Letter from the Director

Thea Harvey

I have been fascinated by Africa since those long childhood afternoons watching Johnny Weismuller Tarzan movies – the incredible dense jungles – and the wide-open savannahs in Mutual of Omaha’s Wild Kingdom. Of course, I have long since learned that old Tarzan movies are terribly racist, and that Wild Kingdom presents a view in which the only threats to animals are drought and lions.

In college, when I took a course in West African art and studied the !Kung San (hunter-gatherer bushmen in southern Africa) and the Mbuti (jungle “pygmies” of central Africa) in an anthropology class, I began to learn something of the diversity of the human landscape of Africa and to develop an awareness of the incredible variety of peoples and cultures.

When I arrived at EPS (then ECAAR), we were just putting together the volume Conflict or Development, which focuses on Africa as a microcosm of many of the challenges facing the world today. Africa’s 900 million people have to deal with the same problems as the rest of us: global climate change, poverty, corruption, violence, finding their place in the world - all within a continent that is larger than the US, Western Europe, Scandinavia, Great Britain, India and China combined.

The African Union begins to address these issues by following Europe’s model. The purpose of the Union is to help secure Africa's democracy, human rights, and a sustainable economy, especially by bringing an end to intra-African conflict and creating an effective common market. Slow progress is being made; AU’s member states provide over 75 percent of all UN peacekeepers in Africa and contribute 40 percent of all troops in peacekeeping missions around the world.

And yet, Africa remains the least developed continent, the most plagued by disease, poverty and malnutrition. The “dark continent” also remains largely off the news radar in the developed world. I think it’s likely that most Americans retain my childhood images of Africa as a wild, untamable, and incomprehensible place. In my last letter, I referred to the film Blood Diamond, which highlights the civil war in Sierra Leone. In this issue, K. Maeve Powlick gives us a more scholarly review of The Economics of Intrastate Conflict: Observations from the Case of Sierra Leone. Since more than fifty percent of all African peace treaties devolve into renewed conflicts within ten years, it is extremely important that we watch post-conflict areas such as Sierra Leone to see what is working and what is not.

Creating domestic and international economic policies to develop conditions in which the people feel secure is one of the principle concerns of all policy makers. How any particular government goes about creating security for its charges is a matter of interpretation.

The current administration of the United States seems to feel justified in using military force to secure access to commodities that are important to its economy. Meanwhile, China is working to develop relations throughout the world with trading partners who are disdained by the US for various reasons. Africans must confront both these manifestations of globalization and, as author Norman Reynolds discusses in his article here, “localization.”
In his article, Dr. Reynolds proposes a method of building international relationships as well as returning control of their economic and civic lives to the local villages. A version of this proposal has been accepted and is being implemented in South Africa, but the current repressive government of Zimbabwe continues to resist. Perhaps not un-coincidently, Zimbabwe is the only country in Africa currently experiencing negative growth. Other articles we bring you are by Åshild Kolås, examining China’s growing role as a trading partner for African oil, and Conn Hallinan, discussing US attempts to control what it sees as its national security interests in the oil fields and capital cities of Africa.

Of course, we can’t hope to cover Africa’s entire story in this small publication. I hope you will agree that we have found four articles that give a flavor of the array of challenges facing Africans today.

Fifty-four countries, hundreds of languages and cultures, the lingering burden of colonialism, and the still vast open spaces. Having spent most of my life in the relatively homogenous US, I am fascinated by the possibilities for thinking outside the (western/northern) box presented by such a wealth of viewpoints. I shall remain passionately interested as Africa’s future unfolds.
Economists for Peace and Security
http://www.epsusa.org