

NUANCING THE NARRATIVE OF AFRICA RISING

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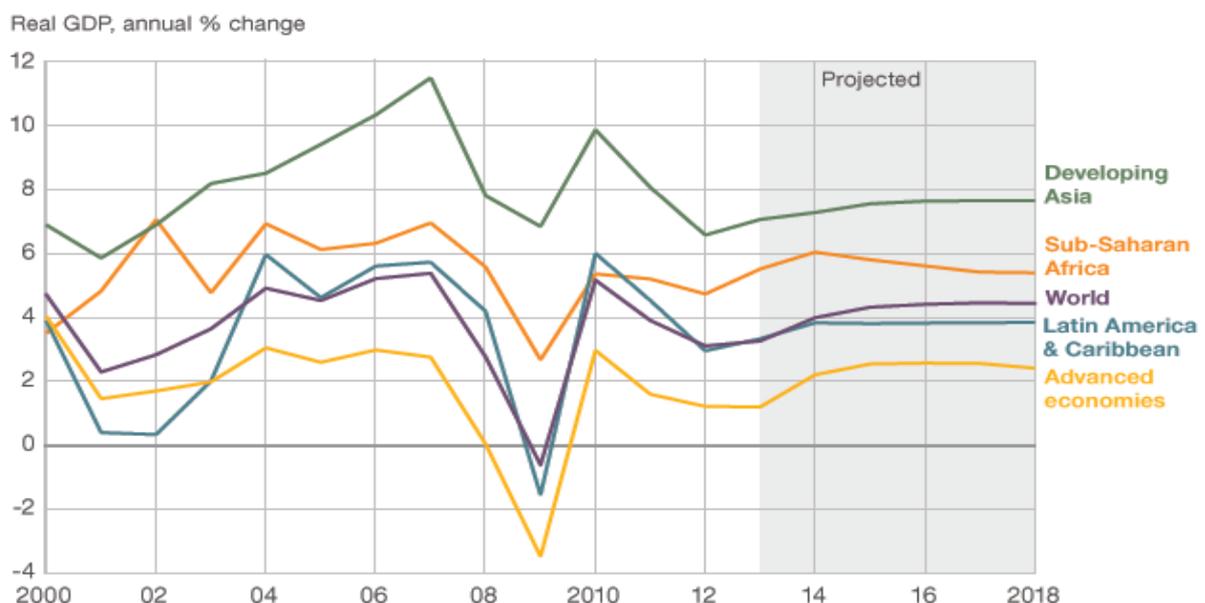
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In a recent Brown Bag Seminar session relating to the theme of Governance at REGENT Business School (http://regent.ac.za/?page_id=3308), the narrative of *Africa Rising* reared its head at question time. In concord with recent commentaries in academic and research papers concerning the subject matter at hand, the house was split in terms of whether the phenomenal growth in African economies was real, or a myth. Moreover, there were those who opined that whilst there was significant growth in African economies it was not benefitting the poor and that the scourge of poverty was unrelenting, and perhaps getting worse. Some within this group even related poverty to food insecurity and the problematique of sustainability, exemplary problems of our time. A few believed that the phenomenon was claptrap and avered that globalisation and capitalist hegemony created a myth which was paraded as the truth in its (capitalism's) own image. Yet, there were others who posited the view that as long as there was poor governance, Africa could not 'rise'. The views expressed ranged right, left and centre of the political spectrum. The ensuing debates made it quite apparent that there were divergent views at the seminar session and that the theoretical positions and discourses expressed by the protagonists were in dire need of critical inquiry.

Is Africa really rising? In our quest to seek the truth and find the most plausible response to this perennial question we decided to critically examine the shibboleth *Africa Rising*. Figure 1 below, as per the International Monetary Fund's *Economic Outlook Database Report 2013* indicates that the annual percentage changes in Real GDP for Sub Saharan African countries to be on the rise, especially when compared to many Western countries which

Figure 1: African Economic Growth (2000 – 2018)



Source: International Monetary Fund, World Economic Outlook Database, April 2013

have experienced an economic slump in recent years. The World Bank likewise, echoes similar views when it states that many countries in Africa, such as Nigeria, Ghana, Kenya, Uganda, Ethiopia, Rwanda and Mozambique are experiencing economic booms. Some critics, however, caution that these high growth rates should be viewed in context. Many African economies, they argue are relatively small, especially when compared with developed economies and are expanding from a lower 'Rostowian' stage of growth and this makes their development look disproportionately impressive, to boot.

A *Financial Times* article (<http://www.ft.com/s/0/f4c5ec6e-aba9-11e3-90af-00144feab7de.html>) further contends that on the surface, all looks well for Sub Saharan economies and that growth rates are expected to average at about 6 percent. Careful scrutiny, however, reveals that many of these economies are experiencing either economic, social or political problems and challenges or a combination of all. Alternatively, many other authors are of the opinion that a good yardstick of measure for economic growth in African countries is the investment index. Notwithstanding the preceding observations, the *Financial Times'* analyses indicate that the long-term outlook for Africa remains intact and indeed, in that respect Africa is rising.

Nevertheless this does not appease our academic curiosity and leads us to a series of tangential but critical rhetorical questions. Who, for example is benefitting from this phenomenon called *Africa Rising*? Has there been a positive *trickledown* effect? Have the subalterns benefitted? Has this new economic tsunami benefitted the masses in terms of poverty reduction and food security? Is sustainable development evident?

When we cast our minds back to the narrative of Africa prior to the middle of the last century, we are quickly alerted to graphic pictures of a continent without hope – a continent where hopeless children with bleak futures are the stereotypical image. Can the proponents of the new phenomenon of *Africa Rising* honestly assure us that their narrative has contributed to the demise of a bleak future, so aptly captured in the images of children without hope? Not so, we contend. Recent conflicts and forced migration in some African countries lead us to believe otherwise.

Although the new narrative resonates with stories of success, trickle down has not reached the masses. We would further argue that the new narrative is singularly restrictive in its description of the 'rise' and has not put paid to the tragic stereotypical images of humans who suffer the indignities of poverty and malnutrition. Indeed, we would like to state that the new narrative seems be comfortable in providing a 'broad stroke' analysis of Africa's rise, by simply using the measure of Gross Domestic Product as a gauge for overall development and success.

In short, we would like to categorically state that in our view, economic growth does not and will never equate to overall development. It would seem that in the euphoria and haste to announce news about *Africa Rising*, critical questions about issues of sustainability are conveniently ignored. In this regard, globalisation has significantly influenced the new currency for theoretical propositions of development. Who for example, really benefits from this phenomenon? The response to this question gives credence to Fanon's prophetic tale about the *Wretched of the Earth*?

Further investigation of the 'rise' indicates that by and large it is not the masses that benefit from Africa's growth, but rather, foreign investors and a merry band of African political leaders. Issues such as socio-economic improvements, sustainability and political cohesion are banished to the periphery of the development discourse – personifying and exacerbating stories about the 'haves' and 'have nots'. What then is new?

At the other end of the opinion spectrum of *Africa Rising*, we also have writers such as Patrick Bond, who opines in an article "Africa 'rising', South Africa lifting? Or the reverse?" (<http://www.dailymaverick.co.za/opinionista/2013-02-06-africa-rising-south-africa-lifting-or-the-reverse/#.U1QLHaJ7Qpk>) that the narrative of the new phenomenon is a lot of twaddle. Using Marxian analysis, he argues that capitalism has put on a new cloak of exploitation and has redefined itself. The reality of *Africa Rising*, notes Bond, "...is very different. Africa owes its economic decline to a variety of accelerators, nearly all of them external and occurring in the past centuries during which slavery, colonialism and neo-colonialism locked in the continent's underdevelopment".

Nonetheless, we contend that despite these negative views, Africa has all the potential to become a developed continent and hold its own on the global development stage. In this respect, various transformative macro and micro policy measures have to be adopted. It is imperative that Africa inculcates its own ideological position and charts its own development trajectory. Theories of dependency have to be nullified. Towards this end, we proffer a new critical discourse that has to be adopted by Africa and for Africa. In this connection we recommend the Hegelian hypothesis of dialectical thinking. We aver that the 'rise' (the *thesis*) and the opinion of sceptics (the *antithesis*) provide hope of an Africa where the rewards of the new phenomenon (economic growth) offers *synthesis* in the form of sustainable development. Development, that is all pervading - giving flight to a new African phoenix.

It will be imperative for African leaders to remember the daily realities of the poor. The reality of Africa is that millions of people suffer from food insecurity and go hungry to bed every day. The multiplier effects of climate change and, conflicts cannot be ignored, Peace is a prerequisite for development – a basic need. The reality of Africa's rise is not for a few, but rather for all who live in it.

We sincerely hope that this critical commentary will provide a platform to further articulate the imperative of *Africa Rising*. Finally, it would seem that we have ended up with more questions than answers in this brief review of the new phenomenon. The narrative of the *rise* definitely needs further critical scrutiny.

In conclusion, we make a special appeal to that those who are involved in Business Education to contribute towards shaping the new discourse of *Africa Rising*. In particular, we believe that as educators we are obliged to play a cogent role in making sure that the new narrative does not in any way hoodwink Africa into believing that self-serving investments such as the new hedge funds are in the best interest of Africa and its fragile future. We need to educate and mentor our students and future leaders into believing and supporting the truth attached to the theory of the aphorism – *Africa Rising*. It is incumbent that we take the responsibility to ensure that the 'rise' is indeed real. In terms of new development policies and strategies, we are beholden to insure that the future leaders and inhabitants of Africa are not duped into believing that the revenues gained from the export of raw materials

equates to economic growth. Our dependency on the 'cash crop economy', aid handouts and policies which are structured in offices of exogenous development agencies are simply not acceptable. It is a new yoke in disguise – a façade or a new cloak for an old form of gross exploitation.

Given the list of unanswered questions, we believe that a dedicated seminar on the narrative of *Africa Rising* is inexorable. In this respect we intend to plan for a seminar on *Africa Rising* at our Johannesburg office, in the near future. Entry will be by invitation and if you are interested please contact researchevents@regent.ac.za

We welcome any suggestions, questions or critique.

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