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Ifedapo Adeleye • Mark Esposito Editors Africa's Competitiveness in the Global Economy



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Foreword

This book is a timely effort to rethink Africa's economic narrative. For nearly two decades Africa's popular storyline was represented by the "Africa Rising" meme built on the commodity boom and rise of China as Africa's leading trading partner. It was simply, catchy and hopeful. It was both hopeful and misleading. The narrative gave hope those who thought that revenue from commodity exports could be reinvested to spur Africa's economies and diversify industrial growth. Worse, it lulled those who believed that the rise of China and the associated commodity boom would restore Africa's so-called comparative advantage as world supplier of raw materials.

The optimism gave birth to new ideas such as resource-based industrialization that were pegged on the historical belief in raw materials as Africa's best starting point for long-term economic transformation. The optimism wasn't all misplaced. For many it became a source of pride and renewed self-confidence that extended to countries that were not benefitting from the commodity boom.

The impact of such optimism will outlive commodity price fluctuations. But optimism alone does not constitute a strategy that could guide Africa's search for alternative development pathways. This book provides new intellectual and pragmatic approaches that could help the continent enhance its global competitiveness and transcend the magical thinking that surrounds reliance on commodity exports. At the core of the alternative approach offered in this book is the importance of industrial policy in long-term economic transformation. The focus on industrial development is a welcome departure from twentieth-century market liberalization ideology that defined globalization as we know it today.

The book elaborates a number of strategic policy approaches needed for industrial development. The most notable of these are the role of cities as centers of industrial diversification, banking institutions as catalysis of industrial growth, services as an integral part of overall economic growth, and human capital development as a critical driver of development.

African cities are some of the most underutilized economic assets on the continent. In most countries they account for the bulk of economic output. Yes, they are hardly managed as economic assets. They are often treated as administrative units often falling under local government. This deprives them not only of the support their need to advance industrial development, but as second-rate regions they hardly get the talent that truly reflects their economic potential. Drawing from diverse strands of economic theory, the book seeks to reposition African cities as centers of industrial innovation and diversification. The point here is not about cities as administrative unit but as clusters of critical assets necessary for industrial dynamism. The same cluster logic is extended to agricultural and energy sectors.

Part of the alignment of urban assets to drive industrial growth includes redefining the role of banking institutions so they can serve as catalysts of industrialization. This is not unique to Africa. Banks have placed this strategic role in emerging economies around the world, starting with Europe and the US when they were in their early stages of industrialization. The book examines this potential with specific emphasis on the role of indigenous pan-African Banks (PABs). The rise and growth of PABs represents a set of new assets that did not exist in the early decades of post-colonial Africa.

The need to rethink the role of the service sector is one of the themes addressed in this book. Much of the economic theory on this topic has been misleading and at odds with reality. The linear assumption that economies transition through certain stages that include the shift from industry to services has been heralded as a model for Africa to explore. The view has been that Africa could leapfrog industrial development and move into services. There are cases where this is possible but the reality is that services are often an integral part of healthy ecological, agricultural and industrial foundation. This view suggests that the need to replace the linear model of economic stages with a more robust systems approach that acknowledges the importance of integration.

Finally, the book stresses the importance of human capital development as a critical driver of economic diversification. This is a key point given Africa's deficiencies in higher education, especially the limited investment in fields such as engineering. The point here is not to argue against humanities and social sciences but to redress the imbalances in the system and biases against investment in technical fields.

This book appeals to policymakers, academics and practitioners alike. But even more important is the timing of its publication. Africa is currently negotiating the creation of a Continental Free Trade Area (CFTA) that will cover all the 55 members of the African Union. The negotiations are an important testing ground for many of the ideas proposed in this book on how to enhance Africa's global competitiveness. Maybe the most immediate application of the ideas is at the African regional level. If Africa cannot rapidly expand its internal trade, it is unlikely to compete favorably internationally. Vibrant regional trade leagues will equip the continent with the knowledge and skills needed to play globally.

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