

Afro-optimists are lacking pragmatism in their assessment of the state of continent

LSE's Waiswa Nkwanga argues that economic growth is no indication that poverty, corruption and suffering are on the decline in Africa.

During the *African Students Panel* in the summer term, I made the mistake of suggesting that things were not going well in Africa, and that there was no reason to believe that they would get better any time soon, (if we continued down the same path that we have pursued for the last fifty years, that is.)



LSE students debate African issues

I had taken it for granted that young Africans are extremely disappointed with the lack of progress on the continent. Boy, I was wrong.

Given the opposing views expressed that day, I stood out as a pessimist. My comments triggered aggressive, albeit optimistic responses from other African students. They argued that Africa was on the rise and that there was no going back. One student cited World Bank data, which shows Africa growing faster than any other country in the world. Another student cited Rwanda as an example of a rapidly developing country on the continent.

There were also endorsements of China as a better partner for Africa than Western countries. The ICC was the only issue that drew overwhelming criticism from the panellists. They accused the Court of serving merely as an instrument of western imperialism and racism.

There is some truth to these claims. Virtually all the individuals facing trial or arrest by the ICC are African. It is also the case that despite the global financial crisis, Africa has been experiencing a boom driven chiefly by rising demand and prices for natural resources. According to World Bank reports, Africa was expected to grow at six per cent in 2011 and 2012. According to journalist and author, Fareed Zakaria, seven of the 10 fastest-growing economies in the world today are in Africa. Indeed, other sources indicate that Africa is growing faster than East Asia, Japan included. Even resource-poor countries such as Ethiopia and Rwanda have registered high growth rates, thanks to large volumes of international aid.

This is great news. But there is also room for pessimism. GDP growth is not new to Africa. In the sixties, African economies grew faster than their Asian counterparts. Then again in the early nineties, many African countries experienced growth of up to six per cent, according to World Bank reports. At the same time, many African countries began to democratise. They adopted multiparty politics, new constitutions and elections.

But things remained as they were before. GDP growth did not translate into better living standards for ordinary Africans. Poverty was on the rise in most parts of Africa including among the best performers such as Kenya and Ivory Coast. At the same time, HIV/AIDS engulfed the continent. Malaria, ebola and starvation claimed thousands across the continent and little was done to stop it.

Civil wars became the trend for power seekers. Children were transformed into killer machines, rape became a weapon of war, with millions ruthlessly murdered. Democratisation became a mere smokescreen for dictators as elections were rigged and term limits were scrapped to allow incumbents to stay in power for as long as they wished. Those countries that did keep term limits only did so after fierce protests and even deaths. In countries such as Kenya and Rwanda, elections have served to justify ethnic cleansing and the murder of innocent civilians, while in Mali and Ivory Coast, democracy has been abandoned altogether. Public institutions have also deteriorated as privatisation and economic liberalism deepened.

To be sure, optimism is important. It gives people hope that things will improve in the face of impossible odds. But optimism at the expense of pragmatism is a recipe for complacency at best and failure at worst. Historians tell us that Napoleon's stubbornness and lack of pragmatism led to his defeat in the battle of Waterloo. It was a similar story with General Lee, the commander of the Confederate army in the battle of Gettysburg in 1863. It could be said today that the misery we see in Africa is a direct result of our own lack of pragmatism.

Many Africans just do not get it. This has nothing to do with pessimism. After all, Lincoln was a pessimist who never believed that whites and blacks could live side by side in peace and thus he attempted to establish colonies for former slaves in places like Liberia. Martin Luther King was also a pessimist who once said that African-Americans were integrating into a burning house. Yet both men are symbols of America's greatness today.

A few months after assuming presidency, President Obama — the man who ran a successful presidential campaign entirely on his message of hope and won a Nobel prize — acknowledged, "I face the world as it is, and cannot stand idle". Are we standing idle?

Africa's plight is a direct consequence of our failure to be pragmatic, as well as plain stupidity. The same mistakes have been repeated over and over without ever looking back, reflecting on the past, or asking questions. Time and again, we have been happy to look the other way while marching straight into disaster. Brutal death from diseases, natural disasters and wars have been accepted as a way of life and as something we are incapable of controlling.

Those who care about Africa and the plight of the African people do not need to pretend that things are okay when they are not. There is nothing noble about having the highest poverty and death rates in the world. Mass rapes, murders, dictatorship, intolerance, corruption, dependence etc are not things that civilised men and women should be proud of. Is this what it means to be African?

And there is little value in blaming others — westerners — for all our mistakes. After all, we have failed to wean ourselves off their charity.

Perhaps it is time to question everything we have been taught, including our cultures, beliefs and history. Maybe we should stop blaming others and take responsibility for our problems. Maybe it is time to try to be pragmatic rather than simply hopeful.

