

Introduction: African Challenges and Opportunities



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1 960 was designated 'The Year of Africa', a year in which 16 African countries achieved independence. In the intervening 50 years, the promise of political independence and hopes for rapid economic development in Africa have been tarnished by cycles of political instability, episodes of growth and stagnation, as well as external intervention and violent conflict. Since the end of the Cold War, however, the external discourse on Africa has shifted between 'African crisis' and under-development to speak instead of change and reform. An African renaissance, while premature, nonetheless seems more possible than at any time in the continent's recent history.

This series of essays by leading experts, analysts and observers of African affairs, focus upon the opportunities as well as the challenges facing the continent at the start of the second decade. As the countries on the continent integrate their foreign policies with internal strategies, their external relations with key international players have become a central part of management of their political economies. This does not necessarily accord with Western conceptions of appropriate growth and development strategies, but underlines the necessity of external observers to appreciate African states' 'ownership', perceptions and choices. This is not to minimise the challenges facing African states in the international global community; the domestic pressures confronting governments of social welfare provision and employment; the difficulties of governance associated with fundamentally weak state structures; or the prevalence of violence and instances of civil conflict. Within African polities, there is an awareness of the need to 'sharpen the role of government' and a new dedication to reform and political stability which reflects its connectivity to fostering growth and strengthening individual states' resilience to external shocks. Important progress has been made in keeping public debt under control and promoting fiscal transparency, but much remains to be done in terms of bureaucratic, parliamentary and political oversight. Corruption – widely identified as Africa's curse – is realised to be an international problem, requiring international coordination and collaboration, rather than simply African remedial action. Other challenges include climate change, and migration.

This report evaluates the current state of Africa, seeking to emphasise an African perspective. Morten Jerven explores the progress of African growth and the potential for a realignment of understanding of the continent's position in the global community. As Ben Shepherd points out, political stability – crucial for growth – has important connotations in the African context, with significant implications for external political and financial engagement. Christopher Alden's focus on the role of 'emerging powers' and Africa points to the realignment of Africa's position in the international global economy, and the irony that economic liberalisation of the structural adjustment era has benefited and been exploited by the BRICs (Brazil, Russia, India and China), rather than the Western international business community. African recipients' empowerment and consequent response to alternative sources of finance and investment has obliged Western governments and business sharpen their act. As Alex Vines notes, Africa has emerged as a key energy global player as the continent offers a vital alternative to resources in the unstable Middle East or ideologically suspect Caribbean basin. As Ghana begins production of its Jubilee field, the role of stable African states offering alternative resources to Nigeria and Sudan is opening up, with associated potential benefits for domestic agricultural and industrial development. Knox Chitiyo emphasises the African diplomatic and institutional achievements in developing the continent's collective security system, and the implications for successful conflict resolution and delivery of humanitarian assistance. Political, organisational, and institutional maturity is matched by the contribution of this diverse continent to the global community. With over a billion people, Africa can afford a diaspora. It has representatives across the globe as leading diplomats, musicians, sportsmen, philanthropists, economists and business leaders. Over the next fifty years, Africa has the capacity to be 'a pole of growth' in a multipolar world, and to finally fulfil the promise of 'The Year of Africa'. ■