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Understanding Africa to Understand the Future:

Education, Development, Diplomacy, and Intercultural Dialogue in the LUMSA Experience

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Abstract

This paper examines the transformations reshaping the role of universities in the twenty-first century, focusing on the challenges posed by demographic decline, the expansion of digital education, and the impact of artificial intelligence. Within this context, the author argues that higher education institutions should move beyond professional training and foster students' critical understanding of global dynamics and contemporary geopolitical changes.

Particular attention is devoted to Africa, presented as one of the key regions for understanding the future. Drawing a parallel with Asia's rise, which was largely underestimated by Europe before its economic and technological emergence, the paper highlights the risk of interpreting contemporary Africa through outdated stereotypes. The continent is portrayed as a rapidly changing reality characterized by demographic growth, increasing demand for education, accelerated urbanization, technological innovation, and a dynamic young population.

The author emphasizes that sustainable development cannot rely solely on international aid but must be grounded in investments in human capital, education, and the enhancement of local capabilities. In this perspective, education emerges as a fundamental tool for promoting economic growth, social inclusion, and civic participation.

These considerations inspired the creation of the LUMSA University Africa Center, conceived as a platform for dialogue, cooperation, and mutual learning between Europe and Africa. Through educational programs, international partnerships, and student mobility initiatives, the Center promotes knowledge based on direct encounter, the overcoming of stereotypes, and the development of meaningful intercultural relationships.

The paper concludes by highlighting the contribution of diplomacy and the author's experience at the Holy See as a privileged perspective on major global issues. Education, development, sustainability, interreligious dialogue, and international cooperation are presented as interconnected dimensions of a common challenge: preparing new generations to live and work in an increasingly complex, interconnected, and multicultural world.

1. New Challenges for Universities and the Education of Future Generations

In recent years, within the Board of Directors of LUMSA University, we have devoted considerable attention to reflecting on the future of Italian higher education. This reflection stems from observing profound transformations that are reshaping the context in which universities operate and that require a reconsideration not only of educational tools but also of the very mission of the university.

LUMSA is a university founded in 1939 through the educational vision of the Tincani Foundation. Today, it serves approximately ten thousand students across its campuses in Rome, Palermo, and Taranto, and represents one of the leading non-state universities in Central Italy. Its identity has developed primarily in the fields of social sciences, communication studies, psychology, law, economics, and international relations. It is precisely this humanistic and social vocation that makes it particularly important to reflect on the kind of education universities are called upon to provide in the twenty-first century.

The first major challenge is demographic. Beginning with the 2026–2027 academic year, the Italian university system will begin to experience directly the effects of the sharp decline in birth rates recorded over the past two decades. For the first time, universities will welcome generations born after 2007, the year that marked the beginning of a period of progressive demographic decline.

The consequences of this phenomenon will be profound. It is not simply a matter of fewer students; rather, it involves a transformation that will affect teaching organization, faculty composition, the financial sustainability of universities, and even the geographical distribution of university campuses. Faced with an estimated decline of between 20 and 30 percent over the course of a decade, universities will be required to rethink established models and identify new forms of attractiveness and internationalization.

A second challenge concerns the growth of online universities. The experience of the pandemic accelerated processes that were already underway and significantly changed students' expectations. However, the spread of distance learning cannot be interpreted solely as the result of technological innovation. It also reflects deeper economic and social changes.

The rising cost of housing, transportation, and university life in major urban centers has made it increasingly difficult for many families to support traditional educational pathways. It is no coincidence that in recent years the average age of students enrolled in online universities has declined. Initially attended mainly by working adults, these institutions now attract a growing number of younger students who choose alternative forms of education for economic, logistical, or professional reasons.

For universities that continue to believe in the value of face-to-face teaching, this evolution represents a significant challenge. The issue is not to oppose different models, but rather to understand what added value the university experience can offer as a place of encounter, dialogue, and personal growth.

2. The Lesson of Asia and the Risk of Cultural Delay

Reflecting on how new generations are prepared to face the challenges of the contemporary world may appear abstract, but in reality it concerns one of the fundamental purposes of education. Educational institutions are not only responsible for transmitting established knowledge; they must also help students understand emerging transformations, developing the critical interpretive skills that enable them to recognize the signs of change before they become evident to everyone.

Recent history offers a particularly significant example. If we mentally turn the clock back to the 1990s, we find that much of European public opinion—including both students and academics—continued to view Asia through images and categories that were already becoming outdated. India was still primarily associated with extreme poverty and major social emergencies. China was often described through stereotypes linked to a centrally planned economy and the difficulties of the period following the Cultural Revolution. More generally, the entire Asian continent was perceived as a distant reality characterized by developmental challenges that seemed to confirm and reassure the West of its own economic and technological centrality.

Yet while these representations continued to dominate the collective imagination, Asia was undergoing one of the most extraordinary transformations in modern history. Millions of people were being lifted out of poverty; new productive systems were emerging; technological and scientific capabilities were expanding; new leadership classes were taking shape; and economic models destined to redefine global balances were being established.

Many Europeans grasped the significance of these changes only belatedly. For years, Asian realities continued to be interpreted through categories that had become obsolete, underestimating both the speed and the depth of the transformations taking place. When the rise of the new Asian powers became undeniable, the delay in understanding the phenomenon inevitably translated into cultural, economic, and, to some extent, political delay.

Even today, it is often said that Europe has lost ground to Asia in terms of technology and innovation. While this observation is certainly valid, it risks being incomplete if one fails to recognize that technological delay was preceded by cultural and interpretive delay. For too long, a new reality continued to be observed through lenses designed to interpret a world that no longer existed.

This experience should serve as an important lesson for the European educational system. Understanding change requires the ability to challenge established representations and to recognize when reality is evolving more rapidly than the categories used to describe it.

It is precisely from this reflection that the question concerning contemporary Africa emerges:

Are we perhaps running the risk of repeating the same mistake?

3. Africa Beyond Stereotypes: Growth, Transformation, and New Opportunities

If the Asian experience teaches us the danger of interpreting the present through outdated categories, the first step toward understanding contemporary Africa is precisely to free ourselves from representations that no longer allow us to grasp its complexity.

For many Europeans, the image of Africa continues to be associated primarily with war, poverty, political instability, humanitarian crises, and migration. These realities undoubtedly exist, and in some contexts they continue to produce dramatic consequences. However, they do not exhaust the reality of the continent and, above all, they do not describe its principal trajectories of development.

Today's Africa is a continent undergoing profound transformation. Its societies are experiencing processes of change that, in terms of intensity and speed, in many respects resemble those witnessed in other regions of the world during the most dynamic phases of their economic and social development. This does not mean

ignoring the fragilities that remain; rather, it means recognizing that alongside these challenges there exist energies, competencies, and potentialities that deserve careful attention.

One of the most significant phenomena concerns demographics. Over the coming decades, a substantial share of global population growth will be concentrated in Africa. This fact is often presented as a problem. In reality, it represents first and foremost a major educational responsibility.

Behind the numbers are millions of young people seeking access to education, training opportunities, employment, and the tools necessary to participate actively in the development of their communities. The real issue is therefore not demographic growth itself, but rather the ability of educational, economic, and political institutions to transform this extraordinary human energy into a resource for development.

In many African countries, it is precisely the demand for education that most impresses external observers. While some developed regions are experiencing growing disillusionment with educational institutions, in numerous African societies education continues to be regarded as a fundamental instrument of individual and collective emancipation.

This aspiration concerns not only basic schooling but also higher education, vocational training, and access to the skills required to participate in the transformations of the contemporary economy. It is a demand that directly challenges European universities and opens new perspectives for academic cooperation.

A second element of great significance is the process of urbanization. Many African cities are experiencing extraordinary rates of growth. Investments, entrepreneurial initiatives, technological innovation, and new forms of social participation are increasingly concentrated within these urban centers. Cities are becoming laboratories in which development models are being tested that will have a significant impact on the continent's future economic and social balance.

At the same time, the expansion of digital technologies is rapidly transforming many economic and social activities. In several African contexts, technological innovation does not necessarily follow the same paths observed in Europe or North America. On the contrary, original solutions frequently emerge that are adapted to local needs, demonstrating how innovation can take different forms depending on cultural and social contexts.

Particularly noteworthy is the growing role of youth entrepreneurship. Across many African societies, new generations of entrepreneurs, professionals, researchers, and innovators are emerging, contributing to the construction of increasingly diversified and dynamic economies. They represent one of the continent's most valuable resources and testify to a determination for growth that rarely receives adequate attention in prevailing narratives.

My experience as Director General of the Italian Development Cooperation Agency and later as Italy's Permanent Representative to FAO, IFAD, and WFP has led me to conclude that debates on development remain too often focused almost exclusively on the dimension of public aid. While recognizing its importance, it is essential to remember that no country has ever truly developed solely through state or multilateral assistance. Aid can support growth processes, strengthen institutional capacities, respond to emergencies, and facilitate strategic investments. Lasting development, however, is generated primarily through the enhancement of human resources, the quality of institutions, entrepreneurial initiative, and investment in human capital.

It is precisely from this perspective that education assumes particular importance. If there is one resource for which many African societies demonstrate a strong demand today, it is knowledge—not only technical or

professional knowledge, but also the capacity to understand the world, participate in decision-making processes, and contribute to the construction of the common good.

This reality becomes particularly evident when one has the opportunity to engage directly with African students, academics, professionals, and representatives of civil society. In such encounters, a very different image emerges from the one often portrayed in Western media. One meets young people who are fully aware of the challenges facing their countries, yet at the same time driven by a strong desire for growth, innovation, and participation.

For this reason, one of the greatest risks lies in continuing to view Africa exclusively through a humanitarian or assistance-based lens. Such a perspective inevitably obscures the agency of African societies and reduces the continent to the role of a passive recipient of external interventions.

The educational challenge, by contrast, is to promote a form of knowledge grounded in mutual recognition, dialogue, and collaboration. Understanding Africa does not merely mean studying its problems. Above all, it means understanding its potential, listening to its aspirations, and recognizing its increasingly important role within the international community.

It is from this conviction that the need arises to create new spaces of encounter among universities, institutions, and civil societies—places where knowledge can develop through concrete relationships and where students and scholars can engage directly with ongoing transformations.

From this need emerged the experience of the **LUMSA University Africa Center**, conceived as an instrument capable of transforming reflection on Africa into an educational journey based on encounter, cooperation, and the construction of shared knowledge.

4. The LUMSA University Africa Center: An Educational Platform for Training, Cooperation, and Reciprocity

The reflections developed thus far gradually led to a conviction: if Africa represents one of the great educational challenges of our time, it is not enough simply to study it. What is required are concrete opportunities for encounter, mutual understanding, and collaboration. It is from this awareness that the **LUMSA University Africa Center** was established.

From its inception, the Center was not conceived as a traditional institute of African studies. Universities and research centers dedicated to Africa have long existed and play a fundamental role in the production of specialized knowledge. LUMSA's objective was different. The aim was to create a space capable of bringing together people, institutions, experiences, and expertise, transforming interest in Africa into a tangible educational project.

To describe this approach, I have often used a deliberately simple and provocative expression: the Center as an “empty box.” At first glance, the image may seem paradoxical, but it effectively captures the philosophy that inspired its creation. An empty box is not devoid of content; rather, it is an open and available space, capable of welcoming diverse ideas, projects, and collaborations. Precisely because it is not rigidly defined, it can be filled with a variety of initiatives united by a common commitment to promoting education, dialogue, and mutual growth.

The central element of this vision is the rejection of a one-directional understanding of relations between Europe and Africa. For a long time, such relationships were interpreted according to models in which one side taught while the other learned, one side provided resources while the other received them. Although these dynamics had historical justifications, they are no longer sufficient to describe the complexity of contemporary relations.

Experience accumulated over recent years demonstrates that the most meaningful learning processes are often those based on reciprocity. The Center's objective is not only to contribute to the education of young Africans but also to help Italian and European students better understand Africa, its societies, and its transformations.

This principle of reciprocity is perhaps the most innovative aspect of the entire project. In a world characterized by increasing interdependence, knowledge can no longer be conceived as a linear transfer of information from one party to another. Rather, it emerges from encounters among different experiences and from the capacity to learn from one another.

For this reason, the Center has developed initiatives aimed at diverse audiences and implemented through international partnerships. A particularly significant example is its collaboration with **ICCROM** (the International Centre for the Study of the Preservation and Restoration of Cultural Property), the intergovernmental organization specializing in the conservation and enhancement of cultural heritage.

Through this partnership, a training program was launched for hundreds of young Africans engaged in the fields of cultural heritage preservation and promotion. The initiative goes beyond the transmission of technical skills. It contributes to the formation of a new generation of professionals capable of enhancing the historical and cultural heritage of their respective countries while strengthening awareness of the role that culture can play in development processes.

In a continent that is often described exclusively through economic or humanitarian categories, the promotion of cultural heritage acquires particular significance because it highlights the central importance of identity, memory, and the dignity of communities.

Alongside these activities, the Center promotes initiatives aimed at LUMSA students and, more broadly, at young Italians interested in deepening their understanding of contemporary Africa. Among the most significant experiences are mobility programs and cultural immersion activities organized in collaboration with African universities and institutions.

Particularly noteworthy was the experience of a winter school organized in Nairobi. The objective was not merely to visit an African country but to enable students to engage directly with the social, economic, and cultural realities of Kenya. Over several days, participants attended academic activities at local universities, met African students and faculty members, and engaged in dialogue with entrepreneurs, journalists, representatives of civil society, and professionals working in the humanitarian sector.

What makes such experiences especially valuable is their ability to bridge the gap that often separates theoretical knowledge from direct experience. Many images of Africa are constructed through mediated narratives, statistics, journalistic reports, or second-hand accounts. All of these are important tools, yet they are insufficient to convey the full complexity of local realities. Personal encounters, by contrast, make it possible to grasp nuances, contradictions, expectations, and aspirations that are difficult to perceive through other forms of learning.

From this perspective, the Center performs a function that goes beyond traditional academic activity. It seeks to serve as a laboratory of global citizenship. The experiences it promotes are intended not only to transmit knowledge about Africa but also to develop in students the capacity to engage with cultural diversity, challenge established stereotypes, and understand the complexity of contemporary societies.

Within this framework, Africa is not presented as a distant object of study but rather as a genuine interlocutor with whom relationships can be built on the basis of mutual respect and the sharing of knowledge. This approach is particularly important in an era in which simplification and polarization continue to shape public debate.

Higher education retains a fundamental responsibility: helping students develop interpretive tools adequate to the complexity of the contemporary world. This objective cannot be achieved exclusively through theoretical study. It requires opportunities for direct engagement, international experiences, intercultural dialogue, and the ability to listen.

The **LUMSA University Africa Center** was founded precisely on this conviction. Its ambition is not merely to generate knowledge about Africa but to contribute to the education of a new generation of students capable of understanding global transformations through encounters with people, cultures, and realities different from their own.

In this sense, the Center represents an educational response to a broader challenge: preparing citizens and professionals capable of interpreting the future not through stereotypes or simplifications, but through knowledge, dialogue, and the construction of authentic relationship.

5. Diplomacy, the Holy See, and a Global Perspective: A Privileged Observatory on the Transformations of the Contemporary World

The reflections that led to the creation of the **LUMSA University Africa Center** stem not only from my university experience in recent years or from decades of engagement in international development cooperation. They have also been profoundly shaped by the years I spent serving as Ambassador to the Holy See, a position that offers a unique and privileged perspective both on the relationship between faith, spirituality, and the secular nature of institutions, and on the major transformations of our time.

By its very nature, diplomacy is an exercise in attentive observation, listening, and interpretation. Every ambassador is called upon to understand different societies, cultures, interests, and sensitivities, helping to build stable relationships among actors whose histories, priorities, and worldviews often differ substantially. Diplomacy with the Holy See, however, possesses characteristics that distinguish it significantly from most traditional bilateral relationships.

Ordinarily, diplomatic activity unfolds within a framework in which economic, commercial, energy, strategic, and geopolitical interests occupy a central place. States cooperate, engage in dialogue, and negotiate, but they also inevitably compete for markets, investments, political influence, and the protection of their respective national interests.

In relations with the Holy See, these dimensions do not disappear entirely, but they assume a much less prominent role. Instead, what emerges most clearly is a constant reflection on the great questions concerning the human person and the destiny of communities. Peace, development, education, religious freedom,

migration, environmental protection, the fight against poverty and inequality, and the promotion of human dignity become central themes of diplomatic engagement.

For this reason, one might argue that diplomacy with the Holy See represents, in many respects, a particularly “pure” form of diplomacy. Not because it lacks a political dimension, but because it directs attention toward issues that precede and, in many ways, guide political choices themselves. It compels engagement with fundamental questions concerning the meaning of development, justice among nations, responsibilities toward future generations, and the construction of peace.

For the representative of a secular state, this dialogue constitutes an especially stimulating experience. On the one hand lies the responsibility of representing the interests and positions of one’s country; on the other, there is engagement with a unique international actor whose influence derives not primarily from economic or military power, but from its ability to speak to communities present on every continent and to intervene in the major ethical and social debates of our time.

The Holy See therefore constitutes a privileged observatory of global transformations. Through the network of local Churches, educational institutions, charitable organizations, and religious communities spread across the world, it possesses a remarkable capacity for listening and observation, often enabling it to identify emerging phenomena before they become fully visible on the international stage.

This perspective becomes particularly significant when considering Africa.

Many of the dynamics that characterize the African continent today emerge with particular clarity in the reflections developed by the Holy See and the institutions that collaborate with it. Issues related to education, youth formation, peacebuilding, environmental protection, migration, and human development are not perceived as separate problems but rather as interconnected dimensions of a single reality.

One of the most important lessons I learned during this experience concerns precisely the interdependence of contemporary challenges. Too often, public debate tends to address problems in a fragmented manner. We discuss the environment without considering its social implications; economic development without reflecting on its cultural consequences; migration without addressing its root causes; education without connecting it to economic growth and civic participation.

Experience at the Holy See demonstrates instead how deeply interconnected these dimensions are. Poverty affects access to education; education shapes opportunities for development; development influences social stability; stability promotes peace; and peace creates the conditions necessary for the protection of human rights and the safeguarding of the environment. Each element is linked to the others through complex relationships that require integrated approaches and long-term perspectives.

This vision finds significant expression in the **United Nations 2030 Agenda for Sustainable Development**, which drew considerable inspiration from Pope Francis’s encyclical *Laudato Si’*, published in May 2015. Beyond the different political interpretations that may accompany it, the 2030 Agenda represents one of the most important efforts undertaken by the international community to formulate a shared vision of human development. It recognizes that the fight against poverty, environmental protection, access to education, health, equal opportunities, and the promotion of peace are not separate objectives but components of a single development project.

Within this context, the contribution of religious traditions assumes particular significance. One of the most meaningful experiences of my diplomatic service at the Holy See was the conception—together with my British counterpart and Archbishop Paul Richard Gallagher, Secretary for Relations with States and International

Organizations of the Holy See—of an international initiative launched in preparation for the United Nations Climate Conference in Glasgow, co-hosted at the time by Italy and the United Kingdom.

For more than a year, we promoted a process of dialogue and consultation involving over forty of the world's major faith traditions and religious communities, focusing on their important role in safeguarding our planet and their responsibility toward future generations.

What makes this experience especially noteworthy is not only its final outcome—culminating in a document jointly endorsed and presented to the Italian and British governments—but also the process that made it possible. Religious communities belonging to different traditions, carrying distinct histories, cultures, and theological perspectives, succeeded in identifying a shared foundation of responsibility and commitment toward a global challenge that concerns all humanity.

This example offers an important lesson for the university world as well. In an increasingly pluralistic and interconnected society, the ability to create spaces for dialogue and cooperation among diverse actors represents a fundamental competence. Universities, like diplomatic institutions, are called upon to foster encounters among different perspectives and to promote a culture of dialogue grounded in mutual respect and the pursuit of the common good.

Education, development, diplomacy, and intercultural dialogue are therefore not separate paths. They constitute complementary dimensions of the same challenge: preparing new generations to live and act in an increasingly interdependent world, contributing to the construction of societies that are more just, inclusive, and oriented toward the common good.

Ultimately, understanding Africa means understanding not only a continent in transformation but also the broader forces that are reshaping our global future. Universities have a crucial responsibility in this regard. They must equip students not only with professional competencies but also with the intellectual, cultural, and ethical tools necessary to interpret a rapidly changing world.

The experience of the **LUMSA University Africa Center** demonstrates that education can play a decisive role in this process. By fostering encounter, reciprocity, cooperation, and critical understanding, it contributes to the formation of a new generation capable of addressing global challenges with openness, competence, and responsibility.

In a world increasingly marked by interdependence, the future will belong to those who are able to understand complexity, build bridges across cultures, and transform diversity into an opportunity for shared growth. It is precisely this vision that inspires the work of the Center and that continues to guide its educational mission.

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