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A look at Africa's progress



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Published: Thursday, July 28, 2016
Kevin Baldeosingh

This short book consists of a long essay by economist Edward Miguel, with responses from nine other contributors, including economist Paul Collier (author of The Bottom Billion).



Unlike most books which try to glorify the African continent, usually on historical or sociological bases, this book published by the Massachusetts Institute of Technology takes a rigorous look at Africa's progress since the 1990s and still adopts a tone of cautious optimism.

In the foreword by economist William Easterly, who is best known for his empirical critiques of aid to developing countries, he writes: "In the West, Africa's image seems forever torn between two false extremes: Politically correct positive and stereotypically negative. Those who promote the first want to persuade us that poverty and bad government are not as bad as they seem in Africa, so a little bit of outside aid and advice can cause rapid change for the better. Those who promote the second seem happy to go along with the sensationalist media stereotypes of ubiquitous child soldiers, genocide, famine and plague, perhaps thinking that their perspective helps make the case for more aid to Africa."

In the main essay, Miguel says: "The academic debate on what went wrong in Africa at the end of the 20th century is extensive, but the leading culprits seem to be bad economic policy and weak state institutions."

He develops this theme, showing how more rigorous analyses of African countries, using village-level surveys as well as rainfall statistics and control group experiments, have helped governments to formulate more effective policies. (A now-popular example, first cited in this book, was done in Kenya where de-worming of children was shown to increase school performance more than other measures, including free textbooks.)

In another counter-intuitive example, Miguel writes: "Botswana has been Africa's economic superstar for the past 40 years, and former Botswana president Quett Masire has claimed that the drought insurance played an important role in its success...It helps maintain peace and prosperity."

Among the core causes for the turnaround in Africa, Miguel identifies more democratic governments, a process which started in the 1990s. "Africa's recent progress in both political freedom and economic growth may well be connected," he writes, although in his response political scientist Jeremy Weinstein warns that many African nations are "pseudo-democracies," having instituted the minimum reforms required to get Western aid but continuing to essentially operate as dictatorships.

In this regard, Miguel also notes that "New evidence suggests that growing economic interactions with China—in particular through the commodities trade—could lead to less democratic institutions, presumably by insulating African political leaders from reform pressures."

Nonetheless, while admitting the fragility of these trends, Miguel concludes, "Africa's recovery may still be modest by China's and India's standards...but it

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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.”

This book is perhaps the best short overview of Africa's state, even seven years after its first publication.

Book Info

Africa's Turn

Edward Miguel

MIT, 2009.

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