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VIEWPOINT

Peace through prosperity: What Emir Abdelkader can teach Africa about building lasting peace

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Abstract

What if peace is not simply the absence of war, but the presence of dignity, opportunity, food security and hope?

Across Africa and beyond, peace is often discussed in terms of conflict prevention, security, political agreements, and institutional stability. These are indispensable, but they are not enough. A ceasefire can stop violence and a peace agreement can end a war, yet neither guarantees that a young person will have a future, that a woman can build an independent livelihood, or that a family will have reliable access to food. This raises a deeper question: Can sustainable peace exist without economic and social conditions that allow people to live with dignity and hope?

I believe the answer is no.

The legacy of the Algerian Emir Abdelkader (1808-1883) offers a powerful starting point for reflection. Remembered primarily as a nineteenth-century resistance leader, Abdelkader's legacy extends far beyond the battlefield. His actions reflected principles of human dignity, solidarity, self-reliance, and peaceful coexistence that remain relevant to contemporary debates about development and peace. The challenge is not to portray Abdelkader as a precursor of modern development theory, but to ask what his example can teach us about the societies we need to build if peace is to become durable.

Peace Requires More Than the Absence of War

A young person without employment, skills, access to finance, or a realistic prospect of building a livelihood can experience exclusion long before conflict begins. Residents of a rural community without reliable markets, infrastructure, or productive resources can become trapped in poverty and dependency. A household facing persistent lack of food lives with an insecurity that may not appear on a military map, but that profoundly affects

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human dignity and social stability. Economic exclusion does not automatically produce conflict, just as prosperity does not automatically produce peace. But where large segments of society are excluded from economic opportunity, the foundations of social cohesion become weaker. This is why development should not be viewed simply as an economic objective that follows peace. Development can itself be part of the architecture of peace.

Prosperity as an Infrastructure of Peace

Prosperity is often measured through national gross domestic product (GDP), national investment, and national income. But its deeper meaning is the capacity of individuals and communities to create value, earn a livelihood, participate in economic life, and imagine a future for themselves. For a young person, a viable enterprise can mean more than income: It can mean independence, purpose, and belonging. For a woman, economic empowerment can mean greater resilience, stronger decision-making power, and a greater voice within her community. For rural communities, productive infrastructure, functioning markets, and local enterprises can strengthen resilience and reduce their dependence on fragile supply chains.

The objective of development programs therefore should not simply be to create beneficiaries. It should be to create producers, entrepreneurs, innovators, and owners of economic opportunity. Africa does not need only more jobs. It needs ecosystems in which young people and women can create businesses, develop solutions, contribute to value chains, and transform local resources into economic opportunity.

Agriculture: From Food Production to Economic Transformation

Agriculture is often treated as a traditional sector whose importance will decline as economies modernize. This vision deserves to be reconsidered. Agriculture sits at the intersection of food, employment, territory, trade, climate resilience, and national security. Its economic impact extends far beyond the farm. A modern agricultural ecosystem can create opportunities in irrigation, agricultural technology, logistics, processing, packaging, finance, digital services, renewable energy, cold-chain infrastructure, and international trade. The farmer is only one actor in this ecosystem. A young graduate can become an agronomist, an irrigation entrepreneur, a data-services provider, a food processor, a logistics operator, or an agri-tech founder. A woman can be a producer, cooperative leader, processor, exporter, business owner, or investor. This is the real potential of agricultural entrepreneurship: not simply to create farmers, but to create entire ecosystems of economic participation around food and agriculture.

Food Security is Human Security

Food security is sometimes treated as a narrow agricultural policy issue. It is much more than that. A country unable to reliably feed its population is vulnerable to external shocks, international price fluctuations, and geopolitical pressures. At the household level, food insecurity affects health, education, productivity, and social stability. Food security therefore is closely connected not only to national security but also to human security and human dignity. The answer is not simply to produce more food. Countries need integrated food systems connecting production with processing, storage, transport, finance, distribution, technology, and markets. In an era of climate change, geopolitical uncertainty, and disrupted supply chains, resilient food systems are both economic assets and social stabilizers. They can also become powerful platforms for entrepreneurship.

What Can Emir Abdelkader Teach Us?

Emir Abdelkader lived in a profoundly different historical context. It would be misleading to project today's concepts of entrepreneurship or peacebuilding onto the nineteenth century. Yet his legacy provides principles that can inform contemporary thinking.

Human dignity. His conduct toward prisoners and civilians demonstrated that even during conflict there are moral limits to how human beings should be treated.

Solidarity. His intervention during the violence in Damascus in 1860 to protect threatened Christian communities remains one of the most powerful examples of humanitarian courage associated with his legacy. It reflected the recognition that the

security and dignity of one community ultimately cannot be separated from those of another.

Self-reliance. Emir Abdelkader understood the importance of organization, institutions and the capacity of communities to take responsibility for their own destiny. Today, this principle points toward economic capabilities that enable people to become actors in their own development rather than permanent beneficiaries of external assistance.

Peaceful coexistence. His legacy demonstrates that defending one's identity does not require denying the humanity or dignity of others. In an increasingly interconnected Africa, this principle remains essential.

From Heritage to Action

If prosperity is to become an infrastructure of peace, young people and women must be at the center of economic transformation. They should not be viewed primarily as beneficiaries of employment or social programs, but as creators of opportunity. That requires more than training. It requires access to finance, markets, infrastructure, digital connectivity, technology, and supportive policies. It requires stronger links between universities and businesses and institutions willing to invest in people with ideas, not only people who already possess capital.

Algeria provides an especially interesting setting in which to explore these ideas. The country combines a young population, considerable agricultural potential, vast territories (including the Sahara), significant energy resources, and growing interest in innovation and economic diversification. It also possesses a rich intellectual and historical heritage, of which Emir Abdelkader is an important part.

The opportunity is to connect these principles with contemporary tools: Human dignity with entrepreneurship. Solidarity with inclusive finance. Self-reliance with productive investment. Peaceful coexistence with economic inclusion. Food security with resilient agricultural ecosystems.

Across Africa, countries face challenges related to youth unemployment, food insecurity, rural poverty, inequality, and climate vulnerability. There will be no single solution. But there is a powerful direction of travel: building economies in which more people can participate meaningfully in creating value. Agricultural entrepreneurship, food security, and economic empowerment cannot guarantee peace. But they can help create the conditions in which peace has a better chance of taking root. Peace therefore should not be understood only as the silence of weapons. It should also be experienced as the ability to feed one's family, build a livelihood, create a business, educate one's children, participate in society, and look toward the future with hope.

For Africa, the question is not simply how to prevent the next conflict. It is also how to build societies in which people have something to live for, something to build, and a stake in the peace they have created.

That is where prosperity becomes more than an economic objective. It becomes an infrastructure of peace.