

Why is Africa Still Poor? The Historical and Social Factors Behind Africa's Struggle with Economic Stability

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ABSTRACT

Africa's economic performance compared to the rest of the globe is poor. The continent struggles with economic instability, facing challenges like low gross domestic products (GDP) and limited industrial growth. Additionally, the civil wars and conflicts that displace millions in Africa exacerbate poverty and war-torn regions find it nearly impossible to create a stable environment for economic development. Many African countries struggle to offer basic education resources, limiting the youth's access to skills required to secure jobs offering high wages. As a result, future generations are stripped of opportunities for advancement, continuing the cycle of generational poverty. In addition, corruption and unstable governments prohibit resources from contributing to development projects. Lastly, Africa is the continent with the highest poverty rates, lowest adult literacy rates, lowest Corruption Perception Index score, and is the most conflict-prone continent. This paper argues that Africa's struggles with economic development stem from the destruction of institutions caused by the transatlantic slave trade, which fostered a survivalist mindset and corruption still present today. However, by understanding these root causes, African countries can break the cycle through institutional reform and a cultural shift towards collective progress.

Keywords: survivalist mindset; Corruption Perception Index; weak institutions; poverty; economic development; "big man" politics; GDP (Gross Domestic Product); HDI (Human Development Index)

INTRODUCTION

Economic instability in Africa is an increasingly alarming problem. Africa is the poorest continent on earth, hosting over 30 of the world's low-income countries (which is over 2 times the amount compared to the rest of the world). Sub-Saharan Africa accounts for 16 percent of the world's population, but nearly 70

percent of the people living in extreme poverty, a figure that rises to three-quarters when including all fragile and conflict-ridden countries (1). Additionally, the continent has the highest debt vulnerability (2), the lowest share of global manufacturing output, GDP per capita, HDI, and intra-continental trade rates. It also has the lowest banking penetration and surprisingly, the lowest labor productivity in the world. These devastating economic issues lead to terrible consequences including high infant mortality rates, political unrest, and lack of opportunities that further fuel this cycle of poverty.

One commonly used explanation for Africa's underdevelopment is its history of extraction, more specifically, colonialism (3). The colonization of many

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African nations by imperialist European powers deeply affected the continent's ability to flourish economically. However, countries like Singapore (formerly a part of Malaysia when it was colonized) have also been colonized around the same time as many African countries, and yet the nation has managed to flip the narrative and thrive economically, even finding effective solutions to eradicate pollution in the big city that many other poor and previously colonized nations struggle with. Although it does affect development, this shows that colonial history alone cannot be used to pinpoint long term development trajectories.

This paper traces the roots of Africa's struggles with poverty, diving into what events triggered the start of Africa's economic decline. This paper focuses on historical events that correlate to the reasons why Africa is performing so poorly economically. This report argues the slave trade began a chain reaction that formed new weak institutions born because of corruption, corrupting society into forming a survivalist mindset, that only weakened institutions further and therefore made the continent unable to develop economically.

THE SLAVE TRADE AND WEAK INSTITUTIONS FORMED AS A RESULT

The transatlantic slave trade was the starting point of Africa's institutional weakness. Recent empirical studies find that Africa's history might correlate to its more recent underdevelopment. Prior studies emphasize the link between colonial history and economic outcomes (4). Millions of the strongest and most capable people were taken from the continent, stripping it from crucial human capital it would need to build strong civilizations. This mass removal of human capital stripped societies and left them vulnerable. Studies show that there is a correlation between the amount of people taken from the continent and the struggles with economic instability they face today. Nathan Nunn's research identified a strong inverse relationship between the number of people enslaved from a country and its later economic development. (3). Slave export data, specifically the variable capturing jurisdictional hierarchy within the local community, shows areas with higher historical slave export intensity did have more divided political systems in villages at the time they were recorded by Murdock (around 1900 to 1960) (5).

Multiple studies found that areas with higher slave export intensity also had higher levels of political societal divisions after the slave trade ended. The slave trade

created opportunities for a source of income for anyone who could get people to raid other towns and villages or manage kidnappings, creating significant political issues, which even divided political units (5). Regions who had the highest slave exports (Angola, Nigeria, Benin, etc.) continue to face major economic problems today. Frequent raids and forced migrations ruined farmland, prevented trade, and reduced populations to a fraction of their potential size. Studies today show how these regions' GDP per capita, weaker infrastructure, and slower development rates (6). The devastation of these demographics caused there to be less workers to cultivate or trade local goods, while the unsafe atmosphere discouraged long-term planning for their respective economies. As a result, the areas that suffered the most from slavery were trapped in cycles of poverty and hindered economic growth, which is still visible in economic data today.

For example, the Dahomey Kingdom's participation in the slave trade forced its economy to be centralized on human exportation (7). This dependence entrenched government systems rooted in coercion and resource extraction (8). This legacy of exploitative institutions persists in modern administrative frameworks, influencing corruption and rent seeking behavior across parts of Africa.

The transatlantic slave trade caused immense demographic, social, and cultural destruction throughout Africa. It is estimated that in excess of 12 million Africans were transported by force to the American continent (including South America), while millions more died in conflicts or during the transportation process (9). It is also important to note that during the 18th century, this would have been a way bigger chunk of the African population, considering how populations are higher today. The huge loss of population prevented a lot of agricultural and industrial progress locally. Communities were broken, which eroded systems that worked as the glue to hold African societies together. The introduction of firearms by the trade increased intense warfare between ethnic groups, creating an ongoing cycle of violence, hatred, and insecurity. The suffering and loss of population caused by the trade set Africa's social and economic development back centuries. In sum, the slave trade initiated a cycle of institutional decay: traditional governance structures were destabilized (10), trust within communities eroded, and societies were primed for weak, corrupt institutions. This legacy helps explain why many modern governments struggle with cohesion, legitimacy, and public trust.

THE SURVIVALIST MINDSET

The prevalence of institutional betrayals destroyed social bonds and trust within communities. This erosion of trust tore apart the social fabric of African communities. Instead of communities collaborating to build their villages, schools and economies, individuals were indoctrinated to pursue their own desires and survival. The long-term cost was that cooperation; an essential ingredient for development, was replaced by individual self preservation and betrayal.

Previous studies examine whether people belonging to ethnic groups majorly targeted in the past tend to trust others less today (11). Nathan Nunn and Leonard Wantchekon's study on the origins of mistrust in Africa, also shows why the survivalist mindset emerged as a rational response to historical threats and why its legacy persists today. Data from the Afrobarometer survey evaluates respondents from different places on the effects of the slave trade on the amount of trust respondents from different places had in their relatives, communities, and government institutions. Individuals belonging to ethnic groups exposed to the slave trade were proven to show lower levels of trust in their communities and government (11). This correlates with the fact that towards the end of the slave trade, it was normal for neighbors, friends, and family members to sell individuals into slavery. More slaves were also supplied by the areas that showed lower levels of trust. These lower levels of trust are still observable in modern times (11). The slave trade most likely affected the cultural norms of the ethnic groups exposed to it and the institutions in those given areas. Studies suggest that the slave trade affected trust in African societies by altering internal beliefs and external institutions (e.g. local governments), although internal channels rare estimated to account for close to 75% of the trust problems in Africa due to the slave trade (11).

To understand the two potential ways of how the slave trade may affect trust in Africa, having some historical background will provide evidence of how individuals' lack of trust stems from their behavior towards politically inflicted violence, as well as their political and civic stances, engagement, and participation (11). Those first sold into slavery were originally prisoners of war. Raids were usually villages raiding other villages, which turned village relationships hostile. This external insecurity caused insecurity within villages as well (11). As mentioned before, people betrayed each other in their own communities. As a result, individuals needed weapons to protect themselves, which they got from

slave merchants or Europeans directly. The problem is to acquire weapons, there would need to be an exchange: a slave was required to be exchanged for European arms (11). These slaves that are sold for weapons are usually acquired through kidnappings or other forms of violence. These conflicts were encouraged by slave merchants and raiders who formed alliances with groups inside villages to obtain slaves (11). The most common method of enslavement was kidnapping, followed by slaves taken in war, being sold by someone you know, and finally through the judicial process (11). These patterns of betrayal cultivated a survivalist mindset that prioritized immediate self interest over communal welfare.

Similarly, because chiefs were often slave traders, which helps explain the mistrust towards political leaders that persists today. Cultural sayings like "Me elo na sa we du"(Fon for "This person will sell you and enjoy it"), "Ki meun na la diaye, lekke sa ndiegue" (Wolof phrase with a similar meaning), and "Bí a bá ta ará ilé eni lópo, a kí írí i rà lówòṅ-òṅ m̀" (Yoruba for "If one sells a member of one's household cheap, one will not be able to buy him back at a great value"), are common phrases used to link betrayal being linked to selling people into slavery, and warn people about gossip and deceitful people (11). Reflect this embedded cultural mistrust.

The survivalist mentality only prioritizes immediate results, creating solutions that are unsustainable. Neighbors, friends and family members turned on one another for personal gain, leading to a breakdown of societal trust and cooperation. Due to these regular occurrences, people are only likely to trust political institutions to the extent that they believe the functions and procedures of institutions are fair and reasonable (12). Seeing how the corrupt were benefiting from the unjust system, to ensure their survival, people often sold-out neighbors and helped slave traders (sometimes even joining them as a whole). People tended to prioritize what could enhance their survival, which only gave individuals short term benefits, hindering the development of society.

WEAK INSTITUTIONS AND THE BIRTH OF "BIG MAN" POLITICS

Weak governments and institutions of Africa today can be linked to the historical factors like slavery and the resulting survivalist mindset, contributing to the development of "big man" politics (13). The phrase weak institutions often refer to corrupt or incompetent governments, officials, or systems (e.g. healthcare, education, ...) that prohibit a society from progressing.

These weak institutions could also be formed because of a system called “big man” politics. The term “big man” politics refers to the practice in which leaders deem themselves above the law, and use their power for personal enrichment, while giving favors to those within their network that are loyal to them (14). For instance, many former African leaders have been exposed for embezzlement and bribing their way into getting their way in politics.

During the colonial period, these power dynamics often facilitated European control, as local leaders willing to cooperate with colonial authorities were empowered, while those resisting were undermined or removed, effectively enabling colonial exploitation. In the post-independence era, the same patterns persist, with corrupt or self-serving leaders creating conditions that make African nations vulnerable to neocolonial influence, such as unfair trade deals, foreign investment dependency, or exploitation of natural resources. By concentrating power and wealth within elite networks, “big man” politics undermines collective progress and weakens institutions, reinforcing external actors’ ability to exert influence and perpetuating cycles of economic dependency. This normalizes national resources to serve individuals rather than the general population.

To measure how corrupt countries are perceived to be, a score/rank is created every year by Transparency International to fight corruption worldwide. This is called the Corruption Perceptions Index (CPI). In 2024, Sub-Saharan Africa had the lowest average score on the CPI, with 33/100, with 90 percent of countries getting a score below 50 (14). This could easily be the case because “big man” politicians redistribute public services to members of their network rather than distributing public goods to benefit all, as well as those outside of their community (15). “Big man” politics is very present in Africa, considering the fact that many Africans are infuriated at their governments because of leaders that embezzle.

Bad governance and policy has ruined people’s hope in Africa’s future. Only 41% of citizens in the region are content with how democracy functions in their country (16). This is mainly because excludes the working class, prioritizing those with money, power, and connections. It is also important to note those living in high poverty are over 15 percentage points more likely to claim that a majority of politicians are involved in corruption, which differs from the richest respondents (16). “Disappearing” funds also diverts public funds from crucial services and development projects. About \$88.6 billion of illicit capital is moved out of Africa every year, which is

about the same amount as 3.7% of Africa’s GDP (17). Movement of money across borders which are illegal in any way is called illicit financial flow (IFF). African governments that have high IFFs spend 25% less than other world governments with low IFFs on health, and even less on education (58% less) (17). This mostly affects women considering health and education are usually less accessible to them. Slow approval of development projects also reflects African governments’ inefficiency. Delayed projects are costly and time consuming (18). This discourages local and foreign investments (19). Investors hesitate to start projects that can be stalled due to corruption. These delays postpone job creation and tax revenue (19). Growth continues to be stifled due to length approval processes.

Corrupt governance can reduce resources that would fund education, healthcare, or infrastructures, preventing development (20). Through rigged elections, mismanagement of resources, and the negligence of human rights, African leaders have ignited conflicts, chaos, and violence. All of these factors hinder long term development, causing the continent to now struggle with food insecurity, debt, and destroyed communities (20). African leaders’ inability to let go of the survivalist mindset has destroyed the continent’s institutions.

THE AFRICAN BRAIN DRAIN

Globalization has facilitated people’s migration around the world, making African nations’ lack of opportunities and weak institutions fuel migration, reinforcing underdevelopment(21). A brain drain occurs when a large number of skilled and intelligent people leave their home country (21). This cycle reinforces itself, holding nations hostage to poverty while fueling development overseas.

There are many reasons for this; skilled professionals leave for safer conditions, higher quality education, and stronger institutions (21). In particular, people struggle to find jobs that pay well, and African healthcare systems are severely underfunded (21). Consider this simple example; imagine a scenario where a talented young doctor in Chad completes medical school but is offered about \$250 a month as a starting salary. He moves to the US, where he makes over 10 times more and has access to better resources to perform tasks more efficiently. Back in his home country, the hospital he once worked at is understaffed and patients wait weeks for care. Stories like this are examples why many Africans leave the continent. Their country cannot provide them with

a stable future, hence why countries with higher wages and better resources gain these skilled young workers that fuel their economy.

African governments have tried to reverse the brain drain's effects by applying policies like increasing healthcare professional's wages and forming "diaspora bonds" that motivate citizens abroad to invest in their home countries'(22). Unfortunately, most attempts have been unsuccessful because corrupt institutions continue to drive the skills away (22). This wave of emigration is damaging African economies in numerous ways. Africa's huge loss of talented individuals has stifled innovation and has resulted in a loss of expertise, both crucial to build a strong functioning society. To start, Africa invests heavily into training a skilled workforce, just to see those trained individuals walk out the door. A study done by Canadian scientists, led by Edward Mills, found that since 2010, African countries like Zimbabwe, Ethiopia, Uganda, Malawi, Tanzania, and even South Africa have spent about \$2 billion dollars training medical staff that ended up migrating (23). Host countries on the other hand profit from using these individuals. Skilled Africans doctors in labor forces trained on the continent have gained the United States about \$850 million dollars between 1990-2010 (24). It is important to note that these figures only account for doctors, and not other skilled professionals like nurses, engineers or teachers. This study also only covers a limited number of African countries. Nevertheless, the broad trend of brain drain is across the continent and if considering loss of investment and productivity, the financial cost is expected to be a lot higher.

The brain drain strips Africa of its most important resource, human capital. Sub-Saharan Africa was found to have a 47% human capital gap and was ranked first with the highest level of human capital deficit compared Western countries and South Asian according to the World Economic Forum in 2017 (25). This low build up has hindered the region's ability to produce revolutionary innovation or adopt new technology. This low level of human capital accumulation is also a sign that a greater number of the citizens do not have the necessary skills and abilities to participate in the growth process (25). As a result, the pace of development of innovative ideas has not progressed towards improving the economic growth of the continent.

The loss of the skilled experts has taken a huge toll on Africa's economy. Furthermore, it has hindered growth in numerous sectors; including healthcare, education, and politics. Neglected industries all perpetuate poverty.

When nations lose their brightest talents, the skilled required to build strong economies go with them. Africa's instability has caused the cycle of poverty to reinforce itself. Skilled Africans have refused to waste their talents to a disappointing system.

CONNECTING HISTORY TO MODERN POLICY APPROACHES

Understanding these historical legacies, from slavery to weak institutions and brain drain, is crucial for crafting effective modern policies. Past patterns of mistrust, corruption, and survivalist approaches inform why governance reforms, technology adoption, and industrial strategies are necessary today. Investment in human capital (25) and examples of successful African development strategies, such as Botswana's reinvestment of resources into public goods (26), demonstrate that context-specific policies can yield tangible improvements. It is also important to recognize that Africa's challenges cannot be explained by the slave trade alone. Colonial administrative differences (British indirect rule vs. French assimilation), post-independence Cold War interventions, geographic and resource disparities, and timing of decolonization all contributed to the complex landscape of poverty and institutional weakness. Addressing Africa's development challenges requires connecting this historical context to contemporary solutions like AI-powered elections, infrastructural development, proper project management, and China-inspired economic models.

POTENTIAL SOLUTIONS

The idea of collective progress offers a path forward, away from the survivalist mindset that fractures communities and chains them to unfair systems. A society that prioritizes collective progress, puts the needs of all first, rather than short term gains of few. For instance, reinvesting funds into education, healthcare, infrastructure, and tech, benefits entire generations, even if individuals do not see immediate results. As opposed to the survivalist mindset, collective progress does not reward selfishness. Instead, it builds trust, sustainability, and strong institutions.

Nations like Botswana show how choosing collective development over survivalist politics can change a nation's future. Furthermore, strengthening institutions will give the continent a strong foundation, allowing them to build better infrastructure, and to develop

better healthcare and education. If African communities acknowledge these underlying issues, they can extract them at their core and start new systems from scratch, not built on ideologies instilled by foreign powers, but by the motivation to uplift their society altogether.

Part of collective progress comes with honesty. AI has become a highly advanced technology that holds the potential to revolutionize various sectors of society, including politics and governance. In African politics, dishonesty is very prominent. From mishandled funds to rigged elections, these are problems that make Africans unable to trust their institutions. To solve the issue of distrust in African institutions, AI powered automated voting systems could be one of the steps forward to help make elections less corrupt.

Democracy in Africa lacks electoral integrity and transparency which are necessary for upholding democratic values (27). The implementation of AI-powered solutions in election processes offers a promising future, guaranteeing fair, reliable, and accountable elections (27). The Ghanaian 2020 presidential elections had over 79% of eligible voters casting their ballots, which is an increase due to the improvement of the digitalization of the electoral system (27). The implementation of better technologies has increased the amount of voting participation.

Although there are benefits of using AI, the technology also provides risks to democracy and human rights, including surveillance and suppression through unreliable facial recognition technology, and algorithmic bias, leaving room for more discrimination during elections (27). Despite these possible outcomes, if used and set up correctly, they can be highly beneficial. AI algorithms should be used to cross-verify election results from different polling stations to increase accuracy (27). Automated monitoring systems can be installed to survey abnormalities and ensure compliance with the law (27). Real time data analysis with more accurate technology can identify irregularities and improve transparency during the voting process (27). Implemented blockchain technology with AI can prevent tampering with the election process and enhance the integrity of election results (27). Integrating AI algorithms will ensure accurate voter registration and verification which will reduce the risk of ghost voters and multiple vote registrations (27).

Infrastructure development is necessary to foster economic growth, attract investors, reduce poverty, and to improve people's quality of life (28). Africa struggles with external project management challenges like

political instability (29). Development projects are often abandoned due to poor stakeholder engagement, political instability, maintenance neglect, funding constraints, inadequate planning, and many more (29). Because the approval process of development projects in Africa are slow, this drives people with the initiative to invest and to build away, hindering the continent's ability to use its resources to its fullest.

China, however, has developed an approach to achieving exponentially increasing economic growth. Studying China's rapid economic growth, two main factors become apparent: large-scale capital investment (financed by large domestic savings and foreign investment) and rapid productivity growth is what helped its economy grow exponentially (30). These two factors work together. Economic reforms led to higher efficiency in the economy, which increased output and resources for additional investment in their economy (30). Numerous fascinated economists have found that increases in efficiency have been another major factor in China's fast economic growth. The improvements in productivity were caused mainly due to a reassignment of resources to more productive purposes, especially in sectors that were heavily controlled by the main government, (e.g. agriculture, trade, and services) (30). For instance, agricultural reforms increased production, enabling workers to look for jobs in the more productive manufacturing field (30). China's decentralization of the economy allowed non-state corporations (e.g. private firms) to surge, which sought more useful pursuits than the centrally controlled state-owned enterprises and were more market-oriented and more efficient (30). Additionally, a greater section of the part of the economy (mostly of the exporting part) had competition. Local governments were able to establish and operate various companies without disruption from the government. In addition, new technology in China increased efficiency (30).

Elements from China's model, like their infrastructure investments and strategic planning, can help Africans flourish like China did. Copying China's development approach directly is unrealistic, considering the fact that African countries have different political systems, economic structures, and geopolitical situations. Nevertheless, learning from it and adapting it based on the differences would help avoid potential problems. Using industrial policy to diversify African economies by focusing on specific sectors besides just raw material extraction can attract investment, create jobs, and stimulate growth (31). Special economic zones (SEZ),

as testing grounds for market reforms can be adapted to the region. Lots of African countries already have SEZs, but their success depends on creating a strong link with the local economy, having proper infrastructure, and the effectiveness of the government (32). If Africa also prioritizes and effectively manages large-scale infrastructure projects similar to China with its roads and rails, African countries can reduce costs, speed up industrialization, and improve connectivity (33). Productive cities are much needed in Africa through strategic coordination. African nations can make sure new cities are productive and create proper jobs. Although Africa's geopolitical situation, economic structure, and government approach may affect the outcome of the Chinese model, prioritizing governance reforms, focusing on regional integration, and creating a single market across the continent similar to the EU (e.g. strengthening the AfCFTA), would tailor the Chinese approach to economic growth just enough to fit its own circumstances (34).

CONCLUSION

The slave trade began a chain reaction that formed new weak institutions that erased old ways of governance. As a result, this corrupted society became a system with no cooperation or trust, and a survivalist mindset among the people emerged. Weaker institutions built under corruption prohibited society from progressing. Now, talented people leave the continent seeking better opportunities elsewhere, building other nations' economies why the ones on the continent collapsed.

Although this paper's main focus is not on colonization, it would be inaccurate to dismiss it as a factor in Africa's contemporary economic challenges. Colonial administrative strategies, such as British indirect rule versus French assimilation, along with post-independence geopolitical interventions, resource distribution, and the timing of decolonization, shaped institutional development and long-term economic outcomes. The weakening of African societies caused by the slave trade only amplified the damages of colonization, while colonial rule reinforced damaging societal norms and entrenched corrupt institutional behaviors, further hindering the continent's capacity to flourish. By learning from successful development models like China's, adapting strategies such as infrastructure investment, industrial diversification, and productive urban planning, Africa can overcome challenges in the future. Paired with governance reforms,

regional integration and investment in human capital, these strategies are an essential roadmap for growth. Africa's path forward lies in combining lessons from history with crucial policies that harness its full potential and resources. Recognizing historical and structural complexity enhances understanding of these challenges and informs targeted, context-specific policy solutions that move the continent from survivalist thinking to collective progress. By identifying the main causes for Africa's poverty, this paper concludes that Africa's poverty can be solved through a cultural shift towards collective progress through context specific policies and development initiatives that prioritize the entirety of the region.

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