

Our image of Africa is hopelessly obsolete

The huge advances the continent has made in recent years have yet to be acknowledged by the west



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The way it was: Bob Geldof in Ethiopia in 1985. Photograph: Rex Features

Think of [Ethiopia](#) and what do you see. Perhaps a starving child, flies in her eyes and belly distended. Painfully thin adults in raggedy clothes, staring balefully at the camera in a fetid refugee camp. Or possibly a famous self-declared saviour from the west, striding purposefully past the decaying corpse of an animal beside a dusty road.

Think again. See, instead, a booming capital city, its cafes filled with graduates and cranes lining the horizon. A nation that is one of the world's largest livestock producers and recently became the second country to take delivery of [Boeing's new 787 passenger jet](#). An economy that doubled in size this century and is growing at 7.5%.

Few countries symbolise the disconnect between outdated western perceptions of [Africa](#) and fast-changing realities on the ground better than Ethiopia, the continent's second most-populous nation, whose [long-serving leader, Meles Zenawi, died last week](#).

Although the example of one country can never fully explain a diverse continent, this ancient nation illustrates in many ways Africa's progress, potential and problems. Mostly, it is a picture of amazing progress, far removed from the usual stereotypes presented by much of the media and their allies in the [aid](#) lobby. They offer simplistic images of death and destruction, ignoring complex realities of a continent encompassing 54 countries and 11.6 million square miles in which life is becoming more peaceful and prosperous.

Last week, Africa was in the news over the shooting of striking miners in South Africa, a disturbing echo of the dark days of apartheid. The tragedy highlighted the failure of the party of liberation to deliver social justice in government; the nation is now the world's most unequal society. But it is worth remembering the country is a democracy, with free

expression, a fine constitution and some accountability for those deemed responsible.

Ethiopia's Zenawi was part of what Bill Clinton and Tony Blair hailed as the new generation of African leaders, heralding an African renaissance alongside [Paul Kagame](#) in Rwanda and [Yoweri Museveni](#) in Uganda. Politically, they failed to deliver, festering in office as despotic autocrats.

But there is a new Africa emerging, powered by capitalism, embracing globalisation and finally shaking off the shackles of colonialism and the cold war that proved so crippling to development. Just look at the land of Live Aid: one of the world's fastest-growing nations, a sub-Saharan success story like six more of the 10 most expanding economies. Poverty is far from banished – it's a grinding way of life for millions – but their numbers are falling fast.

The [global top 10](#) also includes [Ghana](#), which grew by more than 14% last year and whose cherished democracy sets such a great example; Mozambique, rising like a phoenix from the devastation of a long civil war; and Nigeria, the continent's potential superpower. Bundle all African countries together and they have grown faster for much of the past decade than East Asia.

Some dismiss this as just a consequence of the continent's rich resources at a time of rampant development in many parts of the globe. Certainly, oil has fuelled spectacular growth in several countries, while others have made recent discoveries of deposits that ensure Africa will play an increasingly critical geopolitical role. But Ethiopia does not pump any petroleum, relying instead on exports such as cattle, coffee and cut flowers; the value of these exports quadrupled in under a decade.

This is the youngest continent, enjoying a demographic dividend with a working population growing by around 10-12 million people each year. An emerging middle class – [one-third of Africans](#), according to one analysis – is behind an explosion in consumerism. Already, Africans spend more per head than Indians on goods and services.

There are still huge hurdles, with sclerotic border controls, stifling bureaucracy, sluggish courts and sleazy corruption. Infrastructure, while improving, remains inadequate – one reason for the boom in mobile phones transforming everything from agriculture to healthcare. Young Africans – impatient for change, innovative and increasingly well-educated – are using mobile technologies to solve problems presented by poor services and political stagnation.

And this vibrant continent is getting even younger, with plummeting levels of child mortality and falling fertility. Ethiopia, where nearly half the 84 million population is under the age of 15, is one of 10 countries seeing incredible falls in [infant death rates](#) of more than 5% a year. In Senegal, the decline is twice that, stunning figures without precedent in recent history.

There has been no single cause of this child health miracle, attributed to a mix of better governance, new technologies and improved health policies, while for all the enduring chaos in the Democratic Republic of Congo, conflict is becoming rarer and more localised. Even Somalia, ripped apart by civil war, is making a faltering return to normality; [last week, it convened its first parliament since 1991](#). As Michael Clemens, an economist at the Centre for Global Development, said: "This will be startling news for anyone who still thinks sub-Saharan Africa is mired in unending poverty and death. That Africa is slipping away."

Unfortunately, this message is failing to filter through to the west, where too many people remain locked into stale narratives of Africa as a land of suffering in need of our

salvation. This is to our long-term detriment, especially in Britain, with such strong historic ties, a common language in many countries and the soft power strength of pop music and Premier League football. Twenty years ago, there was virtual economic dependence on Europe; today, half of Africa's trade is with other developing nations – and not just China.

The continent is on the edge of economic takeoff similar to those seen so dramatically in China and India. For all the problems that still exist, a recent survey found investors in Africa are overwhelmingly positive, while those not there are unfailingly negative. These anachronistic attitudes reflect the west's myopic view, but we cannot afford to cling on to them in a world changing so fast. It is time to recognise the emergence of the new Africa.

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