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Post-colonial African Economic Development in Historical Perspective

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Abstract

Africa is frequently framed in a narrative that reduces or minimises its significance and achievements. We review geographical and historical perspectives of Africa and present data that provides Africa greater significance and allows us to consider post-colonial African economic achievements outside of a simplistic narrative. We argue that placing Africa in a fairer historical and geographical perspective allows for more coherent planning for Africa's future development.

Résumé

L'Afrique est souvent le sujet de récits qui réduisent ou minimisent sa signification et ses réalisations. Nous passons en revue les perspectives géographiques et historiques de l'Afrique, et présentons des données qui accordent à l'Afrique une plus grande importance et nous permettent de considérer les réalisations économiques de l'Afrique postcoloniale en dehors d'un récit simpliste. Nous soutenons que placer l'Afrique dans une perspective historique et géographique plus juste permet une planification plus cohérente de son développement futur.

Current Confusions about African Trajectories

Africa's positioning on the global scene has seldom been devoid of controversy. Africa has long been portrayed through a distorted lens that betrays the true stature of the continent. With a landmass of over 30 million square km, Mercator's map projected Africa's size to be equal to Greenland's, whose size is fourteen times less. Mercator's 1569 cartographic depiction of

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the world became one of the most influential and widely circulated world map projections throughout the nineteenth and twentieth centuries.

Whilst some have argued that the initial intention was mostly to provide a navigation tool for sailors because of the ease in ensuring angle and shape accuracy, it morphed to become the recognised global map, adorning backgrounds of daily television news, homes, walls and the cover of many atlases.

In fact, despite the knowledge of these distortions, Google continues to use it as a basis for web projection. Many have also argued that the Mercator projection reinforced Western colonial attitude towards Africa and an image of European dominance (Peters 1983; Henderson and Waterstone 2009). Arno Peters, in 1967, provided an alternative way of looking at maps to correct for what he perceived as the inaccuracy and racism being projected by the Mercator map. It led to one of the most stimulating and controversial debates on Africa.

Africa is easily as big as India, China, the US and most of Europe combined. Africa's blue economy is even bigger than its landmass. The maritime zones under Africa's jurisdiction alone totals about 13 million square km including territorial seas and approximately 6.5 million square km of the continental shelf (UNECA 2016a). Still, when Saarinen conducted a study in 1992 that tested the way people viewed the world, the results suggested a diminished view of the size and importance of Africa (Meffe 2013).

Nearly two decades later, Kai Kruse attempted to address what he called 'rampant immappancy' and the extent to which the Mercator projection distorts the relative sizes of countries, with a graphic illustration to depict just how 'immense' Africa is (*The Economist* 2011). His objective was simple: 'to create a simple graphical depiction of the statement: Africa is just immense – much, much larger than you or I thought'. This simple graphical illustration became a global sensation but has still not corrected Africa's distorted perceptions way beyond cartography. Why do the parody and misperceptions continue to this day?

The roots of contemporary pessimism or scepticism about Africa's prospects are obviously quite old and rooted in history. In present-day Africa, misperceptions are not only about the injustices of modern-day cartography or the erroneous views portrayed in contemporary literature. It is about risk perceptions, levels of conflict, political stability and the variety of African experiences. The global perception in many minds continues to be one of an Africa uniformly beset by conflict, crisis, bad governance and a risky place for making investments.

These negative narratives persist because of the images that are embedded in mind-sets, which translate an iconic representation of Africa, thus affecting what narrative prevails. They suggest an accumulation of obsessions undermining the understanding of the diversity of a continent that has experienced remarkable changes since the start of the twenty-first century. The narratives serve to create a gap between perceptions and realities regarding the transformative potential of the continent. It is important that we contextualise these stories, understand what the reality is, and what is an externally driven perception, so that Africa is not short-changed.

Africa is not a Country

The recent rebasing of the GDP of Ghana, Egypt, Nigeria and Kenya, amongst others, has attracted much attention because overnight their economies were considerably sized upwards (World Economics 2016). It raises the question of whether there are other African economies with a systematically underestimated GDP. Just how big is the size of this underestimation? A recent study conducted by World Economics on a sample of recent rebasing exercises for fifteen African countries suggests that there is an average increase of 3.24 per cent in GDP for every year since a given country's last rebasing. The average number of years passed since the last re-basing in African countries is 9.2 years. Taking the 3.24 per cent annual increase in the rate per year and multiplying it with the number of years passed since the last rebasing give us an estimate of how much an African country's GDP is underestimated. These calculations suggest that Africa's GDP is underestimated by approximately 21.5 per cent.

Why is this important? Because the size of GDP is used to determine a continent, region or country's importance. If the real GDP were known, Africa would represent a bigger economy than India (with a larger population still), its debt to GDP ratio would diminish and its consumer market resized considerably. Africa could qualify for a seat at the G7, G20 and other fora as a continent, the same way the EU does. However, the reality is that Bretton Woods institutions and most of the UN agencies continue to classify Africa as sub-Saharan Africa. It is obviously inaccurate to make statements and projections of the entire continent when dealing with just a portion of it.

The colonial legacy of dividing Africa between black (in French the expression 'Afrique Noire' is still in current use) and white endures. Even after the end of apartheid in South Africa the country was not treated statistically as part of Africa, a remnant of the 'White Africa'. North Africa suffers from the same categorisation issue, being lumped together with the Middle East. These inconsistencies extend to the inclusion sometimes of Arab League countries such as Djibouti, Comoros or Mauritania as part of North Africa.

Geography often is a by-product of politics and history. The fact that original Arabs came from the Arabian Peninsula and that their language became an instrument to consolidate national identities is unquestionable. However, there is a strong push back from the original Maghreb Amazigh culture, with a revival of local identity sentiments that have required constitutional changes in countries such as Morocco and Algeria, to accommodate such demands. Not to mention the fracturing of Sudan that can be traced to similar identity issues.

The debate could be about whether we need to treat Africa as a single entity anyway. It is important for certain types of comparisons and to give impetus to the need for regional integration. While in respect of its weight in the world the whole of Africa should be measured; why do we need to decompose Africa when we review trends in African development?

African countries have entered the twenty-first century with a strong pressure from an increasingly educated youth for transformation and change. Some are responding with dramatic leapfrogging and structural transformation. Many are struggling to adjust to the social demands and a shifting global environment that does not offer the same opportunities as before to the commodities traditionally monopolising African economies. It would be useful, when considering these trends, to identify a new typology based on how fast countries are structurally transforming and the role that industrialisation is playing in such change. At the other end of the spectrum it would be possible to identify countries with neo-patrimonial elites eager to salvage a rent-seeking economic model. Such a distinction would certainly be useful, and more valuable for students of development than distinctions between 'Arab' and 'Black Africa'. It would demonstrate commonalities between North African and other countries in the continent and would also graphically demonstrate their dissonance with the Gulf Region in economic terms.

Periodising Post-Colonial African Economic History Narratives and Counter-Narratives

When South Africa transitioned to democracy in the early 1990s, aside from having to deal with great poverty, huge inequality and a stagnant economy, its new leaders had to cope with powerful existing negative narratives about Africa and black leadership. Mandela not only retained the old apartheid government's Finance Minister, Derek Keys, for six months after the elections, but he replaced him with a white banker so as not to shake up the markets (Mandela 2017). When Mandela visited Washington DC in 1994 accompanied by a group of South African business leaders who had been prominent in the apartheid era, British ambassador to Washington Robin Renwick congratulated him on his magnanimity. 'Mandela replied, with understandable bitterness, that he forgot nothing, nor did he forgive, but that he needed them now' (Renwick 2015).

Mandela and his strong 1994 team calculated that they had to make concessions to the dominant narrative – that Africa is doomed and that black leadership is hopeless. They operated under a cloud of prejudice and felt they could not entirely ignore it or defy it. As expected, when the first black minister of finance, Trevor Manuel, was appointed, every word and every gesture was scrutinised by market commentators and the media, as if to confirm his incompetence. Ironically, thirteen years later when Manuel finally left his post, the media and markets mourned the exit of a brilliantly effective finance minister (Perry 2009).

The prevailing negative narrative around Africa is frustrating and often racist (viz. the 'shithole' saga), but even more concerning than this is the risk that the narrative completely clouds our understanding of what is really happening. The gap between perceptions and the real history of Africa since decolonisation is a very important case in point. What are we missing when we caricature Africa?

Post-colonial Boom – Buoyancy and Experimentation

In the *longue durée* of African economic history, the measurable recent period has been disappointing by global comparison. As Johnson, Ostry and Submrananian (2007) put it: 'There is no doubt that Africa has done badly, on average, for the most part, not just over the past 20–40 years, but in fact since the beginning of economic growth in the 19th century.' The colonial period was mediocre for African economic development, and independence did not change the economic trajectory significantly.

The continuity of disappointing outcomes was reflected not only in the inability of many African countries to overcome the economic legacy of resource dependency and the isolation of growth to small extractive enclaves, but it was also represented in the futility of some of the attempts to change the economic trajectory. Pointing to the constancy of economic circumstances and the political nature of bureaucracies, Becker (2014) sees the developmental failure of the groundnut scheme in colonial Tanganyika echoed in the failure of post-colonial villagisation in Tanzania.

During the first decade or so of independence, many African countries grew impressively, particularly considering their circumstances at the time of the transition. Preparations for the transfer of power were generally shallow at best and cynical at worst. Despite this, 'physical infrastructures were greatly improved, particularly in the areas of health, education and communication. New universities, agricultural research centres, national transport networks and local government structures were established to facilitate the national development project' (Cheru 2013:1271). Giovanni Arrighi (2002) noted that 'up to 1975, the African performance was not much worse than that of the world average and better than that of South Asia and even of the wealthiest among First World regions (North America)'.

Despite poor preparation for decolonisation, the transition from colonial status to independence did not decrease the rate of growth of African countries. Sylwester (2005) found that previously independent countries grew faster than did the existing colonies. The removal of colonial control had a positive impact on growth. The removal of control 'by an external power' was positive for growth (Sylvester 2005).

In the period between the start of decolonisation in the late 1950s and the mid-1970s, African growth was strong. Per capita growth between 1960 and 1975, at 1.5 per cent to 2 per cent annually, was similar to or better than most other global regions (Atardi and Saia-i-Martin 2003).

But there was no single trajectory. Much of Southern Africa as well as Portuguese Guinea and Cape Verde remained colonised or under minority settler control. For the rest of Africa, developmental policies and paths diverged, not necessarily depending on either whom the colonial power had been or on what economic form colonialism had taken. Tanzania, Zambia, Uganda, Guinea and Ghana adopted superficially similar policies broadly known as African socialism. Key common characteristics of African socialism were state ownership of larger organisations and a drift towards one-partyism.

In contrast, Kenya and Côte d'Ivoire adopted policies supporting market-driven economic development. Both were the favoured regional centres of the colonial era, and both continued to outpace their neighbours in economic growth terms. Both had relatively diversified economies compared with their regional neighbours, and both, for different reasons, had relatively substantial domestic farming classes and relatively sizeable urban middle classes. In contrast, the indigenous middle class in the countries pursuing African socialism was small. During this period, the Kenyan economy grew faster than that of Malaysia and the economy of Côte d'Ivoire grew faster than that of Indonesia.

Common to these two paths, and unlike the third, was the effort to invest in social and human capital, at least beginning to make up for the distorted public investment patterns of the colonial era. A third variant was epitomised by the tragic fate of the Congo. Brutally colonised by King Leopold II's Belgium, the fabulously resource abundant Congo emerged from colonialism with almost no indigenous middle class, and virtually no social or economic infrastructure except those built to funnel human and natural resource riches out of the country. With neo-colonial interests pre-occupied with preventing the natural resources from being controlled either by independent locals (which was unlikely due to the Belgian legacy of a non-existent Congolese middle class) or the Soviet Union, power fell to the first modern African kleptocrat, Mobutu Sese Seko, after a coup sponsored by the CIA (Prados 2006: 280-82). The outcome despite the continued exploitation of its mineral wealth was no significant economic or social development (Wrong 2000).

Cold War rivalries in strategically significant newly independent African states frequently resulted in the shoring up of plundering autocracies. Even South Africa's Apartheid rulers were able to use the Cold War to mobilise Western powers to defend their racist regime (Lake 1976). In the popular global discourse, the disastrous autocratic regimes of Africa were frequently conflated with more nuanced African national experiments, feeding racially tinged Afro-pessimism.

The Lost Decades

The years between 1975 and 1995 are widely known as Africa's lost decades. Most of Africa's per capita income was stagnant or negative over this entire period. Even though the rest of the world struggled in the wake of the oil crisis of 1973 and stagflation and low commodity prices, the average annual per capita growth rate of the rest of the world in this period was around 2 per cent. African per capita income barely grew and in many countries it fell. Why did Africa diverge so sharply from global trends during this period? Several factors were involved.

Many commodity-exporting countries were trapped in resource dependent patterns. Having borrowed against future expectations of commodity sales and having failed to build a diversified enough economy due to overvalued currencies and relatively poorly endowed human and physical capital, the two-decade long slump in demand for natural resources hit them badly. The initial response was denial, which led to rising government debt, much of which was financed in foreign currencies. The commodity crisis and contemporary monetary policies gave birth to an era of Structural Adjustment Programs (SAPs). The International Monetary Fund (IMF) led international debt restructuring processes conditional on reforms in the African countries affected. The conditions were designed to reduce the fiscal burden of the state and favour market rather than state-led development, based on what was becoming known as the Washington Consensus. At the heart were the neoliberal policies of liberalisation, privatisation and deregulation.

At the peak of structural adjustment in the late 1980s and early 1990s, twenty-nine sub-Saharan African countries were under SAPs (Lopes 2013). In practice, while reducing fiscal burdens, structural adjustment did considerable damage to the capacity of the state, damage that in some countries is still evident. While addressing some of the surface macro-economic and governance challenges of the era, in significant ways structural adjustment undermined the longer-term growth potential of many of its African recipients. The result of decreasing the capacity of the state in the name of efficiency was that in an era when Asia was investing especially in manufacturing, Africa was bleeding capital and losing the capacity to support industrial investment though investment in infrastructure, infrastructural services and human capital (Lopes 2013).

One egregious example of undermining African growth capacity in the name of 'efficiency' was when the World Bank repeatedly, loudly and effectively called for the reduction of investment in tertiary education in Africa, following its simplistic understanding of returns to education analysis. Even though this policy was criticised in the early 1990s, it prevailed and its effects were devastating (CAFA 1992; Banya and Elu 2001).

But stagnation and decline were not universal narratives for Africa during the lost decades. Brautigam (1997) describes how Mauritius used a social pact to build a development coalition that could break path-dependency. From 1973, the socialist prime minister persuaded business and labour to shift Mauritius towards sustainable growth on an employment-generating path. From dependence on agricultural commodity exports, Mauritius diversified into labour intensive manufacturing and later services.

A series of tripartite agreements in the 1970s and 1980s enabled the country 'to adjust more rapidly than other African countries to external shocks and high levels of debt, while keeping coalitions together through judicious use of side payments to the most vocal losers' Brautigam (1997:56). The system of compulsory arbitration of wages, the building of trust by the socialist prime minister and business through symbolic public gestures as signals of commitment to co-operation, and the construction of dense clusters of consultation between business (united in one peak organisation) and government resulted in a co-ordinated form of capitalism that delivered both sustained investment and pro-poor outcomes (Nattrass and Seekings 2010).

Another counter-narrative of steady growth in this era of Africa's 'lost decades' is Botswana's experience. For more than forty years after independence in 1965, Botswana was blessed with a succession of thoughtful, pragmatic leaders – Seretse Khama, Quett Masire and Festus Mogae all had a strong political base in the Botswana Democratic Party. As in the Mauritian case, Botswana's leaders built a steady and trusting relationship with the private sector, which provided consistent growth and improving development outcomes. The state took 50 per cent ownership of the very rich diamond mines in 1969 and followed similar policies with its other minerals and allowed them to be well managed in jointly owned companies. Botswana represents the only case in Africa where great mineral wealth has (similarly to Chile and Norway) been well managed with an effective balance of public and private interests (Robinson, Acemoglu and Johnson 2003).

Post 1990 Growth and the Africa Rising Storyline

In the 1990s, growth patterns began to shift again in Africa. In many data-series the inflexion point seems to be around 1994–95. At this point growth begins to accelerate, incomes start to rise and poverty begins to decline again, all in slow but steady fashion (see, for example, the data in Atardi and Saia-i-Martin 2003). Yet, this trend is not recognised or seen as significant at the time. *The Economist* (2000) still called Africa a 'hopeless' continent in May 2000. Easterly and Levine (1997) used the term 'tragedy' in relation to African growth in 1997 and Atardi and Saia-i-Martin repeated the term in their 2003 paper. However, when one reviews the growth indicators (see Figure 1), the growth tide had already turned. And, as shown in World Bank's Development Indicators and UNDP's Human Development Indicators, the development tide had also turned, especially regarding income poverty, health and basic education.

During the first decade of the new millennium African growth accelerated. African countries were consistently among the fastest growing in the world and the continent became a rapidly growing region in aggregate. Africa has grown in per capita terms too, but not as quickly as it might have had there not been a simultaneous surge in the African population growth rate.

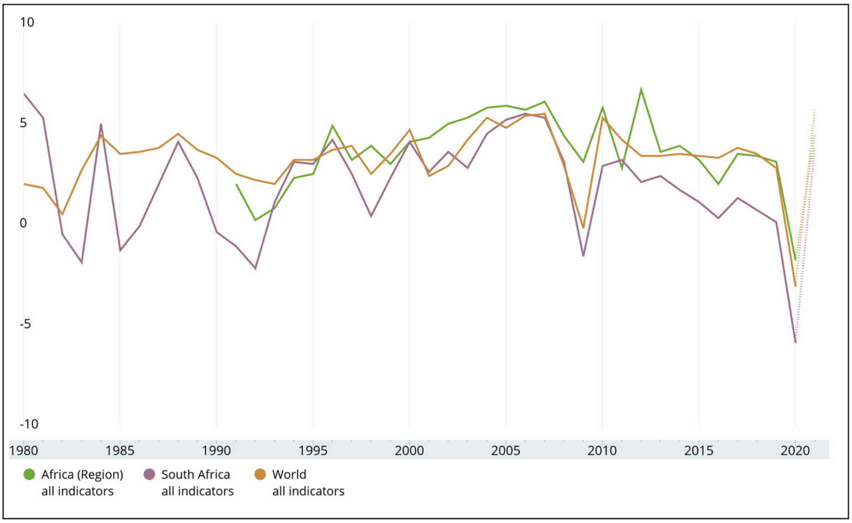

Figure 1: GDP growth Africa, South Africa and the World Average 1991–2020

Source: IMF Datamapper (2020)

Why did African performance improve in the 1990s, and why did it accelerate in the 2000s? The commodity super-cycle, centred on China's huge public and private investments, was the headline economic factor in recent decades for Africa transmitted initially through the demand for African products and later in support for African infrastructure investment. China's capital surplus due to its export-based growth allowed it to offer huge credits for infrastructure investments in Africa as Chinese infrastructure growth began to wind down. The simultaneous debt relief initiatives (HIPC and the MDRI) reinforced the improved growth circumstances with a greater degree of macro-economic stability, which allowed many governments in Africa to shift their attention from servicing debt to improving services and investing in infrastructure.

But indicators show that growth and development improvements began in Africa before the super-cycle and the triggering of the debt relief. While the commodity super-cycle underwrote many of Africa's accelerations, other factors were at play. Indeed, some of the strongest and most consistently developing African countries, such as Ethiopia and Kenya, were barely assisted by the commodity boom.

Clearly important was the completion of Africa's liberation, the democratic transitions in Southern Africa. Vivek Arora and Athanasios Vamvakidis (2005) showed the significant impact of South Africa's post-democratic engagement with the rest of Africa mostly through outward investment by South Africa's multinationals, but also through rising trade.

The South Africa factor is a subset of the positive impact of the end of the Cold War, which contributed by allowing greater domestic accountability and improved governance in many African countries, not only in South Africa and Namibia. The improvements in governance, further encouraged by debt relief initiatives (HIPC and the MDRI) and the Millennium Development Goals, in turn created an environment that increasingly encouraged direct and indirect investment.

Despite the global financial crisis, many African countries continued to grow reasonably strongly after 2008. Most commodity prices fell, but not nearly to pre-boom levels. Some of the continued growth derived from continued government expenditure on consumption and investment drawing on borrowings. Many African governments issued sovereign bonds for the first time. But a further sign of African growth taking a new direction is that a considerably higher proportion of government debt is now locally funded, reducing currency risks and increasing government accountability.

A major counter-narrative in this era is South Africa. In recent years, South African growth has been well below the level of other African countries and below the level of similar middle-income developing countries around the world (Bhorat, Cassim and Hirsch 2017). Most African countries experienced the global financial crisis in the developing country form, as a fall in export prices and a concomitant hiatus in capital inflows. South Africa also experienced the developing country form of the crisis – low demand for commodities and the drying up of foreign capital inflows but, in addition, it experienced the industrialised country form of the crisis – a collapse in domestic credit markets. South Africa is not only caught in an invidious middle-income country growth trap (Bhorat, Cassim and Hirsch 2017), but the form of growth such as it is remains extremely unequal. A McKinsey (2016) study shows that projected South African consumption growth to 2025 is highly concentrated in its small 'affluent' class, in contrast to East, Central and West Africa where growing consumption is largely located in the middle and poorer classes. South Africa's post-2009 trajectory of anaemic growth and growing inequality requires strong and innovative leadership, across society, to enable it to emulate or even exceed its promising performance in the first fifteen years of democratic government.

In contrast, it is illuminating to consider how countries like Morocco and Ethiopia have made determined efforts to broaden the base of growth in regard both to sectoral diversity and economic inclusion. In Morocco the performance of new industries (automotive, aeronautical and electronics) 'have vastly diversified the country's export basket after a decade of active strategies in this direction' (African Economic Outlook 2015). Two telling indicators are a national investment rate of 35 per cent of GDP, and the fact that manufacturing makes 26 per cent GDP, the highest in Africa (Oxford Business Group 2015). This forms a strong basis on which to continue the consistently higher than 4 per cent real growth that Morocco has achieved since 1999.

In Ethiopia, diversified growth has been led by a government committed to improving the capacity for growth and development. The astonishing growth levels of the Ethiopian economy, generally 8 per cent and higher since 2004, is in part driven by high levels of public investment in social and economic infrastructure. Rodrik (2016) noted that Ethiopian growth benefited from 'a massive increase in public investment, from 5 per cent of GDP in the early 1990s to 19 per cent in 2011 – the third highest rate in the world'. According to IMF estimates, between 2000 and 2016, per capita income grew by 277 per cent (Knopf 2017), driven by urbanisation and public investment. But Ethiopia's industrial policies are bearing fruit too, with the manufacturing sector growing at more than 10 per cent annually, admittedly from a low base (Hauge and Irfan 2016; UNECA 2016b).

Collective Development Priorities

Contextualising Africa's transformation within the changes that are taking place globally is critical. Over the past two decades, the international order has experienced significant change. Indeed, a new discourse has gained prominence in the international relations theory that emphasises a rapidly changing global environment characterised by an ever-growing confluence of world-scale challenges. The challenges range from widespread poverty and undernourishment, financial and economic crisis, climate change impact to human insecurity, organised crime, drug trafficking and many others, inextricably linked.

Across parts of Europe, Asia and the Americas common issues of financial and political stability, conflict management, job creation, productivity or climate change mitigation permeate daily domestic policy discussions. The domino effect of Central Banks in Sweden, Denmark, Switzerland, Japan and the European Central Bank slashing interest rates to sub-zero levels since the global financial crisis has certainly given the chills to many. The repercussions are far-reaching and global.

The economic expansion of recent decades has been fed on the earnings from productivity that new technologies have brought about. The distribution has been radically unbalanced. It is not the place here to study this process, but it is important to remember that the concentration of income on the planet is reaching obscene levels.

Our main instrument to measure progress, Gross Domestic Product (GDP), measures neither one nor the other. It does not consider the planet's natural capital depletion. It only shows us the national average intensity of the use of the production machine, not what is produced, for whom and at what costs. The main motivator of private investments, profit, acts against both: it has everything to gain from the maximum extraction of natural resources and externalising pollution costs, and has nothing to gain from producing for those who do not have money to spend. The fantastic possibilities that new technologies open to us are simply wasted.

The global and interconnected character of twenty-first century challenges calls for solutions transcending national borders based on strategic partnerships. These vulnerabilities have provoked the need to re-examine the nature of global relationships and demonstrate the need for Africa to unite. Africa's transformation pursuit is taking place amidst a world attempt at reconfiguring problems into a singular, dominant global governance regime. Even if the continent has enormous potential, African countries are not alone and their engagements with the rest of the world would benefit from being articulated and managed in the context of a comprehensive regional positioning strategy.

Such strategy must be cognisant of five factors that have come to affect Africa's recent development (Lopes, Hamdok and Elhiraika 2017).

- *First,* the emergence of a multipolar economic world that now includes the Global South, a source of new investment opportunities and export destinations, development experience and know-how, as well as a new aid architecture that is forcing a redefinition of multilateralism, including attempts to correct its failures and enhance triangular cooperation.
- *Second*, demographic changes brought about by a young and increasingly urbanised continent of a billion people – a number that is expected to double to 2 billion by 2050, with two-thirds living in cities. This increased 'human capital' has the potential to revolutionise the productive base of the continent. However, the energy of the young population, if untapped through better employment opportunities, has the potential to become a source of instability and political chaos as migration becomes one mechanism for relieving demographic pressures.
- *Third,* the continuing discoveries of large amounts of natural resource wealth, and the associated challenges (including illicit financial flows and corruption in the natural resource sectors), as well as opportunities that arise from managing and sharing that wealth.

- *Fourth,* the real opportunity to 'leapfrog' using technology, including mobile technology.
- *Fifth,* climate change potential to generate significant conflict over environmental assets such as land and water, weakened biodiversity and threats to existing livelihoods if not transformed into a unique call for Africa to take advantage of the new green economy potential. A case in point would be to tap into the enormous potential for a green industrialisation path, based on immense, affordable, renewable energy and innovative, cleaner, frugal innovation.

The African Union Agenda 2063 reiterates the millennial renaissance theme, which demands that Africans work together with global partners towards a new beginning, proceeding from decolonisation towards self-determination, and calling for greater regional integration, socio-economic development, peace, security and democratic development; advocating for Africa's destiny and a redefinition of Africa's place in the globalised world. Agenda 2063 acknowledges that Africa needs new institutional and governance arrangements to effectively shape its agenda for transformation. However, the exact nature, structure and composition of these 'institutional arrangements' are not defined. Although Agenda 2063 moves beyond the UN-sponsored Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs-framework), this cannot be achieved unless countries establish institutions that are capable of balancing and resolving competing political interests.

The current African Union is ill-equipped to front such an ambitious strategy, hence the decision to reform it comprehensively under the leadership of Paul Kagame (2017). Such a reform will constitute the leitmotif test of African leadership seriousness regarding mind-set change and regional integration prioritisation.

Beyond the international stance though, what would count is the capacity to respond to the demographic pressures mounting across the continent: younger, more educated and urbanised Africans are impatient and vulnerable.

Africa will be dealing convincingly with its image problems when transformation strategies adopted by most African countries address squarely the 'dragging factors'. Africa is held back by mediocre democratic credentials, leaders isolated from people's demands and expectations, and a simplistic focus on growth that seldom translates into structural transformation and job creation. We know from the deconstructed history of post-colonial Africa and its sub-narratives that the gap between Africa's potential and its reality is not impossible to bridge. The transformational opportunities now available narrow the gap still further.

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