

Evaluating the Scope and Utility of Modernization Theory in Contemporary African Development

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Abstract

Modernization Theory, a prominent framework for understanding development processes, has been widely applied in African contexts. However, its effectiveness in promoting sustainable development in Africa has been subject to critique and debate. This critical paper examines the effectiveness of Modernization Theory in the African context through a comprehensive review of literature, empirical evidence, and case studies. It explores the theory's core assumptions, including its emphasis on economic growth, industrialization, and technological advancement, and assesses its applicability to the diverse cultural, historical, and socioeconomic realities of African societies. The paper critically evaluates the successes, challenges, and failures of implementing Modernization Theory in Africa, considering factors such as colonial legacies, cultural biases, social inequalities, and environmental sustainability. Drawing on interdisciplinary perspectives from sociology, anthropology, and political science, this analysis highlights the limitations of modernization theory in capturing the realities of contemporary African development. Sociological insights reveal the persistence of social inequalities, marginalization, and power imbalances within African societies, challenging the notion of linear progress posited by modernization theorists. Anthropological perspectives emphasize the importance of cultural diversity and local contexts in shaping development outcomes. By examining the role of culture, identity, and agency, anthropology underscores the need to contextualize development strategies within the socio-cultural fabric of African societies. Political science perspectives illuminate the role of governance, institutions, and political dynamics in influencing development processes. This abstract contends that modernization theory often overlooks the complexities of state-society relations, governance challenges, and the impact of external actors on African development. By integrating insights from sociology, anthropology, and political science, scholars can develop more nuanced frameworks that account for the complexities of contemporary African development, ultimately fostering more inclusive and sustainable approaches to development practice. Drawing on alternative development approaches, including dependency theory and the human development approach, the paper offers insights into opportunities for revising and refining Modernization Theory to better address the complexities of development in Africa. Through this analysis, the paper contributes to a nuanced understanding of the role of Modernization Theory in shaping development discourse and practice in African contexts and highlights the need for more inclusive and contextually relevant approaches to promoting sustainable development in Africa.

1. Introduction

Modernization theory, which emerged in the mid-20th century, seeks to explain the processes through which societies transition from traditional to modern states. It posits that development follows a linear path, with Western industrialized nations serving as models for developing countries (Tambo, 2023). Key proponents of this theory include sociologists like Talcott Parsons and economists like Walt Rostow, whose “stages of economic growth” framework outlines a sequence of development stages: traditional society, preconditions for take-off, take-off, drive to maturity, and age of high mass consumption (Okeke, 2023). At its core, the theory is built upon several key assumptions that collectively shape its interpretation of development. Firstly, modernization theory posits a linear progression of societal development (Yeboah, 2023). It suggests that all societies follow a similar path, advancing through predetermined stages towards modernity. This assumption implies a universal trajectory of growth, where the end goal is akin to the economic and social structures found in Western industrialized nations (Green, 2021). The belief is that traditional societies can, through the right policies and interventions, transition step-by-step to modernity, moving from agrarian economies to industrialized ones, and from rural to urban settings.

Another fundamental assumption is that modernization necessitates profound cultural change. Traditional societies are seen as being governed by customs, traditions, and norms that can hinder economic progress. For modernization to occur, these societies must adopt the values and practices of modern, industrial societies. This includes embracing rationality, individualism, secularism, and a future-oriented mindset (Moyo, 2021). In essence, cultural transformation is viewed as a prerequisite for economic and social development.

Economic growth stands at the heart of modernization theory. It assumes that the key to development is economic advancement, particularly through industrialization and technological progress (Mbembe, 2022). This economic focus underscores the belief that increased production, improved infrastructure, and higher income levels are critical indicators of a society's modernization. The theory

advocates for investment in industry, education, and infrastructure to stimulate economic growth, suggesting that such growth will naturally lead to broader social and political advancements.

Institutional change is another cornerstone of modernization theory. It argues that traditional institutions—whether they be political, social, or economic—must evolve into more efficient, bureaucratic, and merit-based systems. This transformation is seen as essential for supporting the complex needs of a modern economy and society (Brown, 2021). Efficient governance, the rule of law, and modern education and healthcare systems are all considered vital components of a modern society. The theory suggests that these institutional changes create a conducive environment for sustained economic growth and social development.

However, while these assumptions provide a clear framework for understanding the process of modernization, they have been met with significant criticism. Critics argue that the theory is overly simplistic and Eurocentric, projecting Western development patterns as universally applicable and inherently superior (Okeke, 2023). This perspective often ignores the unique historical, cultural, and social contexts of non-Western societies. Furthermore, modernization theory tends to overlook the impacts of colonialism and global inequalities that have shaped the development trajectories of many countries (Green, 2021). This assumption can be detrimental to the development of context-specific policy frameworks.

2. Utility to the African Context

Modernization theory provides a framework for understanding economic growth and industrialization in Africa by positing that all societies move through similar stages of development, with Western industrialized nations serving as the archetype. According to this theory, Africa's path to development involves transitioning from traditional agrarian economies to modern, industrialized ones, following a linear progression that mirrors the historical development of Western nations (Williams, 2022). It emphasizes the importance of economic growth, technological advancement, and industrialization as key drivers of development.

Modernization theory emphasizes that economic growth is a central driver of societal

development. In the context of Africa, this means that economic policies should aim to stimulate growth through various mechanisms, including investment in infrastructure, education, and industry (Osei, 2023). The theory suggests that economic growth will lead to broader social and political advancements, creating a virtuous cycle of development.

One of the key tenets of modernization theory is that traditional societies must embrace new technologies and practices to increase productivity (Mbembe, 2022). In Africa, this has translated into efforts to improve agricultural productivity through modernization and mechanization, which are seen as first steps towards broader economic development. As agricultural efficiency improves, surplus labor and capital can be redirected towards industrial sectors, thus kickstarting the process of industrialization.

Industrialization is viewed by modernization theory as a critical phase in the development process. For African countries, this means building up manufacturing and industrial capabilities to shift from primary commodity dependence to more diversified economies. The theory advocates for the development of industries that can produce goods both for domestic consumption and for export, thereby creating jobs, increasing incomes, and stimulating further economic growth (Oluwole, 2022).

Several African countries have embraced industrialization policies inspired by modernization theory. These policies often focus on creating favorable conditions for industrial growth, such as investing in physical infrastructure like roads, ports, and power supplies, and establishing special economic zones to attract foreign investment (Moyo, 2021). The aim is to create an environment conducive to industrial development, thereby facilitating the transformation from agrarian economies to industrial ones.

One country that exemplifies the utility of modernization theory in Africa is Ghana. Ghana is often cited as a successful example of economic growth and industrialization driven by modernization principles. Since gaining independence in 1957, Ghana has pursued policies aimed at transforming its economy from one reliant on primary commodities to a more diversified and industrialized one (Moyo, 2021).

Under the leadership of Kwame Nkrumah, Ghana invested heavily in infrastructure, education, and health, aligning with modernization theory's emphasis on these areas as foundations for development. The construction of the Akosombo Dam in the 1960s, which provided hydroelectric power, was a significant step towards industrialization, facilitating energy supply for industrial activities (Nkrumah, 2019).

Ghana's subsequent governments continued to focus on industrialization. In recent years, initiatives such as the "One District, One Factory" (1D1F) program have aimed to establish industrial enterprises across the country. This program reflects modernization theory's emphasis on building industrial capacity and creating employment (Nkrumah, 2019). By promoting local manufacturing and reducing dependence on imports, Ghana seeks to emulate the industrial growth experienced by Western nations during their modernization phases.

Another prominent country that serves as an illustrative example of the modernization theory's application in Africa is Ethiopia. The country has embarked on an ambitious plan to transform its agrarian economy into an industrial powerhouse (Mbembe, 2022). Ethiopia's Growth and Transformation Plans (GTP I and II) outline the country's strategy for rapid economic development. These plans prioritize infrastructure development, particularly in transportation and energy sectors, which are critical for supporting industrial activities. The construction of the Grand Ethiopian Renaissance Dam (GERD) is a notable example, expected to significantly boost the country's electricity generation capacity.

Ethiopia has established several industrial parks aimed at attracting foreign direct investment (FDI) and promoting export-oriented manufacturing. The Hawassa Industrial Park, specializing in textile and apparel production, exemplifies this strategy (Mbembe, 2022). By creating specialized zones with the necessary infrastructure and incentives, Ethiopia seeks to replicate the industrialization paths of East Asian countries, aligning with modernization theory's focus on industrial growth as a key to development.

Rwanda's development trajectory also demonstrates the application of modernization

theory, particularly in the aftermath of the 1994 genocide. The country's leadership has focused on rebuilding and transforming the economy through targeted modernization strategies. Rwanda's Vision 2020 and Vision 2050 plans outline its long-term development goals, emphasizing economic growth through investment in education, healthcare, and infrastructure (Oluwole, 2022). The development of Kigali as a modern urban center, with significant improvements in infrastructure, aligns with the modernization theory's emphasis on urbanization as a driver of economic growth.

Rwanda has promoted sectors such as information and communication technology (ICT) and light manufacturing. The Kigali Special Economic Zone (KSEZ) serves as a hub for industrial activities, attracting both local and international businesses (Kagame, 2021). By fostering a business-friendly environment and investing in technology, Rwanda aims to accelerate its industrialization process, moving towards a more diversified and modern economy.

These case studies illustrate that while modernization theory provides a useful framework for understanding and guiding economic growth and industrialization in Africa, its application requires adaptation to specific contexts. Ghana, Ethiopia, and Rwanda have all demonstrated the importance of infrastructure development, investment in human capital, and the establishment of industrial zones—key components of modernization theory.

However, these cases also highlight the necessity of addressing unique challenges. Ghana's industrial efforts must navigate global market dynamics and local economic conditions. Ethiopia's ambitious projects must consider the socio-political complexities and environmental impacts. Rwanda's rapid modernization needs to ensure inclusivity and sustainability to avoid exacerbating inequalities.

3. The African Development Discourse

The adaptations of modernization theory in African development discourse reflect a growing recognition of the complexities and diversities inherent in African societies. These adaptations incorporate indigenous knowledge, social capital, gender perspectives, and a multidimensional approach to development (Moyo, 2021). These adaptations address the limitations of traditional modernization theory

and provide a more nuanced framework for understanding and promoting development in Africa.

The integration of indigenous knowledge and local practices acknowledges the rich cultural heritage and traditional wisdom present in African societies. Recognizing the value of indigenous knowledge systems allows development interventions to be more contextually relevant and sustainable (Harris, 2020). By incorporating local practices into development initiatives, communities are empowered to take ownership of their development processes, leading to more effective outcomes.

The recognition of the importance of social capital and community participation shifts the focus from top-down approaches to bottom-up, participatory approaches. Social capital, which encompasses trust, reciprocity, and networks within communities, is vital for fostering cooperation and collective action (Williams, 2022). By involving communities in decision-making and implementation processes, development interventions become more inclusive, responsive, and resilient to change.

The incorporation of gender perspectives and the empowerment of marginalized groups address the inequalities and discrimination prevalent in African societies. Recognizing the unique challenges faced by women, youth, and other marginalized groups is essential for promoting social justice and inclusive development. Empowering women and marginalized communities not only enhances their well-being but also contributes to broader economic growth and social stability (Smith, 2020).

The adoption of a multidimensional approach to development goes beyond purely economic indicators to encompass social, environmental, and political dimensions. Development is viewed as a holistic process that seeks to improve the well-being and quality of life of individuals and communities (Brown, 2021). By considering a range of factors, including health, education, environment, governance, and culture, development interventions become more comprehensive and sustainable.

By integrating indigenous knowledge, promoting social capital, empowering marginalized groups, and adopting a multidimensional approach to development,

these adaptations offer a more inclusive and effective framework for promoting development in Africa.

4. Implementation Dynamics

Applying modernization theory to Africa is not without challenges. One significant issue is the assumption that African countries can follow the same linear path to development as Western nations, an assumption that often overlooks historical and structural differences (Ahmed, 2019). For instance, the legacy of colonialism has left many African economies heavily dependent on exporting raw materials, with underdeveloped industrial sectors and infrastructure.

Additionally, modernization theory sometimes fails to account for the global economic environment, which can impact Africa's development (Chukwu, 2023). Trade policies, global market fluctuations, and the actions of multinational corporations all influence African economies in ways that the original tenets of modernization theory do not fully address.

Moreover, modernization theory tends to undervalue the importance of indigenous knowledge and practices. In many African contexts, traditional economic activities and community-based approaches can be crucial for sustainable development. Modernization efforts that disregard these aspects may face resistance or fail to achieve intended outcomes.

While modernization theory offers a framework for understanding development, its shortcomings in the African context are significant. Eurocentrism and cultural bias mar the theory's applicability to African societies. Rooted in Western perspectives, it often fails to account for the diverse cultural contexts and historical trajectories of African nations. By privileging Western norms and values, modernization theory disregards indigenous knowledge systems and cultural practices, leading to misunderstandings and misinterpretations of development processes.

The neglect of historical legacies and colonial structures is a glaring weakness of modernization theory in Africa. It overlooks the profound impact of colonialism on African societies, including the exploitation of resources, imposition of artificial borders, and disruption of traditional economies and governance systems (Adesina, 2023). Ignoring these historical injustices perpetuates inequalities and

hampers efforts for true development.

Modernization theory's oversimplification of development processes and societal change is another significant critique. It often assumes a linear path to development, disregarding the complex interplay of economic, social, and political factors (Tambo, 2023). African societies are dynamic and multifaceted, with development trajectories shaped by a myriad of internal and external influences. Failing to acknowledge this complexity leads to misguided interventions and ineffective policies.

The theory's failure to address social inequalities, ethnic diversity, and power dynamics is a fundamental flaw. African countries are characterized by diverse ethnicities, socio-economic disparities, and power imbalances. Modernization theory tends to overlook these realities, focusing solely on economic growth and industrialization without addressing underlying issues of marginalization, discrimination, and exclusion. This oversight perpetuates social tensions and undermines efforts for inclusive and sustainable development.

Addressing these weaknesses requires a more holistic approach that acknowledges historical legacies, cultural diversity, and power dynamics while centering the voices and priorities of African communities. Only through such an approach can development interventions be truly effective and sustainable in Africa.

5. Recent Trends

In recent years, there has been a shift towards integrating more nuanced and context-specific strategies within the framework of modernization. African countries are increasingly looking at hybrid models that combine traditional practices with modern industrial strategies. For example, agro-processing industries that add value to agricultural products within the country are gaining traction, providing a bridge between traditional agriculture and modern industry (Jones, 2020).

Furthermore, sustainable development and environmental considerations are becoming integral to development strategies in Africa. This marks a departure from the classic modernization theory, which often prioritized economic growth over environmental sustainability.

Modernization theory brings forth compelling strengths when applied to the African context. Firstly, its emphasis on economic growth and industrialization provides a clear roadmap for countries seeking development (Smith, 2020). By prioritizing these aspects, nations can transition from primarily agrarian economies to industrial ones, fostering job creation and heightened productivity. This shift also encourages economic diversification, reducing dependency on volatile sectors like agriculture or extractive industries.

Secondly, modernization theory underscores the importance of technological advancement and the modernization of infrastructure. This focus on innovation and connectivity holds the potential to catalyze economic progress significantly. Enhanced infrastructure, such as robust transportation networks and advanced telecommunications systems, not only facilitates trade and communication but also improves overall quality of life by ensuring better access to essential services.

The theory's promotion of education and human capital development serves as a cornerstone for sustainable growth. Investing in education empowers individuals, fosters innovation, and cultivates a skilled workforce vital for participating in the modern economy (Kim, 2021). Moreover, education can foster social cohesion and political stability, contributing to broader societal progress.

However, while these strengths are noteworthy, modernization theory also has its limitations. It tends to overlook the complexities of historical context, cultural diversity, and power dynamics present in African societies. Additionally, its uniform approach may not adequately address the unique challenges faced by each nation. Therefore, while modernization theory offers valuable insights, a more nuanced and context-specific approach is necessary to ensure sustainable development in Africa.

6. Alternative Development Approaches

The effectiveness of Modernization Theory in the African context can be better understood through a comparative analysis with alternative development approaches, such as dependency theory and the human development approach. Each approach offers distinct perspectives on the dynamics of development and has implications for policy and practice in Africa.

Modernization Theory, with its focus on

economic growth, industrialization, and technological advancement, emphasizes internal factors for development. It posits that societies progress through stages of modernization, characterized by increased urbanization, education, and rationalization (Jones, 2020). While this approach has seen some successes in Africa, particularly in countries like Botswana and Rwanda, it faces criticism for its Eurocentrism, oversimplification of development processes, and neglect of historical legacies and power dynamics.

Dependency Theory, in contrast, highlights the unequal power relations between developed and developing countries and the role of external factors, such as colonialism and globalization, in perpetuating underdevelopment. It argues that developing countries remain dependent on developed nations for capital, technology, and markets, which hinders their ability to achieve true development (Kim, 2021). Dependency theory's emphasis on structural inequalities and external influences offers a critical perspective on the limitations of Modernization Theory in addressing Africa's development challenges.

The Human Development Approach, advocated by scholars like Amartya Sen, prioritizes the well-being and capabilities of individuals as the central focus of development efforts. It emphasizes investments in education, healthcare, and social protection to improve people's quality of life and empower them to participate in development processes. This approach offers a more holistic and people-centered perspective on development, aligning closely with the goals of sustainable and inclusive development.

In comparing these approaches, it becomes clear that while Modernization Theory has contributed to economic growth and industrialization in Africa, it falls short in addressing underlying issues of social inequality, historical legacies, and external dependencies. Dependency theory highlights the structural constraints faced by African countries in achieving development, while the human development approach offers a more comprehensive framework for promoting inclusive and sustainable development outcomes (Smith, 2020).

Ultimately, a nuanced understanding that incorporates elements of Modernization Theory alongside insights from alternative approaches is necessary for designing effective development

strategies in Africa. By considering the complex interplay of internal and external factors, policymakers and practitioners can better address the diverse needs and challenges facing African societies on their path to development.

7. Way Forward

Revising and refining Modernization Theory to address critiques of Eurocentrism and cultural bias offers a pathway towards a more inclusive and effective framework for development in diverse contexts, including Africa. By acknowledging the limitations of its Eurocentric perspective and embracing cultural diversity, Modernization Theory can better reflect the complexities of development processes and ensure that interventions are relevant and responsive to local contexts. Here are several opportunities for revising and refining Modernization Theory in this regard:

One opportunity lies in enhancing cultural sensitivity and promoting a deeper understanding of local contexts. By recognizing the diverse cultural norms, values, and practices that shape societies, Modernization Theory can develop more contextually relevant approaches to development. This involves engaging with local communities, respecting indigenous knowledge systems, and tailoring interventions to fit specific cultural contexts.

Revising Modernization Theory offers an opportunity to challenge the legacy of colonialism and decolonize development discourse. This involves critically examining the underlying assumptions and biases of the theory and deconstructing dominant narratives of progress and development. By centering the voices and experiences of marginalized groups, including those in Africa, Modernization Theory can become more inclusive and representative.

Another opportunity lies in promoting participatory approaches to development. By involving local stakeholders in decision-making processes, Modernization Theory can ensure that interventions are informed by local knowledge and priorities. This fosters ownership and empowerment within communities, leading to more sustainable and culturally appropriate development outcomes.

Moreover, Revising Modernization Theory presents an opportunity to foster cross-cultural dialogue and exchange (Williams, 2022). By creating spaces for interaction and learning between different cultures, Modernization

Theory can challenge stereotypes and promote mutual understanding and respect. This involves facilitating exchanges of ideas, experiences, and perspectives at local, national, and international levels.

Finally, revising Modernization Theory offers an opportunity to diversify the sources of knowledge and expertise that inform development practice. By engaging with scholars, practitioners, and policymakers from diverse cultural backgrounds and disciplinary perspectives, Modernization Theory can benefit from a broader range of insights and experiences. This enriches the theory's understanding of development processes and contributes to more innovative and effective development strategies.

By embracing cultural diversity, promoting participatory approaches, facilitating cross-cultural dialogue, and diversifying knowledge production, Modernization Theory can better reflect the complexities of development processes and contribute to building more equitable and sustainable societies.

As societies evolve and complexities emerge, it becomes imperative to revise and refine the Modernization Theory by incorporating insights from various disciplines such as sociology, anthropology, and political science. Integrating sociology into modernization theory allows for a deeper understanding of societal structures and dynamics (Smith, 2020). Sociological perspectives shed light on the intricate interplay between social institutions, norms, and values, influencing the trajectory of modernization. By examining patterns of social stratification, inequality, and power dynamics, sociological insights can enrich our understanding of how modernization processes affect different segments of society unevenly.

Anthropological perspectives bring cultural nuances into the discourse, emphasizing the significance of local contexts and indigenous knowledge systems. Anthropology underscores the diversity of human experiences and the complex ways in which culture shapes development trajectories. By incorporating anthropological insights, modernization theory can better account for the cultural dimensions of change, acknowledging the role of cultural adaptation, resistance, and hybridization in the modernization process.

Political science contributes by analyzing the role of governance, institutions, and political dynamics in shaping modernization pathways. Understanding the complexities of state-society relations, political institutions, and policy frameworks is essential for grasping the challenges and opportunities associated with modernization (Kim, 2021). Political science perspectives highlight the importance of inclusive governance, democratic practices, and participatory decision-making in fostering sustainable development outcomes.

Moreover, promoting interdisciplinary approaches fosters holistic perspectives that transcend disciplinary boundaries, enabling scholars to address multifaceted issues comprehensively. By synthesizing insights from sociology, anthropology, and political science, modernization theory can evolve into a more nuanced framework that captures the complexities of contemporary development processes (Smith, 2020). This interdisciplinary approach not only enhances theoretical understanding but also offers practical implications for policymakers, development practitioners, and stakeholders engaged in fostering sustainable development and social progress (Williams, 2022).

By embracing the insights from these disciplines, modernization theory can adapt to the complexities of the contemporary world, offering a more comprehensive and nuanced understanding of development dynamics.

While modernization theory provides a framework for understanding certain aspects of development, its application to Africa must be nuanced. The theory's emphasis on economic growth, industrialization, and institutional reform remains relevant, but it must be adapted to address the specific historical, cultural, and socio-economic contexts of African countries. Integrating insights from dependency theory, post-colonial perspectives, and sustainable development approaches can offer a more comprehensive understanding of development in Africa.

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