

Radelet, Steven (2010), *Emerging Africa: How 17 Countries Are Leading the Way*, Washington: Center for Global Development, ISBN 978-1-933286-51-8, 169 pp.

What can one possibly say about a book that has received praise not only from the president of Liberia – who wrote the foreword and cooperated with the author on a previous publication – but also from some of the most well-known African specialists at famous American universities, a host of other academics and politicians, and, to top it off, Bono?

The favourable reception of Steven Radelet's *Emerging Africa: How 17 Countries Are Leading the Way* is no doubt due in large part to its positive message, deliberately correcting the “popular perception of sub-Saharan Africa [...] as a region of stagnation, conflict, and authoritarian rule” (28). Botswana, Burkina Faso, Cape Verde, Ethiopia, Ghana, Lesotho, Mali, Mauritius, Mozambique, Namibia, Rwanda, São Tomé and Príncipe, Seychelles, South Africa, Tanzania, Uganda and Zambia are presented as “emerging countries” that have managed to combine economic growth with poverty reduction and increased political accountability.

Excluding oil exporters, Radelet identifies “emerging countries” as those that achieved an increase in annual income of at least 2 per cent per capita over the period from 1996 to 2008, though he also includes Zambia, which only narrowly missed the mark. In addition, there are six “threshold countries” that were selected because they have shown either respectable growth rates over a longer period (Benin, Malawi, Senegal) or rapid economic progress more recently (Liberia, Kenya, Sierra Leone). Although the label “emerging countries” is not nearly as catchy as “Asian Tigers”, Radelet shows how this group outperforms the rest, including oil-exporting countries, on a broad range of indicators.

The heart of the book consists of chapters describing the “five fundamental changes” in the “emerging countries”: the rise of more democratic and accountable government, the implementation of more sensible economic policies, the end of the debt crisis, the spread of new technologies, and the emergence of a new generation of policymakers, activists and business leaders. The argument is effectively supported by widespread use of graphs and diagrams, relying on publicly available data.

The chapters on the technology revolution and the coming of the “Cheetahs” are the weakest, perhaps because they were drafted in part by research assistants, as the author reveals. It is always inspiring to read about heroic individuals, but these stories do not add up to a coherent picture of a new generation of engaged citizens, businessmen, and leaders in Africa. Moreover, as this new generation is apparently springing up across the

whole continent, the crucial distinction between the emerging countries and the rest is diluted. The technology revolution in Africa is mostly about the spread of mobile phones, which are supposedly fuelling entrepreneurship and commerce, expanding access to finance, and strengthening health service delivery, along with democracy and governance. Rather than painting a picture of progress, the reader is reminded of how dismal the starting point really is and how basic the needs in these countries are.

This is the kind of book that has a picture of a black girl sitting in front of a laptop in the chapter entitled “The Technology Revolution” and that illustrates the concluding chapter, “Challenges and Opportunities on the Road Ahead”, with a picture of a sandy road with some cars and pedestrians disappearing into the distance. The conclusion itself contains few surprises, as deepening democracy, strengthening governance, creating new economic opportunities, and building strong education and health systems, among other topics, are uncontroversial. The same cannot be said for the recommendation to promote “proven prevention strategies such as male circumcision, abstinence and faithfulness programmes” (151) in the fight against HIV/AIDS.

It would be nice to think that there is a virtuous circle in which the five fundamental changes identified by Radelet reinforce each other, but that is unlikely to happen. For one thing, almost one-third of the “emerging countries” have been non-democratic for some or all of their recent history, and while most indicators show a positive trend, democracy scores in Africa have remained unchanged since the mid-1990s. Although the emerging countries have improved a little on the World Bank’s governance indicators since the mid-1990s, the rest of the continent’s scores actually worsened in this regard.

This raises some important questions: What exactly is the story? Is it about good news from Africa or good news from only 17 selected countries? If the latter, then what about the other countries? What are their prospects for economic and political development? What should those countries that are left behind do to get ahead – simply copy the policies of the “emerging countries”? What has prevented them from already having done so? Strangely, the author is silent on these important questions. One expects a book like this to put forward a firm set of recommendations, a recipe for success, based on an analysis of the choices made by the most successful African countries. It should not merely be about “how 17 countries are leading the way” but also about how others can follow.

For that, we first need to know why some countries are leading the way while others are on the threshold, and while still others – the majority of the 48 countries in sub-Saharan Africa – are actually lagging behind. In other words, we want to learn about the causes and conditions of success. This

type of analysis, unfortunately, is missing. The book documents change without seeking to explain it; it notices failure without investigating the causes and it celebrates how part of Africa is progressing without asking how the rest can follow. In other words: Why Ghana but not Gabon? Why Ethiopia but not Eritrea? How can Zimbabwe emulate Zambia? What does Niger have to do to become more like Namibia? Last but not least: Are Zambia and Namibia indeed the role models they are said to be?

- Matthijs Bogaards