



## THE LINK BETWEEN ECONOMIC GROWTH AND DEVELOPMENT

A snapshot of the situation in Africa today: regions and even entire states overwhelmed by war, political instability and climate phenomena such as drought and floods, and now the scourge of COVID-19 as well. What is the impact of all this on economic growth? We asked Giovanni Carbone.

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**o At the start of the COVID-19 pandemic, there was talk of everyone being “on the same boat”, whether in China, Africa or Europe, since the virus would eventually come to all of us. It was the first time in a long while that the global North had experienced such a sense of vulnerability. Nearly two years later, it’s clear that we are not all the same. How has COVID-19 impacted Africa’s equilibrium and vulnerabilities?**

From the economic point of view, last year sub-Saharan Africa experienced its first recession in some time, interrupting a long period of growth. We hadn’t seen such a negative trend for about a quarter of a century. There was some recovery this year, but it wasn’t as strong as could have been hoped for. So the region is lagging behind the progress being made in other economic areas and groups, meaning that the inequality gap with other countries is growing – a reversal of the pattern of the last two decades.

Many factors play a role here, but one of them is unfortunately the pandemic itself. Every day we see how ongoing uncertainty over it continues to shake the markets. And African countries face an aggravating circumstance: uncertainty about what’s going to happen in terms of the virus’s spread and vaccination campaigns, which aren’t going well, with low inoculation rates across the continent. And there’s no reason to believe that things are going to get much better any time soon.

All of this is having a clear impact on both the population and social indicators; in fact, we’re seeing a rise in the number of poor people due to the pandemic. So it’s not just a question of positive or negative percentage changes in GDP, but also very tangible negative impacts on individuals.

**o In addition to COVID-19, and in terms of CUAMM’s own experiences, there have been other crises recently including the cyclone in Mozambique, instability in Ethiopia and drought in Angola. If we were to create a sort of map of the emergencies that the continent is facing right now, which would you say are having the greatest impact?**

The first is the challenge of economic growth. There’s a risk when talking about Africa of jumbling all its countries together in the

same pot. While it’s true that the kind of economic slowdown we’re seeing is harder for these countries than for those in the global North, a clarification is needed: *some* African countries are slowing down, like Nigeria, Zambia and Angola, but others, such as Ghana, Tanzania, Ivory Coast and Kenya, continue to do well.

The second threat being faced are armed conflicts. Their numbers continue to grow, and this needs to be underscored, because it hasn’t always been the case. There’s never been a time of peace across Africa, but there have been times – which coincided in part with times of economic improvement – when fewer of its countries were affected by conflicts, and those that did exist were more contained.

The best-known and monitored conflict is the Tigray war, in Ethiopia, a country that stands apart in terms of its growing economy, demographics and geopolitical significance. So the problem is two-fold: the population that’s being forced to live through this atrocity and the economic consequences of the war. Ethiopia was previously doing quite well in terms of well-distributed growth and poverty reduction, but now it’s regressing.

Another vast area where conflict is expanding is the Sahel. After starting in Mali it spread to Burkina Faso and Niger, and now, despite external interventions, it risks spreading further. Then there are newer conflicts, like the one in northern Mozambique, which is in a relatively limited area. This points up something we should keep in mind: the number of conflicts is mounting, but so far we haven’t reached the levels of victims that were seen in the years of the most intense conflicts, the 1990s and early 2000s. We also need to consider how these conflicts and instability are leading to the deterioration of freedoms, of that small bit of democracy that had begun to ripen in parts of the region’s countries, so here too we’re in a phase of regression.

Finally, there’s the climate crisis. We always talk about how Africa’s not to blame for it, that it’s the continent which has contributed the least in terms of the accumulation of greenhouse gas emissions, and is *still* the one that contributes the least. But it’s also the one that’s most exposed to the adverse consequences of climate change, in various ways: through processes of desertification or extreme phenomena risks like floods and heat waves, including for some coastal capitals and island nations. And it’s not just a matter

of exposure. This raises the issue of Africa's role in the fight against climate change, of transition and green growth. These involve costs and financing, which in the global North can also be opportunities, for example by converting companies to green businesses. But it's not as easy to replace what's been built in African countries, because it's less stable and there's less of it.

I'm reminded of the title of an older book on development, *Kicking Away The Ladder*. It's like after using that polluting ladder to reach our own level of development, we Westerners want to snatch it away from others who'd like to use it to do the same thing. While African countries should be part of strategies for tackling the climate crisis, it's the countries that polluted our planet that should bear the cost of cleaning it up.

- o **As we experience an exacerbation of many situations – economic, social, and so forth – do you see any possibility of recovery? Italy's National Recovery and Resilience Plan (NRRP) doesn't mention Africa or relations with Africa as a driver of development.**

I don't think any political entrepreneur or organization raised or pushed the issue hard enough. In recent years, starting around 2013-14, we Italians have paid attention to sub-Saharan Africa. So we haven't remained static; we've changed our approach. Aside from immigration, one of the primary reasons was Africa's economic potential, which I think is still, and should be, a positive incentive. There's a need to go work in and make links with African countries, bringing them into economic processes; it's the only way to help stimulate economic growth as well as the well-being of the population. Development cooperation projects

also have a role to play, but these interventions can't just be done by outsiders, or vertically; they need to be integrated, because they're not enough on their own. Development isn't economic growth alone, but it *can* derive from it. This is why Africa needs to create links with other economies, with trade and investments. It's a fine line, though, since it's clear that such exchanges are based on Western interests, on certain economic rationales, as well. So with regard to Africa, and other regions as well, hopefully some boundaries will be set, but I can't see a different way forward. Greater integration with other parts of the world will provide tools to make the wheel of growth spin faster.

- o **You said that development cooperation is not enough on its own. Overall, what role do you think NGOs like Doctors with Africa CUAMM play in Africa, and what role should they focus on in order to foster the development of African countries in these times of unremitting emergencies?**

Looking at it from the perspective of development processes, these are – and need to be – specific niche roles; to be successful they have to be integrated into what actually *is* in a given country. Vis-à-vis climate phenomena, I envision continually expanding roles, at least in terms of the increasing frequency of such crises. My hope is that the current phase will segue into a more positive, virtuous one in terms both of economic growth, which needs to become more sustainable, and of the current spread of conflicts, *coups d'état* and authoritarian regimes, which are having a bit of a renaissance. It's my hope and expectation that over the medium-long term, the previous path forward will be resumed.