

Book Review: Africa Emerges

by Blog Admin

July 3, 2013

*Many countries in Sub-Saharan Africa are now enjoying significant economic growth and political progress. The new Africa has begun to banish the miseries of the past, and appears ready to play an important role in world affairs. **Africa Emerges** draws on a wealth of empirical data to explore the key challenges Africa must overcome in the coming decades, from peacekeeping to health and disease, from energy needs to education. **Ainsley Elbra** finds that this book is replete with data at all levels and on a wide variety of measures that should be of interest to any reader keen to develop an understanding of recent changes taking place throughout Africa.*



Africa Emerges. Robert I. Rotberg. Polity. April 2013.

Find this book:



Robert I. Rotberg's latest book, *Africa Emerges*, provides a valuable update on the progress of one of the world's most vastly misunderstood regions. Written by a pre-eminent scholar of African affairs, and governance more broadly, the author utilises a raft of quantitative data to outline a more nuanced picture of the continent's development. Overall, the book reveals trends in a variety of areas of interest to development scholars, such as population demographics, disease, conflict, infrastructure and the role of China in the continent's progress. Rotberg's book is well balanced, reflecting on the progress being made (including growth rates exceeding those in other developing regions) as well as the challenges facing the translation of this growth into true development across all groups in society.

Despite any misgivings from the title, the author avoids the common mistake of assuming a continent-wide trajectory at the expense of specific local experiences. Rotberg instead provides key statistics detailing progress at the regional, country and sub-national levels.

The book's chapters are organised by areas in which the author sees specific development opportunities and challenges. Rotberg's chapter on infrastructure includes discussion of the potential for mobile phones to transform the continent. In doing so, Rotberg addresses an area which has often been overlooked by other development scholars and agencies and explains why mobile phone technology should be of greater focus to these organisations. He argues that mobile devices can be utilised to connect people for the purposes of commerce and to enhance political and social freedoms (as seen in the Arab Spring). The potential for mobile technology to contribute to development is highlighted through the role of **M-Pesa**, an online banking system that has been particularly successful in Kenya. The technology has seen a reduction in the number of un-banked Kenyans through the facilitation of electronic funds transfers, deposits into savings accounts, bill payment and application for micro-loans. Rotberg also highlights the proliferation of apps used throughout West Africa which allow sellers to 'know the market' for their commodities, both in real time and in advance of going to the place of physical trade. The increased uptake in mobile phones has been largely driven by the availability of cheap handsets as well as expanded coverage throughout much of the continent. For example, Rotberg cites that in 1999 just 10% of Africans used a mobile phone. By 2013 a large part of the continent will have network coverage. Furthermore, in countries like Zimbabwe, which Rotberg describes as poor but information-hungry, 8.1 million devices exist for a population of 10 million. Rotberg's discussion of the potential for mobile phones to facilitate economic growth and development across the continent is timely and is demonstrative of a familiarity with trends taking place in many African countries.

Rotberg also includes a chapter addressing the perennially popular topic of China's engagement on the continent. However, in keeping with the style of the remainder of the book he avoids making normative judgements about these relationships. He correctly notes that much of the infrastructure gap being filled across the continent is thanks to Chinese investment and that the former Communist state has investments in almost every country in sub-Saharan Africa. However, he also highlights the ongoing tensions between ordinary Africans and their Chinese investors. Rotberg notes that the relationship between Chinese and African workers is largely one of mutual suspicion, with negative perceptions held by each group towards one another. This chapter includes perhaps the most in-depth human story of the edition, a narrative on the role of Chinese investment in Zambia. A country where almost all of the tensions that exist between China and developing states are played out. The author highlights the role Chinese investors have played in rehabilitating the country's formerly failing copper mines but also the tensions between Chinese management and local workers – many of whom are employed in atrocious conditions. Such tension, as Rotberg details, has led to a human cost in terms of mine violence and an underlying anti-Chinese sentiment which has been harnessed by those attempting to gain political power. Rotberg concludes by arguing that China's investment in almost every country in sub-Saharan Africa is not done with the intention of spreading communist ideals, at winning votes in the United Nations, nor is it motivated by a desire to assert itself globally or replace the US as a global hegemon. He instead argues that it is purely economic self-interest driving China to secure "long-term supply of critical raw minerals". He argues there is no way to determine whether Chinese investment is, on the whole, good for Africa, however he does point to a distinct lack of coherent cross-country strategy in dealing with China as a major investor. This is something that could have been led by the African Union or regional organisations such as SADC.

Rotberg's contribution to the literature is timely and reflects the decades of work he has done on the continent. The book is replete with data at all levels and on a wide variety of measures that should be of interest to any reader keen to develop an understanding of recent changes taking place throughout Africa. At Rotberg's own admission the book is 'empirical' and 'dispassionate' and may therefore lose the casual reader who is looking for more of a narrative approach. This, however, is one of the key strengths of the book – a volume which is up-to-date, factual and devoid of the stereotypes most often associated with the literature on this region.

Ainsley Elbra is completing her PhD in International Relations at the University of Sydney. Her research focuses on the role of private governance in Africa's extractive industries. More specifically, her work examines whether private governance initiatives, such as the EITI, assist in alleviating outcomes commonly associated with the resource curse. Prior to commencing her PhD she worked as a corporate banker responsible for a portfolio of Pacific-Island based clients and mining firms. She tweets at [@ainsleyelbra](https://twitter.com/ainsleyelbra). [Read more reviews by Ainsley](#).