FORUM

Is It Africa's Turn?

Progress in the world's poorest region.

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Things were certainly looking up when I last visited Busia, a small city in Kenya, in mid-2007. Busia, home to about 60,000 residents, spans Kenya's western border with Uganda: half the town sits on the Kenyan side and half in Uganda. As befits a border town, Busia is well endowed with gas stations, seedy bars, and hotels catering to the truckers who spend the night on the way from Nairobi to Uganda.

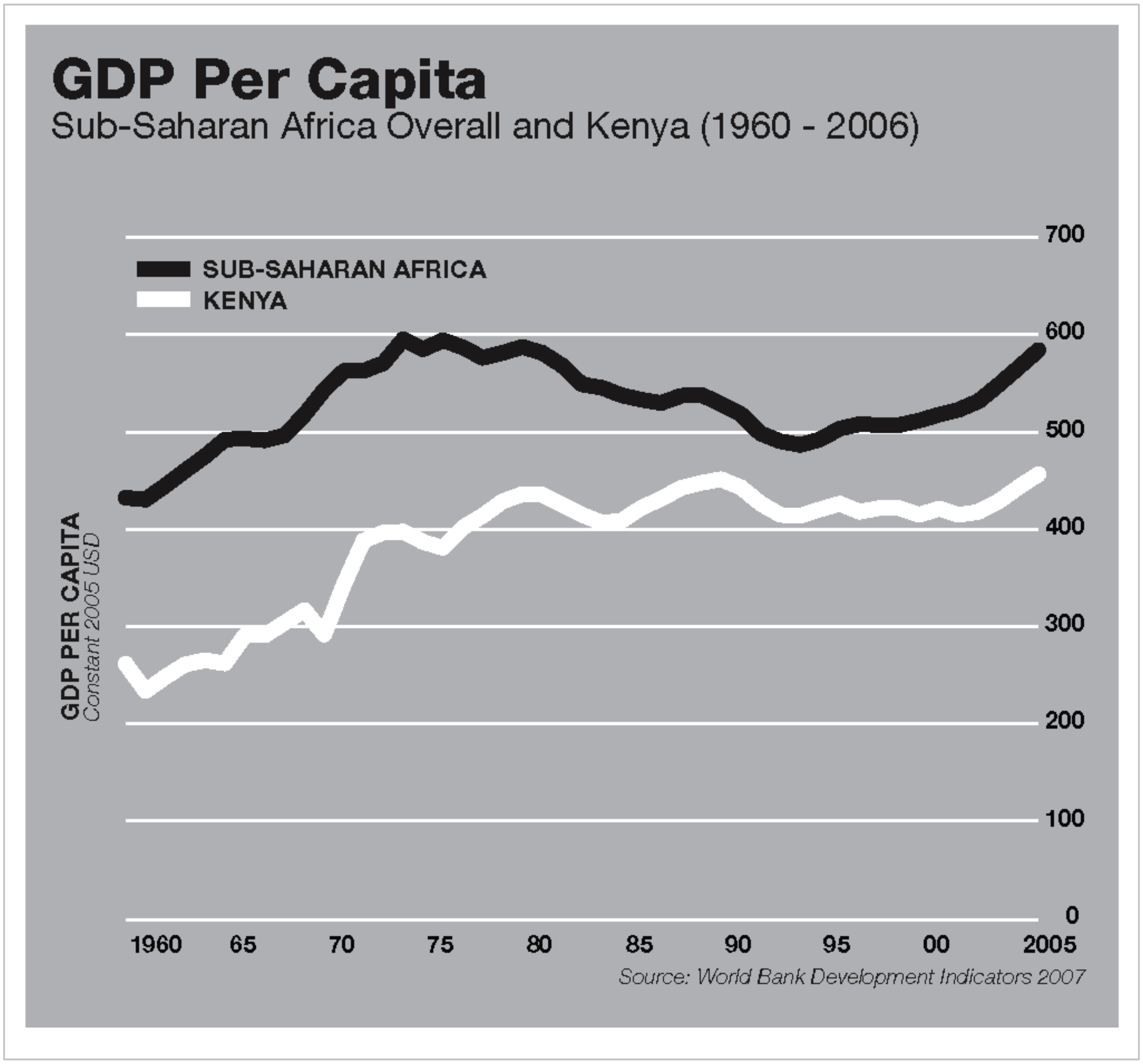
When I visited last June, the city was experiencing an economic renaissance. Busia's first supermarkets, ATMs, Internet cafés, and car rental businesses were all open, and residential suburbs had formed on the edge of town. The small *dukas*—shops selling home food supplies and airtime for now-omnipresent cell phones—were freshly painted with advertisements for local dairy products. And most importantly, the road from Kisumu, the economic hub of the region and Kenya's third largest city, to Busia had become a paved, two-lane highway all the way to the border, expediting trade with Uganda's productive factories and farmers.

Yet, barely a decade ago, poverty and desperation were pervasive there, as in all of western Kenya. Primary-school enrollment rates had fallen throughout the 1990s, public health surveys in 1997 showed that the HIV infection rate might be upwards of 30 percent among pregnant women, and the road into Uganda—the lifeblood of a border town and one of Kenya's critical international trade arteries—was falling apart. Long stretches of the drive from Kisumu were nearly impassable due to moon-crater potholes; cars hugged the side of the road or slalomed across the remaining patches of asphalt. Eastbound and westbound vehicles alternated control over the pavement, setting a deadly stage, especially at night, for road accidents, as oil tankers and buses sped in opposite directions.

I have visited Busia every year since 1997 to help local development-oriented nonprofit organizations design and evaluate their rural programs. In so doing, I have been exposed to impressive changes that are mirrored throughout the country. Kenyan economic growth rates surged between 2002 and 2007, achieving levels not seen since the 1970s. Last summer Nairobi's never-ending traffic jams of imported Japanese cars were but one tangible indication that Kenyans were suddenly on the move. Construction projects were everywhere, as developers took advantage of the unexpected spike in land values. New productive sectors, like same-day cut flower exports to Europe, employed tens of thousands of workers. Like a fever that had suddenly broken, the resignation and fear of the 1990s were replaced by energy, optimism, and a feeling that there was no time to lose.

But that feeling dissipated quickly in the weeks following Kenya's disputed December 27, 2007 presidential election. The incumbent president Mwai Kibaki was reelected, allegedly through heavy ballot-box rigging. The results, and subsequent violent opposition protests and ethnic clashes, surprised many Kenyans and most observers, who thought that the elections would be free and fair and that they would help Kenya turn the corner on its autocratic past. The government power-sharing deal that Kofi Annan negotiated between the government and opposition, after two months of bloodshed, has instilled tentative hope.

The recent violence in Kenya is a heartbreaking disappointment, but the Lazarus story I witnessed in Busia—though it may have been temporary—is being repeated in hundreds of cities, towns, and villages, not just in Kenya, but all over Africa. Economic growth rates are at historic highs and democratization appears finally to be taking root. The question emerges: Will Africa be the world's next development miracle?



In 2000, sub-Saharan Africa—that is, all of Africa, excluding North Africa, which represents only 15 percent of the continent's population—was at the end of an uninterrupted quarter century of economic and political failure, a downward tailspin that gave the world the 1984-85 Ethiopian famine and the 1994 Rwandan genocide and more recently blood diamonds and mass amputations in Sierra Leone. Africa ranked lowest in the world in just about every economic and social indicator, including public health, as one might expect from the epicenter of the global HIV/AIDS epidemic.

Continuing the positive economic trends of the 1940s and '50s, many newly independent African countries saw improvements in the '60s. But these signs of advancement soon gave way to staggering reversals. After peaking around 1975, African per capita income steadily declined through 2000, with average living standards falling 20 percent. Kenya serves as a pretty close stand-in for the entire continent: the timing of its economic advance and decline differs only slightly, with incomes peaking slightly later. During the same period, two other once desperately poor regions carried out an economic transformation: Indian per capita incomes doubled and Chinese levels rose four-fold.

The academic debate on what went wrong in Africa at the end of the twentieth century is extensive, but the leading culprits seem to be bad economic policy and weak state institutions. Here, though, I am more concerned with what has gone right since 2000, the turnaround in economic performance that has lifted African per capita income levels close to their all-time highs. Africa's recovery may still be modest by China and India's standards (average annual per capita income growth for all sub-Saharan Africa has been at about 3 percent between 2000 and 2007), but it constitutes a clear break from the past, and it is now possible to wonder whether the terrible decades of war, famine, and despair are finally over. Several continent-wide trends suggest reasons to hope that they are.

Sub-Saharan Africa has become much more democratic since 1991, and this change has brought new faces into power and challenged old ways of doing business in the halls of government. Although Kenya's recent stolen election was a huge step backwards, there was a time not long ago when opposition parties were not even allowed to contest African elections, and all private media outlets were banned.

Freedom House, an independent nonprofit organization, produces a commonly used index of democratic freedoms, assigning values from one (most democratic) to seven (least). In the 1970s and ’80s most counties in Africa averaged democracy scores hovering around six, a level at which political freedoms are basically nonexistent, dissident speech is violently repressed, and elections—if they are even held—are mainly for show.

Starting in 1991, however, citizens in dozens of African countries fought for political change. Some were inspired by the freedom wave then sweeping the Soviet bloc and the demise of Apartheid in South Africa. By 2007 the African Freedom House average had jumped to a four. Thus, the typical African country is still not as democratic as Sweden or India, but progress has been widespread and visible. Opposition parties are ubiquitous and open debate the norm in a growing number of African countries, putting them far ahead of the entrenched dictatorships in Asian economic stars like China and Vietnam in terms of developing free political institutions.

Until its recent relapse, Kenya had experienced an even more inspiring turnaround, from a Freedom House ranking of seven in 1995 to a three following the 2002 elections won by then–opposition leader Kibaki. Daniel arap Moi, a member of the Kalenjin ethnic group and a violent, polarizing, and autocratic ruler who became President in 1978, imprisoned and tortured hundreds of dissidents when he officially turned the country into a one-party state in the 1980s. By the 1990s Kenya’s political institutions were every bit as corroded as the Kisumu-Busia highway.

Popular protests—buttressed by foreign donor pressure—forced Moi to hold Kenya’s first competitive elections in a generation in 1992 and again in 1997. But neither election was fair; Moi held all the levers of state power and would never allow himself to lose. Ethnic clashes—most likely manufactured by the president himself—broke out before both polls and served to intimidate the opposition, which was already reeling from the blatantly pro-government electoral commission and biased state TV coverage. As the government looked the other way, tens of thousands of Kikuyu families were driven off their land in the Rift Valley by Kalenjin youth militias, which saw (and continue to see) the Rift Valley as Kalenjins' ancestral homeland and birthright.

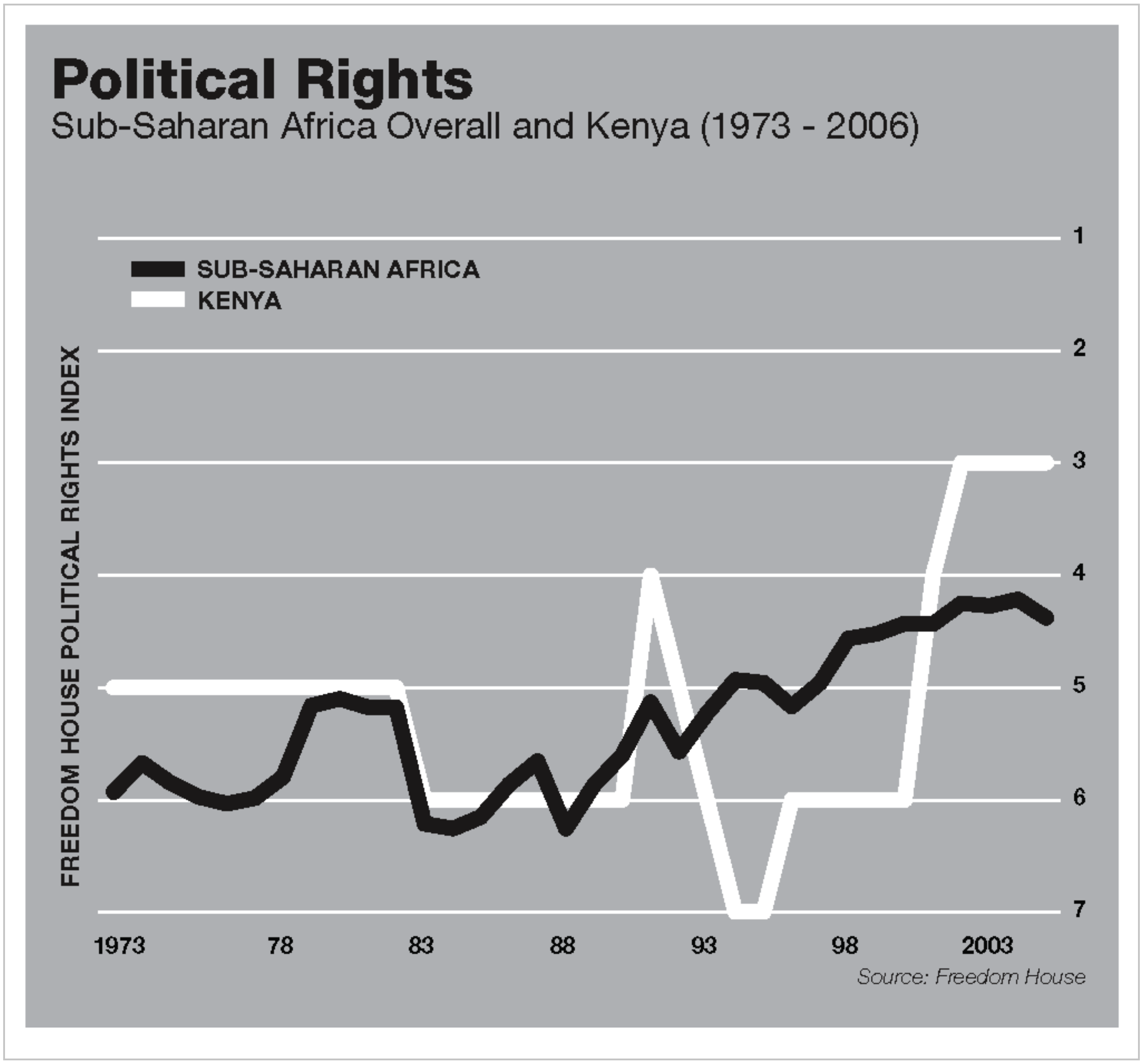
Kenya held another national election in 2007. But this time the political opposition—led by long-time dissident Raila Odinga, himself imprisoned for over eight years without trial by Moi—was leading opinion polls over the now-incumbent Kibaki, who came to power when Moi finally stepped down. Political coverage in flourishing independent newspapers, on radio, television, and the Internet was exhilarating and no-holds-barred. Peaceful protests were ubiquitous. As the incumbent party faced probable defeat in a second consecutive election, Kenya was starting to look like a real democracy.

But things did not work out the way they were supposed to. After Odinga moved ahead in the early election returns, Kenya's Electoral Commission delayed vote counting for two days before producing vote tallies that unexpectedly put President Kibaki in the lead. Many international observers, and even the Commission's own head, claimed rigging was the cause: in some of Kibaki's Kikuyu strongholds, the president received tens of thousands more votes than the total number of registered voters.

The result was massive opposition protests suppressed, often violently, by police. The post-election anger also provided a political opening for renewed Kalenjin-Kikuyu clashes in the multiethnic Rift Valley, the products of a dispute that had largely been on ice since the mid-1990s but was never settled. Hundreds of thousands of Kenyans of all ethnic groups, but disproportionately Kikuyus, were driven out of their homes after the election. A country lauded globally for hosting its troubled neighbors' refugees—from Ethiopia, Somalia, Sudan, and Uganda—suddenly had its own refugee camps. Kenya's success was apparently far more fragile than it seemed even six months ago.

While its Freedom House rating is sure to worsen following the rigged election, some of Kenya's recent democratic gains remain robust, as evidenced by the boisterous new opposition media that openly challenged the results, the mass opposition rallies, and the fact that Odinga's opposition party, despite losing the presidency, did manage to win control of parliament and force Kibaki to share power. These changes have been made possible by a new generation of Kenyan civil-society leaders, journalists, and anti-corruption campaigners who will not allow a return to one-party rule.

Are Africa's democratic reforms a partial explanation for its encouraging recent economic performance? Nobel Prize–winning economist Amartya Sen has famously described how democracy improved the Indian government's economic policies and, in particular, its response to famines. Although it is impossible to prove a causal link, there are good conceptual reasons to believe that democracy can sometimes play midwife to economic rebirth. Democratic elections force politicians to be more receptive to voters' needs: a free press means government policies are scrutinized and malfeasance investigated, and elections provide discipline for even the most venal or incompetent politicians. Get caught stealing and one is unlikely to return to a plum MP post. Africa's recent gains in both political freedom and economic growth could be connected.



As important as Africa's internal political and social changes may be, global economic conditions have also been critical, and in recent years nothing has been more salient than China's rise as an economic force. China's miracle—from rice paddies to mag-lev trains in one generation—affects Africa in multiple ways. The first is through international trade. Total Asia-Africa trade increased to more than $100 billion dollars in 2006 from trivial levels a decade earlier, and China has been partner to much of that gain. Rising commodity prices are a big part of the story. Global commodity prices for petroleum, minerals, and agricultural products have soared over the past five years as surging Asian demand meets limited world supplies.

Crude oil is the best-known example. Its price has more than tripled since 2000, depositing many more dollars in the coffers of the big African producers like Nigeria, Angola, Sudan, and Gabon. The petroleum for Asian factories and urban commuters has to come from somewhere, and Africa is filling the gaps.

But oil is not Africa's only significant export. The per-unit price of copper, used in factories and construction everywhere, soared from about $70 to $350 between June 2001 and June 2007, a boon to Zambia, Africa's largest producer. Kenya and its East African neighbors have benefited from coffee's rise. Prices have been frothy, jumping from $41 per unit in 2001 to $113 in 2007. This increase puts more money in the pockets of coffee farmers, many of whom are smallholders. The consensus is that hungry Chinese consumers are behind a big chunk of all these rising prices.

Gains in key export sectors sometimes help people who are not growing coffee or mining copper themselves. For instance, Kenya's Busia is not a coffee-producing region, but it still benefits from higher coffee prices. As coffee producers in central Kenya get richer, they buy more of Busia's fish and plantains, and also more Ugandan goods, sending ever more trucks (and truckers) laden with imports through the border city.

While rising demand for commodities is one way that Asia's economic boom helps to raise African living standards, China's economic involvement in Africa now goes far beyond arms-length imports and exports. Chinese firms have begun investing directly in African oil and mineral producers and in roads, dams, and telecommunications infrastructure. It is estimated that annual Chinese foreign direct investment in Africa surpassed the one billion dollar mark in 2005 and has continued to rise since. Shuttered factories and mines have been brought back to life and severed roads restored. The spread of cell phone technology has allowed rural African grain markets to function more efficiently, probably improving the lives of consumers, farmers, and traders alike.

No one knows the exact figures, but hundreds of thousands of Chinese workers and entrepreneurs have also migrated to Africa in search of their fortunes. This new Afro-Chinese community—from telecom engineers to owners of small Asian restaurants and medicine shops—has been a striking new presence in my own recent travels in both West and East Africa.

Why have Chinese individuals and firms dived in when European and U.S. investors have largely shied away? In discussions with Chinese investors, it seems the key motive is simple: profit. Africa provides bountiful profit opportunities across multiple economic sectors for Chinese firms flush with cash from their boundless growth at home. Chinese investors also have a major advantage over their Western counterparts in that they know how to make money in a developing–country business environment where the rule of law is optional, corruption and bribery are the norm, and infrastructure is patchy. Their experiences at home give them a big leg up on the competition.

But the importing of Chinese business practices along with Chinese direct investment is not wholly positive for Africa. Take the example of Zambia’s decrepit Chambishi mine, bought out by a Chinese state-owned enterprise and reopened in 2003 to great fanfare. Local support for the project quickly evaporated when brutal labor conditions came to light: workers were given inadequate safety equipment, paid below the national minimum wage, and denied days off—basically, working conditions similar to what many Chinese mine workers face. Perhaps in part due to disregard for worker safety, more than fifty workers died in a serious 2005 accident that shut down the Zambian mine.

A U.S. or U.K. firm with such an appalling safety record would probably face investigations, protests, or even boycotts back home, and the bad PR would likely push it to improve working conditions. Recall the uproar when awful conditions in Nike's Asian factories came to light. But Chinese firms are not subject to the same scrutiny as their Western counterparts with respect to worker, environmental, and human rights issues. The repressive political environment in the People's Republic ensures that Chinese firms never have to say they're sorry, and they thus have a far freer hand than Westerners to squeeze profits out of African workers. While the Chambishi copper mine eventually reopened, the belief that Chinese investment brings slave-labor conditions remains widespread in Zambia. Some have begun to ask whether Chinese investment is worse than no foreign investment at all, as it seems increasingly out of step with Africans' democratic aspirations.

Even more controversially, Chinese investors have taken the lead tapping into Sudan's rich crude oil reserves. Western energy firms have shunned the Khartoum regime as punishment for its support for the *janjaweed* militias that have massacred thousands of civilians in Darfur and displaced millions more. This has left the oil playing field to the Chinese alone, and they have responded by supplying the Sudanese government critical military assistance and diplomatic support at the United Nations. Ironically, Western sanctions have only strengthened China's bargaining position vis-à-vis Khartoum by eliminating the potential competition, boosting their profits.

Sudan is not the only oil producer receiving no-strings-attached Chinese investment and aid. Angola and Chad are two other recipients with questionable human rights credentials and some of the world's worst corruption. Given these countries' unscrupulous leaders and repressive politics, it is unclear whether expanded oil production will yield higher living standards any time soon.

Leaving controversial cases like these aside for the moment, China's economic rise has clearly benefited many millions of Africans, especially through growing trade and higher global commodity prices. And the billions in Chinese investment currently pouring into Africa hold out the possibility of better infrastructure and industrial development in the long run: in 2007, China committed another $20 billion to finance trade and infrastructure development throughout Africa.

Beyond the rise of China, access to rich-country markets for agricultural exports is a key issue for African economies. In the past, the United States, European Union, and Japan have forcibly opened foreign markets to "free trade" in sectors where those wealthy economies have the competitive edge, while subsidizing their own inefficient farmers with hundreds of billions of dollars each year and using tariffs and quotas to keep foreign agriculture off our dinner tables. This is one of the most hypocritical of all international trade injustices but also one that seems impervious to reform efforts.

Cotton is an extreme example of how rich-country policies hinder African economic development. In recent years, 25,000 U.S. cotton farmers have received more than $3 billion a year in government subsidies. The resulting surge in U.S. production floods global markets and drives down world cotton prices, hurting millions of poor cotton farmers in Benin, Burkina Faso, Mali, and Tanzania, for whom higher cotton prices would improve living standards. If U.S. policymakers are genuinely interested in keeping Africa's current economic turnaround going, reducing agricultural subsidies to our domestic cotton farmers would be an obvious starting-point.

Recent history suggests that unilateral trade liberalization by rich countries can make a difference. In 2000 the United States enacted the African Growth and Opportunity Act (AGOA), which reduced tariff rates and lifted quotas on African textiles. It is credited with spurring textile production in a few African countries, including Kenya. A broader opening of rich country markets could have even more profound benefits. Yet here China's growing economy creates tough competition for Africa. The 2005 expiration of the Multi-Fiber Agreement, which ended most textile and apparel quotas worldwide, allowed China's low-cost factories to compete freely with other textile producers for the first time, and China's share of rich-country markets has surged. Africa's textile producers have been among the main losers, and many of AGOA's initial gains have eroded.

The noncompetitiveness of African textiles is emblematic of a broader failure of the recent economic expansion. While natural resource and some agricultural exports have grown, industrial transformation is not driving Africa's growth: in most African countries, the manufacturing sector remains as small today as it was in 2000.

The role of foreign aid is one of the most contentious issues in development economics today. Champions of foreign aid like Jeffrey Sachs of Columbia University claim that dramatically boosting foreign aid is *the* key to breaking poor regions like sub-Saharan Africa out of their "poverty traps," situations in which countries' own poverty prevents them from bootstrapping their way to a better future. Sachs' position is that a large aid infusion will provide poor Africans with enough spare cash to save, invest, and finally grow on their own.

Opponents of increased foreign aid, led by Bill Easterly at NYU, point to the fact that Africa remains desperately poor today despite the hundreds of billions of dollars of aid that have already been routed there. In other words, if there really was a poverty trap, the foreign aid already donated provided ample opportunity for Africans to break themselves out of it.

Many social science researchers have sought to establish foreign aid's causal impacts on economic growth, but there are still no definitive statistical answers. Yet a look at the raw data on foreign aid across regions and time suggests that aid has probably played a rather small role in Africa's recent economic success.

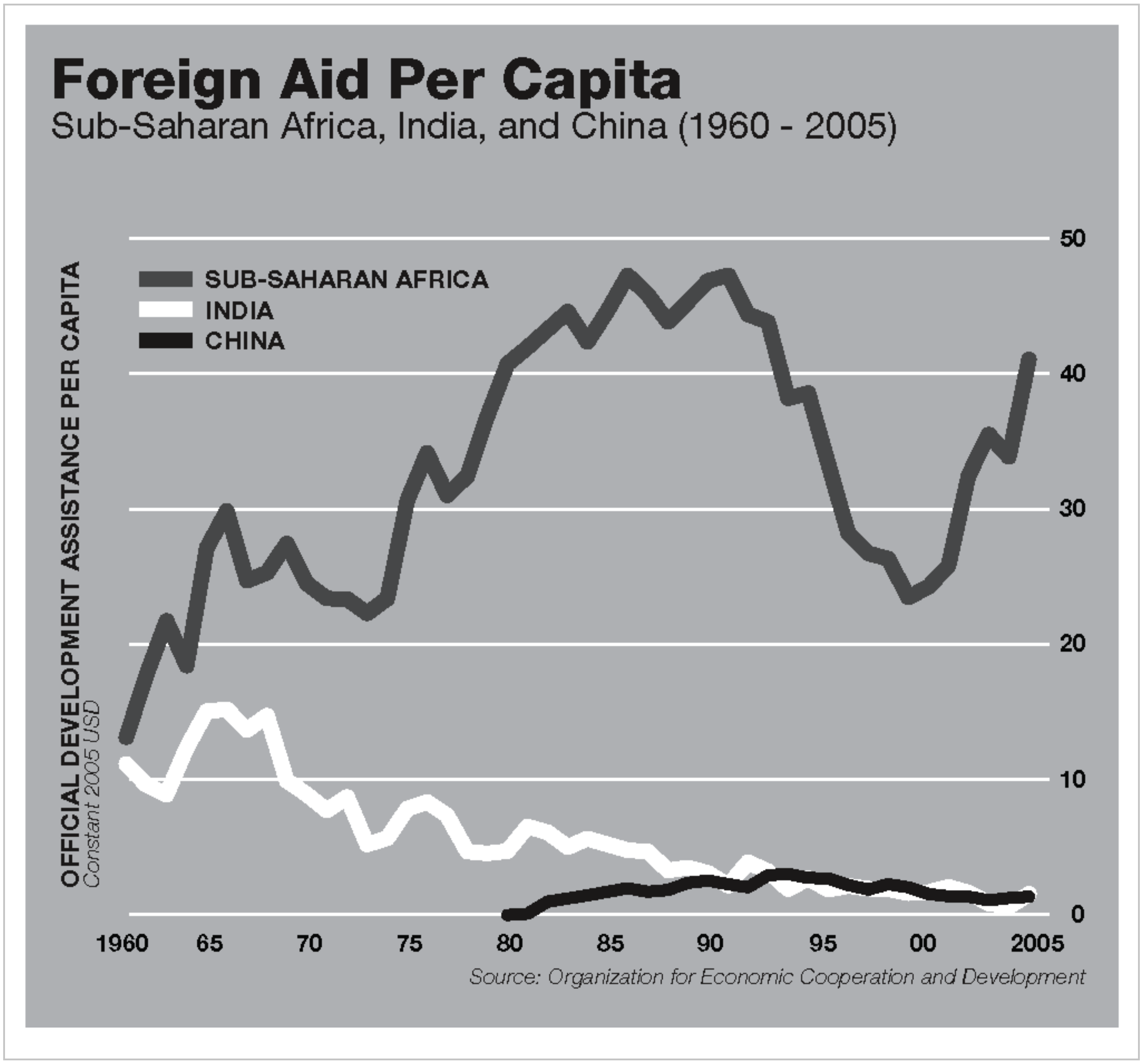
The first instructive comparison is Africa versus the world's two other poor giants, China and India, both of which were at African per capita income levels in the 1970s. It is striking how high foreign aid to Africa currently is in per capita terms: overseas development assistance is a full order of magnitude higher in Africa than in China or India, as it was during the critical 1980-2000 period when those Asian countries moved forward economically and Africa declined. There is no doubt that foreign aid is not necessary for economic development.

Another issue is that foreign aid to Africa increased in the 1980s precisely when its economies started to collapse. You might wonder if foreign aid caused the collapse, but that probably would be inaccurate. Increased foreign aid flows could have been a response to the deteriorating economic circumstances. But this sort of concern makes it very difficult to understand foreign aid's impact. Foreign aid can affect economic growth but it also reacts to local economic conditions, and disentangling causes and effects in the statistics is hard.

A more promising way to get analytical leverage is to compare African economic growth in the 1980s to that in the 1990s. At the tail end of the Cold War, levels of foreign aid to Africa were at historical highs, as the United States and the Soviet Union each plied countries with cash to win their diplomatic support in that grand struggle. Yet foreign aid to Africa fell off a cliff—by nearly 50 percent—between 1990 and 1995, when African countries lost their geopolitical significance. What was the impact of this sudden change, driven mainly by external political factors rather than in reaction to internal economic performance, on African economies? You could think of this kind of sharp, unexpected change as a natural experiment.

A close look at trends in African GDP per capita indicates that average African economic performance remained pretty much the same throughout the 1990s—stable stagnation, if you like—despite the sudden aid drop off. Once again it does not appear that we should look to foreign aid to explain the key turning points in African economic growth performance.

These patterns certainly do not mean that all foreign aid is useless. There are many aspects of human wellbeing—in education and healthcare, for instance—that are affected by foreign aid but do not show up in short-run national income figures. The recent international campaign to fund anti-retroviral drugs is a dramatic example, and it has already saved thousands of African lives. Foreign aid can sometimes improve lives today without changing the bottom line or stimulating the economy as a whole. However, the lack of correspondence between aid and growth should make us more skeptical about simplistic claims that boosting foreign aid alone will break Africa out of its persistent poverty and lead to sustained economic progress. Healthy skepticism about foreign aid's benefits is particularly appropriate in countries where corruption remains widespread and much of whatever aid does arrive will be squandered.



Violence lies just below the surface of politics in poor countries and can derail economic gains. As Kenya illustrates, sub-Saharan Africa is no exception. In fact, African countries have suffered the greatest number of armed conflicts in the world over the past three decades: 70 percent have experienced at least one year of armed conflict since 1980. The damage tends to spill over into neighboring countries. Kenya's January 2008 political turmoil shut down the Kisumu-Busia highway, temporarily cutting off oil supplies into Uganda.

The past few years have seen some optimistic trends on the conflict front, but overall it is a mixed bag. The good news is that several of the most stubborn civil wars—including those in Angola, Liberia, and Sierra Leone—have finally come to an end since 2000, and the conflict in northern Uganda is moving toward resolution. Post-Apartheid South Africa has avoided a political explosion, at least for the time being.

And the postwar recoveries in many African countries such as Mozambique and Uganda show that some economies can quickly overcome the toxic legacies of armed strife. In the cases of Sierra Leone and Uganda, there are signs that the civil war has not permanently demoralized survivors. In fact, experiencing conflict's horrors seems to give some people the will to strive for a better society. Chris Blattman's field research among former Ugandan child soldiers finds that those abducted by the rebels are actually more politically engaged today than those who escaped, while my work with John Bellows shows that members of Sierra Leonean households that suffered violence are more likely to vote, participate in community meetings, and contribute to local school projects than their neighbors who were spared direct violence. These findings highlight the incredible resilience of African households.

Despite these success stories, the total proportion of African countries engaged in ongoing armed conflicts has not budged, remaining near 30 percent since 1995, as new conflicts, such as Côte d'Ivoire's, take the place of the old ones and old conflicts restart (Niger).

The gravest threats, in my view, are the armed conflicts in Congo and Sudan, Africa's largest countries, bordering a combined total of fifteen other nations. African civil wars also have a history of eclipsing national frontiers: the Liberian civil war led to Sierra Leone's conflict, the Rwanda genocide provided the spark for Congo's current mess, and Sudan's Darfur conflict has already rekindled Chad's long-simmering civil war. Unless the wars in Congo and

Sudan end, they will soon threaten Africa's new democracies and economic success stories.

There is growing evidence that African civil violence can be precipitated by adverse economic conditions, and in particular by sharp drops in national income. Of course, this is not always the case: Kenya's crisis broke out during good economic times. But more often than not, extreme poverty breeds desperation and makes taking part in organized violence or crime more attractive. Exploiting two different natural experiments, researchers find that external factors that hurt African economies can set off armed conflict. Large drops in rainfall levels—which lead to economic collapse in agrarian societies—and reductions in key commodity prices have both been linked to the outbreak of civil conflict.

If the economic growth of the last seven years continues for another decade or two, African countries will be considerably richer and more diversified and thus at less risk of falling into conflict. But in the meantime, sudden economic shocks linked to weather or commodity prices are a tremendous risk factor.

Rather than waiting until conflicts arise, we might target foreign aid to vulnerable countries beforehand. I call this attempt to bolster fragile states in their most trying years, "rapid conflict prevention support" or RCPS. Tracking current rainfall levels and commodity price movements is a good way to figure out which countries should receive the aid. The hope is that using more of the existing foreign aid pool as *insurance* for the poorest African countries in this way could pay off by preventing armed conflicts that jeopardize whole regions. I do not think RCPS insurance should (or could) entirely replace traditional aid focused on infrastructure, health, or education. But given that the fruits of so much foreign assistance are currently destroyed by armed conflict, or diverted to humanitarian relief after wars have already broken out, RCPS is a natural complement to standard foreign assistance.

An existing program that provides drought assistance to farmers in Botswana shows that an RCPS insurance mechanism can work. Drought is a frequent visitor to Botswana, as in much of the semiarid tropics. Starting in the 1970s, the government implemented the groundbreaking Drought Relief Program (DRP) to help its people cope through dry periods. The DRP consists of direct income support for rural households in these years, including both public works employment and food aid for the most vulnerable farmers.

It is estimated that up to 60 percent of rural Botswanans received some DRP assistance during the country's severe mid-1980s drought. (To put that in perspective, Medicaid, the largest U.S. social program providing health care for poor families, covers only 13 percent of the population.) In those difficult years, DRP helped preserve social stability by keeping rural poverty and income inequality in check.

But Botswana's government probably got its money's worth: the country has not had a single year of armed conflict since independence in the 1960s. Botswana has been Africa's economic superstar for the past forty years, and former Botswana president Quett Masire told me he thinks the drought insurance played an important role in its success. This agricultural insurance program is part of the social contract between the people of Botswana and their democratically elected government. It helps maintain peace and prosperity in one small corner of sub-Saharan Africa. Other African countries at risk of drought could benefit by following in Botswana's footsteps with similar programs.

Unfortunately, the risk of drought might be increasing. Half a world away from Botswana or Sudan, China's manufacturing boom may as well be on another planet but for one thing: the lives of African peasant farmers and Chinese factory workers—and everyone else on the globe—are connected by our collective effect on Earth's climate. For poor African farmers, weather determines whether the next harvest will yield enough food to eat. What comes out of factory smokestacks in China could literally be a matter of life and death if changing global weather means less rain for Africa, leading to poverty and war.

China's modern economic growth is fuelled by burning coal, gas, and oil. Between 2002 and 2004, energy use in China increased by a staggering 33 percent, and China became the world's biggest greenhouse-gas polluter in 2007. Together, China and the United States account for over 40 percent of global CO_2 emissions, the main culprit behind global warming.

The most recent UN report predicts that temperatures worldwide will increase anywhere from 2.0°F to 11.5°F (1.1°C to 6.4°C) during the twenty-first century. While this rise in temperatures will have a major impact on agriculture, for those of us living in advanced, post-industrial—and air-conditioned—societies like the United States, what do higher temperatures really mean? Perhaps a slightly bigger electric bill at the end of each summer month (counterbalanced with smaller heating bills in winter). Some parts of the United States may be buffeted by stronger hurricanes and tornadoes, but climate change in this range won't be catastrophic for most rich countries. Silicon Valley's idea factories and New York's investment banks will keep on humming even if it is a few degrees warmer outside.

But not so for Sudan, Chad, or their neighbors. Several leading international climate scientists predict that conditions will get worse in Africa's Sahel, a parched stretch of earth containing Chad and Niger, as well as parts of Sudan, Mali, Senegal, and their neighbors. The Sahel is home to over one hundred million of the world's poorest people. Average annual per capita income in the fifteen Sahelian countries is only $346, and the entire region is racked by political instability and warfare. Princeton University's Geophysical Fluid Dynamics Laboratory (GFDL) has developed a climate model that offers dire forecasts, predicting that average temperatures in the Sahel could rise 6.3°F (3.5°C) and rainfall could drop by 24 percent over the next eighty years. So there will be less rain and what little does fall will evaporate more quickly due to higher temperatures. One of the driest places on earth may get even drier. If its fragile soils turn into desert sand, the region's economic situation could grow worse. It is the cruelest of ironies that the poorest people in the world—in the region least able to deal with extreme weather—could be the biggest losers in the global climate change lottery.

Not all climate models produce the same bleak forecasts as that of the GFDL researchers. But given the potentially disastrous consequences for the people of the Sahel, it is worth planning for the worst through new aid policies like RCPS, as well as more research into drought-resistant crop varieties suited to the region.

Looking back at Africa's first four decades of independence, it seems that everyone—including Africans themselves—were far too optimistic about how their economic and political fortunes would play out.

With a few notable exceptions (such as Ethiopia), African nations were inventions of the colonial powers, lines on maps with little real historical or social meaning. (Does "the Central African Republic" sound to you like a name people chose for themselves to express their national identity, or one imposed by a colonial bureaucrat?) Colonizers placed strict limitations on African political participation prior to independence, which impeded the development of genuine local politics. A few African countries, like Ghana, had strong independence movements, but in most cases, especially in Francophone Africa, independence simply dropped into people's laps.

It should not be surprising that it is taking a full generation or more for real nationhood to take root in these infant countries. Everything started from scratch after independence. Politicians had to figure out how to forge political compromises across class, regional, gender, linguistic, tribal, and religious lines. History and civics textbooks needed to be written. Citizens had to come up with their own national narratives and heroes. Creating new identities and institutions is not something that foreign colonizers, aid donors, or the IMF and World Bank are willing or able to do. That kind of transformation demands visionary leaders, who have too often been lacking in Africa, or have themselves been victims of political violence. Further complicating matters, leaders and citizens trying to assemble structures of civic life must contend with the immediate economic imperatives of boosting agricultural productivity, educating the workforce, and building a modern transportation infrastructure.

Historically, the process of creating viable nations has been costly in time and blood. The closest parallel to Africa's painful post-colonial transition is probably Latin America's trajectory after its independence from Spain and Portugal in the 1810s and 1820s. Like twentieth-century Africa, the newly free Latin American republics suffered many decades of civil and international wars, economic stagnation, and political repression before finally establishing stronger states in the late 1800s. These ninteenth century Latin American conflicts were as devastating as the worst African wars, if not more so: in the 1864-1870 War of the Triple Alliance, Argentine, Brazilian, and Uruguayan troops killed over half the prewar population of Paraguay, as they snatched chunks of its land. The comparison with the Democratic Republic of Congo's ongoing conflict—which has lured troops from at least five of its neighbors, all grabbing at Congo's mineral trove and leaving millions of civilians dead—is irresistible.

Nation-building has never happened overnight, and that includes the United States. Our own brutal civil war took place eighty years after independence from Britain, and it was not until after that transformative war that the United States became a genuine economic and military power. After its forced opening to the outside world in 1853, Japan suffered three decades of political instability and economic stagnation before it too found its institutional footing and started on its unprecedented path of economic development.

For the first time in a long while, there is genuine hope today that Africa is on the path to real economic and political progress, and may finally catch up to the rest of the world economy. International trade is rising, better roads and new technologies like cell phones are improving millions of lives, and more countries than ever are turning to democracy. The economic boom and political opening I witnessed in Kenya shows what is possible.

Unfortunately, the latest Kenyan crisis also reinforces the point that Africa is not yet over the hump. The fact that post-election violence could engulf East Africa’s richest and most democratic country overnight—and so readily threaten the past decade’s strides—highlights how fragile its gains really were. Kenya is one country out of more than forty in sub-Saharan Africa, so it would not be right to over-interpret events there. But sadly Kenya is not alone: Côte d'Ivoire and Zimbabwe, two of Africa's most prosperous and stable countries in the early 1990s, have also imploded in bloody political conflict. Other African countries, too, may be just one contested election, one drought year, one plummeting commodity price, or a global economic recession away from similar meltdowns.

It is still too early to know if Africa’s time is now. In the meantime, international efforts to reduce western farm subsidies, use foreign aid as insurance against conflict risk in the most vulnerable countries, end the wars in Darfur and Congo, and promote agricultural adaptation to climate change are concrete steps that may help solidify Africa’s nascent transformation.

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