growth-pole strategy had emerged as the object of considerable fascination and enthusiasm, and was viewed as an idea in good currency (Lasue, 1969).

While many lessons have been learnt in the field of regional policy, it is evident that a majority of regional development attempts today still lay credence to the growth pole strategy (Kimengsi, 2011; Parr, 1999). The strategy which contributed immensely to address regional development challenges in some parts of Europe such as France and Italy may not have received significant success in Sub-Saharan Africa due to a number of implied assumptions and realistic deficiencies which tend to disarm the efficacy of the concept (Mabogunje and Faniran, 1977). This paper argues that growth-poling may not have served as a panacea in Cameroon and Nigeria due to a number of factors including geographical differences, their inherent assumptions, the absence of tailor-made strategies and weak institutions. There is therefore a need for a revolutionised approach to be adopted or enabling environments to be introduced and sustained to assist in growth-poling and balancing observed imbalance within these countries of SSA. The approach must take into consideration the need for tailor-made growth pole policies, the development of sound institutions with a possibility of replicating their best practices at the peripheries, and huge investments in the infrastructural sector to support the revolutionized approach.

Perhaps an exception in Africa's growth pole experience is South Africa. The South African government successfully applied the growth pole strategy to drive national growth, development, and transformation (Ogunleye, 2011). The country implemented a tailor-made regional development policy in the 1960s that relied heavily on this strategy. The government engaged in massive infrastructure investment and establishment of industries in selected areas with the belief that development in such areas will gradually diffuse to the poorer and isolated parts of the country. These developments incorporated issues of sustainability.

The Growth Pole Concept Revisited

Theoretical discussions on regional disparities by Myrdal (Cumulative Causation) as well as the concentration and dispersion theories, as mainly expressed by Christaller (central place), Perroux (enlargement poles) and Boudeville (growth poles), have greatly supported the formation of the growth poles and diffusion model (Rodrigue *et al.*, 2006). Internationally, the growth pole strategy has ruled the field of regional policy and practice for many decades, since the beginning of the 20th century and most specifically after World War II. This strategy was widely applied in the late 1960s and early 1970s by industrialized and developing countries alike in their urban, regional, and national development planning (Christofakis & Papadaskalopoulos, 2011). Originally introduced by English economist William Petty (1623-1687) which focused on the high growth observed in London during that period, French Economist Francois Perroux is largely credited for the concept. Perroux contextualized the growth pole theory on economic rather than physical space, with a consideration that these poles are centres of the most intense economic activity. Growth poles were assumed to be linked to other sectors with varying degrees of strength determined by proximity in economic space (Ogunleye, 2011). The regional planning perspective advances Perroux's definition of growth poles as a strategy to reduce regional inequalities between core regions and their peripheries (Conyers, 2001).

Earlier works on growth-pole strategies did not make a clear distinction between the growth pole as a feature of a dynamic space economy and the growth pole as a key element in a strategy designed to improve the performance of a regional economic system. In other words, a distinction between the 'natural' or 'spontaneous' growth pole and the 'planned' or 'induced' growth pole was not made (Parr, 1999). Natural growth pole as a concept relates to growth within an economy which stems from the effects of disequilibrium and domination (Perroux, 1955). The growth pole was described primarily in terms of a complex of industries, linked in an input output sense and dominated by a propulsive or stimulant industry (*industrie motrice*), the latter being the engine of development by virtue of its capacity to innovate and to stimulate, as well as to dominate, other industries also known as *industries mues* (Perroux, 1961, 1964, 1988).

The concept of the growth pole was further elaborated by Hansen (1967) and Hermansen (1972), Paelinck (1965, 1968), Aydalot (1965) and Boudeville (1966). But this was not always undertaken satisfactorily (Parr, 1999). For

example, one definition of a growth pole in geographical space, in many respects typical of the period, involved a set of expanding industries located in an urban area and inducing further development of economic activity throughout its zone of influence (Boudeville, 1966).

A growth pole is considered as a town or city with an agglomeration of propulsive industries that stimulate growth. The absence of an automatic relation between growth in a major centre and development in the complementary region is the reason for the attention currently paid to the strategy of using growth pole concepts in regional economic planning (Mabugonje, 1971). It is meant to introduce a dynamic industry which will initiate economic development in backward areas. The idea originally was conceptualized by French scholar François Perroux in 1955 in an effort to decentralize the French automobile away from the Parisian basin. A decade later, J. R. Boudeville operationalized *la notion de pôle de croissance* so that slow-growth regions could develop quickly and extend multipliers throughout the rest of the nation's economy. The growth pole theme by Perroux (1955) proposed that “... *growth does not appear everywhere at the same time; it manifests itself at points or poles of growth with varying intensities; it is diffused throughout the whole economy by various channels and with differing overall effects*”

Three stages characterize the implementation of a growth pole strategy. The first stage entails locating a propulsive industry within a targeted growth pole. The second (or polarization) stage anticipates backwash effects where the gaps between the center (growth pole) and hinterland (periphery) will actually widen. The third (or spread) stage should produce trickledown benefits between the center and the periphery that ultimately will converge as economic development ensues. Supporters of the growth pole strategy recognize initial drawbacks, including backwash or polarization effects in the hinterland region. Talented workers will leave small towns and rural settings in search of new opportunities in the new industry. Discussions on the growth pole strategy identify five key factors influencing growth poling. Firstly, there should be a proven economic base, which can sustain growth through the exploitation of local natural resources (Manyanhaire *et al.*, 2011, 2009). Secondly, the existence of high potential for the development of substantial forward and backward linkages with the surrounding hinterlands. The third factor has to do with the availability of adequate resources, both physical and human to sustainably feed the growth pole. As a fourth factor, these centres have the potential to facilitate the process of industrial decentralisation by providing alternative but viable investment opportunities. Lastly, they are established in places where there is already some potential for economic growth and the role of government being to stimulate and support this potential until the process of economic growth becomes sustainable and equitable.

The effect of a growth pole on its hinterland or polarized region needs not be wholly favourable. Favourable and unfavourable influences are likely to operate at the same time and in opposite directions. The results will depend on the conditions under investigation which is likely to be influenced by the magnitude of the pole, the level of national development, the stage of regional economic development and the technical nature of regional economic activity, among others (Manyanhaire *et al.*, 2011; Parr 1973). In this regards, a sequence of three phases on the effects of

growth pole on hinterlands could be identified: (i) an initial phase during which the overall effects of the pole will be favourable (increased hinterland production, increased commuting, improved service provision etc) (ii) an intermediate phase during which the overall effects would be unfavourable (centralization of production, consolidation of points of service provision, etc.) and (iii) a final phase in which the overall effects are favourable once again (decentralization of economic activity and increasing demands being made on the hinterland. With such an idea in mind, it will be important that the study concentrates on designing strategies which are geared towards making the growth pole's (viable region) influence to be favourable to its hinterlands (Manyanhaire *et al.*, 2011; Parr 1973). Phase One and Three are considered as possible areas where success in the attainment of sustainable development can be registered since it creates a spread and trickle-down effect.

The Cameroonian Experience

Government policy on development continues to shed light on the need for balanced development, or to put it more succinctly, "regional balance". This policy stressed the need for the warm arms of development impulses to be felt by all and sundry of the population of their countries, cutting across different races, tribes, political, ethnic and denominational affiliations. Economic development in Cameroon has been placed on a regional basis, paying attention to the problems which are unique in the different regions of the country as exemplified by the different development plans of Ahidjo's Planned Liberalism and Biya's Communal Liberalism. Planned liberalism was realized through the institution of five year development plans which saw the development of a project map for all the regions of Cameroon and relied on heavy government investment. According to the policy of planned liberalism, the government identified development options and established priorities, given its limited resources. The priority projects were contained in National Development Plans which were established for a period of five years and included projects that help to consolidate the economy, create employment and ensured some level of balanced development in all the regions of Cameroon. These projects were in the domain of agriculture, fishing and resource development while other sectors which did not attract the profit motivated private sector and large scale industry, mining, education, energy, transport infrastructure and forestry were handled by the state. These sectors provided the essential resources and had to be handled wisely. This explains why there is still state involvement in some of these corporations such as CDE, AES_SONEL etc. The state became deeply involved in development and even when a business company took up one of these projects, government was still available to encourage and help in its realization through the layout and development of industrial zones, provision of loans and offering a variety of advantages which were set up in the Cameroon Investment Code. On the other hand small scale industry, farming and catering were in the hands of private individuals. Government recognized private ownership as a prime force in economic development and under this system of planned liberalism, the underlying focus was to set out guidelines to orient economic development and encourage private ownership.

Growth poles have enhanced overall development via the administrative creation of seven Regions in 1976 and later augmented to ten in 1987. Each of the ten regional capitals are spatially distributed in such a way that development

impulses are felt throughout the nation to enhance and buttress the growth of the lower order settlements. The ten regional capitals through demographic forces have grown immeasurably large in population due to their dominant roles. The glaring examples are Bamenda (NorthWest Region), Bafoussam (West Region), Ebolowa (South Region) and Buea (South West Region). Others like Douala, Garoua and Yaounde respectively in the Littoral, North and Centre Regions have since independence, combined their demographic influence with their administrative and economic roles to acquire growth and development impulses that covers the outer city regions. This has been feasible through the creation of roads linking the various divisional headquarters and the provision of basic infrastructures like healthcare through their specialized hospitals.

Most tropical towns today are experiencing a lot of tribal and ethnic diversity. The growth poles of Yaounde and Douala for example have substantial communities of at least fifteen, all with their own languages (Fombe & Balgah, 2012). This diversity has enhanced the attractive capacities of these urban areas based on similar rural ethnic populations. The growth strength of regional growth centres based on the 1987 and 2005 population Censuses is presented in Table 1. The contribution of each group in the development process of the smaller towns and villages is very instrumental. As illustrated by Fombe & Balgah (2012), the Mettas of the Widikum tribe excel in agriculture in towns of the South West Region while the Bamilekes excel in the business and commercial domains of major settlements in the Centre, Littoral and Eastern Regions.

Yaounde the political capital and Douala the economic capital of Cameroon have been so far the largest growth poles in terms of their population size (accommodating over 1.5million inhabitants since 2005). In spite of their growth, other regional poles like Bamenda and Garoua have been gaining greater populations due to their socio economic roles in the North West and North Regions and have become the fastest growing growth poles since 2005 with annual growth rates of 37.1% and 30.5% respectively compared to less than 20% for Douala and Yaounde (Table 1).

Table 1: Growth poles and regional strength for selected towns in Cameroon (1987 to 2006)

Region	Growth Centre	Number of Divisions	Population of administrative Region (2006)	% of total population
Northern Region (Far North, North and Adamawa)	Garoua	15	2,636,651	26.51
Western Region	Bafoussam/ Bamenda	11	2,569,005	25.83
Centre/Southern Region	Yaounde	15	2,549,510	25.62
Coastal Region (Littoral and South West regions)	Douala	8	2,192,710	22.04
Total		49	9,947,876	100

Source: Fombe and Balgah, 2012. Data based on National Population censuses of 1987 and 2005 obtained from BCRG, Yaounde, 2010.

Regional development policies in Cameroon have been sought as a way of minimizing the spatial imbalances in economic development and prosperity between regions. The planning objectives are centred on agricultural modernization such as the case of the UNVDA and SEMRY in Cameroon, diversification of economic activities, introduction of tourism, manufacturing and other tertiary activities. Although this strategy stimulated some growth, they were short lived because of the absence of processing industries and the shocks registered by agricultural produce in terms of price fluctuations. The collapse of the Upper Nun Valley Development Authority (UNVDA), the Wum Area Development Authority (WADA) and SEMRY all bear eloquent testimony to this issue. These organizations which were introduced in the North West and North Regions of Cameroon could not yield the expected developmental fruits because of inefficient management issues. In actual fact, they could not be considered as growth poles because of their limited capacities to galvanise regional development. From these perspectives therefore, the notion of sustainability in development efforts were compromised.

The Nigerian Case

Tombstones of limited success in Nigeria's growth pole strategy could be seen from the disappearance of the Kano groundnut pyramids due to the diversion of resources away from the real farmers (the peasants) who are responsible for the bulk of agricultural production in the country. Instead, a disproportionate share of government resources went into farm settlement schemes, government-owned plantations and food production companies, among others. Engaging the peasant farmers in agricultural and rural development initiatives requires a governance system that brings government closer to the grassroots (Mabugonje, 1971). Here again, government efforts have fallen short. As he notes, these efforts have "taken the form of periodic reforms of local government. However, the emphasis in many of these reforms was not to establish what was acceptable to the rural population themselves but rather what the bureaucrat considered as economically viable"



Nigeria-Kano Groundnut pyramid

Source: <http://www.nairaland.com/2424756/forgotten-groundnut-pyramids-northern-nigeria>

A Critique of Growth Poles

The growth pole concept has been criticized on the fact that developments in the centre have led to a spatial concentration of activity clusters rather than the spatial diffusion of these activities away from the centre. This applies to the Nigerian economy. Growth poles may not result in the desired level of regional economic development, thus propagating the phenomenon of regional inequality. The efficacy of growth poles in the context of Nigeria has been examined extensively. For instance Mabugonje (1972; 1971) examined the regional development process in Nigeria with a view to indicating the extent to which growth pole tendencies are already operating in the country. The Nigerian experience shows that emerging growth poles and growth centres introduced some degree of linkage among different sectors of the Nigerian economy. These linkages, however, are still rather weak where they ought to be strong (Mabugonje, 1980; 1971; 1970).

Geographical differences in SSA are not only crucial in assessing differences in their levels of regional development (Gleave and Morgan 2001), but also in the institution of growth pole strategies for regional development. This view is supported by Bloom and Sachs (1998) who noted that “at the root of Africa’s poverty lies its extraordinarily disadvantageous geography...” (cited in Gleave and Morgan 2001). The growth pole strategy account has to provide deeper insights on the nature and dimension of the strategy. One-size-fits all growth pole approaches cannot be used to address the regional development problems of SSA.

Most SSA countries are agro-based economies. Therefore, growth pole attempts were largely targeting agricultural modernization. This saw the creation of extensive plantations across the region. Although this strategy stimulated some growth, they were short lived because of the absence of processing industries and the shocks registered by agricultural produce in terms of price fluctuations.

Discussion

There has been a heated debate on the repercussions of the implementation of growth pole strategies and the nature of the regional policies. For instance, Parr (1999) and Rodrigue *et al* (2011) argue that despite the introduction of growth poles in the Developing World, conditions and quality of life had not improved as expected, while in large urban industrial complexes, the intensifying trends of population and activity accumulation caused severe saturation issues. It is evident that growth poles may not have been very favourable for SSA since it instead led to further concentration of economic activities within the foci to the detriment of the hinterlands. Realistic deficiencies such as the absence of propulsive industries, the nature of the terrain, culture/ethnic issues, low levels of technology and limited transport network connectivity tend to disarm the efficacy of the concept in Cameroon and Nigeria. Consequently, the hinterland response to growth poling has been massive rural out migration. This supports the view that growth at the pole creates an intraregional multiplier effect, part of which is felt within the hinterland and this may be termed a “hinterland response” (Parr, 1973). The role of growth pole in affecting labour demand needs not

be necessarily overlooked especially in the hinterland because commuting to these poles might result to permanent migration and consequent denudation of the hinterland's population (Parr, 1973).

Although it has registered success in some countries, growth poling has failed to meet up with the desired development indicating a series of inherent challenges (Conyers, 2001; Peattie, 1987; Parr, 1999a, 1999b, and 2001). Growth pole investments did not register much success because they were in "poor locations" and were "politically driven" (Cerón 2004). Several factors that explain the failure include: heightened expectations of the benefits of growth poles; over estimations of diffusion and trickle at the peripheries and poor governance which affected the ability of governmental sponsored growth poles to turn lagging regions into leaders (Cerón 2004; Parr, 2001). What is more? The steam that previously characterized growth poles fizzled in the near future. This made such "former growth poles" to witness massive closure of business and continuous depopulation. Furthermore, practical limitations such as failure to take off, failure to control out migration, limited investment, absence of propulsive industries, underdeveloped infrastructure, limited funding options and the effects of the economic meltdown among others (Manyanhaire *et al.*, 2011). The economic viability of the growth poles in Wum and Ndop of Cameroon could not be sustained after 10 years of existence. This accounts for the reason why such would be growth poles have now become shadows of themselves.

The development of growth poles should be characterized by the development of sound institutions that can support the growth-poling process. As the benefits of institutional developments become glaring to peripheral regions, they become inclined to model the growth poles by replication of the good things they observe. Furthermore, a growth pole with improved institutional development that engages in trade or investment activities in peripheral economies are inclined to establish similar institutions at the peripheries (Ogunleye, 2011). This is generally not the case for most SSA countries and it explains why the spatial growth and diffusion process tends to fizzle out within a short period of time thereby compromising its ability to support sustainable development efforts.

Conclusion

Tailor-made growth pole strategies are required for Cameroon and Nigeria. We further suggest based on the growth pole interventions of these countries, the need for a revolutionized approach to be adopted or enabling environments to be introduced and sustained to assist in growth-poling and balancing observed imbalance within the West African economic development landscape. Another way forward to balance the imbalance is to target investments in transport and infrastructure. Central governments should play a vital role especially in the domain of allocating and mobilizing financial resources to support targeted investments in transport and communications infrastructure (UN-Habitat, 2009). This can enhance the envisaged multiplier effects of growth poles.

A structural transformation process for SSA through the development of growth poles is recommended with a focus on two key issues: identifying regional clusters that would serve as development corridors; and developing value

chains of activities and commodities within each cluster. This proposed strategy relies on the fact that, clusters, if well-structured and are successful, have the potential to become growth poles (Ogunleye, 2011). In addition, the initial utilization of SSA's latent resources is required before a shift to create new opportunities based on existing natural, financial and human resources. This will provide the key to unlocking several opportunities that are hidden, yet unknown but waiting to be tapped in SSA.

SSA requires significant developments in infrastructure to facilitate spatial interaction and growth diffusion thereby balancing observed imbalance. Such infrastructure needs are wide-ranging and include energy, roads, railways, bridges, buildings, information and communication technologies and water supply. Our conclusive argument therefore rests on the premise that a revolutionized growth-poling approach which is adapted to suit the realities and context of SSA can stimulate growth and redress disparities. Such an approach will not only support current development efforts but will be vital for future development endeavours.

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