

**Franklin Obeng-Odoom, Department of Political Economy, The  
University of Sydney  
Is Life in Africa Getting Better?**

**Abstract**

A day hardly passes without a news item about the woes of Africa. Civil society organisations do not help as their activities continue to sustain a particularly negative image of Africa. 'Revisionists' have tried to counter this state of affairs by providing 'success stories' from Africa. Thus the literature on the state of affairs in Africa is reduced to propaganda and reverse propaganda without resolving the fundamental question of whether life in Africa is getting better. This paper tries to move that state of knowledge forward by providing a systematic analysis of what development analysts and practitioners mean by 'economic development', while exploring how adequate are the indices for measuring this idea. Framing the question in those terms reveals a complex ensemble of findings among which are the contested nature of economic development, its indicators, and predictions – findings which have substantial implications for judging whether life is getting better in Africa.

**Key Words = Africa, Socio-economic Indicators, Political Economy**

**Introduction**

Now that the UN has declared 2011 as the International Year for people from African descent, it is important to ask whether life is getting better in Africa. This question has been asked time and again and time and again it has generated polarised responses. For example, *The Economist* (2000) has depicted Africa as a 'hopeless continent' where life is getting worse, while the African Development Bank (2010) has suggested that life is good in Africa, and is even getting better. Is life in Africa getting better or worse? This seemingly straightforward question strikes the core of the political economy of indicators of economic development in Africa. Therefore, it requires systematic analysis to separate fact from emotion, and value judgements from evidence.

Framing the question in those terms reveals a complex ensemble of findings among which is the contested nature of economic development, its indicators, and predictions – findings which have substantial implications for judging whether life is getting better in Africa. The paper argues that Africa is too vast to pass a simple, one-size-fits-all judgement on the state of economic development. Also, there are huge deficits in the proxies used to measure progress in Africa. Alternative measures that draw directly on how people feel, however, show that life in Africa is good and most of the people in Africa lead a happy and purposeful life.

This paper has three sections, the first of which examines what development analysts mean by 'economic development', demonstrates the fluidity of the concept, and exposes some of the weaknesses in the proxies used to measure economic development. Next, it explores the possibility of using alternative measures of

economic development. Then, finally, it addresses the research question, 'is life in Africa getting better?'

### **Economic Development: 1887 - 2000**

'Development' is a word that is in vogue. It has a global acceptance among academics, policy makers, sports people, and entertainers. Part of the reason why everyone talks about development is its association with early philosophers (e.g., Aristotle) and religious leaders (e.g., St. Augustine) but also because it is synonymous with the biological metaphor of improving, progressing, or growing and also partly because of the backing that the concept gets from powerful political and economic institutions which claim that development is good for everybody (Rist, 2006).

Exploring whether life in Africa is getting better requires a historical method which entails a reflection of how we got 'here' and the nature of the present debate about economic development. The first time that the notion of 'economic development' appeared in the English language was in the English translation of Marx' *Capital* which is widely believed to have borrowed the idea from Hegel who, in turn, got the idea from Aristotle (Arndt, 1981, pp.458-459). Since then, there was the idea of 'colonial economic development' which, unlike the Marxist usage meant the exploitation of natural resources in the colonies. This duality of meaning – the development of societies and the exploitation of natural resources – characterised economic development for a long time, until The concept next became popular in the post war period after President Truman of the United States alluded to it (Rist, 2006). Since its introduction, however, the meaning of the concept has changed from time to time. What follows is a brief account of the changing meaning of economic development as told by W.H.Arndt (1989) in his book, *Economic Development: The history of an idea*.

Since 1945, economic development has always been regarded as 'a process of change'. However, from the beginning, that change referred only to activities by governments to change the nature of, for example, land. After the Second World War (WW2), however, economic development began to be seen as a process of change that *societies*, as a whole, underwent. Apart from a change in the scope of economic development, it went through three other changes after the war. First, there was a general acceptance that some countries had not experienced economic development. Second, it was felt that those countries needed to experience economic development. Third, there was a tendency to believe that the situation in the latter countries could be helped or worsened by the activities of those other countries that had experienced economic development (Arndt, 1989, p.9). While economic development was considered a process of change that every society had to go through, the *ends* of that change underwent considerable changes.

In the early days, economic development meant modernisation, industrialisation, and even westernisation (Arndt, 1989, p.2). The end of WW2 and, the attainment of

independence of the former colonies (which began to be labelled as 'Third World'<sup>1</sup>) raised *economic growth* to the status of globally accepted objective of economic development. In this regard, capital formation was encouraged. There was an interest in increasing the investment rate to expand the stock of capital, and, hence, to expand output. From this perspective, input-output analysis became popular and capital output ratios were calculated to see how much was needed to raise economic growth by certain margins. Capital aid was frequently sought, to make up for the non-existent capital stock in the Third World. Also, import substitution, industrialisation, and human capital formation (and with it, technical assistance to make up for shortage of skills in the Third World) were encouraged (Arndt, 1989, pp.49-87). Although attention was given to various drivers of change, economic growth was typically the ends sought. That is, economic growth was seen as an end in itself, equivalent to economic development.

From 1965 onwards, economists realised that, although economic growth was accelerating in the Third World, sometimes even faster than in the First World, problems such as disease, illiteracy, inequality, and poor housing remained. In turn, the growth-centred<sup>2</sup> view of economic development started to give way to concerns about broader 'social objectives' of economic development. In particular, there was an emphasis on employment creation, redistribution, providing basic needs of the poor and, in general, poverty reduction (Arndt, 1989, pp. 92-113). This shift represented the first real change in the objectives of economic development. Nevertheless, it cannot be claimed that aspiring for more 'social' ends of economic development was entirely new. Arndt (1989, pp. 89-92) points out that achieving social ends *was* one key aspiration when the UN was formed in 1945.

Nevertheless, it was in the 1960s that greater emphasis was given to broad social concerns of economic development. Economic development then became a process of change to free nations and peoples from multiple deprivations. However,

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<sup>1</sup> This descriptor refers to countries (that contains the nations of Africa, Asia, the Middle East, the Caribbean, and Latin America) other than those in the 'first world' (Western countries and Japan where industrialisation first took grounds and civil liberties were first formally upheld) and the 'second world' (the Soviet Union and former communist countries mainly in Eastern Europe) (Handelman, 2011, pp. 1-2). Development scholars and analysts differ in their opinion about the appropriateness of 'Third world' as a descriptor. Some analysts prefer to use 'developing nations'. Dependency theorists use the descriptor 'undeveloped' countries to explain a state of not being modern, while they use 'underdeveloped countries' to describe the countries that have suffered from colonialism (Frank, 1966). Critics of the TERM, 'developing countries' argue that it connotes a 'catching up' idea or a feeling that the state of affairs in these countries is transient or at a certain stage and would change soon. Thus, the international development agencies such as the United Nations started to use the term 'less developed countries' (Handelman, 2011, pp. 1-2). In this paper, I describe the countries in Africa simultaneously as less developed, Third World, or Developing.

<sup>2</sup> More recent concerns relate to the failure of a growth paradigm to account for environmental degradation and non-market, but useful, activities. Also, that paradigm credits as 'positive' activities that do not really contribute to total real growth (see, for example, Stilwell, 1999).

economic growth once again ascended the throne in the 1980s when the Breton Woods institutions prescribed growth-centric reform policies for the Third World. Old habits certainly die hard. Nevertheless, the calamitous effects of those policies especially for African countries (Structural Adjustment Participatory Review Network [SAPRIN] (2002) led to a 'dethronement' of economic growth, and, by the 1990s, a pluralist view of economic development had firmly gained ground again. Indeed, the pluralist view got an added boost when it became possible to quantify progress by calculating the *Human Development Index*, which is a composite measure of health (measured by life expectancy at birth), education (measured as the literacy rate), and standard of living (economic growth).

### **Economic Development: 2000 -**

At the turn of the millennium, world leaders adopted a 15-year plan to attain economic development by achieving 8 different goals, christened the Millennium Development Goals (MDGs) These are: eradication of extreme poverty and hunger; attainment of universal primary education; promotion of gender equality and empowerment of women; reduction of child mortality; improvement of maternal health; combating HIV/AIDS, malaria and other diseases; ensured provision of environmental sustainability; and develop global partnership for development. It is these that currently constitute the elements of economic development.

Are the MDGs a fair framework within which to consider Africa? It is an improvement over past mono index frameworks. However, there are deep problems with the MDGs too. Take the goal of achieving sustainable land management, for example. Attaining secure tenure under the MDGs entails providing landowners and slum dwellers formal titles to land. Although important, there are many countries in Africa (e.g., Ghana) where the provision of title certificates has not brought secure tenure. In fact, there are many people who, without titles, feel that their land is secure. Also, in countries such South Africa, the very notion of providing titles to gain secure tenure is secondary to a broader problem of unequal distribution of land. This latter problem has recently been compounded by a phenomenon of land grabbing where the state colludes with private capital to dispossess people of their land (see, for example, Cortulla and Vermeulen, 2011; Chu, 2011). So the issue of secure tenure is conceptually contested and vague (Obeng-Odoom, 2011a).

Other goals are similarly problematic, at least conceptually. The goal of ensuring access to water is a case in point. There are countries where access has improved, but cost, distribution and reliability of water service have worsened (Allen and Bell, 2011; Obeng-Odoom, 2011b). Also, goal 1 of halving the share of people living under the poverty line says nothing about those people who live under the poverty line. The focus is mainly about those who rise above the poverty line, not those people below it (Easterly, 2007; 2009).

Furthermore, feminist political economists argue that the gendered nature of economic development is grossly oversimplified into primary school enrolment rate which does not even correlate with income and employment disparities in the 'real world'. By ignoring glaring disparities in gender relations, the MDGs have been

nicknamed 'most distracting gimmick' (Francisco and Antrobus, 2009, p.164). There are also problems of data collection, manipulation, and extrapolation that misrepresent the state of economic development in the African countries (Alvarez et al., 2011).

Easterly (2007; 2009) has consistently tried to show that the MDGs are biased against Africa. He shows that because African countries are starting already from a 'low base', the calculations of 'progress' or 'regress' by the UN is likely to tell more positively on other countries than those in Africa. Also, although the MDGs were globally accepted in 2000, the base year for analysis is 1990. Incidentally, the 1990s were a period where the economic climate in most African countries was poor. Therefore, the mark of failure was awarded to 'Africa' at the very beginning of the MDGs. Because poverty is usually a *nonlinear function* of per capita income, how quickly it is reduced depends on the initial average incomes. It follows that even if African countries grow at the same pace with countries in other regions, they would perform worse on reducing poverty than other richer countries. Thus, most African countries need to grow faster than richer countries elsewhere to attain goal one (Easterly, 2007; 2009).

There are huge disparities in targets in the MDGs (e.g., 50 per cent reduction in poverty; a reduction in child mortality by 67 per cent), arising from the fact that the MDGs were formulated on the basis of global historical trends. That is, on the basis universal historical trends would be the same as future trends. It follows that the MDGs are only as good as a global, not necessarily a country-specific or even regional specific, framework (Vandemoortele, 2008). The many contradictions in the process of economic development would suggest that it is more appropriate to define it by the empirical facts rather than normative ideals (Rist, 2006). From that perspective, economic development is a problem in itself.

In spite of this complex picture about economic development, both 'friends' and 'enemies' of Africa all too often talk about how harsh is life in Africa and how bad is everything African on the basis of indicators and frameworks of development. There is even a suggestion that failure is the African way. A content analysis of the ten most widely read newspapers in the United States of America showed that, from May to October 2010, only 5 out of 245 articles published on Africa focused on a positive picture of wealth and growth. The rest were about images of death, dying, and poverty (Ezekwesili, 2011, p.ix). It is not only journalists who perpetrate this imaging of Africa. Eminent scholars who write about Third World development are guilty too. For instance, in *The Challenge of Third World Development*, now in its sixth edition, Handelman (2011) attributes 'failure' in African countries to 'a *tradition* of deep government corruption' (p.50, my italics), but when it is about other countries in other regions, he talks of 'a *tradition* of honest governments' (p.48, my italics). The so-called friends of Africa are equally guilty. During a recent symposium focusing on Africa, one attendee suggested that there was something 'African' about

despotism when he asked a section of African ministers of state, 'why does Africa have such a big appetite for despots?'<sup>3</sup>

To counter the emphasis on 'negative Africa', Africanists have started focusing on the success stories in Africa (see, for example, Chuhan-Pole and Angwafo, 2011; African Development Bank, 2011). Yet, these studies normally use the same indicators. Also, they merely generate a case of 'reverse propaganda' where negative stories are replaced with positive ones. Chinua Achebe (1978, p.13) once suggested that this approach is akin to offering developed countries, especially Western ones, bribes to make them think positively of Africa.

Telling positive stories about Africa is important, but the practice does not address the bigger problem of the appropriateness of some of the socio-economic indicators used to paint a negative image of Africa. Ghanaians frequently warn their leaders who tell them how well the economy is doing that people do not eat the economy. There is the need for using other indicators of progress. Williams (2009), for example, suggests that the rise of African majorities to overthrow white supremacist and minority colonial rule could be an important index the same way that 'colonial economic development' was deemed a success. This method is important, but care is needed not to be stuck with the past. Present and future indices are also needed.

One of such 'progressive' alternatives is 'happiness' (e.g., Strack et al., 1991) which has recently been described as 'absolute, universal, ultimate' and *the* index to replace traditional measures of economic development (Yew-Kwang, 2011, p.1). In turn, several questions have been asked of happy people. What makes them happy? Why are they happy? What do they do when they are happy? And, most importantly, how is happiness measured (Veenhoven, 1994)?

#### **Considering one alternative: Happiness**

How much one is satisfied with one's life, the whole life, is what is usually called happiness (Ott, 2010, p.632). Happiness is normally understood to be comprised of three elements, namely positive affect, satisfaction in life, and the absence of stress (Argyle and Lu, 1990, p.1011).

It is an important measure of progress because it tells how satisfied people are regardless of where they live, their age, sex, or race. Happy people are friendly to their neighbours and have less stress. They are optimistic and look forward to a future of hope and promise. Happiness levels change with ill health and bad mood (Myers and Diener, 1995; Hills and Argyle, 2002) and it is rare for people to fake happiness in the mist of 'misery' (Veenhoven, 1991, pp. 13-14). For all these reasons, it is an important measure of the quality of life of people.

Psychologists have shown that there is a strong positive correlation between being an extrovert and being happy. The reason is that extroverts partake more in social

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<sup>3</sup> The forum was dubbed 'Building bridges between Africa and Australia'. It was held at the University of Sydney on the 13<sup>th</sup> of May, 2011. The author was in attendance.

activities, such as being members of clubs and teams, parties and dances. Extroverts are also happier because they tend to joke more, are assertive, and co-operate more (Lu and Argyle, 1991). Not only does being sociable correlates with happiness, but also it predicts more happiness (Argyle and Lu, 1990). General network relationships, network-based information channels, and mutually agreed sanctions for breach of community trust are said to predict happiness too (Leung et al, 2011).

Economists claim that the process of producing happiness is sometimes reduced to only four factors, namely present circumstances, past experiences, future expectations and comparison with others (Frey and Stutzer, 2002, p.405). However, psychologists contend that the issues are more complicated involving debates about whether happiness is a product of emotions or thinking, or whether people are born with happiness traits, and whether it is mainly dependent on the satisfaction of needs or comparison with others (Veenhoven, 1991, pp.14-15). More recent studies (Veenhoven, 2011, pp.11-12) have shed some light on these issues. First, there is a variation in the levels of happiness of different people over time. So, trait may be important but it is not all about trait. Comparison too may be important but absolute measures are likely to carry more weight.

The measurement of happiness could be done 'subjectively' or 'objectively'. Establishing subjective well being, or measuring happiness subjectively, entails interviews with people using different questions about how satisfied they are with life. The Oxford Happiness Questionnaire and the Oxford Happiness Inventory are popular tools for collecting information about people's self-reported happiness (Hills and Argyle, 2002) and the World Database of Happiness is a one stop shop for papers on the subject (see Veenhoven, 1994 for an overview).

There are also objective measures. Such measures are proxies to determine whether individuals are happy. Specific questions include whether personal needs have been met. There are also reflections on creativeness and self actualisation suicide rates and so on. These proxies constitute what economists call 'revealed preference'. To economists, subjective measures are unscientific, only objective measures are (Frey and Stutzer, 2002). However, psychologists, who pioneered the study of happiness, have shown that there is a general consensus that people's life satisfaction cannot be assessed using proxy indicators. It is better to seek people's subjective well-being (Veenhoven, 1991, pp.9-12)

On this basis, can it be said that Africans are happy? Table 1 is revealing. It contains data on the share of the population in a selected number of countries who were asked about whether they have a purposeful life. The top 20 performers in a league containing the US, UK, Netherlands, France, Sweden, and Australia are African countries. Liberians are the happiest people on earth. People in materially poor countries such as Sierra Leone were happier than the populations of resource rich countries such as the USA (49<sup>th</sup>), the UK (116<sup>th</sup>), and Norway (100<sup>th</sup>).

Table 1: Ranking of Countries on the basis of happiness

Ranking on the Basis of population Living a purposeful life	Country	% of people who agreed that they have a purposeful life	Negative Experience Index (0, most negative; 100 least negative)
1	Liberia	100	27
1	Venezuela	100	19
3	Togo	99	21
3	Malawi	99	14
3	Mali	99	13
3	Niger	99	14
3	Namibia	98	16
3	Kenya	98	19
3	Ghana	98	22
3	Cote d'Ivoire	98	16
3	Sierra Leone	98	37
3	Congo	98	23
3	Panama	98	15
3	Ecuador	98	27
3	Colombia	98	25
3	Jamaica	98	18
3	Viet Nam	98	17
3	Nicaragua	98	28
3	Lao	98	N/A
20	South Africa	97	24
20	Sudan	97	28
28	Benin	96	24
28	Madagascar	96	19
28	Uganda	96	31
28	Guinea	96	26
28	Central African Republic	96	28
28	Peru	96	28
49	USA	94	28
82	Denmark	89	15
90	Australia	87	22
90	New Zealand	87	24
100	Norway	85	16
100	Sweden	85	16
100	Germany	85	22
116	UK	79	24
124	Netherlands	70	16
134	Hong Kong	60	26

Source: UNDP, 2010, pp. 176-179



Also, Table 1 shows that the negative experience index (column 4) or the 'scale indicating the percentage of survey respondents in a Gallup World Poll who experienced a negative emotion such as physical pain, worry, sadness, stress, depression and anger the day before the survey' (UNDP, 2010, p.224) showed that there are similar levels of emotional problems among African peoples as peoples in other regions (e.g., Central African Republic and USA; Ghana and Australia; South Africa and New Zealand). And the countries with the least share of their populations reporting negative experience are all African countries, namely Mali (13 per cent), Niger (14 per cent), and Malawi (14 per cent). Of course there is also the case of Sierra Leone (37 per cent) and Uganda (31 per cent) where negative experience is on the high side. Even then, it is not the case that the majority of the population are so distressed as would warrant the negative images such countries receive in the Western media houses.

### **Conclusion:**

So is Life in Africa getting better?

'Silence!' the King called out and read out from his book, 'Rule Forty-two: All persons more than a mile high to leave the court.' Everybody looked at Alice. 'I'm not a mile high', said Alice. 'You are', said the King. 'Nearly two miles high', added the Queen. 'Well, I sha'n't go, at any rate', said Alice: 'besides, that's not a regular rule: you invented it just now'. 'It's the oldest rule in the book', said the King. 'Then it ought to be Number one', said Alice. The King turned pale, and shut his note-book hastily (Lewis Carroll, *Alice in Wonderland*, cited in Lund, 1998, p.1).

Often analysis about the state of Africa is selective to produce a bad image of Africa. 'Africa is a failure' is the dominant discourse. Some of this reading of Africa is the result of ignorance - ignorance about the diversity in Africa: that Africa is not a country but a continent; ignorance about the political economy of economic indicators, and ignorance about history –, but ignorance is only part of the picture. There is also a deliberate and concerted effort to present only the negative side of stories from Africa. It is intuitive that civil society organisations need to paint a picture of Africa which is bleak enough to get funding from which they often profit. Others need to create a desperate image of Africa and how they are helping the situation. In the process, they turn themselves into heroes. Then, there is the issue of how to measure other successes quantitatively or without creating controversy (Achibe, 1978; Vandemoortele, 2008; Williams, 2009; Obeng-Odoom, 2011a).

Whatever the reason for equating Africa with failure, whether Africa is doing well or badly depends on which indicators are used for analysis. Economic development is nothing and everything. It is never static in its meaning and objectives, but fluid and loose. It means different things at different times. On some of its objectives, African countries are doing well, but on others they are not doing so well. On many more, African countries differ in their ranking. So, just as people do not make sweeping generalisations about the Americas based on evidence from Brazil or simplistic

generalisations about Europe based on problems in Belarus, it is misleading to depict 'Africa' as a hopeless continent on the basis of the evidence of a few countries on the continent.

The one thing that is clear is that, across Africa – North, South, East, and West, Central, Madagascar, and the small island states - the African people themselves have made an emphatic statement: they live a purposeful life which is not paradise, not hell, but a happy and contented life.

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