TRENDS IN AFRICA PROVIDE REASONS FOR OPTIMISM

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The Problem

Negative stereotypes of Africa mask the reality of a rich and diverse continent, making it difficult to notice changes regarding governance, economic growth, development, violence, and corruption.

My first impressions of Africa were shaped by a 19th-century world atlas that my father's family carried with them when they emigrated from England. Similar to the one below, the volume's map of Africa consisted of an outline of the continent, with some areas delineated normally but with large portions depicted only as white spaces. Africa was a great unknown. In the intervening years, the great white spaces in Africa have been replaced in the popular imagination not by facts, but by enduring stereotypes. Africa the unknown became Africa the caricature. Although kernels of truth often lie within stereotypes, their exaggerations and distortions form barriers to real understanding. The purpose of this article is to examine a few of the more widespread stereotypes of Africa and to test them against emerging realities.

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What is the popular image of Africa? Here are a few assertions that are often heard:

- Africa is poor, and there is little hope that poverty will be alleviated.
- Africa is underdeveloped, and most projects aimed at development end in failure.
- Africa is badly governed, and democracy has made little progress.
- Africa is prone to corruption, with tribal and ethnic factors contributing to this problem.
- Africa is unstable and beset by violent conflict, and there is little hope of respite.

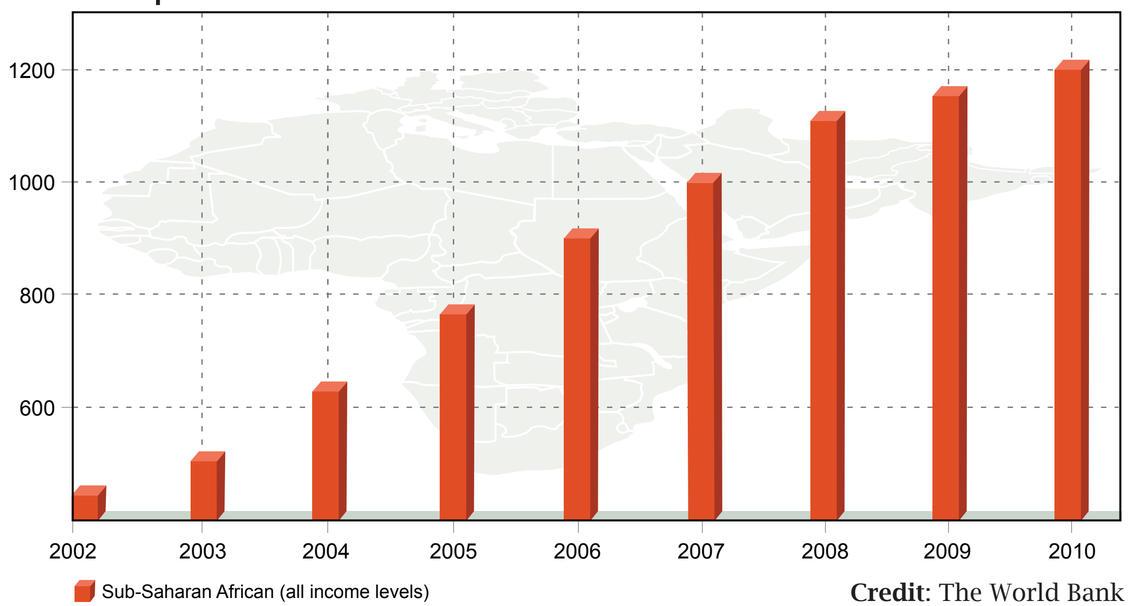
Credit: Melville J. Herskovits Library of African Studies, Northwestern University

Remarkably, these images are often applied to Africa as if it were an undifferentiated whole (Radelet 2010, 11). It is as if the lack of democracy in North Korea or of economic development in Nepal formed the basis of blanket statements about Asia, ignoring countries like South Korea, Singapore, and China. In this sense, Africa is still the "great white space" of the 19th-century atlas. Let's take the time to examine each of the elements of the African stereotype.

Africa is Poor but Growing Stronger Economically

Without question, most Africans are poor, but are they poorer than those of other regions? Is there really no hope? In fact, Africa is not the poorest region of the world. A greater proportion of South Asians than sub-Saharan Africans live on less than two dollars per day according to The World Bank's website. During the first decade of the 21st century, African real per capita incomes resumed growth after two decades of decline. From 2000 to 2009, real per capita Gross Domestic Product (GDP) grew at an average annual rate of 2.6 percent in sub-Saharan Africa (World Bank 2011, 11). Steven Radelet, a noted researcher and adviser to African and Asian governments and currently chief economist at the United States Agency for International Development (USAID), has noted that growth in 17 "emerging" African economies was even faster. Unlike most industrialized nations, African economies have continued to

GNI Per Capita *



Credit: The World Bank

* GNI per capita (formerly GNP per capita) is the gross national income, converted to U.S. dollars using the World Bank Atlas method, divided by the midyear population. GNI is the sum of value added by all resident producers plus any product taxes (less subsidies) not included in the valuation of output plus net receipts of primary income (compensation of employees and property income) from abroad.

grow through the difficult years of the world economic crisis since 2008. In October 2011, the International Monetary Fund (IMF) projected that economic activity in sub-Saharan Africa would expand by 5.25 percent in 2011 and by 5.75 percent in 2012 (IMF 2011, 1). These projections are, of course, subject to exogenous influences, such as the possibility of slowing growth globally.

Traditionally, economic growth in Africa has depended upon income from extractive industries. This has changed. From 1996 to 2008, real per capita incomes grew about 3 percent annually in the 17 "emerging" economies and only about 2 percent in the 9 oil-exporting economies (Radelet 2010, 32). What caused this turnaround? One factor is the growth of the African middle class. A McKinsey & Company study reports that the numbers of African middle-class consumers has increased, so that Africa now has more middle-class households with incomes of $20,000 or above than India (Leke et al. 2010, 7). Second, foreign direct investment in Africa has grown rapidly—a six-fold increase from 2000 to 2009. Third, total trade in the fastest growing African economies has spiked, tripling since 1995. Fourth, productivity is rising in sub-Saharan Africa and exceeds 2 percent annually in the fastest growing economies (Radelet 2010, 37).

So it appears that the first stereotype is misleading. Africa remains poor, but incomes are rising and the middle class is growing rapidly.

Development—A Long Way to Go but Not Failing

The second stereotype concerns development in Africa and is tougher to evaluate for a couple of reasons. First, anecdotal evidence supporting the stereotype is not difficult to find. The rural landscape of Africa is littered with the remains of abandoned projects. Rusting farm machinery and dry bore holes abound. Second, the media sometimes seem to report failures in development more often than successes.

Another factor contributing to the sense that development efforts in Africa have failed has been the inability of official and private development agencies to quantify the impact of projects. For example, in the water and sanitation field, it is fairly simple to quantify inputs in terms of funds and other resources applied. It is not much more difficult to enumerate outputs (i.e., numbers of wells dug, latrines installed, and community instructional workshops held). Outcomes—the significant and lasting contributions that projects make to the welfare of intended beneficiaries—are more meaningful and more difficult to measure. Two difficulties in measuring outcomes stand out. First, agencies often begin projects without establishing a baseline. For example, project workers might fail to examine the burden of water-borne diseases on the community before the start of a water and sanitation project. As a result, quantifying outcomes at the end of the project might be impossible. Second, it is difficult to control for the influence of other factors. Was the decline in deaths from water-borne diseases due to the completion of the community borehole or to the introduction of simple oral rehydration techniques?

In the absence of good data on development outcomes, we must look at surrogates. Three factors that influence development in a powerful way are

- Mortality among children under five,
- Primary school enrollment, and
- Agricultural production.

According to the United Nations Children's Fund (UNICEF), one in eight African children dies before his/her fifth birthday.

In 2009, of the 31 countries in the world with over 100 deaths among children under five for every 1,000 live births, all but one (Afghanistan) were in Africa. Development, however, is about change, not static measurements. In 1990, the under-five mortality rate in sub-Saharan Africa was 180. By 2009, it had declined to 129. Especially considering the effects that the human immunodeficiency virus (HIV) and acquired immune deficiency syndrome (AIDS) pandemic have on African child mortality, this decline of between 1 and 2 percent annually is significant.

The positive changes in primary school enrollment and agricultural production in Africa are more striking. In the 17 "emerging" African countries identified by Radelet, net primary school enrollment was 65 percent in 1999 but has climbed to 80 percent today. There has even been progress among the "not-emerging" African countries, where the rate has gone from 56 to 65 percent. In many African countries, agricultural production doubled from 1987 to 2007. Even the slowest growing tier of countries experienced 30 percent growth.

Although these data indicate that Africa has a long way to go and is lagging other world regions, the stereotype that development in Africa has failed is not supported by current realities.

Governance—Some Improvement but Uneven

Stereotypes regarding poor governance in Africa have often been fed by media accounts of the lavish lifestyles of entrenched African rulers. This image is misleading. The Ibrahim Index of African Governance provides probably the most complete overview of the situation. The Index includes 48 sub-Saharan countries. Comparing the scores registered by those countries in 2006 and 2010, we find that 24 improved, 10 remained the same, and 14 declined. This trend is positive, although less pronounced than in recent years.

In 1990, there were four democracies in sub-Saharan Africa. By 2008, there were 23. The proportion of African leaders who gave up power without the assistance of coups, violence, or assassination had reached 80 percent by 2005. Data from the World Bank's Database of Political Institutions indicate that in 1990, 36 of 46 countries had an executive who was either unelected or elected in a contest that had only one candidate. By 2006, only nine leaders were chosen that way.

To be sure, freedom's hold in Africa is tenuous. Freedom House, in its 2012 survey, rated 9 (18 percent) sub-Saharan countries as free, another 21 (43 percent) as partially free, and 19 (39 percent) as not free.

While the "emerging" African countries have approached parity with the world median in several sectors of governance, progress has not been uniform and other countries are lagging behind. For example, the Ibrahim Index disclosed significant declines in two of the components—safety and rule of law and participation and human rights—that comprise overall governance. The scores of 33 of 48 countries declined in the category of safety and rule of law. In the field of participation and human rights, 35 of 53 countries suffered declines.

Corruption Saps Africa's Vitality

It is probably in the arena of corruption that the African stereotype comes closest to describing reality. The World Bank (2010, 1) calls corruption "Africa's fundamental problem." Corruption cuts across and weakens efforts to achieve progress in other areas, including health and education. Some countries, including Liberia, Rwanda, and Tanzania, have made progress in combating corruption, while others have lagged behind or even regressed. According to the Council on Foreign Relations, of the 10 countries considered most corrupt in the world, 6 are in sub-Saharan Africa. A 2002 African Union study cited by the Council estimated that corruption costs the continent roughly $150 billion annually. Over half of East Africans polled paid bribes to access public services that should have been freely available. Graft and corruption increase the cost of doing business in Africa and undoubtedly contribute to the failure of the benefits derived from extractive industries to trickle down to communities. The World Bank (2010, 2–21) also focuses on "quiet corruption," which it defines as "types of malpractice by frontline providers that do not involve monetary exchange." Because of poor controls at the producer and wholesaler levels, 43 percent of the analyzed fertilizers sold in West Africa in the 1990s lacked the expected nutrients. In Tanzania, a survey revealed that nearly four out of five children who died of malaria had sought medical attention from health facilities that were classified as "modern." This sort of malpractice or malfeasance manifests itself in myriad ways but must be conquered if governments want to reduce poverty and promote sustainable growth.

Violent Conflict Remains a Big Problem but Is Diminishing

The final stereotype—of a continent permanently wracked by conflict—is outdated. According to the Stockholm International Peace Research Institute (SIPRI), which takes on the unenviable task of enumerating and cataloguing the world's conflicts, Africa's share of the global burden of violent conflict has declined. In 2000, 8 of the world's 18 major armed conflicts were being fought in Africa. During the following decade, the number of conflicts declined globally in an uneven fashion, but the reduction in African wars was more consistent. In 2009, only 4 of the world's 16 major armed conflicts were being fought in Africa (SIPRI, 62). Without minimizing the terrible burden of conflict in Africa, especially its recent resurgence in North Africa, the Cote d'Ivoire, and the Great Lakes region, this trend is a positive, especially when compared to the toll taken on the continent by infectious disease. Compare, for example, the 14,000 direct-conflict deaths in Africa in 2007 (Geneva Declaration 2008, 16) with 1.3 million deaths annually from HIV and AIDS and between 600,000 and 900,000 deaths annually from malaria (both latter figures are for 2009).

In conclusion, we see that of the five stereotypes, four are untrue, outdated, or misleading. The fifth—corruption—is regrettably still generally applicable to the continent, although not to every country. Whether true, partially true, or false, however, stereotypes are unhelpful because they conceal the richness of variation within the region and make us less apt to pick up early warnings of change. For these reasons and more, we need to focus on the real Africa that exists today on the ground, not the stereotypical Africa that may be in our minds.

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