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# Opportunities and Challenges for Development in Africa: An Introduction

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# Opportunities and Challenges for Development in Africa: An Introduction

## **Abstract**

This special issue of *GeoJournal: An International Journal of Human Geography and Environmental Sciences* emerged from a series of sessions that I co-organized with one of the authors, Kwadwo Konadu-Agyemang of The University of Akron at the 99th annual meeting of the Association of American Geographers, held in New Orleans, LA, March 5-8, 2003. The theme of the sessions was “Africa’s Development in the 21st Century: Pertinent issues, Opportunities and Challenges”. Although the presenters were not required to use any particular conceptual framework in their analysis, collectively the 18 papers that made up the sessions addressed the following questions with reference to Africa: What went wrong? What are the prospects of Africa moving beyond its current state of socio-economic and political development? Will the 21st century be any different? What are the opportunities for development? What are the constraints? Three of the papers in this issue (Otiso, Yeboah, and Amissah-Arthur) were first presented at these sessions, one paper (Konadu-Agyeman & Shabaya) emerged partly from the sessions, and the other one paper (Hanson), although presented at that meeting, was not as part of the sessions.

## **Keywords**

African and African American Studies, spatial and socio-economic inequality, geography

## **Disciplines**

Agricultural and Resource Economics | Environmental Indicators and Impact Assessment | Urban, Community and Regional Planning

## **Comments**

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## Opportunities and Challenges for Development in Africa: An Introduction

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This special issue of *GeoJournal: An International Journal of Human Geography and Environmental Sciences* emerged from a series of sessions that I co-organized with one of the authors, Kwadwo Konadu-Agyemang of The University of Akron at the 99<sup>th</sup> annual meeting of the Association of American Geographers, held in New Orleans, LA, March 5-8, 2003. The theme of the sessions was “Africa’s Development in the 21<sup>st</sup> Century: Pertinent issues, Opportunities and Challenges”. Although the presenters were not required to use any particular conceptual framework in their analysis, collectively the 18 papers that made up the sessions addressed the following questions with reference to Africa: What went wrong? What are the prospects of Africa moving beyond its current state of socio-economic and political development? Will the 21<sup>st</sup> century be any different? What are the opportunities for development? What are the constraints? Three of the papers in this issue (Otiso, Yeboah, and Amissah-Arthur) were first presented at these sessions, one paper (Konadu-Agyeman & Shabaya) emerged partly from the sessions, and the other one paper (Hanson), although presented at that meeting, was not as part of the sessions.

The goal of this special issue is less ambitious than that of the sessions. The five papers published here address some of the important challenges that hamper Africa’s development efforts

and suggest ways of addressing them – including a discussion of spatial and socio-economic inequality, Africans’ creativity and resilience and the potential usefulness of climatic models for agricultural productivity. The authors however do not pretend to provide silver bullet solutions to the problems they discuss; in fact in some cases they disagree over the causes, and therefore the solutions of the problems they address. Such debates are healthy not only for a continent as diverse as Africa, but equally importantly they provide a justification of why geography matters in the search for solutions to Africa’s crisis. Moreover, they point to avenues for future research.

Two of the papers (Otiso and Konadu-Agyeman & Shabaya) discuss the persistence of spatial and socio-economic inequality in Africa, albeit from different points of view. The Otiso paper chronicles the Kenyan government attempts to use secondary cities as a strategy for reversing the country’s urban and regional inequalities inherited from colonialism and discusses why such strategies have failed. He identifies two phases on the strategy: between 1970 and 1983, top-down strategies were pursued, but with the adoption of Structural Adjustment Programs (SAPs) in the 1980s, the government shifted to bottom-up strategies, as exemplified by the District Focus for Rural Development (DFRD). He argues that both policies failed because true decentralization of political and economic power that is necessary for ensuring success of secondary cities as spatial development hubs was never implemented because it contradicted the interests of the elites. According to him, if the government is serious about spatial inequalities, then it must develop a comprehensive urban and regional development strategy that ensures real devolution of political and fiscal power to municipal authorities. While Otiso sees the potential of secondary cities as a solution to the inequality, Konadu-Agyeman and Shabaya suggest that African countries should focus on the eliminating political corruption and rent-seeking as part of a strategy for reducing inequality. They argue that although inequality in Africa is rooted in the

continent's colonial history, the post-colonial persistence and worsening inequalities can only be understood with reference to the widespread corruption, nepotism and mismanagement by the elites. The authors document various forms of inequality in Ghana and Zimbabwe – rural/urban, regional, and socio-economic – and make a case for a relationship between persistence of inequality and political corruption through urban bias policies. According to them, “the allocation of more resources to urban areas to pacify the urban elite while depriving the rural areas of development programs that are due them is itself a form of corruption (pp??).

Yeboah's paper on housing the urban poor and Hanson's paper on apprenticeship collectively discusses the creative responses of individual Africans to the challenges that they face. Yeboah asks a basic question frequently ignored by the international agencies that support self-help housing policy for the poor: what type of housing do the poor want and how can the poor be enabled to get what they want? Using ethnographic case studies of three homeowners in Accra, Ghana, each representing the following housing experiences: the relatively cheap houses built by the poor; the moderately expensive estate houses built by development companies; and the very expensive individually developed villa-style houses. Yeboah finds that although there is not much difference in these three types of housing in terms of their ability to provide protection from the elements, they differ significantly in terms of size, materials used, services available and the cost of housing. He concludes that given the necessary support, the poor can provide their own housing. Thus, the government's role should be limited to facilitating self-help housing for the poor by providing security of land tenure, creating innovative housing finance systems that target the poor, and supporting research that combines traditional and modern building materials and techniques. Like Yeboah, Hanson discusses how individuals are responding to the economic change by documenting how the practice of apprenticeship has been transformed into

a survival strategy in Ghana. Using Chamber's concept of vulnerability and Watts and Bohle's concept of "space of vulnerability" he argues that neoliberal economic reforms have increase the vulnerability of many urban households, compelling them to adopt creative survival strategies, including reliance on apprenticeship. He argues that apprenticeship in Ghana is no longer merely a means for knowledge and skills transfer, but has also become an avenue for social networking and has been commodified into a business contract. The new formation works to benefit proprietors because it allows them to acquire revenue, increase production and secure cheap labor. It also helps them in cultivating and sustaining social networks that can be useful for gaining access to materials, resources, information and credit.

Finally, Amissah-Arthur addresses one of the major hindrances to agricultural productivity in Africa: the year-to-year variation in the onset of rainfall and extreme climatic conditions (especially the frequent incidence of droughts and floods). Using El Niño – Southern Oscillation (ENSO) based predictors, in a site in Meru, Kenya, she demonstrates that climatic forecasts could be used to help farmers change crop management strategies, such as selecting appropriate planting dates and maize cultivars to help minimize risk and improve productivity.

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1. "*Kenya's secondary city growth strategy at a crossroads: Which way forward?*" Kefa M. Otiso, Department of Geography, Bowling Green State University, Bowling Green, OH 43403. Email: [kmotiso@bgnet.bgsu.edu](mailto:kmotiso@bgnet.bgsu.edu)
2. "*What has Corruption got to with it? Understanding the Persistence of rural-urban and inter-regional inequalities in Ghana and Zimbabwe*" Kwadwo Konadu-Agyemang, Department of Geography and Planning, The University of Akron, Akron, Ohio 44325-5005. Email: [kkonadu@uakron.edu](mailto:kkonadu@uakron.edu) and Judith Shabaya, College of Applied Science, University of Cincinnati, OH, 45206. Email: [jueds@yahoo.com](mailto:jueds@yahoo.com)
3. "*Housing the Urban Poor in Twenty-First Century Sub-Saharan Africa: What do the Poor in Ghana Want and how can they get it?*" Ian E.A. Yeboah, Departments of Geography and Black World Studies, Miami University, Oxford, Ohio 45056. Email: [yeboahie@muohio.edu](mailto:yeboahie@muohio.edu)
4. "*Vulnerability, partnerships and the pursuit of survival: Urban livelihoods and apprenticeship contracts in a West African city*" Kobena Hanson, Department of Geology and Geography, West Virginia University, Morgantown, WV 26506. Email: [kobena.hanson@mail.wvu.edu](mailto:kobena.hanson@mail.wvu.edu)
5. "*Value of Climate Forecasts for Adjusting Farming Strategies in Sub-Saharan Africa*" Abigail Amissah-Arthur, Dept of Geography, Geology and Environment, Slippery Rock University, Slippery Rock, PA, 16057. Email: [ABIGAIL.ARTHUR@SRU.EDU](mailto:ABIGAIL.ARTHUR@SRU.EDU)