

Africa Rising by the numbers

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Oh dear... please save us from the "Africa is Rising" narrative which is being continually and habitually foisted on this continent by the international media. The most recent round of debate on Africa's rise, or whether in fact it is rising, was started by Time Magazine. "Africa is the world's next powerhouse," declared Alex Perry in his cover story for the December 12 2012 issue of the US news journal. Predictably the statement was suffixed with the warning: "But huge challenges lie ahead."

This is not Newsweek's first story on "Africa Rising". Just over ten years ago, in the June 2001 of the weekly magazine published in New York City and online, Time Magazine reported another story under the same headline. This article began rather dramatically: "Hope is Africa's rarest commodity. Yet buried though it is amid the despair that haunts the continent, there is more optimism today than in decades."

But Time Magazine isn't the only Afro-pessimists to commit this sin. Who can forget The Economist's story about how Africa's star was rising. Under the headline: "The sun shines bright", the financial journal waxed lyrical about Africa's hopeful economies. This story was also a cover feature and had an illustration of a young boy flying a kite that was shaped like the continent of Africa.

Like Time Magazine, ten years earlier The Economist had also thrown this continent in the trash bin by calling Africa "the hopeless continent" in a cover story by the business magazine. That particular feature was doom and gloom, and positioned Africa as a singular continent of disease, famine and war.

"Since The Economist regrettably labelled Africa 'the hopeless continent' a decade ago, a profound change has taken hold," reported the more recent article which was published in 2011. The article went on to highlight continental tycoons like Nigeria's cement mogul, Aliko Dangote who had overtaken Oprah Winfrey, it said, as the "richest black" in some or other rich list. The cover story also featured the fast growing African economies of Ghana, Mozambique and Ethiopia.

International politics and global affairs magazine, Foreign Policy, quickly jumped into the fray after the more recent Time Magazine article speculating on the continent's good fortunes. Oh no, Foreign Policy speculated, in an article entitled "The Myth of Africa's Rise", the continent's growth was being greatly exaggerated the journal said in a feature this January.

Scarcely a couple of weeks later at the end of January, FP would publish yet another piece on Africa called: "We Have No Idea if Africa Is Rising". This time the economic historian, Morten Jerven, would write in the political magazine: "It's been fascinating to watch FP's recent debate on economic growth in Africa. Some commentators argue that African economies are destined to remain trapped in the bottom billion unless some sort of fundamental change occurs," writes the author of Poor Numbers: How We Are Misled by African Development Statistics and What to Do about It.

"Others beg to differ, speaking of a continent that's showing every indication of rapid progress. Yet, despite their wildly different interpretations, what's striking is that both camps base their arguments on the same set of numbers." What Jerven tells readers is that those numbers are debatable.

"In November 2010, the statistics office of the government in Ghana announced that it was revising its GDP estimates upwards by over 60 per cent, suggesting that previous estimates had left out economic activities worth about \$13 billion. After the revision a range of new activities were accounted for, and as a result Ghana was suddenly upgraded from a low-income country to a (lower) middle-income country," Jervis writes, explaining that a similar move was made in Nigeria.

The Time, Economist and Foreign Policy features on Africa point to two key issues that governments and economies on the

continent need to face. The first is that Africa needs to tell its own growth story, and to do a good job of it. Certainly it needs to do a better job than the international media are currently doing.

Secondly Africa needs to produce credible, empirical and transparent data about its economies. As a research company that operates in South Africa and Nigeria (and which has associate businesses in Ghana, Uganda, Tanzania, Angola, Namibia, Botswana, Zimbabwe, Ethiopia, Kenya, Seychelles, Zambia, Madagascar, Mauritius and Mozambique), Ornico is well apprised of the challenges.

In part Ornico's growth has been hampered because of the lack of uniformity in media and advertising data from country to country, and part of our vision for growing with the continent is to ensure the availability of reliable, robust and uniform data.

When it comes to investing in new regions, or launching brands in new territories, trusted data is everything to international investors, and so it should be. As this continent turns to reject aid, and to create growth through trade, empirical data is what will track our growth and show the world how we're doing.

Africa is rising, but let's ensure that the data and numbers we use to tell this story, our own story, are impeccable.

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