



Africa Expert Exposes Myths Around Development on Continent

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"Single solutions (to poverty in Africa) are tempting: more aid, more democracy, eradicate corruption, get prices right, get better leadership. But inevitably, these single answers leave true believers disheartened. In the book I call Africa 'the graveyard of silver bullets'," quips Todd Moss, a respected international economist and author of the recently-released book, 'African Development: Making Sense of the Issues and Actors'.

Moss, a senior fellow at the Center for Global Development, an anti-poverty think-tank based in Washington DC, says he wrote the book not as a "quick fix" or as a "text book" aimed at ending impoverishment in Africa, but to provide an "orientation" to those working in the continent's development sector.

He offers no answers to people trying to find a plan for saving Africa. In fact, Moss's book cautions against such an approach, in the face of heightened interest in the continent.

"While interest in Africa is rising, there are also a lot of barriers to understanding Africa and its challenges. Africa, especially for Americans, is very far away, and mysterious."

Moss is also a former senior economic advisor on Africa at the World Bank, and says he remains surprised by the fact that many self-professed "African experts" have never even visited the continent. Moss himself has spent many years in various countries in Africa researching why, after half-a-century of development efforts, much of the continent remains mired in poverty.

"We're now in the middle of a modern-day crusade with promises to do a lot more (for Africa): more aid, freer trade, new technology, greater engagement ... There probably has never before been so much attention on Africa's political and economic and cultural challenges than there is right now," Moss asserts.

But many of the critical debates are far from settled, he says, and in his book he seeks to highlight these.

Moss, whose work focuses on United States-Africa relations and financial issues facing sub-

Saharan Africa - including policies that affect private capital flows, debt and aid – also teaches on African economics at Georgetown University.

He says he wrote the book in an attempt to penetrate the “sea of jargon” about development in Africa.

“There’s a lot of misinformation out there...A lot of people go to Africa with more enthusiasm than knowledge. I don’t want my students to go work in Tanzania and not know who was (the country’s founding president) Julius Nyerere. I don’t want friends who are joining the peace corps in Mali, or going to work in public health in Ghana, or to teach in Zambia, to not know, what does the World Bank really do (in Africa).”

Moss maintains that his book tries to make “simple sense” of the issues and actors involved in development in Africa. It answers such questions as “Who was Kwame Nkrumah (Ghana’s founding president? Who are the key figures in Africa today? What is NEPAD (the New Partnership for Africa’s Development)? Why isn’t Africa growing as fast as Asia?”

Moss says there are “armies” of donors and aid workers working against poverty in Africa, but the continent remains largely poor. He reserves criticism for non-governmental organizations.

“The saintly reputation in some circles of NGO’s is sometimes underserved. Many NGO’s loudly demand to be heard and claim to speak for the people, but are themselves often accountable to nobody.”

According to Moss, there are “multiple views” on African leaders in the international development community. Some see African political elites as working for the good of the people; some consider them to be little more than thieves. To expose this duality, Moss in his book highlights the example of Republic of Congo President, Denis Sassou-Nguesso, who is constantly pleading for debt relief for his war-wracked country, and telling the world that he cares about his people.

“You could also argue that he was a thug that came to power as the head of a vicious gang called the Cobras, who couldn’t really care less about his own people and when attending UN poverty summits in New York, thought nothing of spending three hundred grand of his country’s money at a luxury hotel,” Moss says.

He cautions against what he terms the “hype” surrounding development in Africa.

“Those seeking to get attention or raise money for African causes, invariably invoke emotional appeals to ‘crisis’ and ‘emergency’; usually there are pictures of underfed children – flies on the eyes is a perennial favorite and I think should be considered an immediate red flag. At the same time there are always salesmen for Africa who think that the real problem is media misrepresentation, or that Africa has finally turned the corner; we don’t need to worry anymore.”

Moss says the development sector is “rife with many myths” that get repeated so often that people come to believe them. These “myths disguised as facts”, he states, are aimed at

ensuring that NGO's receive more funding.

"There are facts peddled, sometimes by campaigners – for example the fact peddled by anti-debt campaigners that debt was killing 19, 000 children a day in Africa. And this is a figure was arrived at through a convoluted series of both errors and assumptions."

Moss labels the aid industry in Africa a "mess of confused ideas" and "dysfunctional agencies" that is in itself part of Africa's problem.

Much of the data on which efforts at development in Africa are based is of "pretty bad quality", says Moss.

"Even very basic information such as GDP, exports, number of children in school, or how much a particular country spends on hospitals, is little more than an educated guess. Sometimes formal surveys are done - through a census or other formal agencies - but these are a lot more infrequent than you would think," he warns.

In his book, Moss cautions that there are "very large margins of error" in the data collected about Africa.

"Is a country with an average income per capita of \$300, really 50 percent better off than its neighbor, at \$200? I wouldn't think so. If a country's reported primary school enrollment jumps by four percentage points next year, how much confidence do we have that there are a lot more kids in school?" he asks.

"Now if we think that aid agencies are setting their budgets based on getting such results, and that countries get more money when they reach these targets, it's pretty easy to see that the incentives are aligned for donors and recipients to overestimate gains. And at the same time there are reasons to think that people would rather not disclose a lot of this information - especially to government agencies or too foreign enumerators. Now imagine a stranger shows up at your house, and starts asking all kinds of long, detailed questions about your personal finances and your family ... How much are you really going to tell them?"

Moss also urges scholars et al to "keep Africa's size in perspective. Africa looms very large in development circles, but it's really a very tiny player on the global stage. Metropolitan Washington DC has 5 million people; there are 20 countries in Africa that are actually smaller in population."

African economies are "even more miniscule", says Moss: "The economies of all 48 sub-Saharan countries – including South Africa – combined, is about the same size as Chicago's economy. I live in Montgomery County, Maryland and the economy of Montgomery County is bigger than every single African country, except for South Africa and Nigeria."

But after half a century of independence in Africa, Moss explains, the lack of economic progress on the continent is "one of the greatest disappointments in recent history". But even more worrying, he says, after many years of efforts to free Africa from poverty, is how little is understood about how to turn a poor society into a wealthier one.

"As a whole there is still no clear way to turn Africa around. Even if its recognized that external efforts can only do so much, and that change must come from within, the development community still really does not know how to encourage that process. In short, we simply do not know how to make Chad more like South Korea."

Moss, however, believes that Africa has "some very real opportunities" - but they come with major implications.

"The potential of global trade and investment to contribute to African prosperity is absolutely massive – if the conditions are right. But taking advantage of these opportunities and not allowing Africa to be further marginalized means getting Africa into the race to the top by equipping African societies to compete in the global economy. And this endeavor is not only the responsibility of African leaders, but also



for the world to ensure that the rules are fair and not fixed to Africa's disadvantage."

Much of Africa is mired in poverty, despite a half century of development efforts

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