



Launching PolitiFact Global News Service

By Jon Greenberg on Tuesday, February 9th, 2016 at 7:59 a.m.



The Obama administration's Power Africa aims to make power easier to get in places like the Alexandra township in Johannesburg, South Africa. (Jon Greenberg)

Tuesday, Jan. 11 wasn't a banner day for patients at the Charlotte Maxeke Academic Hospital (below left) in Johannesburg, South Africa. Yes, the medical complex is a venerated institution, and the services it provides to people across the region are a

point of pride, not just within the city but around the country. Its towers stand out prominently across the Johannesburg skyline.

But that Tuesday did not go well. At about 10 a.m., the city power went out. For a moment, the hospital's backup generators kicked in, then they failed, too. Without power in critical wards, doctors sent a handful of babies in neonatal care to nearby hospitals. Surgeons and nurses scrambled to carry on in the operating rooms. With CT scans off line, the oncology center came to a halt. The next day, administrators fired the medical center's chief engineer.

[See related rulings](#) ▼

Unusual? Only slightly. Relative to most of Africa, the infrastructure of South Africa ranks pretty well, but even in this more developed country, no one takes electricity for granted. At the posh Rosebank Mall in a largely white Johannesburg suburb, the first-run movie theater reassures patrons that if the power stops, its private generators will make sure the show goes on.



The situation in the rest of Sub-Saharan Africa is much worse. High school physics teacher Asante Kwame lives in Kumasi, the second-largest city in Ghana. His wife is a fashion designer, but Kwame said electric service is so spotty, she often can't work.

"We lose power like that," Kwame said. "And then it is off for 24 hours, maybe longer."

Across Sub-Saharan Africa, [two out of three people](#), about 634 million in total, have no access to electricity. There is not enough power produced, there are huge gaps in the grid to

bring it to families and businesses, and small-scale local solar power systems are just beginning to take hold. When President Barack Obama visited the [University of Cape Town](#) in South Africa, June 30, 2013, he spoke of electricity as an essential ingredient to lift Africans out of poverty .

"It's the lifeline for families to meet their most basic needs," Obama said. "And it's the connection that's needed to plug Africa into the grid of the global economy. You've got to have power."

In that 2013 speech, Obama unveiled Power Africa, a \$7 billion effort to boost capacity in Sub-Saharan Africa by 10,000 megawatts in the first round of funding, and much more beyond that. Rather than pay for projects directly, the program would use government dollars to foster projects by other public and private players.

Two years later, conservative journalist Daniel Greenfield penned an article with the headline [Obama spent \\$7 billion to bring electricity to Africa, failed miserably](#). From what we could see, Greenfield based that conclusion entirely on research about the lack of grid connections in Kenya. Edward Miguel, a co-author of that study and an economist at the University of California-Berkeley, repudiated Greenfield's summary.

"I am really disappointed that the author (Greenfield) seems to blame Obama for the failures of the Kenyan electrical utility," Miguel said. "That seems bizarre, and really unfair."

We fact-checked Greenfield and rated his statement Pants on Fire. When he wrote his article, Power Africa had only spent about \$1.7 billion, not the \$7 billion he claimed.

Debunking statements like Greenfield's are part of a new initiative at PolitiFact. With about \$380,000 from the Bill & Melinda Gates Foundation, we have partnered with [Africa Check](#), a fact-checking operation based in South Africa and Senegal. The goal is to assess statements about health and development globally.

Many bogus talking points hang around for years. In 2014, former Hewlett-Packard CEO Carly Fiorina joined a long line of people including Hillary Clinton when she said

that women make up 70 percent of the poorest people. We dubbed that figure the "**Zombie Stat**" for its refusal to die no matter how often it was challenged. For the record, the actual figure is about 50 percent, or exactly what you might expect.

Oxfam Ireland tweeted that women "own just 1 percent of the world's land," another notion devoid of any supporting evidence. **Stephen Cohen**, a University of Maryland sociologist, tracked it back to 1978 when a researcher pulled the number out of thin air. The limited data that do exist suggest that women own much less land than men but the situation varies widely from country to country. Plus, the statistic implies that whatever land women don't own, men do, and that is hugely incorrect.

One might argue that such claims are harmless, or whatever damage they do is marginal, but in the developing world, wild assertions can have devastating impacts.

By mid 2003, polio was on the verge of being eradicated in Nigeria. Then, a group of religious and political leaders in the northern part of the country claimed that the polio vaccine caused infertility. They advised their followers against having their children vaccinated. What followed was a surge in new cases. Reporters at Africa Check documented the impact in this chart.

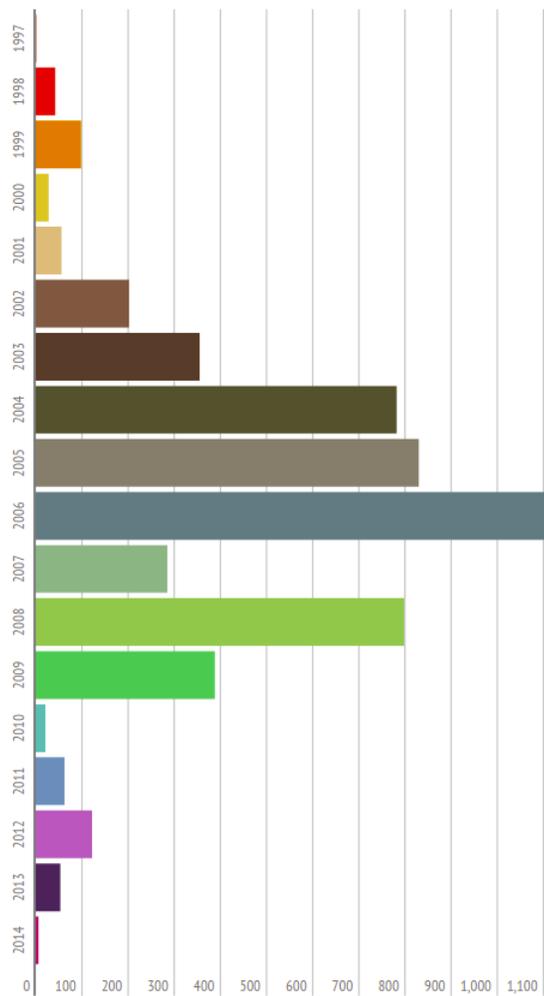
It was a defining moment for Peter Cunliffe-Jones, the founder of Africa Check.

"Media in Nigeria and elsewhere in Africa reported the baseless claims without fact-checking them and, by the time the claims were withdrawn, the damage had been done," Cunliffe-Jones told us. "Polio surged in northern Nigeria and spread from there to a swathe of countries around West Africa and the world."

Cunliffe-Jones says a timely correction could have spared thousands of people from the disease. To be sure, the medical science was crystal clear on the polio vaccine, but sometimes setting the record straight is more challenging.

Fact-checking in the international arena takes place in a realm where hard data is often spotty or entirely absent. Jishnu Das is the lead economist at the World Bank's Development Research Group.

POLIO IN NIGERIA



Source: WHO (<https://extranet.who.int/polio/public/CaseCount.aspx>)

"There are big gaps in the data on health so people have a choice," Das said. "They can say that we don't have enough information to draw firm conclusions, or they can take the absence of data as license to make a variety of unsubstantiated statements. And it's usually the latter."

Das warns of another danger. Limited research might suggest some intervention has a powerful impact. The connection becomes, in Das' words, "received wisdom" that triggers millions of dollars in spending.

"Once it's in that realm, it gets used heavily and it's not questioned. And then it's very difficult to correct."

Das said that with vast needs in low- and middle-income economies, and limited resources to help ease the grinding effects of

poverty, hunger and ill health, vetting the accuracy of claims and the substance behind them takes on a particular importance.

The new venture between PolitiFact and Africa Check will produce some data of its own. It explores how a collaboration across two continents will work in practice. And it tests whether the tools of fact-checking can inform the debate over global health and development in the same way it has informed the debate in the realm of politics.





**20+ LIVE CHANNELS
FOR ONLY \$20/mo.**

ESPN TNT HGTV AMC CNN

**NOT AN INTRODUCTORY PRICE
THAT'S YOUR PRICE**

sling™ **WATCH NOW
7 DAYS FREE**
Restrictions apply

About this article

Researchers: [Jon Greenberg](#)

Sources:

IOL, [Hospital power crisis causes havoc](#), Jan. 12, 2016

News 101, [Charlotte Maxeke Academic Hospital without Electricity](#), Jan. 12, 2016

National Energy Regulator of South Africa, [System adequacy outlook](#), Jan.14, 2015

Eyewitness News, [Charlotte Maxeke sacks resident engineer after lengthy blackout](#), Jan. 12, 2016

Africa Check, [Could Nigeria be declared polio-free in 2015?](#), March 19, 2015

Email interview, Peter Cunliffe-Jones, founder, Africa Check, Feb. 2, 2016

Interview, Jishnu Das, lead economist, Development Research Group, World Bank, Jan. 7, 2016

Email interview, Edward Miguel, professor of environmental and resource economics, University of California-Berkeley, Jan. 21, 2016

Interview, Asante Kwame, teacher, Kumasi, Ghana, Jan. 10, 2016

How to contact us

Email comments and suggestions for fact-checks to truthometer@politifact.com or find us on [Facebook](#), [Twitter](#) and [Google+](#). (If you send us a comment, we'll assume you don't mind us publishing it unless you tell us otherwise.)

We're especially interested in any viral images or social media memes that you would like us to check out.

Sign up for PolitiFact's email newsletter

Find out which politicians and pundits are telling the truth, which ones are stretching it, and which ones are making statements we rate Pants on Fire.

[\(Privacy Policy\)](#)

What do you think?

Should women be required to register for the US military draft?

Browse The Truth-O-Meter™

[Barack Obama's file](#)

[Pants-On-Fire rulings](#)

[By our rulings](#)

[By subject](#)

[By person](#)

[View recent articles](#)

ADVERTISEMENT

Obama Urges Homeowners To Switch To A 15 Year Fixed
 If you owe less than \$625,000 on your home, use Obama's Refi Program. You'll be shocked when you see how much you can save.

Tap Your Age:

18-25	26-35	36-45	
46-55	56-65	66-75	Over 75

Calculate New House Payment

©2016 LowerMyBills.com. All rights reserved. LowerMyBills.com

Subscribe

Keep up to date with PolitiFact

[Sign up for our e-mail](#) (about once a week)

Put a free [PolitiFact widget](#) on your blog or Web page

[Subscribe to our RSS feeds on Truth-O-Meter items](#)

[Subscribe to our RSS feeds on GOP Pledge-O-Meter items](#)

[Subscribe to our RSS feeds on Obameter items](#)

 [Follow us on Twitter](#)

 [Fan us on Facebook](#)

[Advertise on PolitiFact](#)

HARRY'S

HANDSOMER SHARPER LESS EXPENSIVE

[TRY HARRY'S](#)



© 2016 • All Rights Reserved • Tampa Bay Times
490 First Avenue South • St. Petersburg, FL 33701 • 727-893-8111
[About PolitiFact](#) | [Contact Us](#) | [Advertise](#)
[Privacy Policy](#) | [Terms, Conditions & Copyright](#)