

Event Report: African Development Forum #ADFsoas

LSE's Francesca Washtell reviews the "stimulating" inaugural African Development Forum at SOAS.

On Tuesday May 29, SOAS hosted its inaugural African Development Forum, organised and managed by a group of nine postgraduate students in the Development Studies department. The theme was "Africa: Driving Its Own Growth" and an impressive array of speakers explored this theme from both business and academic perspectives.

The idea of celebrating economic growth on the continent is not a new one, having emerged in the last few years as a counter-argument to pessimism about the persistence of poverty and insecurity in many regions. "Afro-optimism" has been bubbling away for some time, as growth rates in many sub-Saharan countries have soared, particularly those of Angola (11.1%), Nigeria (8.9%) and Ethiopia (8.4%), putting them in the world's top 10 fastest growing economies in 2010.

The aim of the conference was to go beyond optimistic data trends and discuss whether or not Africa is itself really driving growth, as many debates around "growth" still revolve around Foreign direct investment (FDI) and its polar opposite, western aid.

Gibril Faal, chairman of the African Foundation for Development (AFFORD) and the founder of RemitAid, was the keynote speaker and argued that the key question is whether this bout of economic growth is a momentary flash in the pan or whether it has a strong foundation and will leave an enduring legacy. As the founder of RemitAid it was understandable that he would refer to the African diaspora and how their investment in the continent can substantially shape fiscal futures. But I wonder if this undercut the idea of the conference somewhat, as the diaspora are still technically outside investors. All this optimism will perhaps be more assured when "building Africa" can come from within, unreliant upon outward migration and global communities re-investing.

This is where the issue of high growth in African economies in recent years gets a bit contentious. Increasingly economists are referring to "jobless" growth on the continent, as fiscal and economic increases are being made largely in narrow, high-corporate areas without providing job creation. The first panel discussion explored "Unique Sectors Driving Economic Growth in Africa", with representatives from the oil industry, agribusiness, private equity and business development.

Each speaker understandably gave a quite technical and sector-specific -powerpoint presentation that was a bit amiss at a development conference. They essentially explored the optimism via each of their sectors that plenty of money and technological skills are flowing into Africa in a variety of guises. But there was not an attempt at this stage to make the connection to a simple truth that economic growth and *development* are not synonymous, and that development is not the key mission of private interest on the continent.

When I asked Rosalind Kainyah, Vice President of External Affairs and Corporate Social Responsibility at Tullow Oil, about how her company felt about upcoming transparency legislation which is being debated by the European Union, I was directed to Tullow Oil's website, which purportedly proves a commitment to human rights and will publish details of transactions with governments only when given explicit permission, as Tullow Oil does not want to act unilaterally. (The EU legislation would make it compulsory to publish what oil and other extractive companies pay to governments.) This was a standard corporate response, but not an adequate answer. A verbal "commitment" to measures such as transparency is not enough with a company such as Tullow Oil, which has been embroiled in tax disputes with the Ugandan government in particular and has come under much criticism for fuelling corruption at a governmental level. This is the sort

of high level growth that looks great in a bar chart, but will never manage to tangibly change or transform African societies because it will simply never reach them.

Inadvertently, the conference had made a key point about how business and development interact. Essentially at the moment, they don't. While the first panel was made up of professionals and those working in the private sector, the second panel was formed largely of academics, apart from Ade Ajayi, a managing partner at St Marks Capital. He made an arresting argument that the private sector should be more tied to a sustainable approach, ensuring that current economic growth meets the needs of the present generation without compromising those of the future. Other speakers on this panel were willing to admit that growth needs to diversify and be more inclusive, as it is dangerously far from trickling down to women and civil society groups. Despite issues such as climate change being referred to vaguely as "opportunities" from a speaker on the first panel, when growth booms are not harnessed and used to fuel infrastructure and longer term investments in Africa's people, such as in education, resource-based growth looks great on paper but won't affect change or significantly help development.

This was a stimulating first conference and an event that should continue annually, but it would have been nice to see the private-sector professionals interact more with the academic speakers, whose vision of "growth" was more akin to that of development studies students. Is Africa driving its own growth? At the moment, not entirely, and this current economic growth could well be hollow. The optimism of flourishing businesses and capital will become entrenched and leave, like Faal suggested, a legacy only when it is more grounded in efforts such as transparency, infrastructure and actually creating jobs for African workers.

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