

# **Transnational Law & Contemporary Problems**

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## **Book Review: Emerging Africa - How 17 Countries Are Leading the Way**

*Emerging Africa: How 17 Countries Are Leading the Way*

Author: Steven Radelet, with an introduction by Ellen Johnson Sirleaf

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Reviewed by Luke Jenson, University of Iowa College of Law, J.D. Candidate 2013, Student Writer for  
*Transnational Law & Contemporary Problems*

In the summer of 2011, Congressman Christopher Smith (NJ), a senior member on the Foreign Affairs Committee in the House of Representatives, kicked off a policy meeting on Africa by noting that “current statistics amply demonstrate that the United States does have a strategic interest in sub-Saharan Africa.”[1] Africa’s abundant natural resources, particularly oil and ground minerals, have largely propelled greater international trade with the region.

In many ways, recent developments in sub-Saharan Africa (“SSA”) buck the outdated “common knowledge” of a destitute continent and now provide strong economic possibilities for trading partners like the United States and China, and most importantly, internal development and prosperity for hundreds of millions of African citizens themselves. As Edward Miguel’s review of *Emerging Africa: How 17 Countries Are Leading the Way* summed it up, underdevelopment, dictatorships, civil wars, and health pandemics through the 1970s-1990s amounted to a simple verdict: “Africa equaled failure.”[2]

Steven Radelet’s lively and quick *Emerging Africa* is a tremendous introduction to these developments from an experienced and educated scholar on African affairs, and it should be read by anyone interested in an introduction to SSA, or third world generally, development and where American foreign policy on the region should focus in upcoming years. It would certainly be a fitting requirement for a variety of undergraduate courses in political science departments.

Mr. Radelet’s publisher, the Center for Global Development, is an independent Washington think tank with considerable influence in foreign affair committee halls. In many ways, the book is put together similar to research reports from institutions like the World Bank or Human Rights Watch: interesting anecdotes, colorful graphs, full page pictures of hopeful African young adults and children, and accessibly written chapters all characterize the 169 page volume.

The focus of *Emerging Africa* is on a handful of countries in the region that are benefiting from some or all of the following characteristics: (1) increasing democracy and government accountability, (2) stronger economic management, (3) the end of the debt crisis and evolving aid patterns, (4) technology, and (5) a new generation of young “cheetahs” sustaining and developing improvements.

In the early chapters of the book, Mr. Radelet identifies Botswana and Mauritius as setting the mold for emerging Africa. Not only do the two countries have “a long history of democracy, good governance, and strong economic management,” but their success created a sphere of influence that positively shaped the pro-growth policies of their African neighbors (pg. 34). A key to this growth has been the importance of agriculture, and although unmentioned in *Emerging Africa*, the work of Iowa-native Norman Borlaug and the Sasakawa Africa Association in improving yield production seeps between the lines of the discussion of agricultural importance. In addition to noting these early models in the beginning chapters, Mr. Radelet relates some interesting facts that exemplify the flavor of the book. For instance, Uganda’s cut flower industry is located on only little more than 20 large farms, and employs over 6000 workers, but exports over \$30 million in flowers yearly (pg. 39). Thanks to improvements in health and vaccine availability in the emerging countries, almost 30 more children out of 1000 are living beyond their first birthday compared to 1980 (id.). In addition, nearly three-fourths of all children in the emerging countries complete primary school (pg. 40).

The emergence of democracy and accountability, detailed in Chapter 3, is strongly set amidst the backdrop of the fall of the Soviet Union in the late 1980s. Since then, Mr. Radelet notes that the change has been “remarkable: in just 20 years, Africa has gone from almost no democracies to nearly half the continent under democratic rule” (pg. 55). The growth of democracy has a further intrigue: “It is all the more extraordinary because so many of the countries are among the poorest in the world, and it was long through that democracy wasn’t really feasible for low-income countries” (id.).

Democracy, along with economics and better governance (whether completely democratic or not), is part of

a virtuous cycle propelling emerging Africa to new heights (pg. 66). Focus must remain on sustaining these heights, which is a particularly fragile task in young democracies.

The new economic policies of emerging Africa are promoted in Chapter 4. Francis Fukuyama's "end of history" theory is unmentioned, but vindicated here. Economic policies in the countries shifted "away from heavy state intervention and toward fairly orthodox economic policies" which is actually free market policies (pg. 78). The shift to free market economics has been a resounding improvement for the experimenting countries. This improvement is easily seen in agriculture. No longer is an urban bias undermining farmer incentives, nor is there statist controls undermining crop prices. As a result, farmers can sell their products for better prices, and the farmers are not as taxed on those prices as heavily as they once were (pg. 82).

Chapter 5, The End of the Debt Crisis and Changing Relationships with Donors, is the most important chapter from the perspective of U.S. policy-makers. The first part of the chapter helpfully explains the debt problems African countries found themselves in, and the roles that the International Monetary Fund and the World Bank played in promoting "the Washington consensus" to the countries. For anyone looking to get a solid introduction on what these institutions do, Mr. Radelet offers a great perspective. The other part of Chapter 5 largely dives into the raging debate on the importance and necessity of aid to emerging Africa. Mr. Radelet has a nuanced view of aid, neither believing it deserving of the criticism some give it nor deserving of complete praise. Instead, Mr. Radelet sees aid as largely helping those countries who help themselves. His suggestion is primarily to continue aid, but importantly continue the trend of recipient flexibility and allowing the donee-countries to use the aid in pursuit of economic revival as they best see fit (pg. 102). Because more countries have better economic policies and more government accountability, allowing recipient flexibility should theoretically still be a safe move.

The growing importance of cell phones and the internet is another crucial characteristic of emerging Africa. Mo Ibrahim, one of Africa's few billionaire businessmen, is mentioned in passing, but a quote from him speaks volumes: "Mobile phones play a really wonderful role in enabling civil society. As well as empowering people economically and socially, they are a wonderful political tool" (pg. 121). Mr. Ibrahim's importance in emerging Africa, in both technology matters and political matters, is not given enough attention, unfortunately. Those looking for a more in-depth profile of Mr. Ibrahim would do well to read Ken Auletta's article in the March 7, 2011 edition of *The New Yorker*.<sup>[3]</sup>

Mr. Radelet's final characteristic is the coming of the "cheetah" generation, a term coined by one of the book's heaviest influences, George Ayittey. Mr. Radelet describes them as mostly young, both men and women, generally well-educated, urbanites who, in many cases, have experienced life abroad, and come back or grow up in African countries and are committed "to break from the past and move their countries in a new direction" (pg. 126). In Chapter 7, Mr. Radelet tells of Africans like Patrick Awuah, born in Ghana, educated at Swarthmore College in Pennsylvania, worked for Microsoft, and returned to Ghana with his young family to help found Ashesi University. Or consider Ellen Johnson Sirleaf, who wrote the introduction to *Emerging Africa*. Born in Liberia, she attended college at the University of Wisconsin-Madison and Harvard before moving back to Liberia. She worked for the World Bank and Citibank, and then entered Liberian politics. In 2005, she was elected president of Liberia, a country Mr. Radelet has close professional ties with and considers not yet "emerging" but one of the countries on the verge of joining the ranks of emerging Africa, an astonishing feat considering their recent civil war troubles.

There are several other examples of the "cheetah" generation in Chapter 7, but the central conclusion remains the same: amazing people are helping to sustain the progress and further develop Africa's emerging countries. These cheetahs are "coming to the fore as the new generation of talented leaders in business, government, politics, and civil society. The future is in their hands. And in their hands the future looks

bright” (pg. 139).

The final chapter briefly touches upon several challenges for Africa that could each be a book in themselves. For example, one of these is “Managing the rise of China” a topic that is increasingly discussed in edited collections and stand alone books, like Robert I. Rotberg’s edited collection *China into Africa: Trade, Aid, and Influence* (2008) and Deborah Brautigam’s book *The Dragon’s Gift: The Real Story of China in Africa* (2010). But despite these challenges, Mr. Radelet remains optimistic, though noting that stalling is certainly possible (pg. 157).

Because Mr. Radelet’s would serve as a great introduction to undergraduate students or lay readers, more footnotes and more explanatory footnotes would be appreciated. For example, early in the book, Mr. Radelet notes that “Africa’s economic decline ended in 1995, 15 years ago—a point that many commentators cannot seem to grasp.” A footnote then lists six sources, without pin-cites. Are these the commentators that cannot grasp the end in 1995? Presumably not, because several of the sources are approvingly cited later in the book. Do the sources then point out the disfavored sources? A reader cannot know unless he or she goes on to browse the entire cited source. In the discussion of aid effectiveness, no direct citation provides critical reports or authors, though they are certainly out there, writing important papers and books like Dambisa Moyo’s *Dead Aid: Why Aid is Not Working and How There is a Better Way For Africa* (2009) and Raghuram G. Rajan and Arvind Subramanian’s “Aid and Growth: What Does the Cross-Country Evidence Really Show?” (2007).

Aside from that criticism, Steven Radelet’s *Emerging Africa* is highly recommended for those seeking an excellent preface to the possibilities of African development in the near future.

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[1] Chairman Chris Smith, “Coordinating Africa Policy on Security, Counter-Terrorism, Humanitarian Operations and Development.” July 26, 2011.

[2] Edward Miguel, “Africa Unleashed: Explaining the Secret of a Belated Boom.” *Foreign Affairs*, November/December 2011, available at <http://www.foreignaffairs.com/articles/136547/edward-miguel/africa-unleashed?page=show>.

[3] Ken Auletta, Annals of Communications, “The Dictator Index.” *The New Yorker*, March 7, 2011, p. 45.

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