

## Africa rising, but what is rising?

*Koert Lindijer* in Wageningen, October 28, 2014. Summary.

The continent, or most of it, is on the march. Most **economies are growing at a spectacular rate but, in a way, politics is reversing** to the autocratic era before the nineties.

In the 60's there was **economic growth led by the state**, with cooperatives and commodity boards, and the hope it would reach a form of equality. There were hardly any slums and poverty was very much in the rural areas.

**Of that ideal little is left.** Economies went into recession in the 80's and 90's, IMF and World Bank came in demanding huge reform in the state sector, also damaging, as in health with a later effect on the Ebola epidemic.

The big change 15 to 20 years ago was the **re-emergence of the private sector**. States sold off companies at giveaway prices and stealing took place, contributing to the emergence of the middle class, e.g. in Kenya. But a young chap in Nigeria told me: "free market means participating in the economy, freedom and democracy".

Withdrawal of the West after 1989 and arrival of Asia caused a surge in mineral exports to Asia. Huge export earnings plus the population explosion created a **consumer class**. Nigeria shows us a consumer society: long traffic jams, sexy ads for alcoholic drinks, expensive cars, deodorants, etc. It attracts foreign investors but as soon as you leave shopping malls, you get into public Africa with huge potholes on the roads, corrupt officials, a lot of crime and with human life in huge slums which is most degrading for millions. That is also free market.

Controversy still revolves around **private versus public Africa**. Positive signs are the new infrastructural projects, the huge expansion of internet and telephone communications, many more flight connections, and growing financial stability with less need for development aid from the West. Negative signs are that products made in Africa are still very rare, that growth does not translate into many more jobs, and hundreds of thousands of street kids in hopeless poverty.

There are now probably more than a million **Chinese** in Africa. In Kenya for instance they build roads and railroads. Many take up jobs that Africans should do. In Kenya companies complained of not getting contracts to build the new railroad; they went to the Chinese.

Economic progress does not have an equal match in **politics**. Most politicians are detached from the common man, they never dare to go to slums. There are no new ideologies. In many countries (Burundi, Congo, Burkina, Uganda) old leaders want to stay in power or keep power in the family (Kenya). Special cases are Rwanda and Ethiopia: countries with old fashioned dictatorships but they do deliver on development.

Ebola, civil wars and radicalisation all pose **serious threats**. When Somalia disintegrated the UN and the US thought they could stop it. What arrogance! Radical Islamic groups are new. Diverse reasons lead Africans to join terrorist groups. A military solution cannot solve the problem.

Several years back I was told that Africa does not have good soils like in Asia to develop a striving **agriculture** but now development strategists speak of enormous potential. I only see that the majority of the population (80%) live in rural areas. God forbid they all come to the cities. In Nigeria I met young people going back to rural areas to make a living. Policies stimulating local produce seem to work, after a long negligence of agriculture, a period with easy oil money. The Dutch disease, it is called.

The big land grab taking place and other efforts to go into large scale farming are a sign that **profit is the main driver**. Large scale farming may work in Africa, I really don't know, but it is taking place at a disadvantage for the smallholder. Can a complete free market help the development of agriculture? I wonder, but think that government has now to assist. Problems in agriculture in many countries are similar: lack of fertiliser, credit, education, good seeds, modern equipment and market information. The green revolution is yet to start.