The Centre For Issue & Crisis Management

The 7 Myths about Risk in Africa

by David Cecil

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Introduction

Africa is still viewed by many as a *terra nullius* – an uncharted land of danger and mystery. With all the horror stories of plagues and war coming out of the continent, not to mention fables of the new Eldorado, arguably foreigners' perceptions of Africa have not moved on much from the days of the early explorers.

Fig 1: Early map of Africa, replete with *terra nulliusi*

Summary: the 7 Myths about Risk in Africa

1. The continent of disaster
2. Africa is an economic dead-end
3. Africa may be rich in terms of resources, but consumers?
4. Corruption makes it impossible to do business
5. There is no rule of law in Africa
6. Africa is permanently wracked by chronic instability
7. With no infrastructure, there's no business

Yet this 'unknown' continent is a vibrant hive of economic activity that any investor would be unwise to ignore. To get past the stereotypes about Africa, it is necessary to consider how our perceptions of contemporary Africa have been formed by popular history and the domineering gaze of the international media. With an awareness of these biases we can then rethink some of the common misconceptions about the economic challenges facing Africa: lack of productivity; corruption and the rule of law; infrastructural underdevelopment, and so on. In many cases, what appears to be absent may in fact be present in a different form; in others, a problem may appear insoluble, but only because the textbook rules may not apply. Overall, the purpose of this article is to encourage the reader to look at African investment strategy from a more open-minded and localised perspective.

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Fig 2: Africa: Geopolitical Map

Each country and region within Africa is subject to considerable economic variation. Nonetheless, there are enough common and generalized features to allow us to develop guidelines that are broadly applicable. In this report, we discuss *7 myths* which crop up in discussions about most sub-Saharan countries. They are derived chiefly from ignorance and distance from the continent. Just as text-books are necessarily limited and partial in what they can teach you about the disordered reality of business, no less obfuscating are the myths that enshroud every foreign marketplace, not least in outsider perspectives on Africa.

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Facts about Africa

1	**Number of Countries:**	According to the United Nations, Africa has 54 fully recognised states, plus 10 non–sovereign territories
2	**Geographic size:**	Africa is the world's second largest continent
3	**Population:**	With a population of about 1.1 billion people, Africa is also the second most populous continent, with 16% of the world's population
4	**Resources:**	Africa contains 30% of the earth's remaining mineral resources
5	**Demographics:**	Africa has the youngest population in the world, with 40% under 14 years of age; the population is projected to reach 2.3 billion by 2050
6	**Middle class:**	Much greater than India, and by 2020, half of all African's will have discretionary spending ability
7	**Telecoms:**	Africa has 253 million unique subscribers (2013) with over 502 million connections in sub-Saharan Africa; the amount of people with mobile phones is 78% today and set to increase to 84% by 2015
8	**Workforce:**	Soon to have one of the world's largest workforces – by 2035 it will be bigger than China's
9	**Arable land:**	Africa contains most of the world's uncultivated arable land, with a potential for 60% of the world's farmland
10	**GDP:**	In 2013, Africa was the world's fast growing continent at 5.6% per annum, with GDP set to increase at an average of 6% per year until 2023

Myth 1: Welcome to Africa, the continent of disaster

A potential investor perusing the mainstream media to get a taste of the economic climate in the African continent may be forgiven for shuddering and looking away. The obstacles seem overwhelming and the risks incalculable: violence, epidemics, dictatorships, poverty, corruption, and so on. As the Afrikaner saying goes, "TIA mate – This Is Africa". The continent, from this negative, European perspective, seems uniquely messed up. There is, however, a more opportunistic interpretation to 'TIA', which could equally translate its uniqueness in another way: "This Is Africa. Anything goes". Where there is chaos, there is potential; where there is lack, there is demand; where the timid fear to tread, the canny ones clean up.

One cause of the widely-held Afro-pessimism is the continent's troubled history, from slavery to colonization, from independence to war, from exploitation to underdevelopment, and so on. Africans are often portrayed as living in the shadow of all these disasters, as if our present moment was inescapably doomed by the past. As recently as thirty years ago, in the mid-1980s, the situation looked grim. South Africa was an international pariah under apartheid rule, and had recently annexed Namibia; Nigeria was being subjected to the rule of one military dictator after another, with the oil billions enriching only a tiny elite; the brutal Ethiopian government was busy aggravating one of the worst famines in modern history; Uganda was the epicentre of the AIDS epidemic during a ten-year civil war; and South Sudan did not even exist as a state, but was a fly-blown backwater besieged by a racist northern regime.

Fig 3:"Throne of Weapons", Kester 2001[2]

Fast forward a generation and these basket cases have undergone a dramatic transformation. South Africa is now 'the Rainbow Nation', with 3 non-Afrikaner presidents since 1994; Nigeria has held 4 democratic elections since 1999; the Ethiopian government conducts nation-wide nutritional programmes in schools; Uganda has achieved one of the greatest drops in AIDS infection rates in Africa after 25 years of stable government; Namibia is politically autonomous and enjoying growth rates over 5%; while oil rich South Sudan (despite the conflict that began in December 2013) has joined the United Nations as an independent state with significant interest from investors.

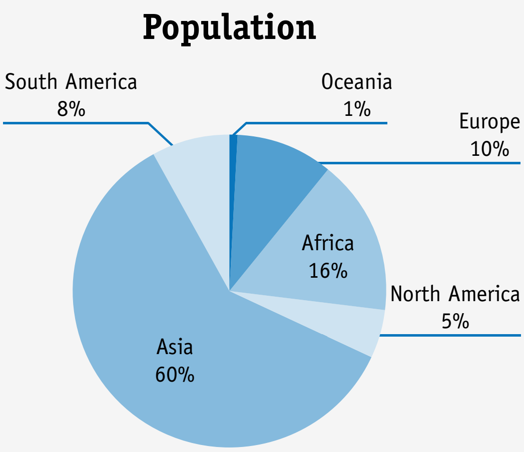
While this 'African miracle' may be partly due to donor nations' generosity, international aid can only be effective where reliable systems and structures exist to feed into. Some critics argue that aid is, in fact, a key part of Africa's historic underdevelopment: the conception of Africa as a site for mere disaster, not self-sufficient growth, locked the continent into a corrupt, stultifying system of international and domestic patronage. According to this logic, Africa needs less aid and more trade, handled with greater transparency and on better terms[3]. However simplistic such arguments may be, they form part of a 'post-aid' trend towards economic independence. Recent developments have correspondingly seen African governments responding with a range of investment incentives, coupled with tighter controls over potential investors, and backed by initiatives from international agencies[4].

Even the most optimistic observers cannot deny the challenges that face investors on the continent, which are unpacked and examined in the sections below. At a glance, Africa may look like a disaster zone. However, this representation has much to do with media-perpetuated stereotypes, which are both a hangover from history and a misreading of the present. While Africa's current rising fortunes may be partly a result of changing international attitudes, the continent is being pushed by African elites and entrepreneurs towards a less dependent future. Presenting Africa as a disaster zone makes good headlines, but poor business sense.

Myth 2: Do the numbers: Africa is an economic dead-end

"When you go to a good doctor today, they don't just look at one or two vital signs… They look at a hundred statistics."
Joseph Stiglitz, former chief economist and vice president of the World Bank.

According to the IMF, African countries are among the poorest in the world. Africa has nearly one sixth of the world's population, but less than a thirtieth of its GDP. Per capita, this would seem to make its citizens the poorest in the world[5].



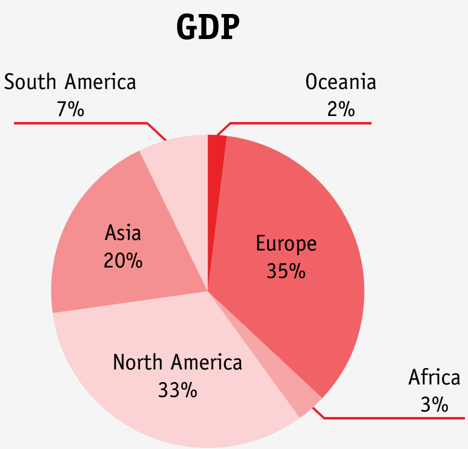


Fig. 4: Coltan ore containing tantalum, a breakthrough element of modern communications technology

However, GDP is based on a limited range of factors and is scarcely indicative of a country's economic potential. In a critique of GDP as a means of assessing national wealth, Joseph Stiglitz (quoted above) underlined how little we can take this trusted international measure as an indicator of potential[6]. Take, for example, Africa's mineral deposits. If African wealth were measured in terms of what lies beneath the continent, and what is yet unexploited, it would be richer even than Europe. Citing the latest United Nations Economic Report on Africa, a CNN report recently claimed "*the continent has 12% of the world's oil reserves, 40% of its gold, and 80% to 90% of its chromium and platinum. Africa is also home to 60% of the world's underutilized arable land and has vast timber resources*"[7]. If we add on the 76% of global tantalum production that is coming from Africa, we start to see how rich the continent is and how important it will continue to be for the future of the entire world[8].

Clearly the wealth gap is not due to an inherent material deficiency in Africa, but to its manufacturing capacity, which is so weak that its vast repository of mineral products are exported raw at correspondingly low prices. The extensive mining projects undertaken by China in the Democratic Republic of the Congo and neighbouring countries are a simple and obvious testament to this[9]. While precise statistics are elusive due to the opacity of China's trade agreements with African states, the extent of their involvement is undeniably huge and their engagement with Africa is growing ever more sophisticated, in terms of trade terms, political bargaining and social issues. Recent reports show that Sino-African agreements are increasingly marked by a concern for sustainability and lasting infrastructural improvement in the host country, indicating that Chinese economic experts view Africa as a profitable long-term trading partner[10].

It may be asserted that China's African operations are all underwritten by the CCP. However, Africa's large-scale investment potential is not merely for state-backed companies or huge international corporations, with vast reserves of capital to draw on. Spotting an undeveloped opportunity and bringing new technologies to Africa are just two ways that relatively small companies with a bold vision can thrive, as the following examples show:

- In the mid-80s, Tullow Oil, an Irish start-up with no major backers, began acquiring rights to relatively small deposits of oil and gas in western Africa. By 2013 Tullow had expanded into a multi-billion dollar company, with a primary listing on the London stock exchange and new projects across 4 continents[11].

- The MTN Group started as a small South African communications company in 1994 called M-Cell. Through a process of piecemeal acquisitions, mergers and well-negotiated loan agreements, it is now Africa's leading international mobile phone network and internet service provider, with around 176 million subscribers in three continents, the bulk of them in 16 African countries[12].

Undoubtedly, Africa is a poor performer in terms of recordable GDP. Its political rulers were historically over-keen and short-sighted in trade negotiations, contributing to the continuing disparity between its financial health and actual wealth. Despite this, the reality on the ground is not so much desperation and despair as a sense of urgency, dynamism and opportunity. Numerous studies have recently claimed that the next century heralds an unprecedented transformation for the continent, in the words of one: "the next Asia is Africa"[13]. Even if we are cautious about such prophetic statements, in more concrete terms, six of the ten fastest-growing economies between 2000 and 2010 were in sub-Saharan Africa[14]. These are figures international investors can ill afford to ignore.

World's Top Ten Fastest-Growing Economies*
Annual average GDP growth, %

2001-2010†		2011-2015‡	
Angola	**11.1**	China	9.5
China	10.5	India	8.2
Myanmar	10.3	**Ethiopia**	**8.1**
Nigeria	**8.9**	**Mozambique**	**7.7**
Ethiopia	**8.4**	**Tanzania**	**7.2**
Kazakhstan	8.2	Vietnam	7.2
Chad	**7.9**	**Congo**	**7.0**
Mozambique	**7.9**	**Ghana**	**7.0**
Cambodia	7.7	**Zambia**	**6.9**
Rwanda	**7.6**	**Nigeria**	**6.8**

Source: The Economist; IMF

**Excluding countries with less than 10m population and Iraq and Afghanistan*

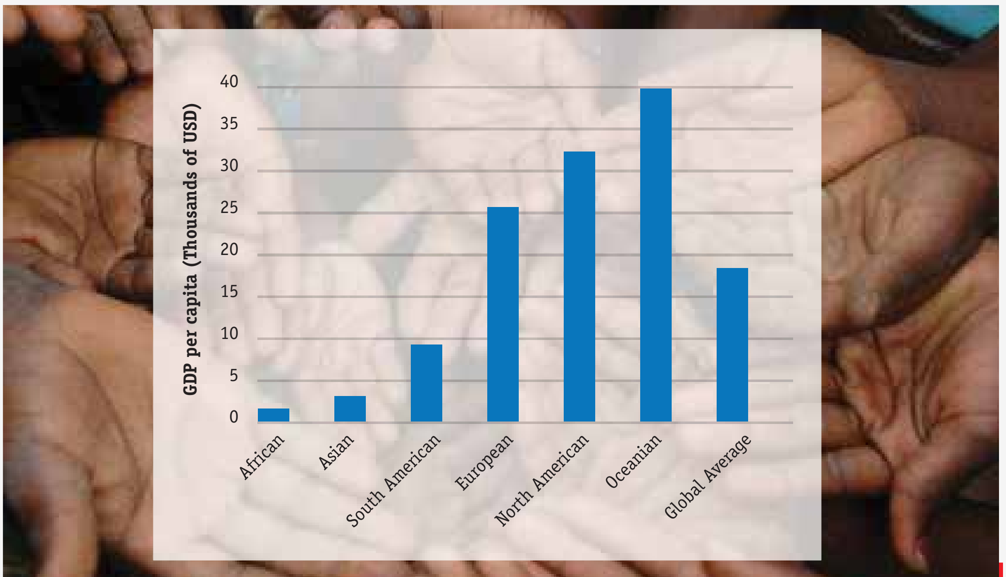
†2010 estimate ‡Forecast

GDP growth, unweighted annual average, %

Myth 3:
Africa may be rich in terms of resources, but consumers...?

In terms of individual wealth and productivity, Africa is the poorest continent on the planet, by a long way. With a per capita GDP of $1,576, the average African is twice as poor as the average Asian, 12 times poorer than the world average, and 25 times poorer than the average citizen of Oceania[15]. These grim figures seem somewhat off-putting to any business looking to explore new markets.

Fig. 5: Global GDP per capita in US dollars, in comparative perspective.



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As with the question of Africa's wealth, the answer to finding its consumer base depends on looking in the right places. The continent holds a vast untapped consumer potential, partly due to the lag in market-oriented development. One obvious starting point for research may be: 'Where are the most affluent Africans, and what do they spend their money on?' This may lead one to speculate, for example, in the established import trade in second-hand Japanese cars in the African powerhouse economies of Nigeria, South Africa and Kenya. However, it is well worth considering the popular economies of scale, in the market for everyday items: 'What is everyone spending money on in Africa?' There are many basic goods and services – education, healthcare, communications, bottled drinks – that are in high demand, nation-wide, and this demand is met often with inadequate supply.

Nigerian Aliko Dangote looked at the economy of scale. He started off taking over a family concession in cement, branched into sugar and flour and, 25 years later, is set to launch a $9 billion oil refinery, petrochemical and fertiliser plant. He is now the richest man in Africa, valued at 20.8 billion. While not everyone can replicate his particular history, including canny political positioning, they can learn from his model: spreading risk over the longer-term though a range of products that everyone needs, so that if one fails there will always be market for the others. The relationship between business and politics will be examined in more detail later, but for now it is worth noting (contra claims that Dangote only made it because of his connections) that plenty of African businessmen have friends in power, but that is worth little in the long-term without a sound economic base. In Dangote's case this was not the fabled Nigerian 'black gold', but cautiously spread investments in basic foodstuffs and constructions materials[16].

Mobile subscribers in sub-Saharan Africa have increased 18% a year from 2008-2013 to 253 million. The region's mobile users may reach up to 346 million by 2017. (Source: GSMA report 2013)[17]

In the 1980s, when Dangote was a young cement importer, the only telephone lines were fixed and could hardly be called a growth industry, due to the prohibitively expensive infrastructural work and low-density rural populations. That has all changed with the advent of affordable, wireless handsets and pay-as-you-go tariffs. The consequent revolution shows little sign of abating. Despite the highest global growth rate, current usage still only represents a 31% penetration rate of mobile phones into the sub-continent , compared to 80% in the EU. Such gaps can prove remarkably lucrative for SMEs with an international outlook, an eye for an unexploited opportunity and an understanding of local dynamics. A key point here is that relatively low GDP means low start-up and labour costs, even without being unethical. A little money goes much further in Africa.

A good example of this is the International Medical Group, Uganda. Beginning with the humblest of origins, northern Irish missionary Dr. Ian Clarke worked his way up from doing emergency surgery under a tree in post-conflict Uganda in 1987, to opening a small private clinic in 1995, to running the one of the biggest medical groups in the eastern African region. International Hospital Kampala (IHK) is now the best-equipped hospital in the country with numerous affiliate organizations, including a pharmaceutical wholesaler, a medical insurance company, a university, charitable foundations, and leading clinics across the regionx[18]. As Clarke says: "From a mere $100,000 in 1996 when IMC was opened, the organisation is now worth around $15m, excluding the university."[19]

Fig. 6: From humble beginnings: The International Hospital of Kampala and its founder, Dr. Ian Clarke

Another significant growth sector for African SMEs, with a clear ethical purpose, is education. Like healthcare, most African states are not providing for a demand that is rapidly gaining the status of a universal need. Again, the statistics for the growth in private education are impressive. According to recent UNESCO study, since the 1970s, tertiary enrolment has grown by an average of 8.6% annually, with a sector that has effectively doubled in size every 8 years[20].Given the international outlook of middle-class African families and the obvious value of internationally-recognised qualifications, this is a sector in which foreign companies automatically have a very strong competitive advantage. On the other hand, African companies like the Cavendish Africa University Group (Zambia) and Kampala University (Uganda) have profited immensely from a cosmopolitan approach, forming partnerships and associations with European institutions, marketing themselves regionally, and establishing new campuses abroad[21]. This points to another even less risky route for non-African companies that does not require a physical presence on the continent.

Focus: Higher Education in Kenya

- 52 public, private and constituent university college institutions.
- A total student population of 251,000, up from 81,000 in 2003.
- A one-year increase of 20% in newly enrolled students for the 2012-13 academic session.
- 79,000 students in 40 technical and vocational institutions, up from 34,000 in 2003.

Although Africa has, for numerous reasons, lagged behind the 'developed world' in terms of consumer growth, it is quickly catching up. From a historic perspective, this transformation is actually fairly rapid. Europe took centuries to move from mainly rural-based subsistence economies to urbanized, industrial ones. Colonialism, for better and for worse, attempted to compress this process into a few decades in Africa. Although it largely failed to recreate a modernist transformation in its own image, the colonial project set other forms of African modernisation in motion, which are now yielding societies of consumers. (See, for example, points in the previous section about Africans technologically 'leapfrogging' history.) The growth of the consumer middle class in most African countries is now well-established; potential investors should research which commodities are most attractive to the emerging Afro-bourgeoisie in each national context and where there may be a shortfall in supply.

The imperialist thrust was not only focused on extraction and 'development', it was also about opening up new markets for European products. Now that this has happened, it is predominantly the Chinese, Indians, South Africans and a few adventurers who are really taking advantage of the popular market. All the statistics show that African consumers are increasingly demanding, so international businessmen should step up and supply.

Myth 4: Corruption makes it impossible to do business

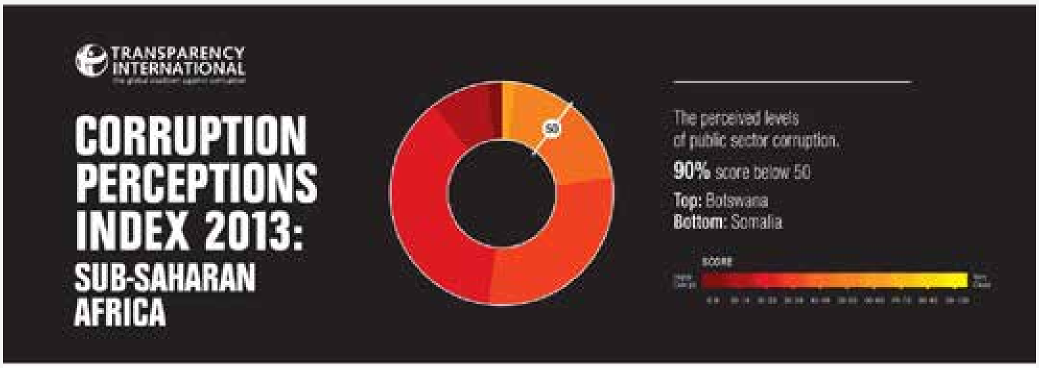

Fig. 7: Transparency International cites Africa as the most corrupt region of the world after Eastern Europe / Central Asia[22]

RANK	COUNTRY/TERRITORY	SCORE
30	Botswana	64
41	Cape Verde	58
47	Seychelles	54
49	Rwanda	53
52	Mauritius	52
55	Lesotho	49
57	Namibia	48
63	Ghana	46
72	Sao Tome and Principe	42
72	South Africa	42
77	Senegal	41
82	Swaziland	39
83	Burkina Faso	38
83	Liberia	38
83	Zambia	38
91	Malawi	37
94	Benin	36
94	Djibouti	36
106	Gabon	34
106	Niger	34
111	Ethiopia	33
111	Tanzania	33
119	Mauritania	30
119	Mozambique	30
119	Sierra Leone	30
123	Togo	29
127	Comoros	28
127	Gambia	28
127	Madagascar	28
127	Mali	28
136	Côte d'Ivoire	27
136	Kenya	27
140	Uganda	26
144	Cameroon	25
144	Central African Republic	25
144	Nigeria	25
150	Guinea	24
153	Angola	23
154	Congo Republic	22
154	Democratic Republic of the Congo	22
157	Burundi	21
157	Zimbabwe	21
160	Eritrea	20
163	Chad	19
163	Equatorial Guinea	19
163	Guinea-Bissau	19
173	South Sudan	14
175	Somalia	8

The 2013 Corruption Perceptions Index measures the perceived levels of public sector corruption in 177 countries/territories around the world. To see the full results go to:
www.transparency.org/cpi
#stopthecorrupt

Africa is synonymous with corruption, which is widely cited as a cause of its under-development. There are swathes of academic texts, numerous developmental

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think tanks and entire international non-governmental organizations devoted to exposing manifestations of corruption in Africa. Perhaps because of its nebulous and shadowy aspect, much effort goes simply into compiling instances of corruption and combining these into daunting, totalising statistics, listing the quantity of recorded corruption - per state, per department, per sector - across the whole continent. Transparency International is a good example of this – they specialize in graphic, generalised illustrations over useful localized content. Without analysis of what is happening on the ground, the tone becomes a paternalist jeremiad that condemns corruption as an evil that can be isolated and stamped out. Is this useful to an investor or project manager, beyond being off-putting? Surely we need to understand what is happening behind the graphs we are observing.

With all this data, surprisingly little effort goes into understanding how corruption actually works in practice - its 'uses' and the rationale behind it. The more illuminating accounts demonstrate how profoundly corruption is intricated in people's everyday lives, to the extent that it is not only normal, but a functioning part of the economy[23]. The more revisionist accounts define corruption as enabling valuable functions: paying wages, ensuring fulfillment of contracts, aiding implementation of services, providing incentives, cutting through needless bureaucracy, etc. To quote the title of a influential study, corruption is one of the necessary ways in which 'Africa Works'[24].

Whatever view one subscribes to, undoubtedly business in Africa is characterized by high levels of what would be regarded as 'irregular practice' in Europe. This does not mean one should avoid doing business there altogether. Once a system is understood, it becomes relatively predictable. The watchwords are understanding, caution and trust: be aware of how the system works at a local level; put in place safeguards to head off nasty surprises; and, most importantly, forge sustainable local partnerships based on long-term reciprocity.

Not everyone is untrustworthy, but in all emerging markets people are often quick to act before an opportunity disappears. Therefore, trust is built over time, rather than being an assumed part of a deal. With the growth of capitalism, and a concurrent awareness of how foreigners like to do business, many Africans are changing their view from short-term to long-term. The construction of a reliable network of local associates is a personal process, as much as an economic trajectory, and it does require a significant investment of time.

Although the international corruption monitors may not always penetrate to the root causes of graft, their presence in donor circles and their annual reports have, over time, been making some African governments aware that the issue matters to foreigner investors and development agencies. This awareness has, to take one shining example, produced an impressive turnaround in levels of corruption in Rwanda. Since courting the international community from the end of their civil war in 1994, Rwanda has reduced corruption to 5 times lower than the mean of its regional neighbours[25] Then there are the consistent performers like Botswana, ranked alongside Spain as number 30 in the global corruption index[26].

On local and business levels in many parts of Africa, it is becoming taboo to openly ask for bribes, especially when dealing with non-Africans. The combination of increasing penetration of international business, the scrutiny of governments (including local government) by INGOs, higher levels of education, and the growth of a middle-class tired more aware of their rights, have all combined to reduce levels of corruption across the continent. This is not to say that one should go into any situation assuming business will be transparent – that would be naïve. However, arguably the best insurance one can find is to build up trust in people you work with, put in place more safeguards than you would in Europe or the US, and, above all, learn how the local system works before you commit time and resources to any project.

Myth 5:
There is no rule of law in Africa

"It seems that, once in power, African leaders revert to the African traditional modes of doing politics…" from 'The Paradigm of efficient judiciary'[27].

Without a guarantee that contracts will be enforced in court, one might as well do business in the Wild West. If a national stealing from a foreign firm is treated more favourably than the foreign owner, then no foreign business is secure. If, at any moment, a minister or 'big man' could seize the assets of a company as their own, then why would anyone ever do business in such an environment?

Such questions and rumours constitute the myth, and there are countries in Africa where the judiciary is hopelessly compromised, because of political pressure, cronyism or a culture of venality. Fortunately, these cases are in a fading minority. Most African leaders are keen to attract sustainable foreign direct investment and are wise as to what constitutes an attractive investment climate. Meanwhile, long-term growth of the international NGO sector and the linkages of inter-governmental aid to 'good governance' have ensured that corporations and politicians in Africa are under more scrutiny than ever before.

A strong judiciary is perhaps the most important line of defence against dictatorships on the one hand and majoritarian rule on the other. These threats are much more immediate in post-colonial states than in the long-established democracies of Western Europe. The positive news is that many African judges are, for this reason, taking their jobs very seriously indeed. Even oil deals and electoral disputes are now operating with an unprecedented degree of transparency. A recent dispute between Heritage Oil, Tullow Oil and the Ugandan government was subject to close public scrutiny and the court's role was decisive[28]. While many point to the numerous contested elections in Africa as indicative of social breakdown, it is also arguable that such popular protest points to the development of a rights-based culture and a corresponding unwillingness of citizens, backed by the legal sector, to accept the arbitrary imposition of political power.

There are some markers which help to indicate where one may find a more stable and independent judicial system. An obvious rule of thumb is to look at the balance of power: where the executive is barely restrained, it is likely that judges will be cowed and corrupt; where the legislature is active and vocal, the judiciary is more likely to be independent and confident. Each country will have its own history of struggle and compromise between these branches of the state, again highlighting the importance of focused, localized research. There are now a number of African legal consultancy firms which specialize in assisting investors and NGOs in understanding the specific legal context of each African country[29].

When it comes to the reliability of legal practitioners themselves, accredited lawyers in Africa are ranked according to the international 'tier' system. Unless one hires a back-street lawyer, it is perfectly easy to find a firm that is reputable and the costs are likely to be relatively low compared to commercial lawyers in Europe or the US.

From an African government's point of view, there is self-interest in establishing a transparent judiciary. If there is no rule of law, there can be little sustained foreign investment from companies who wish to have the legal assurance that comes from transparent practice. There will always be states and international corporations with few scruples and enough capital to bribe judges and politicians. However, such shady arrangements are coming under increasing scrutiny from within countries and internationally. Local rights groups, often from with the legal sector, are demanding accountability and they are being assisted by international agencies who are focused on corruption and long-term resource management.

An innovative example of this is the Extractive Industries Transparency Initiative (EITI). This holy trinity of "the private sector, government and civil society … stops the sort of cosy cabal that can exist between government and industry, and asks questions about how revenues are utilised, where the revenue streams are going, and how they are being applied", according to Lord Paul Boateng, former chief secretary to the UK Treasury[30]. While we cannot naively assume that such initiatives will automatically guarantee justice, they are an indicator of general tendencies towards more mature and accountable business practices in Africa.

African governments are turning the international lobbies and human rights advocates to their economic advantage. Using detailed research data from an NGO called RAID (Rights and Accountability in Development), the Organisation of Economic Cooperation and Development (OECD) is confronting Chinese mining companies in the notoriously chaotic Democratic Republic of Congo (DRC). International law exists to protect workers and industry. RAID and the OECD is working with the government of DRC to ensure that safety standards are maintained and that revenues from extraction are feeding back into the national economy. China is complying, sensing that the terrain has shifted. A mixture of international scrutiny and African democratisation has led to a situation in which sustainability requires more accountability than ever before[31].

Overall, the general trend in African countries is towards more independent control of resource extraction, on more equitable terms, and more just distribution of resulting revenues. This requires more independent judiciaries across the continent to enforce the legal aspects of agreements and to punish malpractice by rogue investors.

Meanwhile, African lawyers, judges and legislators, with the help of French and Canadian counterparts, have been seeking to harmonise commercial law across the continent, with the introduction of the OHADA system[32]. With 16 states signed up to this trans-continental agreement and more applying, this is yet another healthy sign of Africa moving together from a fraught post-colonial period of fractious dictatorships and war, in which the idea of such shared legal systems would have been a distant dream.

Finally, it is worth mentioning, in the context of justice, the importance of government connections, those shadowy, back-door linkages which are often portrayed as the only path to success in Africa. "It's who you know…" is a common mantra, affirming the continent's reputation for high-end graft. The richest man in Africa, the Nigerian Aliko Dangote, has been widely accused of monopolising various sectors via his family connections. This argument is reductive, illogical and envious, misunderstanding the fraught path to power that Dangote cleaved. Many can claim family connections to someone in government, yet hardly any exploit those connections so successfully. What really brings success, as is the case anywhere in the world, is a solid concept backed up by careful analysis and safeguards. Dangote does indeed work with the Nigerian government, but strictly on his own terms and only after painstakingly building up a business in basic goods like cement and sugar. The connections, in reality, came to him. In the words of the Financial Times: "Dangote's success has many roots but it owes something to his ability to play the system to his advantage – AGIP, or "any government in power", as Nigerians call the trait…"[33] Government connections and social influence are assets anywhere in the world, but they cannot be turned to one's advantage if one lacks a decent business plan and the patience to see it through.

It would never be wise to operate in an environment where the law can be simply bought and sold, but happily that is not the case in most parts of Africa. Before investing time and money in an African country, it is necessary to research the recent national record for judicial impartiality, check precedent for the relevant sector, hire a good lawyer and ensure that contracts are as tight as possible. Once the project is up and running, the government connections can then be approached from a position of strength. In other words, the protocol is not so different from that in the 'developed world'.

Myth 6:
Africa is permanently wracked by chronic instability

Along with Poverty, AIDS and Famine, War is the fourth horseman of the Apocalypse that gallops into view when the mass media turns its gaze onto Africa. Besides being cinematically the most exciting of human disasters, it guarantees emotive and shocking headlines like no other. In the last four decades the continent has supplied the worldwide media with a devastating and seemingly endless series of conflicts. However, one may question whether this crimson tide is a characteristic feature of Africa per se, or of a particular historical period in international relations.

The international media's approach to African war is typically straightforward – some would say 'black and white'. Coverage universally condemns the outbreak of hostilities, so that one would struggle to find a recent example of a 'just war' started by an African state. Contrast this attitude to, e.g., the NATO bombing of Kosovo or Libya and it is obvious that some offensives are deemed 'juster' than others, depending on who is waging them. A stark, distinct quality characterises most reports: African war is uniquely brutal and senseless, conducted by self-interested actors using ruthless methods. Complex, internationally-fuelled conflicts, such as the ongoing battle for southern Somalia, are reduced in 2-minute videos to inexplicable barbarism perpetrated by inhuman 'warlords' or 'terrorists'. Meanwhile, on the ground in Somalia, life goes on, particularly in the lucrative import markets and the peaceful northern regions which have been barely touched by the southern war[34]. Apart from observing that not all of Africa is ablaze, an investor should understand why the continent has seen so much conflict of late and whether it is doomed to remain perennially in the shadow of war.

The colonial moment in Africa was remarkably brief. Although Iberian and Dutch merchants and settlers had maintained a presence in Africa from the 15th to the 20th centuries, the European powers only attempted to officially govern the continent for little more than 70 years. In practice, many of the African colonial states consisted of garrisoned trading centres with a post office, and virtually no transformative penetration of the hinterland[35]. At the outset of this brief period, at the Berlin Conference of 1885, the Europeans definitively carved the entire continent into discrete political territories and, on the eve of their departure, they vested their indigenous successors with the robes and tools of state. The pressure on these post-colonial leaders was unprecedentedly intense. The modern European states were forged from the heat of war; in Africa, wars inevitably followed the artificial creation of states by the European powers. From the 1960s-90s, the continent found itself mired in conflicts as post-colonial elites fought for control of these quasi-states and struggled to impose centralized government on unassimilated populations who had no concept of citizenship[36]. Understanding the precariousness of this legacy also helps to explain the rise of the infamous 'Africa dictator'; leaders often resorted to strong-arm tactics in

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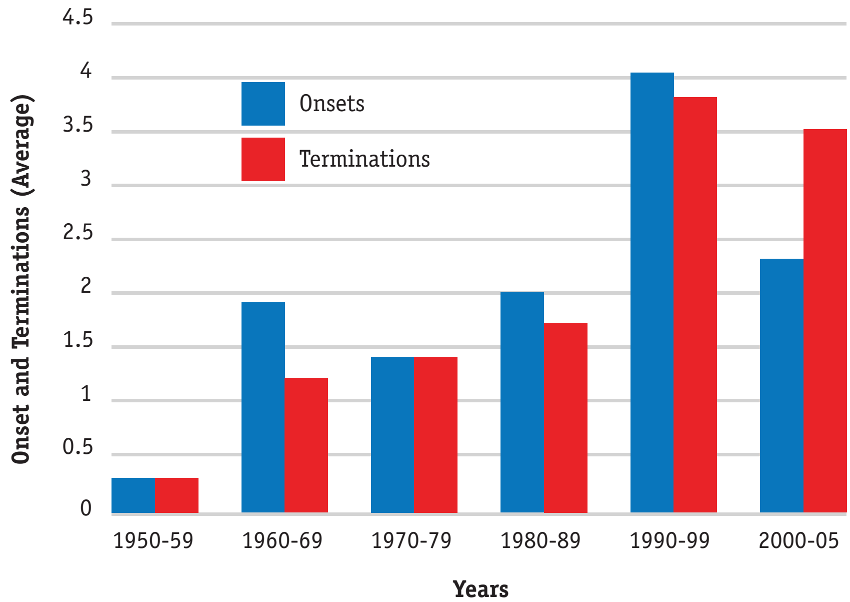
an attempt to impose centralized government on a widely-dispersed and hitherto ungoverned population.

We may now be entering a 'post-post-colonial' generation, in which many of the border conflicts have calmed down, populations are becoming more urbanised and educated, and leaders are more experienced in negotiating the challenges of domestic politics and international relations. With many conflicts ongoing, it would be absurd to argue that we have seen the last of African war, but the graph below, illustrating outbreaks and terminations of war since the 1950s, reveals an interesting pattern. Independence in the 1960s brought an upsurge in conflict as the elites fought for power and colonial borders were challenged. The spike in the 1990s may be partly explained by the end of the Cold War. Many African leaders had pledged commitment to one or other side of the ideological divide, or both, in return for superpower support. When that support vanished, these regimes were called to account by their populations, with corresponding outbreaks of war[37].

Human Security Brief, 2007

Figure 2.7
State-Based Conflict Onsets and Terminations per Year in Sub-Saharan Africa, 1950-2005



Data Source: UCDP/Human Security Report Project Dataset

The rate at which conflicts were starting and ending in the 1990s was twice that of previous decades

Even if the general trend is towards a new 'African peace', war is not going to go away in Africa or anywhere else, despite current optimism on that point[39]. Developments in international relations (e.g. the rise of militant Islam) will bring new challenges. However, without being cynical, where there is a crisis there is also an opportunity. Populations that have been through war are beneficiaries of international aid and usually have wide-ranging needs – from infrastructure to medicine to food supply to vehicles. Post-conflict states can be extremely profitable, albeit risky, as recent events in South Sudan and Angola demonstrate in very different ways. Although South Sudan's independence in 2011 was marred

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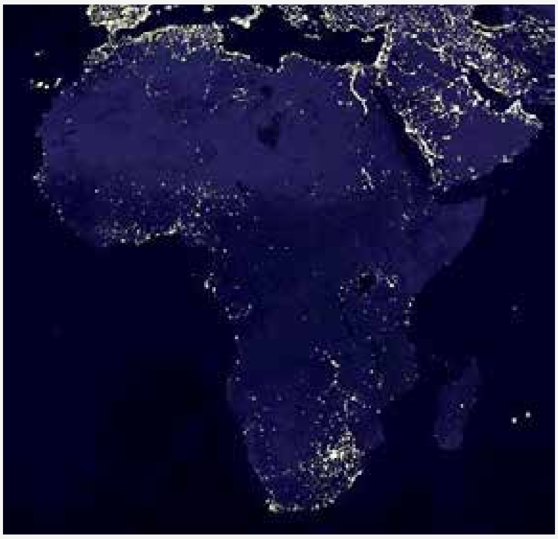
by an outburst of infighting in late 2013, as usual the international media was quick to leap to the gloomiest conclusion that this was a return to full-blown civil war. In fact, international businesses, including banks, are still fully operational there there and it is regarded as an increasingly lucrative market by entrepreneurs across the eastern African region[40]. After more than three decades of anti-colonial and post-colonial war, Angola's economic growth was in double digits from 2004-08 (peaking at 23% in 2007) and it quickly recovered from the global recession to current figures of 7-8%[41]. International entrepreneurs in both of these post-conflict states had tremendous opportunity and bargaining power, due to the general perception that no-one could invest in such a climate.

Starting a business or an NGO in a post-conflict zone is not for the faint-hearted, but as with all of the myths in this article, the reality is not nearly as bad as it seems. The very fact that so many people are averse to doing business in Africa makes it all the more potentially lucrative, since the field is relatively clear in terms of international competition. The idea of Africa as a continent mired in war is at best a reflection of its colonial and post-colonial history. At worst, such depictions are a product of the sensationalist international media, hungry for stories: "If it bleeds, it leads." Localised research, from beyond the headlines, can reveal many profitable opportunities in a continent that many people ignore because of over a hundred years of negative stereotypes.

Myth 7: With no infrastructure, there's no business

Nocturnal satellite photos graphically illustrate the limited extent of Africa's infrastructure. Besides being largely off-grid, Africa is legendarily difficult and dangerous to travel through – the Dark Continent of colonial imagination. Joseph Conrad's "Heart of Darkness" – a chilling account of colonialism - epitomised the European view of African travel in the 1890s: "Going up that river was like travelling back to the earliest beginnings of the world, when vegetation rioted on the earth and the big trees were kings"[42]. Much of today's writing about Africa is in the same vein, with journalists and aid workers undertaking perilous journeys down 'Blood River' and to 'Where Soldiers Fear to Tread'[43].

Fig. 8: 'The Dark Continent'



Alas, the reality on the ground does reflect this popular literature, albeit with less romance and more stress. To nature's obstacles, humanity has added its own: roadblocks, potholes, downed lines, derailed trains, dodgy planes and traffic jams stretching to eternity. The Internet, which relies on a stable and precisely-functioning infrastructure moves at painful 'dial-up' speeds in most parts of Africa. Every year, Africans are promised 'broadband', the latest sign of equality on the global civilisational indices, yet each year it lags behind Europe. The situation becomes far more tragic and frustrating with the knowledge that many of the systems should actually be in place, but none of them are working because... TIA - This Is Africa.

As with so many applications of that unfortunate phrase – TIA - the disappointment stems not from an absolute lack, but from the lack of what is normally available in western Europe. If one looks at how people are coping, at what is being used in the absence of the 'developed' norm, the picture becomes one of innovation and adaptation. The lack of what we take to be necessary infrastructure has forced Africa to leapfrog technological history. Though contemporary African bandwidth is comparatively small, in the late 1990s some states in Africa had proportionately more people online than certain states in the US[44]. Suddenly, rural populations across the entire continent, living where the postman had never travelled, are able to receive electronic mail every day. Private landlines are an unobtainable dream for the majority, so the mobile telecommunications revolution has proceeded far more rapidly than it did in Europe and, because of its ultra-individualized, unit-based market model, almost all Africans are willing and able to pay for it.

The mobile communications revolution has spawned countless affiliated innovations in Africa, some of which are now being copied by European firms. Money transfer systems like Mpesa and Mobile Money are among these. Facilitated by local and international companies across Africa, these nation-wide financial services have obviated the need for high street banking. The absence of conventional street maps, like the London A-Z, has led to a rise in virtual mapping, with dedicated applications for the growing numbers of urban smart phone users. An outstanding example of this was Kenya's 'Ushahidi' platform, a geographical, news-based social medium, developed to map flashpoints in the post-electoral riots of 2007. It is now being applied to a myriad of other situations worldwide, from aid delivery to cross-country bike races[45]. In a world in which the most vital infrastructure is becoming virtual, Africa may not be at such a disadvantage after all.

It may be reasonably objected that Africa can only truly realize this revolution if the promised hi-speed connections are delivered continent-wide, that is, if Africans become connected as widely and intensively as Europeans. Yet the intense frustration of using the Internet in Africa is offset by the surprising speed with which communication systems and platforms are diffusing, improving and evolving. As with mobile phones, because 'traditional' communications are unrealistic for Africa, the take-up is exponentially fast. Facebook, for one, has specifically highlighted the disproportionate levels of client growth in Africa. Other innovations which were only moderately popular in Europe have boomed in Africa. For example, a fusion of Internet and SMS is now widely used for publicity because of prohibitive printing costs for flyers and the lack of postboxes to put them in. Wireless is now expected, not a luxury, in uptown bars and coffee shops. Coastal areas of Nigeria, Kenya and South Africa do now have broadband, thanks to the frustration of cosmopolitan entrepreneurs needing to compete on a global level. Despite the lack of roads and railways, the continent is suddenly connected as never before. The trick now for foreign investors is not so much to fill in a gap, but to stay ahead of a curve that is being rapidly shaped by local exigency.

There are two models to building an infrastructure that are worth considering here, from an investment and developmental perspective. One is very much state-driven and top-down, the other is more diffuse and chaotic. Both demonstrably work.

Twenty years since its infamous genocide, Rwanda now enjoys an enviable virtual and physical infrastructure that, particularly in the capital, would put some European cities to shame. Its President, Paul Kagame, used a canny mixture of foreign investment, international aid and expertise, and an alarmingly efficient state bureaucracy to achieve this. Like its neighbour and ally, Uganda, Rwanda has balanced a mixture of oriental and occidental funding and initiatives. Wary of putting all eggs in one basket, and particularly wise to the conditions and whimsies of international aid, this tactic has allowed these states to operate the post-Cold War equivalent of a 'mixed economy'.

Not everywhere is blessed with such determined and visionary leadership or with the blessings of the international community. Lagos, the pulsating heart of Africa's most populous country, is a chaotic and ramshackle megalopolis with an impressive 21 million citizens, up from 1.4 million in 1970[46]. The compromised political elites in the distant administrative capital seem unable or unwilling to assist with the strain of this extraordinary growth, so Governor Fashola of Lagos has taken an unusual step. He has implemented the gradual privatization of the city's infrastructure, to build it with invisible hands. Focusing initially on healthcare and transport, his office of Public Private Partnership is floating the provision of most public services of the city-state on the market[47]. While many African cities have been allowing a similar mode of informal service-provision to develop, normally state representatives only appear as a bribe-taking nuisance, on hand to benefit from the industry rather than assist with its functioning. Governor Fashola's novel initiative is an example of private-sector-led public service provision in which the entrepreneurs are approached on equal terms – as partners. If successful, other African cities and states will doubtless follow this seminal initiative, boding well for investors and, hopefully, citizens too.

Where some people see an absence, others will see an opportunity. The lack of infrastructure does not mean one cannot build it, but that it has yet to be built. Roads obviously require vast investment, but infrastructure provision is a large, modular and intricate sector, with room for operators of all sizes. As the success of the telecommunications industry and its innovative offshoots have shown, ideas are as valuable as concrete assets in a continent that is growing at such great speeds.

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Conclusions:

Starting a business or NGO in Africa will not suit everyone, particularly the risk-averse. However, this very point leaves it wide open for more adventurous investors and entrepreneurs.

The relatively late adoption of centralized states and capitalism in Africa means that the economic terrain is notably different to that of Europe, North America and the more prosperous parts of Asia. The approach to doing business in Africa must therefore be fundamentally different, in several important ways, to the model they teach in European and US colleges. One cannot approach African business in the same way as one would approach it in Western Europe; however, the same could be said of Russia, the Middle East or Japan. The point is to understand the rules of engagement wherever you intend to operate.

Localised research and forward-thinking analysis are vital – these are 'emerging economies', after all. Building up reliable contacts on the ground takes time, but is immensely valuable where such ties count for more than references.

Although this article has necessarily discussed broad issues, always treat each economy as different. Africa is not the Eurozone. What works in one country may not work in another.

A good, if rather dry, starting point is a World Bank affiliated website, which gives basic information on the climate in each country and a rough indication of how easy it is to set up a registered company: http://www.doingbusiness.org/

Africa is emerging from a period of colonialism, war and economic upheaval. However, many areas seem to have stabilized. Consider exploiting gaps in the market in post-conflict states.

The figures for investors are promising in the long-term. There is a demographic boom which will provide tomorrow's consumer base. The cementing of democratic reforms in the last 20 years promises greater long-term stability. Infrastructure is more developed than ever, despite post-colonial upheavals, and is set to improve with ongoing European and Chinese investment.

Certainly, within African business circles, there is a renewed sense of possibility and a determination to maximize the exploitation of the continent's resources to the advantage of Africans[48]. In practical terms, this means that governments may increasingly legislate in favour of partnerships with local companies, as has recently been shown by a toughening up of legislation on foreign employees and investors in Kenya[49]. This shift in attitude may become continent-wide, and requires strategic planning and a more consciously equitable approach to forming local partnerships.

A word of warning: despite the optimistic tone of this article, the old rules do apply regarding a 'free lunch', especially in Africa. One of the many reasons colonialism was so short-lived on the continent is that Eldorado has always been a figment of the imagination. Just as anywhere else, if a deal or prospect seems too good to be true, it most probably is. People may well be dealing diamonds like potatoes in Congo, but, in the process of getting them, a mining investor would have to get their boots very muddy. If you meet a guy in a bar who claims to work in the Ministry of Agriculture and offers you the keys to a lucrative plantation in exchange for a few hundred thousand dollars, the first question you should ask is: why is he telling you all this in a bar? Such romantic stories hark back to a buccaneer way of doing business away from the comfort zone. These adventure stories are comparable to the notorious African mercenary missions of the 1970s, and recent attempts to relive those have all ended in disaster. (See, for example the attempted 'Wonga coup' by Simon Mann and Mark Thatcher in Equatorial Guinea[50].) Africa has largely moved on; where it has not, one would be ill-advised to start a business.

The best way to dispel the myths and really understand a place is to go there. Fortunately, travelling to most African countries is now relatively cheap and easy, certainly no longer the 'tropical adventure' of the colonial days. Visit the continent and meet people, get a feel for the atmosphere of a capital city, discover the potential of the continent first-hand.

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Continent	GDP (millions of US$)
1 Europe:	18,799,894
2 North America	17,506,458
3 Asia	10,574,581
4 South America	3,632,841
5 Africa	1,594,777
6 Oceania	1,066,845
7 Antarctica	N/A

Continent	Population
Asia	4,298,723,000
Africa	1,110,635,000
North America	355,361,000
South America	574,127,000
Europe	742,452,000
Oceania	38,304,000
7 Antartica	N/A

Source (table left): World Bank report 2011 http://databank.worldbank.org/data/home.aspx

Source (table right): UN Department of Economic and Social Affairs http://esa.un.org/unpd/wpp/Excel-Data/population.htm

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