

OPEN LETTER TO PROF NEIL TUROK

1 June 2014

Dear Prof Turok

I am writing this open letter to you because you refused to respond to my request for your data sources.

Your TED 2008 talk focusses on Africa and draws certain conclusions based on certain claimed factual premisses:

The claimed factual premisses are:

1. Economically either nothing has changed in Africa between 1960 and 1990 or 'things have got worse' – your words.
2. there is a desperate shortage of professionals – doctors scientists etc in Africa.

You then conclude that major changes can be made by creating more scientists and more professionals, and that these young scientists and professionals will lead change in the future for Africa. You then propose a new institute to produce first class mathematicians in Africa.

This analysis fits in with certain liberal assumptions about Africa that the continent is plagued by war, disease and poverty but that these are nothing that better education cannot solve. Just give money to improve education in Africa and voila there will be major sustainable change in the future. In marketing terms this is an easy sell. It fits in with the prejudices and assumptions of western liberals, it suggests that Africa's problems are basically of their own making (i.e. the problems are caused by their own deficits in education), and for academics whose own careers and lives were changed with better education it confirms that education is the most important factor in life and economy and therefore all governments (especially Western governments) should spend more not less on education, regardless of other priorities

Another implication of this view is that the current generation of Africans are the problem primarily because they lack good education. This is not explicitly stated but is a clear counterfactual. If the present generation of African professionals were well educated then producing more well educated Africans would hardly seem to be a likely game changer i.e. good education would not be a significant variable. However suggesting that contemporary African professionals are badly educated fits with certain liberal prejudices about Africans so is unlikely to be challenged.

As an aside you highlight your parents political involvement. Being imprisoned under apartheid was an experience that happened to thousands, including many friends of mine. None of them (my friends include famous poets) would think that experience would entitle them to link their name to Mandela ... even those who were on Robben Island with Mandela.

I can only assume from your silence that your data set is exclusively that from an amateur (in economic theory terms) site - <http://www.worldmapper.org/>, that you frequently refer to, and so I wish to provide some comments:

You use 'world mapper' to show graphic images of the economies of Africa using 1960 and 1990 transformed data sets. You claim that this showed that nothing changed in between or it simply got worse. Nothing could be further from the truth. World Mapper organisation is a largely underfunded cartography site. Their choice of data sets could be influenced by lack of funds or by the fact those data points are the ones that confirmed the usual prejudices of Western liberals. One cannot tell. The issue would then be why you did not consult UN, World Bank and other pure economic data

sets as any serious academic student would be expected to do. These would have shown convincingly that after 1960 there was serious growth in Africa followed by a period of collapse under IMF constrained 'structural adjustment programmes'. The conclusion that nothing changed or nothing happened or it consistently got worse would therefore be entirely unsupported by the evidence. In fact the choice of formulas and algorithms in Worldmapper is highly tendentious and contestible (and the use of an unexplained purchasing power parity variables distances the graphs from more generally available economic data) and in no way obvious to an untutored eye. The maps do not present what they appear to present once the data set is accurately identified. Absolute and relative values are constantly mixed in a visual mish mash that is close to being utterly deceptive and if used in advertising would probably be banned under advertising standards.

You claim that there were 45,000 people dieing per month in the Congo. The report I assume you refer to has been criticized by the Human Security Project as unscholarly. A typical comment is: ' This failure to follow standard survey practice means no confidence can be placed in any excess mortality estimates from this period'.

A fundamental step in your proposal is the conclusion that Africa is short of professional manpower and the creation of that manpower will change Africa – therefore the role of AIMS. The problem here is that this analysis has little relationship to reality which a simple reflection of the facts would have shown you. One of Africa's major exports is professional manpower.

Let us look at medicine:

<http://www.theguardian.com/global-health-workers/health-workers-move-from-area-of-origin>

'As a doctor in Sierra Leone Iris Rogers was paid just £40 a month and often had to put her hand in her own pocket to help people get the treatment they needed, but since her move to Sydenham in south-east London just over ten years ago she's seen her career blossom.'

Further:

Journal of Pioneering Medical Sciences:

<http://blogs.jpmsonline.com/2012/08/08/medical-brain-drain-in-africa/>

'Although Africa is lamenting, the developed countries seem to be benefiting greatly from it. Take an example of Chicago (USA) and Sierra Leone; First of all, there are more Sierra Leonean doctors in Chicago than in the whole of Sierra Leone yet the doctor to patient ratio of the former is 1:390 compared to 1:33,333 of the latter. The maternal mortality rate of the two countries is 9 deaths per 100,000 live births (Chicago) and over 1000 deaths per 100,000 live births (Sierra Leone) while the life expectancy of Sierra Leone is 34 years. What a disparity!

- See more at: <http://blogs.jpmsonline.com/2012/08/08/medical-brain-drain-in-africa/#sthash.jkMAB4I4.dpuf>

If there are more Sierra Leone doctors in Chicago than in the whole of Sierra Leone then creating more Sierra Leonean doctors is mostly likely to lead to a growth in numbers of doctors in Chicago not Sierra Leone. Why should the same outcome not happen to African mathematicians?

With respect to professional services, supply does not create its own effective demand. Mathematicians, scientists and professionals, unlike entrepreneurs, do not create their own

employment.

What exactly is AIMS?

Brilliant African students have been sent in the past to Cambridge and Harvard to study maths either under scholarship or with parental funding. What does AIMS offer? Why should a parent of a brilliant student send their child to AIMS rather than Cambridge? It seems to appear as a preparatory school/selection process for the top universities in the West for those whose parents could not otherwise afford the preparatory expenses. Alternatively we can see it as a crammer for poor but gifted African students to bring them up to world standards. To the extent that it offers opportunities for poor students it is a variant of a scholarship fund. To the extent that it claims to offer education at a lower price (lower price to whom? For a scholarship student at Harvard there can be no lower price) it seems to be confused. Do you mean lower price to sponsors – and then is this simply a reflection of lower salaries for staff and no research activity? Most top universities such as Cambridge and Harvard are clearly capable of making space for poor students and funding for exceptional students is seldom an issue. As AIMS is not a substitute for Cambridge or Harvard it is simply not clear what it is. In respect of the key issue: funding for post doctoral research AIMS propaganda is entirely silent.

statistics

You claim the charts shows 'nothing has changed' or it got worse. However between 1960 and 1990 the rest of world grew sensationally. If Africa's proportion remained the same it must have grown at least as much as the rest of the world. What it did not do is decrease the gap between itself and the rest of the world. This is simple mathematics which a brilliant mathematician must have immediately seen. In your talk you specifically state that 'things have got worse' in Africa since 1960 – despite the worldmapper site not supporting that at all. It seems this image is one you just made up according to the usual western liberal prejudice. Wherever it came from it is not supported by the facts.

Academic standards regarding Africa

One area of concern for me is the reflection this shows on what is an acceptable standard of academic behaviour when it comes to Africa. I find it hard to believe that anyone would even dare to make a public analysis of the economies of Europe or USA based on 2 data points from a site that does not even claim to be an expert site on economics i.e. a site that is primarily cartographic and wishes to display some new graphical techniques for displaying data. Even if someone dared one knows that within minutes economists would have trashed the paper. But where Africa is concerned these same economists and Africa specialists remain silent and complicit where some Westerner is involved. If it were an African academic making some elementary errors it would have been dissected immediately. This has also been my own experience observing western academic sites dealing with Africa ..an amazing display of double standards: harsh criticism of African academics and total complicity with Western scholars.

Any causal review of African universities would show that lack of trained Africans is not the bottleneck. American universities are evident proof of the abundance of good African academics. Opportunities at home and funding for research are the real drivers for their absence on the continent. An increase by ten times in the number of well trained academics will make no

difference if there is no staff opportunities and no research funding. Since Einstein's day science has become BIG Science and unfunded research would now be more or less an oxymoron.

Prof Kunle Olukotun was responsible for the development of the multi processor architecture at Stanford University. Ten more such professors would benefit Stanford more than Africa. AIMS will benefit the individuals selected (and that can only be applauded) but as to its impact on Africa the likelihood is that it will be zero. This is a policy proposal without any serious intellectual underpinnings.

Policy implications

Your talk and the publicity surrounding it has led to changes in the allocation of resources due to the public pressure from the international publicity you have garnered. These changes have taken place based on false information and poor policy analysis provided by yourself and to that extent you are responsible for the harm this reallocation has produced. Poor policy analysis playing to popular western liberal prejudices is not the way to help Africa.

Yours sincerely

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