

## Africa - The “Shackled Continent”

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Africa has often been called the “shackled continent”. There have been a lot of actions being taken to try to remove the “shackles” from Africa. But generally, for the past several centuries and decades, the world has not witnessed much substantial economic or political developments in Africa, and it probably will not witness much in the future. This is due to long-lasting impacts that stem from numerous “hot” conflicts, the overall disadvantageous natural environment, and rampant corruption.

The hope for economic progress is slim in Africa – firstly due to the long-term conflicts in the region. It seems that Africa, as a continent, walks hand in hand with violence. The large-scale conflicts that have been happening in multiple places throughout Africa can be attributed to the chaos left by the European colonists. In the 15<sup>th</sup>, 16<sup>th</sup>, and 17<sup>th</sup> centuries, various European powers such as Great Britain, France, and others exploited and invaded numerous parts of Africa. Their purpose was to take control of the lush natural resources, tap into the slave market, and establish colonies (Marshall, 2016, p. 121).

Back in the great European capital cities, governments took out the contour maps of Africa and drew lines on them to mark their new territories. However, just as the renowned British journalist, and author Tim Marshall wrote in his book *Prisoners of Geography*, “...these lines were more about how far each power’s explorers, military forces, and businessmen had advanced on the map than what the people living between the lines felt themselves to be, or how they wanted to organize themselves.” As a result of rash decisions, many regional conflicts have started to poison the African continent (Marshall, 2016, p. 122).

For example, take the Democratic Republic of Congo (“The DRC”). The people in the DRC are divided into more than two hundred ethnic groups, and there are several hundred languages spoken across. The DRC was previously colonized by the Belgians, who did not consider how the locals agreed on respective territories and simply divided them up. As a result, when the Belgians left in 1960, civil wars began immediately and only intensified as time went by. Up until today, civil wars are still plaguing the DRC, and this country, abundant in natural resources, is so war-torn that it cannot even be included in the “developing world”. There are many cases of similar atrocities in Africa, such as in Libya, Sudan, Somalia, Kenya, Angola, Nigeria, and Mali which illustrate the long-lasting impacts of conflicts that have their roots in the era of European colonization (Marshall, 2016, p. 124).

Moreover, the internal conflicts between the different countries and ethnicities are unlikely to end soon. The issues are deep-rooted and would require massive amounts of international effort and reorganization of the territories and of culturally matched local ethnic groups. What is more,

Africa has recently started to become the new stage for proxy fights between China and the western powers. China has already established firm political and economic relations with many African countries, and it is improbable that the U.S. and its allies would sit back. As a result, resource-rich regions such as the DRC can potentially become the next Afghanistan, where the superpowers manipulate local forces to push their own interests and try to destroy each other.

African countries, it is necessary to look at the economics of violence. In a recent World Development Report, issued by the World Bank, the authors argued that violence is becoming the primary cause for economic poverty and the killer of economic development (The Economist, 2011). A pertinent example of the economic effects of violence is the small African state of Burundi. In 1990, the GDP of Burundi was at 1.1 billion USD. Three years later, in 1993, a civil war broke out. By that year, the GDP of Burundi was at 939 million USD, and in 1994 the number had fallen to 925 million (The World Bank, n.d.). This example shows that war can have immense negative impact on economic growth. Since wars in Africa are unlikely to end soon, the economies in that continent will probably not rehabilitate and develop.

Furthermore, the natural environment in Africa impedes much economic development. The top third of Africa is relatively arid, consisting of the Sahara Desert and the Sahel region below. The bottom two-thirds of Africa are more temperate. The top third of Africa is unsuitable for vast areas of farming to progress. However, there are other problems related with the natural environment that makes economic progression difficult. One is the rivers. Africa has a lot of rivers, yet few can actually be harnessed efficiently for trade and other economic activities (Marshall, 2016, p.120). Take the Zambezi River as an example. Although it is the fourth longest river in Africa, white-water rapids and falls have made trade along the river difficult to conduct. The other rivers in Africa share similar traits, blocking easy trading routes. What is more, the water bodies in Africa are not connected. Unlike the Danube in Europe, the rivers in Africa hinder the formation of large trading regions, crucial for economic growth.

Additionally, Africa has been plagued with many deadly diseases and viruses, such as Ebola, malaria, etc. Even though vaccines have been created and dispersed and scientists have found multiple ways to deal with those diseases, they still claim many lives each year. And since many already-poor countries must budget an additional amount for fighting those diseases, they have less to spend on basic infrastructure or the establishment of economic zones. For instance, the Ebola outbreak in 2014 impacted Liberia, Guinea, and Sierra Leone to the tune of around \$2.8 billion, according to the World Bank (Mercy Corps, 2019). If the \$2.8 billion lost were invested into the respective economies, then economic growth would at least have been maintained.

Another major human-caused problem is rampant corruption. Transparency International, a Berlin-based global NGO that focuses on reducing graft, ran a survey in December 2015. According to the survey, 22% of Africans who had contact with public services admitted having

paid a bribe in 2015. In Kenya and Nigeria, two relatively important economies, the number were 37% and 43% respectively (The Economist, 2015). Corruption could significantly hold back development. For instance, a *The Economist* article reveals that in 2015, ballpoint pens were being bought at \$85 each, and wheelbarrows for \$1,000, in Kenya. At the same time, the government is “running a fiscal deficit of almost 9% of GDP, forcing it to block pay raises for teachers and spending on such things as repairing roads.” South Africa was once an economic powerhouse in Africa. However, in recent years corruption has exploded. According to another article by *The Economist*, South Africa’s economy has been floundering primarily because of large-scale mismanagement and corruption (The Economist, 2016). South Africa’s Corruption Perceptions Index is at 44, and in 2016 the economic growth rate was only at 0.5% and was expected to not exceed 2% growth in the coming years (Knoema, 2020). Many other African countries, including Nigeria, Botswana, Seychelles, etc. face similar issues. If corruption remains unchecked, then economic growth and its attendant benefits will remain absent.

Admittedly, opponents of this negative stance on economic progression can argue that today, with the advancement in technology and globalization, most of the geographical barriers have been broken with industrial power, and vast amounts of minerals and oil have been extracted from Africa, creating huge economic profit. However, this idea is flawed in many ways. For one, economic growth in many countries is still dependent on global prices for minerals and oil. For example, countries whose national budget are predicated on receiving \$100 per barrel of oil have little to fall back on when prices drop to \$80 or \$60. For another, manufacturing-output levels in Africa are still close to where they were in the 1970s, and due to the mayhem and inability to save money, may not develop much in the future (The Economist, 2011).

Overall, due to the continuous mayhem and warfare that are more likely to intensify than stop, the hindersome natural environment, and widespread negative human factors across the region, there is little optimism for economic development in the future. According to economic theory, economic development must rely on a stabilized, peaceful, state, a helpful nature, and a competent government. Few African countries possess all these factors. Also, more fundamentally, most countries in Africa do not have a main ethnic group, nor are their governments secular. Possessing a main ethnic group and having a secular government are crucial for economic development. For example, China, Japan, and even the U.S., have a major ethnicity. As a result, internal strife can be mitigated, and hearts can be unified for a common goal, one mostly free from religious interests. Mustafa Kemal “Atatürk”, a champion of this approach and the founder of modern Turkey, demonstrated that secularizing his government during his governance, lead to rapid economic growth. In today’s world, science, knowledge, and reason are the bedrocks of economic development. In all aspects, hope in Africa remains dim, and there is a lot of work to do.



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