Poverty in Africa since independence

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1. Introduction

Most African countries gained independence in the early 1960s. At that time, their average income levels were higher than in many Asian countries and on par with some Latin American countries. Since then, however, Sub-Saharan Africa has become associated with economic stagnation and persistent poverty. Especially during the so-called 'lost decades' of the 1970s to 1990s poverty rates in Africa rose while other developing regions took large strides in poverty eradication. Today, many of the poorest countries in the world are found on the African continent, although there is a significant spread in income levels across countries. Average regional poverty expressed as the *share* of the population living in poverty is declining since the 2000s, but at a slower pace than has been observed in many Asian countries. Moreover, due to rapid population growth, the *total number* of Africans living in poverty has grown and may well continue to rise for decades to come.

Rising poverty levels stand in sharp contrast to the large natural resource wealth and overwhelming young labour force of many African countries. The rising global and local demand for agricultural commodities, and mining and forestry resources has not created a solid basis for sustained poverty reduction. Despite improving pre-conditions for sustained economic growth and a durable improvement in living standards, the revenues of Africa's natural wealth are too often unequally distributed and/or invested in activities that create little extra jobs for growing numbers of un- and underemployed people. In some countries, such as Botswana, the governance of national wealth works relatively well and such examples provide optimism and hope for the future, but in other countries corruption, elite capture and violent conflicts hamper alleviation of mass poverty.

This chapter focuses on economic forms of poverty, which can be defined in terms of *material* living standards. We will discuss two different dimensions of poverty, at the national and at the individual level. We will explain how both dimensions are measured and compared internationally. We will present estimates of absolute poverty and poverty rates and explore the trends in Africa in a global comparative perspective. While this may sound straightforward, it is important to note that human wellbeing entails much more than material conditions. For example, aggregated measures of economic poverty exclude access to health care and education; environmental sustainability and resilience to climate change; empowerment and agency; political freedom and acceptance of independent sexual orientation, gender, and ethnicity. These aspects remain beyond the scope of this chapter. Further, this chapter focuses on poverty in Africa since independence. We begin in the 1960s, a decade that marks African independence and the beginning of annual poverty data provided by the World Bank. We explore the data up to 2016, which is the most recent year for which the World Bank offers data on poverty levels.

The chapter is structured as follows. It begins with a discussion on how poverty can be defined and measured. We then proceed to present global and African poverty trends, which also entails a discussion of rural versus urban poverty. This is followed by a discussion of both African and international poverty-mitigating strategies. Finally, we dare to look ahead to future opportunities and challenges affecting African poverty.

2. Defining and measuring national and individual poverty

Before we can study levels and trends in national and individual poverty we need to understand how poverty is commonly defined and measured. The definitions we adopt in this chapter refer to economic poverty, which is usually measured in terms of *material* living standards. The most common measures are GDP per capita and the number or share of people living under the poverty line. Both measures are used by international organisations such as the United Nations and the World Bank. The advantage of using a widely accepted definition and measurement standard for all countries in the world is that it facilitates international and inter-temporal comparisons. The disadvantage is that these measures are rather rough and miss much of the regional, national and local context that matters for living standards at communal or personal levels. Moreover, these measures also contain no information on how the poor perceive their living conditions.

What does it mean when we say that a country is "poor"? *National poverty* is for all intents and purposes the same as the lack of economic growth. A country's wealth is measured in terms of GDP (Gross Domestic Product), which is the total value added to all goods and services produced in a national economy per year. Because the size of any country's economy is related to the number of inhabitants, GDP is commonly divided by total population to obtain *GDP per capita*. This measure allows us to compare income levels across countries and to compute income growth over time. The World Bank classifies economies into four income groups: lower income (up to US$ 1,005), lower-middle income (US$ 1,006 - 3,955), upper-middle income (US$ 3,956 - 12,235), and higher income (US$ 12,236 and above) (*these are official standards for Gross National Income in 2018*).

GDP growth is measured as the increase in total value added from one year to the next. *GDP per capita growth* is measured as GDP growth divided by population growth. So, for nations to become richer it is important that growth of GDP outpaces population growth. Yet, growth in GDP per capita doesn't necessarily mean a reduction of poverty, defined as the share of people living at or below the poverty line, because this crucially depends on how national income and the growth of GDP is distributed across the population. Hence, it is possible to have *inclusive* or *pro-poor* growth, that benefits the society at large, including the poor. But there are also examples of *exclusive* growth, which only makes the rich richer.

In general, countries with high GDP per capita levels find it difficult to grow fast. Their income levels can rise especially because of a steady growth in GDP per capita over time, without too many years of negative growth. Poor nations, on the contrary, often record higher rates of GDP growth, which is called *catch-up* growth, but whether they close the gap with richer nations crucially depends on the stability and long-term sustainability of their growth path. Especially in Sub-Saharan Africa, many countries have recorded high rates of GDP growth in the past 20 years, but also years with considerable set-backs. For instance, Botswana in the 1970s and Rwanda in the 2000s had spectacular annual growth rates of 11 and 8 percent respectively, but to consolidate these gains and reduce poverty at a structural level, such episodes of growth have to be continued for many decades.

To compare GDP per capita across countries we need to express income levels in a single common currency, usually US Dollars (US$). There are two ways to do this. The first is to use exchange rates between the local currency and US$. This has the disadvantage that sharp fluctuations in exchange rates affect the international comparison of income beyond 'real' changes in comparative economic performance. Therefore, the second approach is considered to be more accurate, since it focusses on changes in domestic prices levels rather than the value of the national currency. To convert GDP into US$ economists use so-called Purchasing Power Parities (PPPs). A PPP is constructed by composing a basket of goods and services and comparing the price levels of this basket across countries. The PPPs thus obtained can be almost equal to the official exchange rate, but there are also many cases where the PPPs (relative domestic price level) are considerably lower than the official exchange rate. In this case using the exchange rate would make the country appear poorer, and would make the purchasing power of its population appear lower than it really is. Another way of understanding the difference is that PPPs allow for an estimation of what the exchange rate between two currencies would have to be, in order to perfectly reflect relative prices levels in countries.

Individual poverty levels are clearly affected by GDP per capita levels, but also depend on how income is distributed among national populations. In 2008, the World Bank set a new standard by defining the *extreme* poor as people who, on average, live on less than US$ 1.25 per day. Again, PPPs are being used to make this poverty line comparable across countries. This line changes over time as prices increase, which they tend to do in the long-run. Hence, in 2015, the World Bank updated its calculation of the cost of a subsistence consumption basket and increased the global poverty line to US$ 1.90. This poverty line is commonly used to estimate the number of people living in *extreme poverty*. Of course, this doesn't mean that people who can spend a little bit more than US$ 1.90 per day have escaped from poverty. In fact, billions of people today are living just above that poverty line, as the numbers of extreme poor are declining. This trend is also visible in Africa.

But even for those who live on US$ 1.90 the context of poverty matters a lot. Poverty is not a static condition. Just as individuals can move out of poverty, they can fall back into poverty again. Many people today who are no longer considered living in poverty have only managed to improve their incomes on the margin and they are extremely vulnerable to any change in their incomes. In an effort to address these shortcomings, the United Nations introduced a Multidimensional Poverty Index (MPI), which measures not only income, but also health, education and some other components of living standards since 2010. Another important dimension of poverty is how people perceive poverty in *relation to* the communities and societies in which they live. *Relative* poverty refers to people's living standards as measured against the average living standards of a particular society. It makes an enormous difference to be poor in a rich country, or to be poor in a poor country. To be poor in a poor country may ingrain the poor with a pervasive sense of injustice and be mentally more difficult to cope with. On the other hand, being poor in a rich country may have the positive side that opportunities to escape from poverty are larger because social mobility is higher.

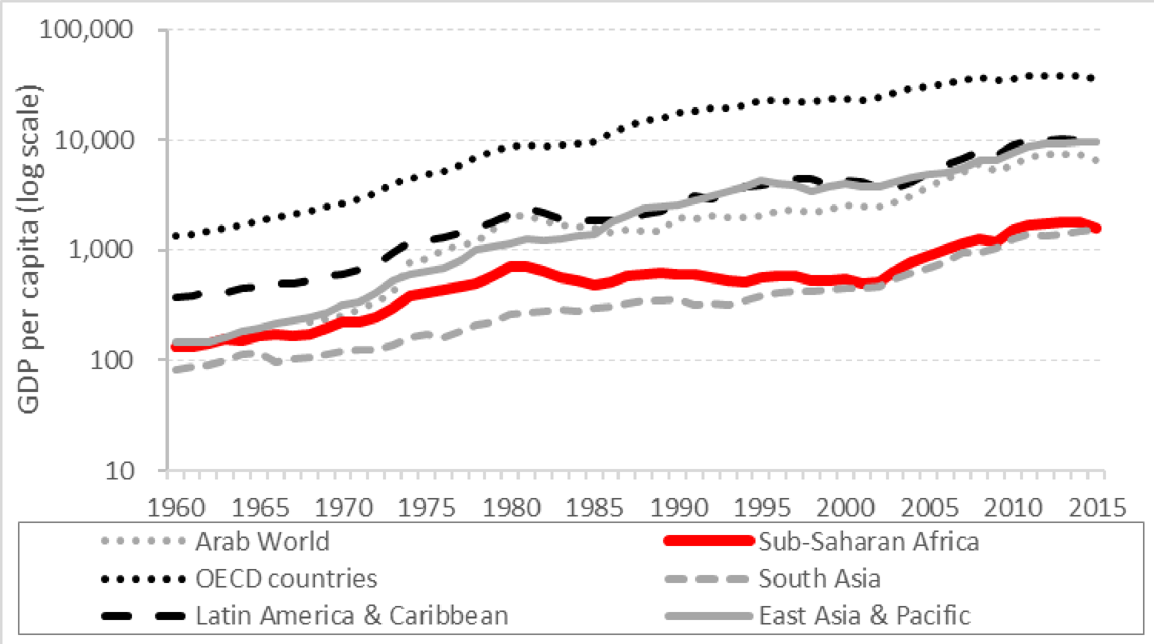
3. Poverty trends in Africa

In this section we map and compare African poverty trends using (1) GDP per capita; (2) levels and shares of populations living in poverty; and (3) rural versus urban poverty. It offers a comparison between Sub-Saharan Africa and other world regions, and a presentation of a number of country cases showing the diversity within the region.

3.1 National poverty in a global perspective

Figure 1 presents GDP per capita trends by world region. The OECD countries (Organisation for Economic Co-operation and Development), the richest countries situated in Europe and North America, have been placed on the right-hand axis – OECD (black dotted line; axis 0-US$ 40,000) and the developing regions on the left-hand axis (US$ 0-12,000). The graph shows that during the past half century, there has been a sharp divergence in GDP per capita between Sub-Saharan Africa and South Asia and other regions such as Latin America, East Asia and the OECD countries. Until 1980, GDP per capita in all regions, except the OECD countries, was below US$ 2,000. However, since the 1980s all world regions except Sub-Saharan Africa and South Asia, have surpassed the US$ 2,000 benchmark. Latin America and East and Pacific Asia have grown beyond US$ 8,000.

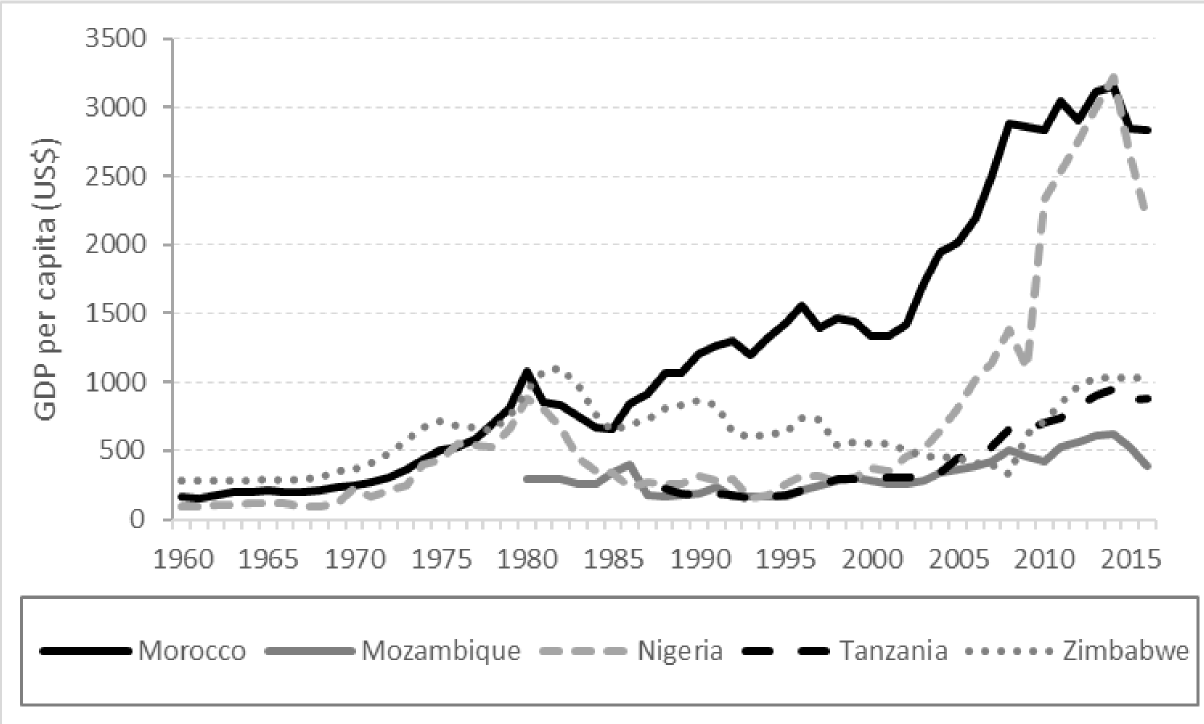
Figure 1: GDP per capita in US-Dollars (log scale) regional trends, 1960-2015



Source: World Bank, *World Development Indicators (WDI)*.

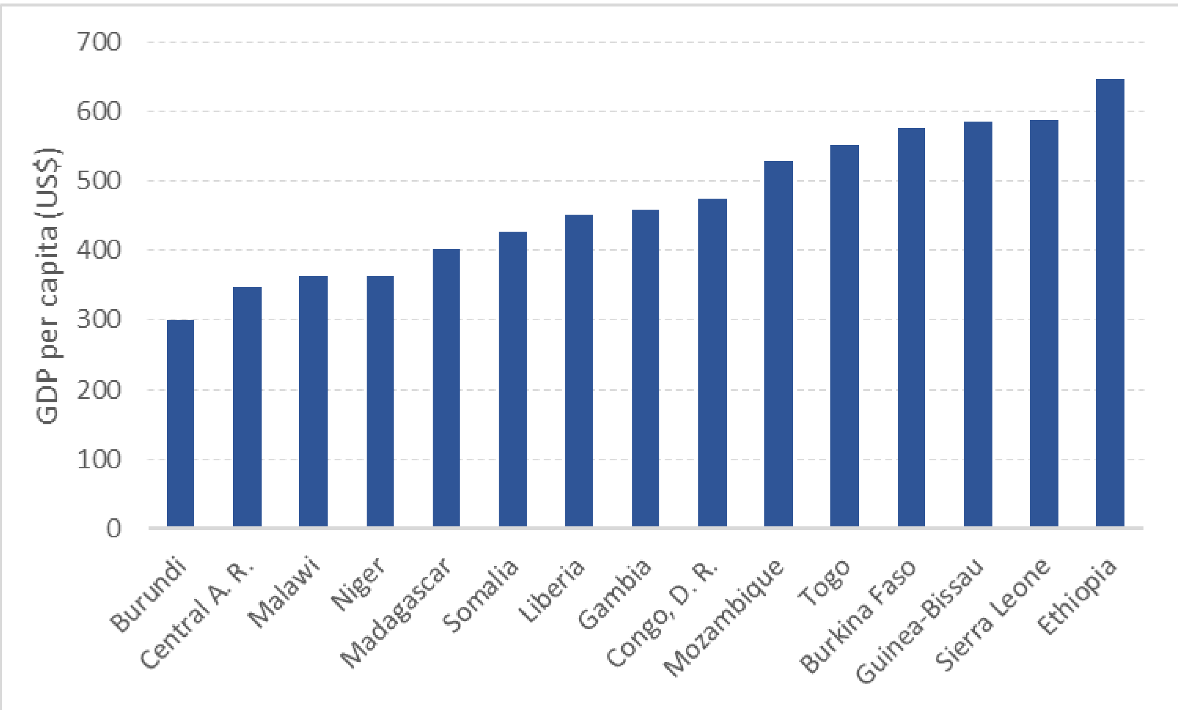
The comparison *between* regions shows how Sub-Saharan Africa has developed in a global perspective. In figure 2 we explore the variation within Sub-Saharan Africa. We selected five countries – Morocco, Mozambique, Nigeria, Tanzania and Zimbabwe – which offer a good impression of the diversity in growth trajectories. Morocco's economy took off in the mid-1980s and has since developed comparatively well. Nigeria follows – after the significant commodity boom with increasing oil prices in the early 2000s the oil-dependent economy has experienced significant growth. However, there is a large risk this growth spurt will turn into a bust if world market prices for oil continue to fall or stabilize at the low levels they have attained since 2015 - the last year in this graph. The economy of Zimbabwe grew in the 1970s and 1980s, but has experienced decline and stagnation as a result of the economic and political turmoil in the 1990s and 2000s. Zimbabwe recovered after 2008, but it is not clear to which extent the growth rates have been manipulated by the regime – as it is well known that there are reliability issues with many African income statistics. Mozambique has been entrenched in a long civil war up to the 1990s and has recovered slightly in the years of peace since 2000, but the growth of GDP has been partly erased by rapid population growth. In Tanzania population growth remained high as well, but GDP growth has been more impressive than in Mozambique, so that there was a notable divergence in per capita growth in these neighbouring countries in the past decade (2005-2015).

Figure 2: GDP per capita trends in 5 African countries, 1960-2015



Source: World Bank, *World Development Indicators* (WDI).

Figure 3: The 15 poorest African countries in 2016



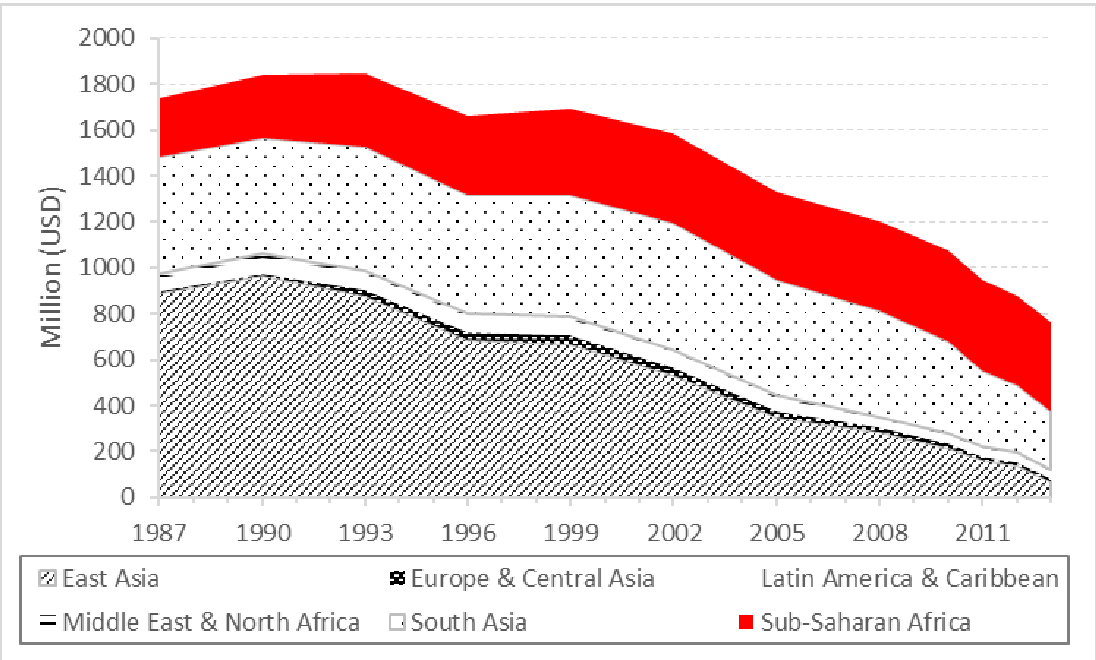
Source: World Bank, *World Development Indicators* (WDI).

While the commodity boom since the mid-1990s has led to considerable economic growth in many African countries, it has not yet been enough to reduce the number of poor countries significantly. Figure 3 shows the poorest 15 African economies in the year 2016. At the bottom we find Burundi and the Central African Republic, Malawi, and Niger with a GDP per capita lower than US$ 400.

3.2 Individual poverty in a global perspective

Figure 4 presents the total number of people living in poverty by world region. It reveals that global poverty levels have been falling at impressive rates since the early 1990s. Between 1987 and 2013, the number of extreme poor more than halved from 1.7 billion to 766 million people. By 2013, the most recent years for which reliable data exist, 11 percent of the world's population was living in poverty compared to 35 percent in 1987. During the past quarter of a century, poverty has fallen in particular in Asia and Latin America. East Asia (bottom) and South Asia (second from top) have been largely responsible for this dramatic decline. China alone is responsible for two-thirds of the overall drop in poverty between 1987 and 2013. India, Indonesia and Vietnam are also seeing poverty gradually disappear. Yet, the total number of Africans living in poverty (red top area) has increased from 250 million in 1987 to 390 in 2013. Half of the world's population living in poverty are now thought to be African.

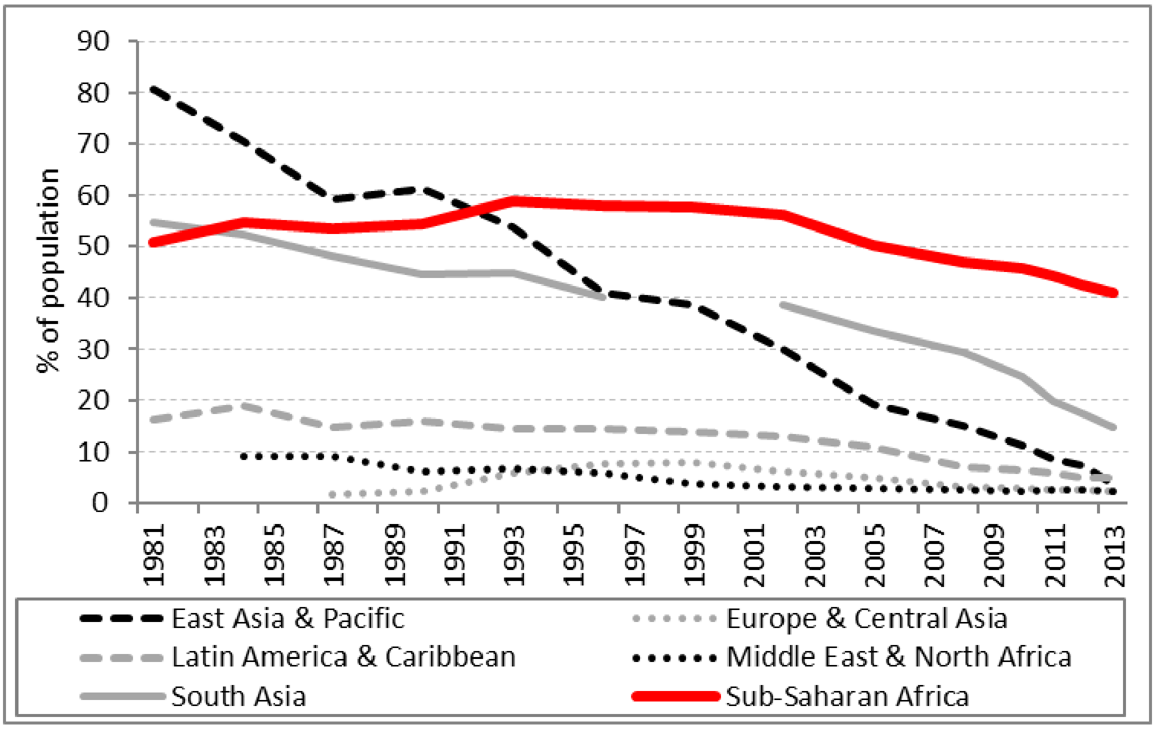
Figure 4: Total population living in poverty by world region, 1987-2013



Source: World Bank, *World Development Indicators* (WDI).

While Figure 4 displayed absolute poverty *levels*, Figure 5 compares the *percentage share* of the African population living on or less than US$ 1.90 (thick red line), i.e. the poverty rate, with other world regions. It shows that globally, the share of populations living in poverty has been in decline since the 1980s. Most impressive has been the decline in East Asia and Pacific and South Asia, but also Latin America more than halved its poverty rate. Figure 5 also shows that Africa's poverty rate has fallen from 51 percent in 1981 to 41 percent in 2013. Thus, while *absolute* poverty in Sub-Saharan Africa remains on the rise, relative poverty levels have been declining. This paradoxical situation can be explained by the fact that relative poverty rates are not declining fast enough to outweigh Africa's rapid population growth (by about 2.5 percent a year, compared with 1 percent for Asia). Hence, the number of Africans living in poverty today (2018) is higher than it was in the 1990s. No doubt, while the reduction in relative poverty can be seen as a positive trend in line with the renewed growth experience of many African economies after 1995, poverty remains a major development challenge for the region for decades to come.

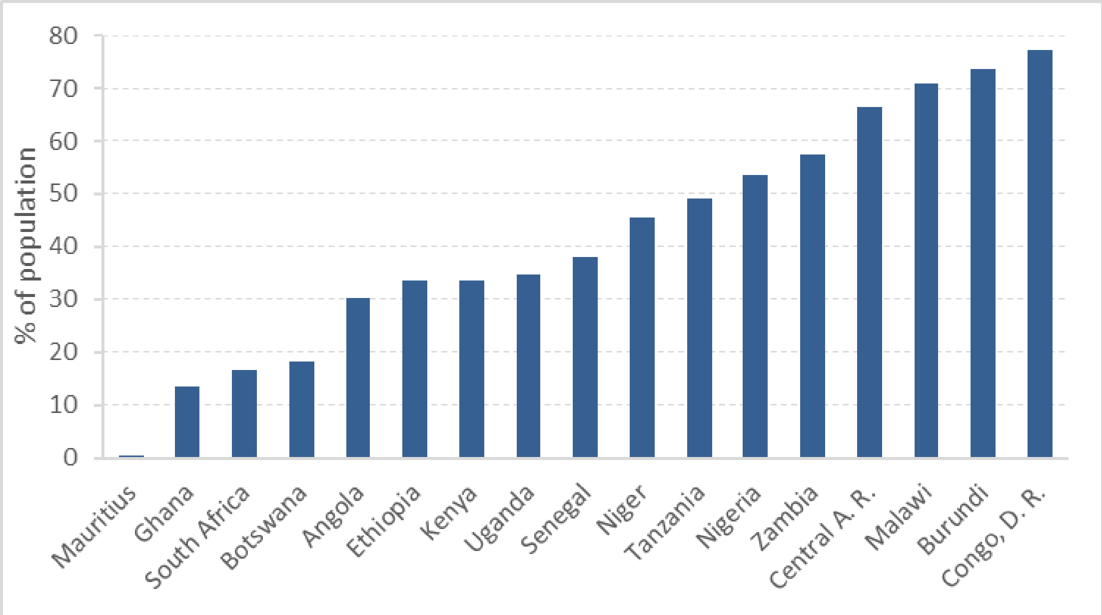
Figure 5: Regional poverty rate at US$ 1.90 a day (2011 PPP) (% of population)



Source: World Bank, *World Development Indicators (WDI)*.

Figure 6 presents poverty rates in a number of African countries in 2012. We can see that there are singular cases, i.e. Mauritius, where poverty has more or less been eradicated. In this island state, which is one of the African growth miracles, only 0.5 percent of the population lives under the poverty line. In the other growth miracle, Botswana, the share of people living in poverty is still 18 percent. The highest poverty rates are recorded in the Democratic Republic of Congo (77 percent), Burundi (74 percent), Central African Republic (66 percent), Zambia (58 percent) and Nigeria (54 percent).

Figure 6: Poverty headcount ratio at US$ 1.90 a day (2011 PPP), % of population, 2012



Source: World Bank, *World Development Indicators (WDI)*.

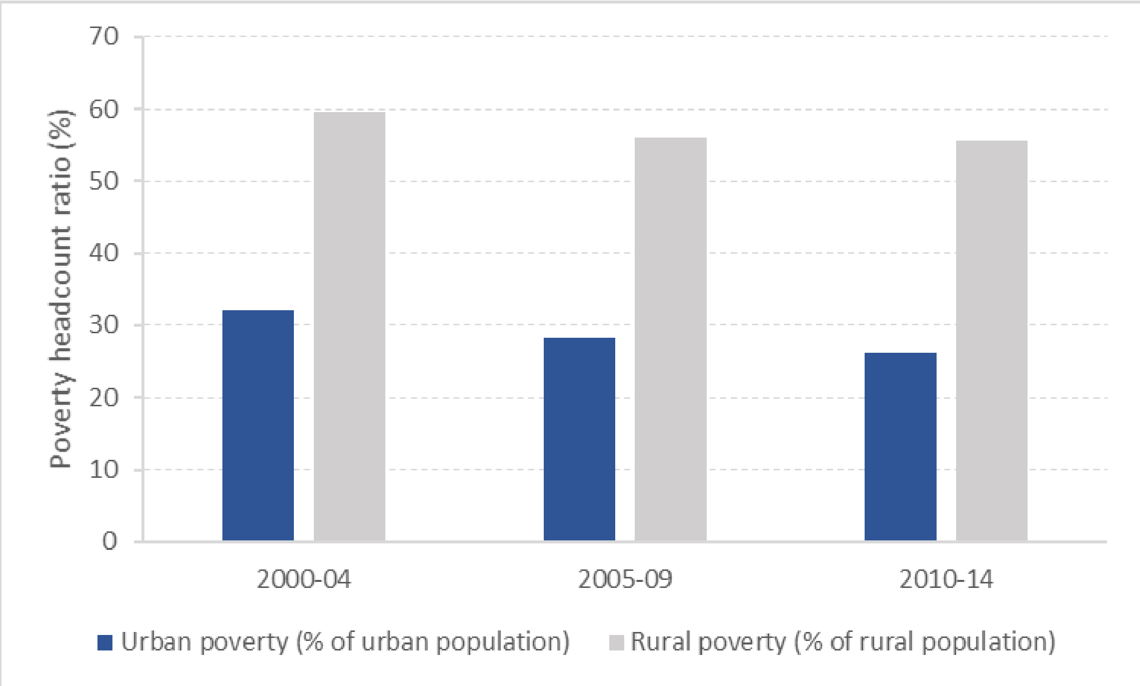
Why are so many Africans still stuck in poverty today? The reasons for the continued high rates of Africans living in poverty are various and complex, and also range from deeply historical (ultimate) causes to more proximate causes. But let us highlight three important factors. First, poverty is related to the region's high population growth of 2.6 percent a year. While African economies are generating more income, that income has to be shared among an ever-growing number of people. The second factor is related to the depth of Africa's poverty compared to poverty elsewhere. Even if the continent's income is growing, it is often not enough to push people over the US$ 1.90 threshold. Thirdly, it is related to unusually high levels of income inequality or uneven income distribution among a population causing a wealth gap between the rich and people living in poverty. Where initial inequality is high, economic growth delivers less poverty reduction and the proceeds primarily go to the already well off.

3.3 Poverty in rural and urban Africa

So far, we have discussed national averages, but *within* countries there are different groups of people living in poverty and their challenges for getting out of poverty vary. The most important divide is between the urban and the rural poor. These two groups depend on and relate to each other in many ways, but urban poverty manifests itself in quite different forms than rural poverty.

Figure 7 presents the average percentage share of rural and urban populations that live in poverty. It shows that, although both African rural and urban poverty has been declining during the 21st century, rural poverty remains twice as high as urban poverty.

Figure 7: Rural and urban poverty headcount ratio (%), Sub-Sahara Africa



Notes: Data not available for each country in Sub-Saharan Africa. Includes closest year within year ranges.
Source: World Bank, *World Development Indicators (WDI).*

However, poverty is not predominantly a rural phenomenon anymore. Research shows that soon, urban areas could increasingly become the new home of the majority of impoverished people. Urbanization is one of the most significant trends in 21st century Sub-Saharan Africa, with rural populations, in particular young men and women, migrating at unprecedented rates to urban areas in search of employment and economic growth. Africa is the world’s fastest urbanizing continent. In 2016, about 38 percent of Africans resided in towns and cities, compared to 15 percent in 1960. Rural-urban migration is not only a coping mechanism to escape poverty, it represents a perceived opportunity particularly for young people to improve their status, learn new skills, and send money back to their rural families. However, the reality for rural migrants in cities is often a different one. Urban areas are becoming extremely overcrowded and overburdened, putting pressure on insufficient infrastructures, schools, health facilities, sanitation and water systems. This escalating urbanization has created a new context of poverty in which urban centers are unprepared to absorb increasing youth unemployment. According to a 2007 study, Africa appears to be the only region amongst developing regions where urbanization is not correlated with poverty reduction.

The consequence of fast-growing urban centers without sufficient economic growth includes, among others, the mushrooming of slums (also referred to as townships or squatter settlements), expansion of informal activities, pressure on infrastructure and the social problems that accompany unemployment in an urban setting. The large slums of Africa’s mega-cities are perhaps the best indicator that urbanization has not improved the living standards of all urban dwellers. In 2010, the United Nations recorded that 62 percent of Africa’s urban population lives in slums, which is the highest rate in the world. Rapid growth of slums has some serious repercussions for the security of those areas, as poverty, criminal, violence, drug abuse, prostitution and HIV infection rates appear to be more prevalent in urban slums. Failing to prepare for these, or to address them adequately, could see Africa fall into the trap of replacing rural poverty with urban poverty.

4. Responses to poverty in Africa

There have been various responses and strategies by African peoples and the international community aimed at eradicating African poverty.

4.1 African responses to poverty

Most people living in poverty seek to help themselves and each other. The African poor are not just victims of poverty, they also show a great capacity to anticipate and find solutions to their everyday problems. Money management is for the poor a fundamental and well-understood part of everyday life. It is a key factor in determining the level of success that poor households enjoy in improving their own lives. Most poor households do not live hand to mouth but employ a variety of informal financial tools. For example, people organize themselves in informal self-help associations such as rotating saving schemes (popularly known in some parts of Africa as ‘Round’ or ‘Stokvel’ and money clubs) as well as informal savings clubs, savings with a money guard and burial insurance societies. Poor entrepreneurs also overcome their lack of access to formal banking by becoming customers of microfinance institutions. In addition, Africa leads the world in mobile money and technological innovations have made it possible to extend financial services to millions of poor people at relatively low cost. For example, Safaricom’s M-Pesa ("pesa" means "money" in Swahili) pioneered mobile phone banking in Kenya in 2007 and since has made a dramatic impact. Seven in 10 adults in Kenya use M-Pesa, making 9 million transactions daily in 2016, which provide the livelihoods of 130,000 agents. Across Africa, similar schemes operate that offer a range of services including transfers, savings, loans, and health provision that boost financial inclusion and create greater financial stability for African families. Also, African farmers increasingly seek membership in agricultural cooperatives to gain access to capital to invest and commodity markets to sell their produce at reasonable prices. They also, exhibit awareness and cope with risks of climate change with increasingly unpredictable rainfall and rising droughts by growing short season crop varieties (e.g. smaller grains) from improved seed varieties that are drought resistant to minimize the risk of famine.

These examples demonstrate that poor households in Africa lead rich and complex financial lives. They often find innovative solutions to their everyday financial problems (e.g. paying school fees, affording health care, contributing to social ceremonies) by employing a variety of strategies.

4.2. Global responses to African poverty

The reduction of extreme poverty and hunger was the first so-called Millennium Development Goal, as set by 189 United Nations Member States in 2000. Specifically, it set a target of reducing the poverty rate in half by 2015, a goal that was met in 2010. Now the United Nations have set a new ambitious target to end extreme poverty by 2030. There are many international and African NGOs and development charities that contribute to efforts for global poverty reduction but the lion’s share comes as official development assistance or ODA.

ODA is financial aid given by governments and other agencies to support the economic, environmental, social, and political development of developing countries. It is distinguished from humanitarian aid by focusing on alleviating poverty in the long term, rather than a short-term relief after natural disasters, wars and famines. Such aid may be bilateral: given from one country directly to another; or it may be multilateral: given by the donor country to an international organization such as the World Bank or the United Nations Agencies (e.g. UNDP, UNICEF, UNAIDS). The proportion is currently about 70% bilateral 30% multilateral. African countries received about one third (34%) of total ODA, which is the largest regional share. Table 1 lists the top African recipient countries and its international donors in 2015. Over the past two decades, China has also become an important donor, although the bulk of Chinese spending does not classify as ODA as it is primarily intended for commercial and infrastructure projects.

Table 1: African ODA recipients and international donors, 2015

Top 10 ODA recipients	**billion (US$)**	**Top 10 ODA donors**	**billion (US$)**
Ethiopia	3.23	USA	9.32
Congo, D. R.	2.60	European Union	6.25
Tanzania	2.58	IDA	5.18
Egypt	2.49	UK	4.20
Kenya	2.47	Germany	3.04
Nigeria	2.43	United Arab Emirates	2.84
Mozambique	1.82	France	2.29
Ghana	1.77	Global Fund	2.21
South Sudan	1.68	African Dev. Bank	2.18
Uganda	1.63	Japan	1.76
Other African recipients	28.34	Other donors	11.77
Total	**51.04**	**Total**	**51.04**

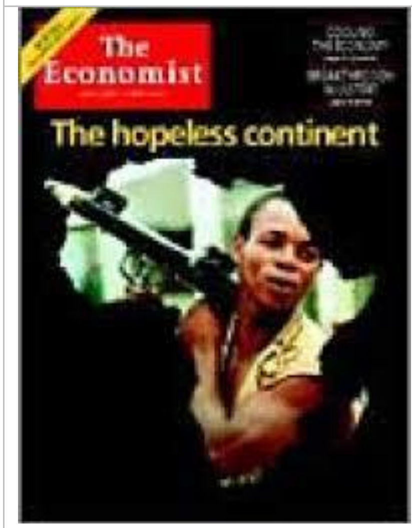
Source: OECD (2018), *International Development Statistics (IDS) online database*.

5. Outlook: Can Africa Grow out of Poverty?

The debate on whether Africa will grow out of poverty or not involves a discussion of the opportunities available to the continent for poverty reduction on the one hand, and its challenges to achieve this, on the other hand. Sub-Saharan Africa's recent economic boom has raised hopes and expectations to lift the region out of poverty by 2030. Also, African poverty reduction over the past two decades nourishes hopes that further declines can be achieved in the near future. Substantial African economic growth over the past two decades has revealed Africa's economic potential. Consequently, perceptions of a perennially poor Africa are changing as parts of the continent have witnessed positive changes in political democratic systems, less armed conflicts, increased macroeconomic stability and consistent growth in agriculture and industry. This has also been acknowledged by one of the leading international newspapers, *The Economist*, that wrote off Africa as "the hopeless continent" in 2000, only to correct itself recently in 2011 and 2013, describing African growth potential as "rising" and "aspiring" respectively.

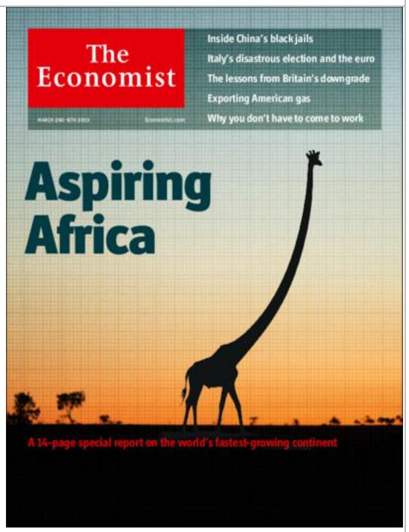
Figure 8: *The Economist* newspaper cover in 2000, 2011 and 2013

2000



2011

2013



Source: *The Economist*, various issues.

The growing global demand for various agro-commodities, mining and forestry products is stimulating traditional and non-traditional markets for Africa's exports, resulting in a rise of economic growth rates in some cases. In the majority of African states peaceful transitions of power and enhanced levels of stability and good governance seem to be the hallmark of economic success and poverty reduction for the future.

However, while the case for Africa as a continent of opportunity is supported by numerous positive indices and trends, the prevailing image still is of a continent trapped in a cycle of national and individual poverty, widespread corruption and weak checks and balances on abuse of power by African governments. And this picture is aggravated by a number of developments that may jeopardize poverty reduction in the coming decades. Let us mention three of these concerns. First, it remains very insecure what the effects of climate change will be on agricultural production in large parts of the region. Some regions may become wetter, others dryer and hotter. In any case, it means that farmers, a lot of whom live under the poverty line, will have to adapt to changing weather conditions, while they may lack the (financial) means to do so.

Second, is the intimate link between natural-resource abundance, economic growth and (rising) income and asset inequality in African countries. To what extent will the benefits of on-going resource exploitation be distributed more evenly in the future? Will the mining, plantation and forestry sectors generate sufficient jobs to provide a descent income to expanding new generations of job-seekers? It remains unclear to what extent African economies can diversify into a wider range of internationally competitive manufacturing and service industries in order to reduce their dependence on primary commodities and natural resource revenues.

Third, and this turns back in many poverty-related issues, what will be the long-term effect of demographic growth and urbanization? Will the exceptional pace and scale of population growth accelerate ecological degradation, raise youth unemployment, intensify resource conflicts and provoke mass emigration? Or will growing concentrations of urban consumers and better connected rural hinterlands open-up new opportunities for market development, infrastructural investment and new divisions of labour? In the latter scenario Africa’s population boom may enhance the development of internationally competitive manufacturing and service industries as an alternative to the region’s long dependence on primary commodity exports. Yet, as we have seen above, at the moment demographic growth pushes up the number of African poor. But perhaps it is generating conditions for a sustained reduction in poverty at the same time?

Study questions

1. Define poverty and explain the main methods of measuring it.
2. How does Africa fare in an international comparison of poverty at the national level, i.e. GDP per capita?
3. Which trends can we see when comparing changes in different African countries' GDP per capita levels?
4. What has happened to the reduction of the total number and share of people living in poverty in Africa over the last couple of decades?
5. What strategies are employed by Africans, organisations and governments to reduce poverty levels?

Suggested readings

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