



# africa's economic malaise: understanding and perspective

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*Where can South Africans who may be 'groping for their African identity' begin to look for an understanding of economic developments in their own continent? Wolfgang Thomas reviews the best of the recent attempts to analyse Africa's economic problems and suggests that some real progress is now evident.*

**D**emocracy, prosperity and self-rule - this was the vision of African independence. But today, few Africans express satisfaction with the fruits of uhuru.'

With these lines, Richard Sandbrook, political scientist at Toronto University, introduced *The Politics of Africa's Economic Stagnation* (Cambridge University Press, 1985). Three years on, and despite some significant changes in the African economic scene, this book is still one of the best analyses of the reasons for Africa's poor economic performance in the period 1960 to 1985.

The book seems of particular importance for (white) South Africans groping for their 'African identity', yet appalled by what they hear about stagnation, retrogression and chaos in black Africa. Are similar trends to be expected in an independent Namibia? And what about a black (ANC?)-dominated post-apartheid South Africa?

One can tackle Sandbrook's 157-page, concisely written book in two ways. The first is to focus on it

alone, and emerge sobered from any undue optimism about a quick reversal of the downward spiral but also warned against any simple, unidimensional explanation of this 'tragedy'. The second is to include it as a crucial link in a chain of selected readings on 'Third World' underdevelopment. I strongly recommend the latter approach.

Such a zooming-in might start with the famous Brandt-Report *North-South: A Programme for Survival* (Pan Books, 1979) which sets out the global dilemma and pleads for international cooperation and increased aid. This rather utopian study appeared at a time when disillusionment about Third World development was at its strongest. For a brilliant journalistic account of this perspective the reader should turn to Paul Harrison's classic *Inside the Third World* (Penguin, 1979), which discusses key issues in considerable depth and in a refreshingly non-ideological way.

Outside Africa the early 1980s produced several development



'breakthroughs'. Some were on a macro-level - like the Asian success stories Hong Kong, Taiwan, Singapore and South Korea; others were on a sector-specific level - like the 'green revolution' in agriculture; yet others were project-specific, for example, appropriate technology or integrated rural-development projects. Paul Harrison's equally readable second book in the field, *The Third World Tomorrow: A report from the Battlefield in the War against Poverty* (Penguin, 1980) deals with some of them.

Africa showed few signs of such breakthroughs. The much debated Berg report on *Accelerated Development in Sub-Saharan Africa: An Agenda for Action* (World Bank, 1981) offered a new, market-orientated strategy for development, yet lacked any deeper analysis of the malaise, or any sympathetic understanding of the causes. As a result, the prescribed policies - increase basic agricultural prices, prune state spending, depreciate currencies and 'open' the economies - not only fell on deaf ears but elicited sharp reactions from OAU circles and leftwing scholars.

Catastrophic droughts, political turmoil, massive corruption and economic stagnation coincided, during the early 1980s, with increasing pressures from the World Bank, the International Monetary Fund, the United States and Western European donor institutions, forcing African political leaders, planners and development practitioners to reassess their strategies.

At this point, Sandbrook's book appeared: it and a highly polished collection of scholarly papers edited by Robert J. Berg and Jennifer S. Whitaker, *Strategies for African Development* (University of California Press, 1985) complement each other superbly.

Sandbrook places Africa's post-independence economic stagnation in the broad context of four fundamental 'failures', which interact in mutually re-enforcing ways to create a fifth factor, that is, the 'downward spiral' of underdevelopment.

The first factor is that black Africa, more than any other Third World continent, lacked a properly functioning institutional and administrative infrastructure and an adequate natural, financial, and skilled human resource base. After all, exportable minerals deep in the interior of the vast continent are as uneconomic without a proper transport network as an immense hydroelectric capacity situated far away from human settlement and industries. Similarly 'fertile' tropical forests are rapidly transformed into deserts if there is no effective ecological protection.

A second explanatory factor is Africa's colonial legacy, which has resulted in dependency relationships with developed economies.

The other two factors are political in nature. Tribes and classes still interact strongly in Africa, determining much of the political terrain and the unequal distribution of economic wealth. Finally, the absence of strong national cohesion in most African countries has strengthened personal rule and led to corruption, erratic policies and the dampening of private risk-taking and economic growth.

Sandbrook draws attention to a wealth of explanatory factors and forces, revealing both similarities between countries and the uniqueness of specific events. This section should be compulsory reading for all (white) South Africans in danger of explaining Africa's economic and political decay **mainly** in terms of race or ethnicity, colonialism or the apartheid system, or economic structures.

In his concluding chapter on 'Sur-

vival Strategies' Sandbrook anticipates much of what seems to be unfolding at the present time, namely a slow, yet distinct turn-around of Africa's downward spiral.

A few points summarise his approach, which is particularly relevant to all those who want to understand recent developments in southern Africa:

- 'We must believe that people make history despite objective constraints.' (p. 145)
  - 'Africa cannot sit passively by and wait for a reformed world economy to solve its problems.' (p. 146)
  - 'Foreign aid will continue to be an important item in Africa's balance of payments.' (p. 147)
  - 'Africans must look to domestic responses to their crises.' (p. 148)
- These should include an avoidance of bureaucratization, a freeing of markets and the 'building' of a new state, consisting of 'coherent, competent and committed administrative and regulatory institutions'. (p. 154)

A more popularised version of **some** of these strategies is contained in Paul Harrison's third book on this theme, *The Greening of Africa: Breaking through in the Battle for Land and Food* (Collins/Paladin, 1987). Goran Hyden's *No Shortcuts to Progress: African Development Management in Perspective* (Heinemann/University of California Press, 1983) is another classic work in this field.

In the more general sphere of economic policies, World Bank publications, like the authoritative annual *World Development Report*, and the IMF 'country' studies have recently documented important changes in policy stances and institutional structures. Slow yet steady, and sometimes quite dramatic progress is visible in several African countries, including once chronically ill states like Ghana, Uganda and Tanzania.

Against the background of these readings the next few years should be exciting, not only in southern Africa, but in the continent as a whole. Undoubtedly there will be ample scope for disillusion, but for the careful observer and analyst the tide may already have turned. □