

An Alternative Perspective on Africa Rising

LSE's Nyaguthii Maina finds that Winnie Byanyima is hopeful despite the continuing challenges the African continent faces.

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Is Africa's growth trajectory overhyped? Is it as Omidyar Network's Ory Okolloh call, 'a fetishisation' over some of the continent's development achievements at the heavy expense of turning a blind eye to the weighty issues? As she concernedly asks, "will technology 'save' the continent from its poorly run resources, bad leadership and ineptitude?" Is Africa really rising? And if she is indeed rising, who are the beneficiaries? This was the subject addressed by Winnie Byanyima, Executive Director of Oxfam International when she spoke at LSE on 12 October 2015.



"As I prepared to come here to give my views on this topic, I promised myself I would not be an Afro pessimist," she announced. "My job has me talking about poverty everyday but being an African girl, I can say that I am proud of what Africa has achieved. I am proud of my country, the continent and her people and at the grassroots especially, you see a true reflection of the resilience of her people."

"Africa has witnessed four centuries of slave trade, one century of colonialism totalling five centuries of domination with just 60 years of independence," she continued. "Growing up in Uganda, I know what it feels like to have false freedom and false independence. I grew up with a leader, Idi Amin, who would decide overnight new legislations pinning them to what he claimed lucid dreams; dreams of women without make-up, skirts, and more aggravating, education. But regardless of this, we took on the risk of getting an education with the support of ordinary people who inspired resilience," she reminisced.

Today, African economies are growing at an average rate of 5% per year and Foreign Direct Investment has expanded by over 30%. Fewer mothers die in child birth and the rate of child mortality has decreased tremendously. The continent boasts several of the fastest growing economies in the world and is posited to leapfrog in development through its ever growing innovation and technology. "The universities are hotbeds of innovation," the speaker stated with a

smile. “However, despite all this, one in two Africans lives in extreme poverty. Women are the hardest hit earning 30% less than men.”

“The most important question I would ask you today is, Africa is rising but it is rising for whom?” she poses.

“Jane is my mother’s god-daughter. She was married at 16 years old and not out of choice but for labour. She was a successful farmer tilling her husband’s land. She lost three of her children to curable diseases but due to poverty, she had to bear the burden of burying her own. Her husband too passed on. I am helping her to build on her husband’s land but now she wants to leave it to her son. Under Ugandan law, she can claim the land but as a second wife, the land belongs to the son of the first wife. When she came to ask for money to buy the land from her son, I challenged her to claim what was rightfully hers to which she opposed.” Through this poignant story, Winnie Byanyima unmasks the reality of Africa, her people and the challenges they face on a daily basis; challenges of legacies of discrimination regulated by traditions and custom.

“Increasing the income share of the poor and middle class increases growth; illicit financial flows alone make Africa a net creditor to the rest of the world,” she informs. “Tax reforms need to be fit for purpose.”

“I have worked in several positions but none compares to working at Oxfam International where I feel that I can challenge elite capture. I love this job because I can speak truth to power,” she affirms. “Power lies with organised citizens because it is through solidarity that power shifts. Africa is the youngest region yet the oldest and by the year 2030 we will see a demographic dividend. My hope is that we will have halved the tax gap and these resources will be channelled to health, education and social protection thus investing in Africa’s true wealth, her people.”

This article is based on a LSE Public Lecture with Winnie Byanyima, Executive Director of Oxfam International. [Follow this link](#) to listen to the full lecture.

Nyaguthii Maina is a Masters student at LSE. She blogs at [Musings of a People](#). Follow her on Twitter [@nm_wangui](#).

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