

BROOKINGS

Africa in focus

Africa is an opportunity for the world: Overlooked progress in governance and human development

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While narratives over the past few decades have painted a wide range of views of Africa—as a child in need of development, a rising economic power, an imminent threat, a tinderbox of terrorism, poverty, forced migration, and disease—the truth is, as always, more nuanced. One thing is certain: the transformation that Africa has undergone in recent decades has been remarkable. Africa is shaping its own destiny and should be referred to as the “African opportunity” instead of the “African threat.”

It is shortsighted to ignore this progress—but acknowledging progress does not absolve the responsibility to continue working toward faster and greater positive outcomes.

By recognizing Africa as an opportunity, rather than a threat, governments, citizens, and organizations on the continent and around the world will be better positioned to face challenges and further boost positive trends.

GOVERNANCE GAINS AND THE ROAD TO POLITICAL STABILITY

Since the beginning of 2015, Africa has experienced more than 27 leadership changes, highlighting the continent-wide push for greater accountability and democracy. Countries like Mauritius, Botswana, Cape Verde, Namibia, and Ghana

rank relatively high as politically stable, democratic countries. These countries, as well as other rising democracies across Africa, serve as encouragement to international partners that stability can be achieved throughout the continent.

Across Africa, governance has improved considerably since 2000. Thirty-four countries, home to 72 percent of Africa's citizens, have improved their governance performance over the last 10 years, and significant improvements have been seen in participation, rule of law, and rights, among other categories. Over the past five years, many countries have also shown improvements in transparency and accountability.

Challenges remain: Elections are sometimes marred by corruption and fraud, and improvements in some dimensions of governance have stalled or declined in recent years or have not reached all countries. The current situations in Zimbabwe or the Democratic Republic of Congo are telling. African states, however, are not ignorant of these challenges; the African Union dedicated the entirety of 2018 to “winning the fight against corruption.” As citizens get more educated, they are also becoming more vocal and more equipped to hold their elected officials accountable to the needs of the people.

RESPONDING TO CONFLICTS AND CRISES

The African Union has designated 2019 as the “Year of Refugees, Returnees, and Internally Displaced Persons in Africa.” This consensus on the importance of African-led solutions to forced displacement is indicative of the continent's initiative to construct a sustainable solution to migration issues. African countries still host the largest number of refugees in the world; Uganda, Ethiopia, and Kenya collectively host about 2.8 million refugees. Their governments, despite having few resources, have responded quickly and efficiently to the influx of refugees from neighboring countries.

More progress is needed to reduce the number of conflicts, and thus refugees, on the continent, but there are signs of progress. Although there were 18 state-based conflicts in 2017, the number of deaths was relatively low: 2017 was the ninth least violent year in Africa since 1950. Many conflicts in recent years can be largely explained by the rise of the Islamic State, a global problem, and climate change, which tends to be overlooked and accounts for mass migration in many parts of Africa. And most conflicts are geographically restrained, taking place in a limited number of countries and, within those countries, in limited geographic areas.

Clearly, there is much work to be done. But looking to the past can provide some hope for the future: Rwanda, once known primarily for its tragic genocide, is now known as a model of stability and economic growth, while Eritrea and Ethiopia signed a peace agreement this year to end two decades of war and enmity. African countries must push for further peace initiatives while continuing to support refugees and populations affected by conflict to further improve stability and growth on the continent.

IMPROVING HEALTH AND REDUCING THE IMPACT OF DISEASES

Significant public health improvements have been made in Africa over the past several decades. There have been substantial declines in maternal and child deaths, and the incidence of chronic malnutrition among children under five has decreased by almost 10 percentage points from 1995. Most countries are making good progress on preventable childhood illness and communicable diseases. HIV/AIDS and malaria continue to have a widespread detrimental impact on Africans, but treatment options are improving. Across the continent, life expectancies and healthy life expectancies are rising.

To view Africa solely as a hotbed of disease and hunger is to ignore the significant strides that countries and communities have made. African governments and health workers are committed to preventing illnesses, especially neglected diseases that often tend to get short shrift, improving access to treatments, and finding better ways to deliver quality health care. There is now scope for businesses and emerging partners to join governments in the fight against disease through technological innovations and health systems strengthening.

OVERCOMING SOCIAL CHALLENGES

The share of people living in extreme poverty in Africa has declined over the past decades, and for most countries, the outlook for poverty reduction is positive. Ethiopia, for example, is projected to almost eliminate extreme poverty by 2050. However, the concentration of poverty—40 percent of Africa's extremely poor are projected to live in Nigeria and the Democratic Republic of Congo by 2040—means that the next challenge will be reducing poverty in all countries.

Nonmonetary dimensions of poverty have also been improving. Many countries, including some of Africa's poorest, are on track to make significant progress on the United Nation's Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs) by 2030. Since 2000, the number of African children enrolled in primary school has increased from 60 million to 150 million. Adult literacy rates are up by almost 10 percentage points from 1995, and the gender gap in literacy is shrinking, partially driven by massive improvements in gender parity in school enrollment. However, this gender parity has to shrink further, especially in the sciences, if African countries are to make further economic, political, and social gains.

Africa is ahead in some areas of improving gender equality. For example, in 11 African countries, women hold almost one-third of parliament seats, more than in Europe and the United States. Women, citizens of democratic countries, and workers

are receiving greater autonomy and power throughout Africa because leaders have started to recognize the need for inclusive participation.

What's more, young African leaders are not shying away from the challenges that remain. These leaders are building bridges with the diaspora, connecting the potential of Africa to the rest of the world. They are showing that Africa is not a threat, nor a failure. Africa is an opportunity, one that is being shaped by and for the African people.