

The 'Africa Rising' narrative is dead. Why is it being resurrected?

There's a startling phenomenon in Kampala's real estate market. A spectre of empty apartment buildings with no tenants, essentially white tombs, clog the city's skyline. Multiple fancy shopping malls, which, in true '[Ugandan English](#)' style we refer to simply as 'arcades,' are shutting down. Some [banks are closing](#). The cause for this turn in fortunes, while multidimensional in nature, doesn't need one to have an economics degree from Harvard to figure out: More and more people simply have not enough money in their pockets to spend. The Uganda Bureau of statistics' latest House Hold Survey that found poverty increasing from 19.7% in 2012 to 27% in 2017, a whopping 8 million people, also found that monthly expenditure portfolio for a household of 4 is a paltry sh400,000 (about \$100).

This is not a problem limited to Uganda alone. Poverty levels in many sub-Saharan African countries have of late been spiking.

Towards the end of April I visited Nigeria, Africa's largest economy and the continent's biggest oil producer. Talking with ordinary folk on the street brings out the misery of the country's youth. Although Nigeria has one of the world's highest economic growth rates averaging 7.4% Poverty remains significant at 33.1%. Nollywood films might glamorize Nigeria as a country of large houses and huge fuel-guzzling SUV's, and indeed there are very rich Nigerians; but the gap between rich and poor is so great that the combined wealth of Nigeria's five richest men – \$29.9 billion – could end extreme poverty in that country according to a 2017 report published by Oxfam. A country where more than half the population lives in

poverty, and 60% of the urban population cannot afford the cheapest house is not a country that is 'rising'. Six Nigerians fall into chronic poverty every minute, according to the real time poverty tracker World Poverty Clock. In 2018 Nigeria overtook India as the country with the largest number of people living in extreme poverty, with an estimated 87 million Nigerians. If the current trend persists, warns the IMF, more than 120 million Nigerians, or 45 percent of the population, will be living in extreme poverty, that's less than \$1.90 a day, by 2030.

Many countries in Africa aren't fairing any better, and this is partly evidenced by the flight of some of world's and region's biggest brands back to their home origins after their franchises failed to register progress on the continent.

Retail chain Shoprite has been closing stores from [Zimbabwe](#) to [Uganda](#) since at least 2015. So has Kenyan supermarket giant Nakumatt.

Food giant Nestle significantly scaled down its presence in Africa in 2015, including cutting its workforce in sub-Saharan Africa by 15%. Speaking to the Financial Times then, its Africa head was brunt as to what had led to the company's decision:

"We thought this would be the next Asia, but we have realised the middle class here in the region is extremely small and it is not really growing". Of late the company has shifted its focus to 'lower-income consumers', an admission that having bet its investment on the 'Africa Rising' narrative was a big misreading of African economic fortunes.

What better example could explain the hollowness of the 'Africa Rising' narrative than the Millions of poor African migrants trekking dangerous routes across deserts and oceans to reach Europe in a naïve, misguided, search for a better life?

Coined around 2000 by The Economist, the 'Africa Rising' term described the rapid economic growth in Sub-Saharan Africa then, and the belief that rapid economic development on the continent was inevitably going to transform the continent. Its empirical basis was that over the past decade, six of the world's 10 fastest growing countries had been from Africa. The world's economic, aid and humanitarian elite hopped onto this false narrative. Major conferences were held under its banner. Key investment decisions such as Nestle's above, were made at the back of this premise. African governments were made to believe they were doing so well that some made unwise policy decisions based on this false narrative.

What these forecasters forgot, despite rich lessons from history is, one, Africa is not one country but 54 with different socio-political, economic and cultural contexts; that extraneous factors such as high population growth rates would erase any gains made by economies, that climate change would be devastating to economies of an agrarian continent, that political instabilities, not to mention corruption and a plethora of other governance challenges that can't be put onto the Richter scale, would upend that narrative.

A **'rising middle class'** was one of the most deceitful tropes of the 'Africa Rising' Charade. In 2011, a report from the [African Development Bank](#) claimed that up to 34%, or 313 million Africans were then in the middle class (which they defined as people living on \$2-\$20 a day – can you imagine! \$2?!) using, like most metrics, Household Surveys.

But what these analysts also forgot is that despite one's income at a particular time, normally a family catastrophe like a chronic illness, a natural disaster, or a loss of a job, always means economic ruin for people with no assets, those who live pay check to pay check.

THE MYTH OF AFRICA RISING

A 2015 [report](#) exposed the myth of Africa's growing middle class. Three sceptical economists – Anthony Shorrocks, Jima Davies and Rodrigo Lluberas – used a new creative method to determine who was middle class and who wasn't. They decided to look at WEALTH, rather than income, as a measure of ones middleclass worthiness, essentially making wealth quintile the better predictor of a middle class life.

When they did this, they found that Africa's so-called middle class was dismally smaller, and inexistent in many countries.

Their study found that 664 million adults (aged 20 and older), or 14% of the world's population, belonged to the global middle class in 2015. In Africa, only 3.3% of the continent's 572 million adults was found to be in middle class. That's just 18.8 million Africans; if their net worth, and not what they spend, is used as the reference to who is in middle class.

Even more interesting was the fact that of those 18 million Africans, some 4.3 million of the them—or one quarter—live in just one country, South Africa (perhaps the reason some South Africans don't consider it an 'African country' if you know what I mean). If you also count Algeria, Egypt, Tunisia, Morocco and Nigeria (countries we like to say are not 'African' at all with the exception of Nigeria), this number rises to 14.1 million, leaving just 4.7 million of the middle class located in the rest of the continent—some 48 countries.

True to form, these same narrative setters, most of whom do not even live in Africa, are at it again. Of late a slew of western publications, leading global thinktanks, newspapers like Forbes and think tanks continue to perpetuate similar motifs of Africa as containing the 'fastest growing economies in the world' with possibly incredible outcomes for its people.

'By 2025 Uganda's economy will be the fastest growing in the world, followed by India,' claimed one of the thinktanks, the Harvard University Center for International Development (CID), a claim that delighted Uganda's president Yoweri Museveni and a coterie of his patrimonial advisers who blanketed TVs, Newspapers and social media with the good news. Museveni himself alluded to this report in his State of The Nation address last year and, taunting his ragtag opposition, attributed the charitable forecast to the 'good policies' of his ruling National Resistance Movement. "They will die of [High blood] pressure", Mr Museveni said of his 'enemies of progress.'

AFRICA NEEDS A DEEPER REFLECTION

Just like Bill Clinton 1990s branding of some Africa's presidents as 'new breed of African leaders' (apparently because they held 'multiparty' 'elections') spectacularly boomeranged on him when his characterisation soon turned out to be a remarkably naïve trope, the Africa Rising narrative was premised on a lie. It was only a matter of time before that bubble was to bust, and bust it has.

The reincarnation of this faux narrative by the global elite should not be allowed to flourish by the African people. Narratives like these hurt, rather than help the continent.

African governments would be wise to ignore these useless foreign-born forecasts and focus instead on their own home-

grown, context-specific transformation.

The Africa rising narrative proved to be a case of the bride being too beautiful. **Africa doesn't need to be told how great it is doing by outsiders. The continent needs to engage in its own deep self-reflection and honestly dissect its challenges, and then plan its own future.** This unfounded praise of the continent's fortunes in the end hurt our continent, because a lot of critical decisions are made on the back of such false narratives.

There are examples where some nations are showing that you don't need these global forecasts to transform.

Rwanda's [astute leadership](#), genuine corruption [crackdown](#), population growth management [policies](#) and [ICT mainstreaming](#) show one example of a nation that is writing its own story, and setting its own narrative.

Others had better take note.

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