

USA Africa Dialogue Series - Bright Continent: - By Nicholas Kristof, Published: May 1, 2009

Mention Africa in polite company, and those around you may grimace, shake their heads sadly and profess sympathy. Oh, all those wars! Those diseases! Those dictators!

Naturally, that sympathy infuriates Africans themselves, for the conventional view of Africa as a genocide inside a failed state inside a dictatorship is, in fact, wrong. In the last few years, Africa over all has enjoyed economic growth rates of approximately 5 percent, better than in the United States (although population growth is also higher). Africa has even produced some "tiger cub" economies, like Botswana and Rwanda, that show what the continent is capable of. (A new Web site, See Africa Differently, specifically aims to present a more positive image of the continent.)

The bane of Africa is war, but the number of conflicts tearing apart the continent has dwindled. The murderous old buffoons like Idi Amin are gone, and we're steadily seeing the rise of highly skilled technocrats, who accept checks on their power and don't regard the treasury as their private piggy bank. The Rwandan cabinet room is far more high-tech than the White House cabinet room, and when you talk to new leaders like Ellen Johnson Sirleaf of Liberia you can't help wondering about investing your 401(k) in Liberian stocks.

Richard Dowden's "Africa : Altered States, Ordinary Miracles" aims in part to correct the negative stereotypes. Dowden, a veteran British journalist who now heads the Royal African Society, has been bouncing around the continent since 1971 and covers a great deal of ground. Much of the text is travelogue that I found a yawn. But Dowden is at his best when looking at grand themes - like the degree to which Africa is more promising than journalists or aid workers often acknowledge.

"The media's problem is that, by covering only disasters and wars, it gives us only that image of the continent," Dowden writes ♦ and 90 percent of the Africans reading this are now nodding at that line. "Persistent images of starving children and men with guns have accumulated into our narrative of the continent."

"The aid industry too has an interest in maintaining the image of Africans as hopeless victims of endless wars and persistent famines," Dowden continues. "However well intentioned their motives may once have been, aid agencies have helped create the single, distressing image of Africa. They and journalists feed off each other."

In particular, Dowden lets loose at celebrities like Bob Geldof and politicians like Tony Blair with their "messianic mission to save Africa." As Dowden writes: "That set teeth on edge. It sounded like saving Africa from the Africans."

I've thought a good deal about these issues, partly because I'm often a purveyor of columns about war and disaster in Africa, from Darfur to Congo to AIDS in southern Africa. And frankly, it's discomfiting to feel that I'm helping Africa by exposing such catastrophes, and then have African leaders complain - as they do - that such reporting undermines their access to foreign investment and their ability to expand their economies and overcome poverty.

My own take is that we in the news media and in the aid world can and should do a much better job providing context and acknowledging successes. Yet the problem surely isn't that the news media have overdone coverage of the disasters. Congo is the most lethal conflict since World War II, costing about five million lives since

1998, and it has dragged on partly because journalists haven't done a better job propelling it onto the international agenda. You'll never persuade me that we've overcovered the slaughter in Congo ♦ our sin is that we didn't scream enough, not that we screamed too much.

I agree more with Dowden's point that Africans must be more central to the narrative. As he writes: "Aid agencies, Western celebrities, rock stars and politicians cannot save Africa. Only Africans can develop Africa. Outsiders can help, but only if they understand it, work with it." It's true that the most successful and cost-effective interventions are typically not those started by a grand conference in a capital; rather, they are the grass-roots efforts started by local people with local knowledge addressing local needs. We could do much more to support such efforts, with us Westerners serving as aides and financiers to African social entrepreneurs.

After discussing these themes in the opening of his book, Dowden takes us on a wearisome sight-seeing excursion through Somalia, Sudan, Zimbabwe, Uganda, Burundi and Rwanda. But then the journey abruptly livens up when, hidden in a chapter on Senegal, there is a thoughtful discussion of why Africa is poor. Dowden chronicles the problems of colonialism and geography, but he also bluntly points the finger at wretched leadership. He quotes Jerry Rawlings, the former Ghanaian ruler, as acknowledging that outsiders were not to blame and adding, "We broke the pot."

One of Africa's problems to this day is that there is very little manufacturing of the kind that is powering Asia's industrial revolution. The sweatshops of Asia look unpalatable to Westerners, but it's sometimes said that in a poor country the only thing worse than being exploited is not being exploited. Employment opportunities in Africa are meager and rarely involve wealth creation.

"Many African friends who tried to get a business enterprise going," Dowden writes, "all reported the same problems: workers did not turn up on time, they had no urgency and they delivered sloppy work. Often they found themselves blocked by rivals. The elites who made money out of importing and exporting had an interest in preventing the development of local manufacturing or processing."

One of the best American aid programs is almost unknown but addresses this problem. It's called AGOA - the African Growth and Opportunity Act - and it offers duty-free import of African manufactured goods into America, to encourage the rise of a vibrant business sector in Africa.

Dowden tends to be skeptical about the benefits of aid. "It is significant that none of the most passionate advocates of aid for Africa are African," he says. He acknowledges that aid can help with vaccination programs and emergency relief and in some kinds of development but adds that "aid from the outside cannot transform whole societies." This is also the argument of a controversial new book by an Oxford-educated Zambian, Dambisa Moyo, called *Dead Aid: Why Aid Is Not Working and How There Is a Better Way for Africa* (Farrar, Straus & Giroux, \$24).

Dowden would like to see Western countries help in ways other than simply offering aid. Ending agricultural subsidies in the West, for example, would be a huge benefit to the many African farmers who have to compete. West African cotton farmers suffer not only from droughts, corruption and wretched roads, but also from America's cotton subsidies.

I'm more sympathetic to aid (while acknowledging its myriad shortcomings) than Dowden is, but he's on target

in most areas. In particular, I think his basic optimism is well founded, with the caveat that climate change may wreak particular havoc in Africa.

We journalists tend to cover Africa in stark and simple contrasts, but countries live and grow and falter in grays. So it's refreshing to encounter not only Dowden's hopefulness, but also his reliance on shading and nuance, on the recognition that the world does not have to feel sorry for Africa to care about it.

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A version of this article appeared in print on May 3, 2009, on page BR16 of the New York edition.

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