

Andrew Garber

World Geography 2

Jan 26 2023

Africa South of the Sahara

Africa has the greatest potential for economic, political, and social growth in this century. With a gigantic, young population, a still largely untapped wealth of natural resources, and investments in capital and technology from East and West, Africa is poised to become a major player in the global economy. Despite this, no one can avoid skepticism that without a major change in the way African governments operate, the continent will continue to be plagued by poverty, disease, and violence. None of this is meant to imply that Africa is a monolithic entity, and this point is exemplified by the extreme nature of all of these points in the Central and Southern regions of the continent. The North, East, and Northwest regions of Africa are very different from the rest of the continent, but Central and Southern Africa are comparatively similar: huge potential, but struggling to realize it.

While the Sahara might seem an arbitrary line to draw, it has (and still is) a nearly impenetrable barrier to trade and communication. Huge differences in culture in comparatively small regions North and South of the Sahara are directly traceable to the fact that crossing it is supremely difficult. Compared to the comparatively stable Northern Africa nations (with the notable exception of Libya), the nations of Central and Southern Africa are plagued by corruption, violence, and poverty. While the Democratic Republic of the Congo is the most egregious example of this, it has become the punching bag of the "African Failures" discourse, and not without good reason - it is the second largest country in Africa, and has been plagued by violence and corruption since its independence from Belgium in 1960. The DRC is a prime example of the "resource curse" - the idea that countries with large amounts of natural resources tend to have less economic growth, less democracy, and worse development outcomes than countries with fewer natural resources. The DRC has unimaginable quantities of diamonds, gold, oil and other valuable resources and yet remains one of the poorest nations on Earth. While a large part of this is directly traceable to the lingering effects of being the Belgian Congo, it doesn't excuse the government's failures to maintain even a semblance of stability.

While any nation in Southern or Western Africa could be chosen for a case study of institutional failure and corruption, to follow up on the DRC, the oldest nation in Africa should be examined: Ethiopia. Despite avoiding colonization (with the exception of the brief Italian occupation in the late 1930s under Mussolini, who really had to work for it), they have also near-totally failed to develop a significant industrial sector and still fall victim to plague, famine, and violence. While the Ethiopian government has been working to improve the situation, it is still a long way from being a stable, developed nation. Ethiopia is not without resources, if not as rich as the DRC, and has a large population - why has it failed to develop? The answer is a combination of factors, but the most important is the lack of a strong central government. Ethiopia has been plagued by civil war and violence since its inception post-WWII, and the government has never been able to establish a strong central authority. This has led to a lack of infrastructure, a lack of education, and a lack of economic development. Flirtation with communism also did not help, but even still it is difficult to see a clear path to development for Ethiopia without significant government reform and perhaps outside help from the international community.

In conclusion, Africa has enormous untapped potential - it just has to realize it. The nations of Central and Southern Africa have a long way to go, but with the right leadership and the right reforms, they can become major players in the global economy. They have young, growing populations, and a wealth of natural resources. They just need to get their act together, and with some help from the international community we can lift a whole continent out of poverty and into prosperity, enriching our world in the process.