
Editorial: Reclaiming a Continent

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I recall first hearing Africa referred to as ‘The lost continent’ when I was in Tanzania listening to women who had gathered from just a few of the 54 countries that make up Africa. They were fiercely defending their countries, the diversities of their lives, the histories and futures. They argued for authenticity of their cultures, their histories, their languages in defiance of development policy that was bundling them into one big basket case. They were strong in their rejection of Africa as a requiring a special focus of development policy and strategy. They reminisced on African renaissance and freedom – away from the development rhetoric that at that time (in the early 1990s) depicted Africa as an economic development failure. It was a deeply troubling debate one that certainly rocked my own sense of what was the future for these women and their countries. This journal issue on ‘African Strategies for Transformation’, I am glad to say, presents a far more positive story of ‘The Continent’. The articles are reflections of many of the successes in Africa over the recent years highlighting the myriad of innovative activities for African-led economic and social change.

As with the other issues in this volume, the articles explore economic justice rather than economic growth as the goal of development. With voices of African scholars, journalists, civic society and government leaders, the issue gives a unique insight into the mood of African countries in transformation today.

Guest Editor, Charles Onyango-Obbo, kicks off the discussion with his recognition that there is both pessimism in ‘old Africa’ alongside optimism in the newly emerging Africa flourishing in the Continent today. He captures the journal’s overall sense of renewed hope and confidence in the African narrative finally emerging as a positive success of development policy. With six of the world’s fastest growing economies in sub-Saharan Africa and more growth to come, the continent’s economy seems to be on firm ground. African countries have undergone a transformation, one that is part of a shifting geo-political reality that is displacing traditional development partnerships of Africa with Europe and opening up to Chinese and Middle East investors. Africans are coming home to take up exciting positions in new market places, seeking opportunities that were unthinkable just a decade ago. Young leaders in the public, private and civic sectors are pushing beyond the old stereotypes and creating the change.

However, as these articles suggest, these changes while leading to economic growth are not necessarily leading to economic justice. There continue to be deep contradictions.

Development 55(4): Upfront

Increased income inequality adds to traditional ethnic and social, rural and urban divides. Resource extraction and land grabs are leading to violence and struggle as communities defend their land and rights. Climate change is impacting on fragile ecology and peoples' livelihoods, food crises loom, and there continue to be many wars and conflicts. What the mine strikes in South Africa and the emergent industrial unrest in other countries indicate is the limits of the growth model. The journal also hints at the generational struggle no doubt to come – giving the increasing numbers of young people frustrated by the lack of space for their political ambitions and youth bulge and the recalcitrance of the current leadership to acknowledge this need. The international economic system is yet to take into account Africa's expressed needs with resulting complexities in the international relations arena.

This journal issue takes stock of the rapid and tumultuous changes that the continent has undergone. The articles reflect from very many different positions what it is like to live in the whirl of change, the hopes and concerns that need to be interrogated more deeply in order to grasp the transformation Africans are experiencing.

What is clear is that Africa's positioning in development is changing, and the views and experiences of Africans are vital to that debate.

As an 'African watcher', I was struck that within the mix of voices there is much more celebratory sense of being African than when I first visited Tanzania so many years ago. There is not the same defiance or anger, authors speak with great confidence in a future where Africa is a world player, led by Africans for Africans. Some of this hope and indeed knowledge of what is possible has been due to mobile technology. Mobile technology has been

key to the production of competitive market places. Over 50 percent of Africans use mobile technology making it the fastest growing mobile market in the world. There are 100 million mobile phones in Nigeria alone. The 700 million consumers of telecom companies use it not only for calls, but also for businesses, money transfer, information on crops and commodities. At the same time, electrical grids are not keeping up with the populations' needs so, somewhat comically, Twitter is used to monitor the frequency of power outages.

The articles reveal these contradictions – and dangers. From the discussions in the journal, it emerges that this economic growth is uneven and little is being thought about by way of distribution. If so, as many authors point out, poverty will remain unless an African welfare state is part of the design of continent's future.

So as Africa is entering a new dawn, the diversities and inequalities remain. What also struck me as I read the articles is that being African is now something to speak about, to reflect on at a personal level. There are personal, social and cultural struggles around what is tradition, what is modern, what it is to be African now. There is also a strong desire to convince others of the complexity of African lives – an Africa that is a rapidly emerging economic giant abounding with vibrant change, yet also a place where HIV and AIDS, TB and malaria continue to destroy communities and deeply rooted patriarchal oppression keeps its hold.

It is a unique journal issue, soliciting the views of dozens of Africans from all walks of life, asking them to share how they see their lives now, how they understand the complexities of changes that are happening so rapidly around them and what they hope for the future.