

# Introduction

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## 1. We are all Africans

Africa is the cradle of mankind. During the 20th century scientists have found strong evidence that the evolution of the modern human being (*the homo sapiens*) originated in Africa, some 500,000 to 200,000 years ago. From Africa our ancestors migrated to all the corners of the world, first to Asia and Europe, and later to Australia, America and many of the tiny islands in the world oceans. Since the time of this exodus, societies inside as well as outside Africa have experienced very different development paths: some societies became sedentary agriculturalists, others remained or became tribal hunter and gatherers. Economically, politically and military powerful nations were created. Industrialization revolutionized societies first in Europe and later also in many other parts of the world. Some societies became wealthy, while others stayed in poverty. All of these changes happened in different ways and at different times depending on a variety of historical circumstances. For us to understand where we have ended up today, we need to know where we came from and what has influenced these various trajectories of development. This makes the study of history so valuable for personal intellectual development.

Today Africa boasts with energetic people and their numbers are increasing rapidly. It is estimated that by 2050 about one quarter of the world population will live in Africa. All these people want to make the best of their own lives and that of their children. Africa hosts a large number of animals, plants and trees that can be found nowhere else in the world. The continent has vast tracts of fertile land in varying climate zones and some of the world's richest deposits of minerals. But if Africa is so resourceful and has so many people eager to develop these resources, why then are so many Africans still poor? Why are African economies less productive than most Western or Asian economies? And why is wealth and power *within* African so unequally distributed across different groups of people? To study such vastly important questions one has to start thinking in a more systematic way about the specific development trajectories of African societies, politics and economies.

This textbook aims to introduce African students to a wide range of themes and concepts that deal with the history of African development. The book seeks to create bridges between the study of economic, social and political history and long-term human development in Africa. The key premise of the book is that understanding the drivers of historical change is the key to explaining long-term development, and that within this process of historical change, there are important 'general patterns' to discover in the economic, political and social structures of African and non-African societies. A better understanding of these patterns will help a new generation of African students to engage with the major development issues of their time.



## **2. The authors**

The authors of this book come from various places in the world. We are African and non-African scholars who have scholarly expertise in African socio-economic or political history. We are committed to spread our knowledge and communicate the results of our academic research to a wider public audience. This book is the outcome of a project that ties our expertise together in a single and freely accessible ‘open source’ textbook.

The chapters of this book all deal with a specific topic. Each chapter is written by an author who has a specific expertise on this topic or theme. Some of the views of the authors are open to debate and there is nothing wrong with this. In fact, without discussion, science would not make much progress. Therefore we encourage students not only to read these texts (as consumers) but also to discuss these texts (as critical users). The chapters are written in such a way that they can be used in courses that deal with, or touch upon, African history, African development studies or African economics and politics. We have taken care to keep the chapters basic, with a limited length (ca. 5.000 words) and with a lot of tables, maps, graphs and pictures to enrich the reading experience. Every chapter contains a brief list of suggested reading materials and ends with 5 discussion questions, which you can use to test your comprehension of the contents.

The authors have all contributed voluntarily to this book because we believe in the added value of studying history for obtaining a deeper understanding of present-day development issues. We also believe that more people with a deeper understanding of development issues, increase chances of creating a better world, a world with less poverty, lower inequality and a world governed by wise leaders that prioritize social interests over private interests.

### **3. Our approach**

We have chosen to combine three approaches for teaching history and development. First, we adopt a *historical approach* because the development of states, economies and societies can only be thoroughly understood from a long-term perspective. People, families, communities or countries do not originate from one day to another, nor do they grow rich or become powerful in a split second. Societies that have grown wealthy have achieved this as a result of centuries of change and current levels of global inequality are the outcome of a long-term historical process of socio-economic and political divergence.

Second, we adopt a *comparative approach*. Conducting comparisons is valuable because it helps us to identify similarities and differences that form the basis for drawing lessons from history. One of these lessons, for instance, is that societies who manage to diversify their exports are less vulnerable to sudden changes of commodity prices in the world market. African history is full of lessons that can be used to inform current economic policies. Comparisons can be made on various levels. Some chapters place African countries in the context of global economic developments. Others compare development within Africa, or do both. Comparisons are essential to develop a broader spatial and temporal framework in which to explore the determinants of development.

Third, we adopt a *thematic approach*. Each chapter of this book discusses a specific theme that is connected to the encompassing question of long-term African development. This can be a historical theme, such as the African slave trades, the African partition or Africa's colonial history, but it can also be a more contemporary theme, for instance about the causes and consequences of African population growth, the development of education or the explosive growth of African cities.

Chapters use some important breakdowns in time, which we call temporal demarcations. The most common breakdown is threefold: the pre-colonial, the colonial and the post-colonial era. These are very crude temporal distinctions and do not equally apply to all African societies. Whereas one could argue that the colonial period in some parts of West Africa, such as Senegal started around the mid-19th Century, in other parts of Central Africa we would locate such a 'start' somewhere in the early 20<sup>th</sup> Century. Periodisations are also open to criticism because they raise the impression of a clear break in development path whereas in reality, such breaks can often not be pinpointed to a particular moment in time. For instance, while many Africans celebrate a day of formal political independence, which was in the majority of

countries obtained in the year 1960, economic independence may not have been obtained until present. Nor did formal independence mean that external political influences became irrelevant.

Still we have good reasons to structure the analysis of African development into a period before, during and after European colonial rule. First, most of current African countries are the result of territorial borders that were drawn during the colonial era. These borders were not established overnight, but they do constitute an important political reality at present. Second, the era of independence did eventually alter the foundations for the governance of African societies, as nearly all African countries became ruled by local African politicians replacing European officials.

The geographical demarcation of this book also poses a major challenge. Throughout this book we will discuss development in Africa, thus suggesting that there are patterns that are common to a large uniform geographic entity. In reality we know that Africa is an extremely diverse continent, with very different social, political and economic structures. How can we justify the term 'African development', if the historical experience of development has been so varied? This is a difficult question. One way to cope with this complicating factor is that most of the chapters focus on Sub-Saharan Africa, excluding North Africa. A second way of dealing with variety is that we try to indicate, whenever possible, to which areas certain 'general patterns of development' do apply, and which areas form the exception.



#### **4. A complex history**

The history of African development is, as we have argued above, a complex history. If the problem of poverty, for instance, would be easy to resolve, all Africans would be wealthy today and there would also be little reason for studying economic development. If all African countries were governed by highly efficient and effective administrations, there would be less reason to study political development. The fact that poverty and coercion has been a constant factor in human history, while people have made great efforts to reduce it in every region of the world indicates that wealth and power are complex phenomena. History is a study of complexity.

The reason that we need to study the history of development is that it includes many different factors that all affect and connect to each other. Understanding development thus requires not only an understanding of the relevant factors (economic growth, education, health, good governance, food security), but also an understanding of their specific *interaction*. To understand ‘causality’ in long-term processes of socio-economic or political development implies a basic conception of what is meant by ‘sufficient’ and ‘necessary conditions’. The best way to start exploring complexity it is to break it down in pieces that we can understand. This is what the chapters in this book all try to do. Break down an extremely complicated long-term process of development in a very large area of the world (Africa) into pieces. The challenge that remains to the student reading these texts is to reconnect these pieces and start building up his or her own understanding of African development and, by doing so, enlarge the intellectual wealth of Africa.