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Envisioning Africa's Future: A Story of Changing Perceptions

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Nations' futures are shaped by how they are perceived by their citizens, policy makers, and external forces. The present state of sub-Sahara Africa (SSA) is a product of actions by external and, more recently, internal actors that have been driven by how Africa has been seen in the past. Thus, current perceptions of Africa will help shape its future.

Over the past half century, external actors for Africa have included missionaries, adventurers, entrepreneurs, empire builders and, more recently, donors. In designing the various schemes that have shaped the present perceptions of Africa, in particular the "dark continent" image has played a central role.

Likewise Africans' perceptions of themselves have been critical in shaping Africa, more so in the post-colonial era. The "victim" perception particularly has played a critical role in determining the image and the relationships that Africa has developed with the outside world. Indeed, how people see themselves determines what standards they hold themselves to.

Perceptions about Africa will continue to influence how its future is viewed and thus shaped. The year 2010 marks the 50th anniversary of "The Year of Africa," and as we anticipate how Africa will develop over the next 50 years, it is important to understand how perceptions of the continent have evolved in the past. This paper explores how the changing image of Africa has influenced the thinking about its future prospects since the 1960s, and how current perceptions may influence its future development.

Pre-Independence: From Land of the Gods to the Heart of Darkness

In antiquity there was a great fascination with this largely unexplored land South of Egypt. For the Pharaohs of Egypt, it was the land of their forefathers, where they looked when in need of renewal. The Greeks had great reverence for the "Blameless" Africans where their gods went

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to feast with the older Gods of Ethiopia. For the Romans, it was the land of great mystery which led Pliny-the-elder, the famous Roman geographer and writer to quip that "...Something new always comes from Africa...."

In the Middle Ages, Africa was the land of gold and knowledge. Italian Arab geographer Leo Africanus gave vivid accounts of a rich intellectual and commercial life in Timbuktu. Africa was also the land of Prestor John, the conquering Christian King of Ethiopia, who was going to save Europe from the Islamic juggernaut.

The rise of Europe following the discovery of the new world and the industrial revolution changed perceptions of Africa, and the images formed during this period continue to influence how Africa is perceived today. The discovery of the new world created huge demand for slave labor. The industrial revolution created demand for both raw materials and for markets for surplus products. The need to enslave people and colonize lands clashed with the humanity of Europeans; to reconcile the two, Africa had to be reconstructed to fit an image that would allow for the execution of these schemes. This required robbing any dignity or morality of people to be enslaved or colonized, making them inherently inferior. The epitome of this view was the German philosopher Hegel's teaching of 1830 that "...Africa is no Historical Part of the World, having no movement or development to exhibit." (Davidson 1994, 80). The "Heart of Darkness" myth was thus born. Africa became a backward place that needed to be tamed and developed, giving justification for the 3Cs project (Civilization, Christianization and Commerce). In Rudyard Kipling's words, Africa became the "White Man's Burden".

The 1960s: The Winds of Change

The Second World War had the effect of shaking the image of the Europeans. The survival of the big colonial powers came to depend on African soldiers. The myth of the colonial powers' invincibility was thus shattered in many Africans' eyes. Europe's exhaustion from the two world wars combined with the awakened Africans led to a change in perception that colonial rule could be sustained. This change of mood was best captured by the famous "Winds of Change" speech by the British Prime Minister, Harold MacMillan, in 1960 that signaled the end of colonialism.

The granting of independence changed perceptions of Africa. A new sense of understanding was called for. Now the missionary and the witch doctor were urged to find a meeting ground (Carter 1962). The colonial administrators were replaced by the development experts. Africa thus graduated from barbarism to become the poster child of development. A report to the American Academy of Sciences of the science mission to Africa captures the changing image:

"My predominant reaction on this trip was surprise — surprise that Africa had come so far as it has in science, self-government and in eagerness to move ahead." *(Seaborg 1970, 169)*

Indeed the economies of Africa grew at a good pace averaging GDP per capita growth of about 2.3 percent (Fosu 2009). Africa was doing well in moving people out of poverty.

Future Forecast In 1967, Kahn and Wiener forecasted the long-term prospects of Africa using year 2000 as the horizon (see Shaw 1982). As shown in Figure 1 (page 4), the forecast projected Africa almost doubling its income by year 2000 and maintaining its share global GDP.

While Africa's GDP rose substantially between 1965 and 2000 compared to the forecasted growth (700 percent vs 370 percent), the growth in terms of purchasing power parity (PPP) was only about 200 percent. The per capita income in PPP terms actually fell by about 5 percent, primarily because of the unforeseen economic shocks of the 1970s that resulted in very high global inflation and also worsening terms of trade for Africa.

The 1970s: From Winds of Change to Whirlwinds of Change

The very image of Africa's backwardness as original, almost primeval, resulted in post-colonial Africa simply reinforcing bad ex-colonial structures rather than setting up new structures that were attuned to the history and reality of the continent. For instance, Mazrui (2002) points that the constitutions bequeathed to Africa were replicas of British and French models, as if pre-colonial Africa had no governance structures and traditions to draw from. The results were constitutions that were alien to the people. On top of these weak foundations, independence was granted to highly unprepared countries. Congo, a country the size of Western Europe, awoke to self-rule with 30 university graduates, no doctors, no lawyers, no secondary school teachers, no army officers, and a civil service with only three Congolese out of 1400 posts (Meredith 2005, 101). Africa had thus started off with extremely weak and unstable state structures. These weak structures engendered highly corrupt patrimonial systems as unstable elites sought to entrench themselves. They quickly failed to deliver the independence promise of modernization.

The failure to deliver the promise of independence prompted the military to offer an alternative (Ajayi 1998). This new whirlwind brought the first coup in 1966 and by 1973 more than half of Africa was under military rule. Military rule was now seen as the long-term pattern of evolution of the African state since the military was the only institution with a national outlook. The military proved to be poor rulers, transforming Africa to the "bloody continent". However, in the prevailing cold war discourse, regimes had no problems finding a legitimating framework. To the cold war adversaries, Africa was the new battleground for influence.

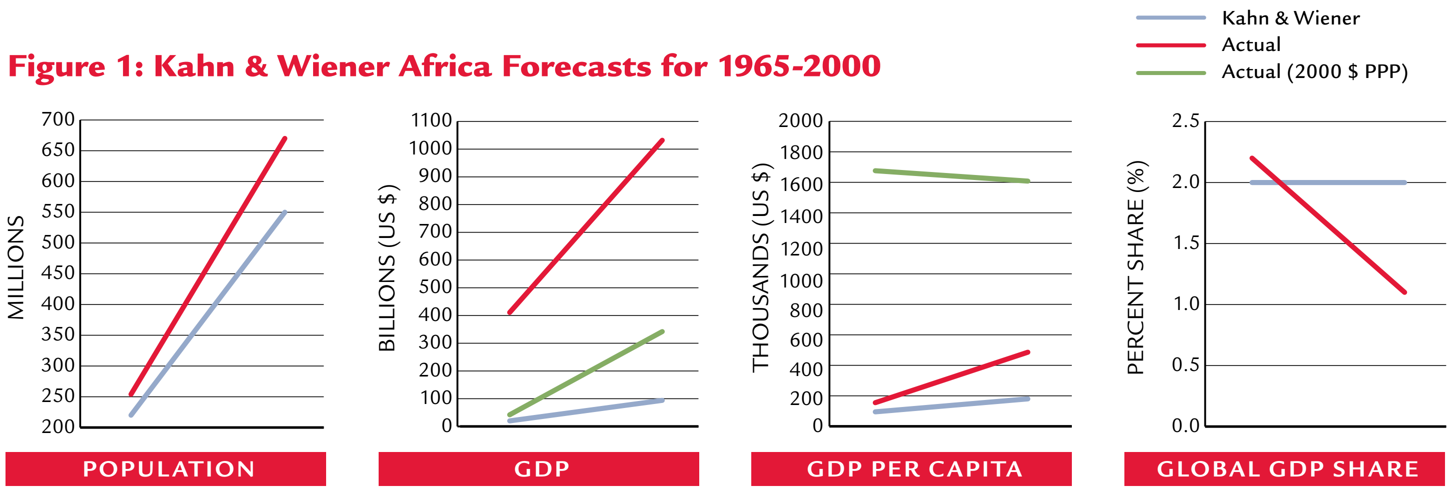
The situation was exacerbated by the 1973 and the 1979 oil shocks that ushered in global recessions. Africa fared poorly in this turbulent period. As a result, the high per capita income growth of 2.2 percent experienced in the 1960s had plunged to zero percent by the end of 1970s (Fosu 2009). Africa was on its way to negative growth in incomes, with the World Bank forecasting a worst case scenario of –1.0 percent growth for the 1980s decade (Helleiner 1983).

Future Forecast Figure 2 (page 5) summarizes the forecasts done for Africa by Hughes and Strauch in 1978 (see Shaw 1982). This forecast turned out to be fairly close to actual outcomes when using market exchange rates data. However the inflationary period of the 1970s had greatly eroded Africa's purchasing power so that when using PPP these modest forecasts turned out to be quite optimistic. The incomes per capita in PPP terms actually declined by about 16 percent (on PPP power basis) and Africa's share of global GDP declined by about 50 percent.

In trying to explain the deterioration of Africa's prospects, two schools of thought emerged. The dependence/neo-colonialism school argued that Africa was a victim of a world system that had been structured to exploit it. The dependency school called for disengagement with the West. To this end, in 1980 Africa adopted the Lagos Plan of Action that called for the move toward self-sufficiency, where African countries would focus on working and trading with each other.

The self-inflicted injury school saw Africa as being responsible for the situation. It pointed to poor leadership and misguided policies that had exacerbated the poor initial conditions. As a result, this school argued, Africa had been losing competitiveness over the years. The solution to the problem was seen as structural adjustment of the economy from state centric models to market driven models.

Figure 1: Kahn & Wiener Africa Forecasts for 1965-2000



Source: Shaw (1982) for Kahn & Wiener forecasts (1967) and The World Bank's World Development Indicators Online (WDI Online) for actual outcomes.

The 1980s: Africa is in Crisis

In the 1980s, Africa plunged into its biggest economic crisis since independence. GDP per capita declined to negative territory; it averaged –1.76 percent between 1981 and 1985 and stayed in negative territory until 1995 (Fosu 2009). A major famine also hit at the beginning of 1980s, sending images of hopelessness and death across the world. Africa seemed to be in its death throes and this called for radical interventions.

The self-sufficiency option proposed in the Lagos Plan of Action failed to gain any traction and the Bretton Woods Institutions (BWIs) stepped in to the rescue. Africa was put through a painful structural adjustment program (SAP). This entailed deep cuts in government, public investments and the introduction of cost-sharing in government services. SAPs were highly unpopular with the public and the politicians. But the fact that they were implemented underscored the depth of the crisis Africa was in. The prevailing view was that incompetence and a free hand had driven Africa into a hole that only outsiders could extricate it from. Africa had also lost much respect so that in developing SAPs, the BWIs were accused of displaying arrogance and paternalism (Helleiner 1983).

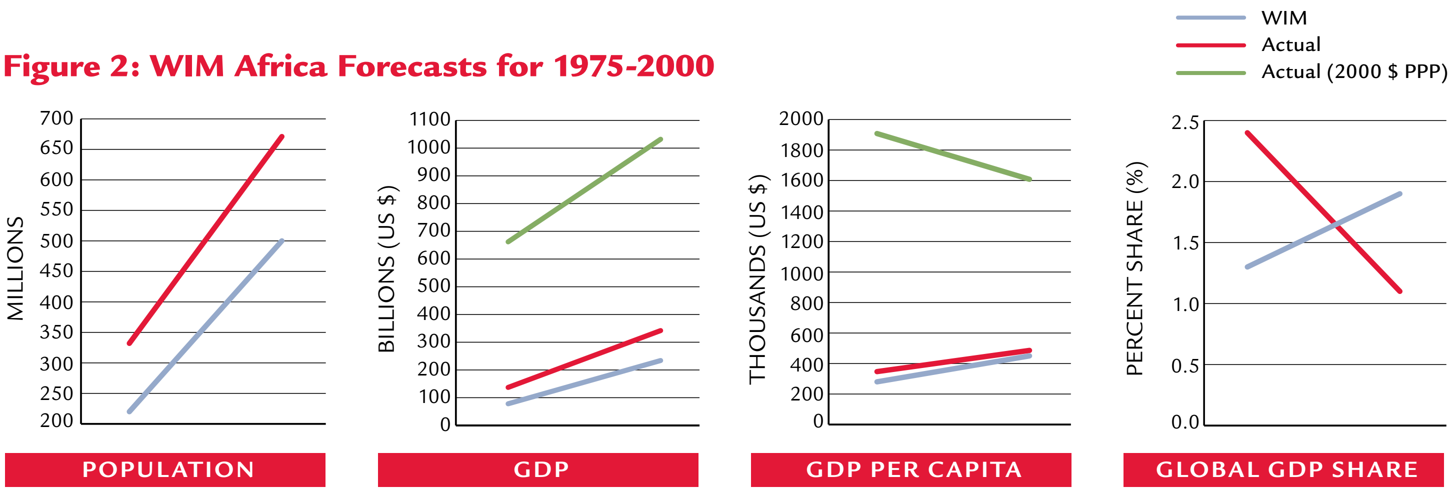
Future Forecast Africa in the 1990s was seen as spiraling to anarchy. This future was best captured by Robert Kaplan (1994) where "...failed government leading an unruly army, a corrupt and ineffectual bureaucracy, unchecked spread of disease, deforestation, and environmental destruction... urban shantytowns, declining economies... hopeless despair and illiterate teenage gangs inflicting unbridled violence in societies marked by incessant tribal rivalry...."

Moynihan (1993 cited in Pham 2005) predicted that this was the start of the break-up of Africa to tribal enclaves with over 150 states. While Eritrea broke off from Ethiopia and Somalia disintegrated to two yet unrecognized regions (Puntland and Somaliland), the generalized disintegration never gathered pace. Indeed the break-up that happened was a reversion to colonial boundaries (Eritrea under Italian rule and Somaliland under British rule) implying that the artificial boundaries of Africa may be more enduring than thought.

The 1990s: Africa is Dying

The 1990s saw Africa hit the nadir. The abortive start of forced democratization introduced new instability as entrenched incumbents put up a spirited resistance. The application of SAPs proved quite inadequate in saving Africa economies. The weakened state provided a welcome opportunity for a new type of insurgent, the conflict entrepreneurs; with no powerful armies to face and interested only in looting, these groups could accomplish

Figure 2: WIM Africa Forecasts for 1975-2000



Source: Shaw (1982) for World Integrated Model (WIM) forecasts (Hughes & Strauch 1978) and The World Bank's World Development Indicators Online (WDI Online) for actual outcomes.

their mission by holding a small territory for looting and training children as soldiers. Sender (1999) points that references to Africa assumed stomach churning medical/biological terms like "blood," "rot," "scars," "mutilation" and "plagues." The New Republic had a special issue, "Africa is Dying" (June 16, 1997).

Attempts to explain the unraveling of Africa cited the nature of Africans themselves. Explanations included "...the jealousy of an African underachieving culture..." "...perverse 'tribal' culture and political debauchery of Africans..." (Chege 1998, 212). Easterly and Levine (1997) pointed to ethnicity as the key culprit, arguing that ethnic competition had prevented development of good policies.

The New Millennium: The Dawn of an African Renaissance?

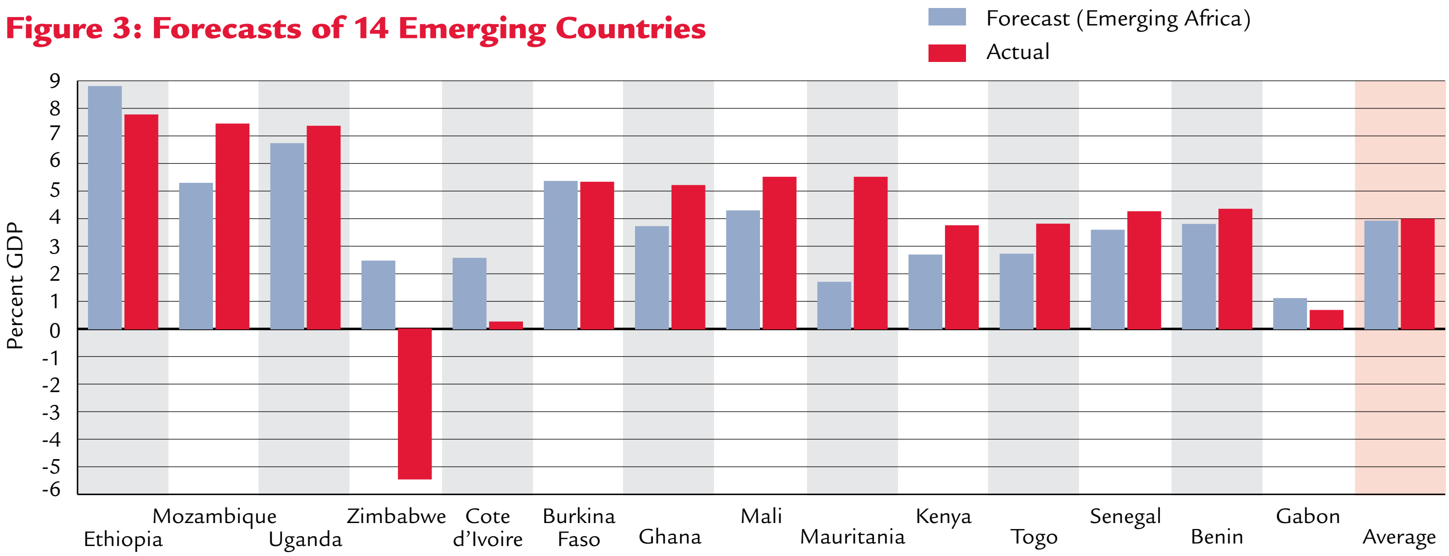
The ascent of Nelson Mandela in South Africa and the great leadership he displayed put to rest the idea that Africa was on a path to anarchy. Further, in the new millennium the vicious developments of the 1990s had been contained and the situation was seen as improving. Liberia and Sierra Leone had managed to remove the criminals who had captured the state with an African country, Nigeria, playing a central role in restoring stability. In Rwanda, the genocidal regime had capitulated to new leadership that was foresighted and disciplined. There was talk of new leadership emerging in Africa. The tide seemed to have changed. Thambo Mbeki used the term "Africa Renaissance" to capture the change. This was despite the continuing instability and conflict in Congo.

The external perception of Africa also turned. The continent was now seen as

Future Forecast At the dawn of the millennium, a number of countries had recorded growth rates of more than five percent per year. The terms of trade for the high performers were not better than for low performers, indicating that internal factors were at play in explaining the differences in performance. The Organisation for Economic Co-Operation and Development (OECD) was of the opinion that this spurt of growth pointed to the first time since independence the possibility of an economic takeoff in Africa. To this end, it commissioned a study to understand and project the positive trends being observed. Figure 3 (page 6) shows the projection for 14 identified reformers under the maximum growth scenario.

The identified countries have generally performed better than forecasted, re-affirming the authors' hunch. The exceptions were Cote d'Ivoire and Zimbabwe, which subsequently went through political turmoil.

Figure 3: Forecasts of 14 Emerging Countries



Source: Guillaumont, Jeaneney and Varoudakis (1999) p. 47 for forecast, World Bank (WDI Online) for actual outcome (data from 1999-2008).

a victim in need of a helping hand, with the unfortunate fate of being trapped in poverty by a combination of factors not of its making, especially bad geography (tropical diseases, poor soils etc.) and a colonial legacy. The call for massive aid programs to get Africa out of its development trap, led by Jeffrey Sachs, gained momentum. A new type of philanthropic efforts, epitomized by the Bill & Melinda Gates Foundation, took on Africa's challenge. Media stars led by Bono also enthusiastically took up the new "White Man's Burden" as concern for Africa suddenly became cool (Magubane 2007).

While the effort undertaken by donors, foundations and celebrities were lauded, some saw a sinister side to this development. Mugabane (2007) argues that this was reviving the colonial-era message that the future of Africa is for Europeans (the West) to shape. Pineau (2005) also makes the point that by highlighting the plight of Africa to mobilize donations, aid agencies became guilty of reinforcing the image of Africa as a place of death and desperation.

2010 and Beyond: The Last Business Frontier

With growing population and rising incomes, Africa is starting to look like the last frontier of business. It has been observed that the market for baby diapers in Nigeria is now potentially larger than the whole of Western Europe while the U.S. government Overseas Private Investment Corporation (OPIC) notes that Africa offers the highest returns on investment (Pineau 2005). A new scramble for Africa's business landscape is now evident with both global and local players joining the fray.

Asia, led by China, is leading the renewed interest in business opportunities in Africa. China construction industries, telecommunication firms and agro-business firms are investing heavily. The Middle East is also investing heavily especially in banking and telecommunication. From the West, the traditional multinationals are being joined by private equity firms that are investing in an array of activities including power generation, finance, and telecommunications. These new players are also showing great interest in investing in agriculture as countries start to worry about the security of future food supply. Even the world of sports recognizes Africa's potential for market expansion and its ability to host major international events as the FIFA World Cup holds its 2010 tournament in South Africa.

The big business opportunity has not been lost on African firms that are now venturing aggressively beyond their borders. Nigerian firms are moving into West and Central Africa markets, Kenyan firms are branching to Eastern Africa, and Southern Africa firms are invading the whole of Africa. North African countries led by Libya are re-orienting themselves to face south. We are witnessing the birth of African multinationals.

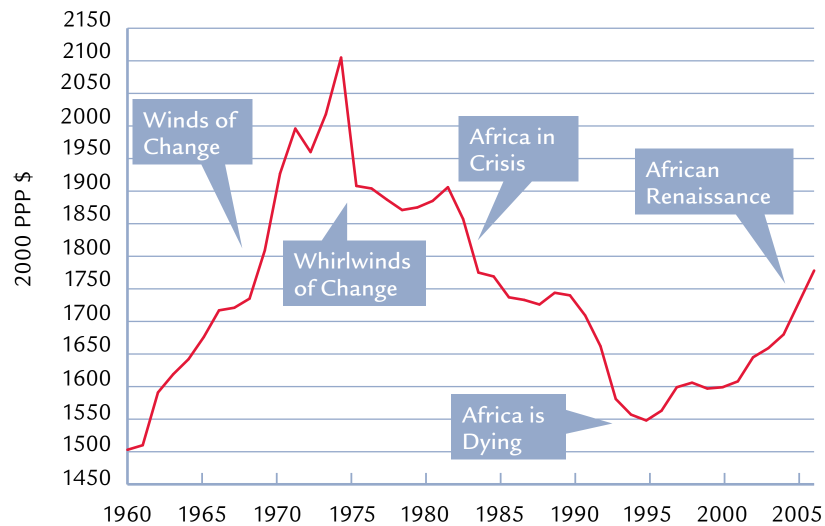
Conclusion

The perception of Africa's future is heavily influenced by current events rather than a detailed understanding of the underlying drivers. Thus when Africa's economy does well the future becomes rosy; when an economic crisis hits Africa, analysts are quick to declare it dead (Figure 4). Sender (1999) makes a powerful argument against this type of analysis. He demonstrates that Africa had made spectacular progress especially in education and agriculture between 1960 and 1994 yet the commentary at the time showed Africa descending to anarchy.

Collier (2006) observes that Africa seems to be a game of snakes and ladders and the snakes seem to be more prominent. This point has been analytically well-documented by Bethelemy and Soderling (2001), who after analyzing growth rates of African countries over 40 years found a preponderance of reversal in growth spurts. They observed that countries migrate in and out of the top and bottom ten with a few cases of persistent high growers and low growers. Indeed Bratton (1997, 68) makes the point that rather than seeking simple cross sectional generalizations, analysts must recognize that African countries are on forking, circuitous and contested paths.

Predicting the future of Africa will continue to be a hazardous affair. However, under the chaotic surface that seems to inform perceptions, real progress is being made. Like the game of snakes and ladders, progress is made despite the snakes, so long as one keeps on playing. A review of the past 50 years shows that Africa has been playing and will continue to play maybe even better now that the bigger snakes may have been passed.

Figure 4: The perception of Africa tends to be shaped by prevailing economic situation



Source: GDP data, Ifs Ver 6.23 (Original data from the CIA and The World Bank).

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