AN EVIDENCE-BASED ANALYSIS FOR A GLOBAL READER

Why Is Africa Still Poor?

We Have Resources, Don't We?

COURAGE GARIKAI



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The analysis in this book synthesizes peer-reviewed research, publicly available data, and historical scholarship. Readers are encouraged to consult original sources cited in the appendix.

Courage Garikai Books

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To every African who has ever asked this question out loud — and to every reader anywhere who genuinely wants an honest answer.

Not a slogan. Not a recitation. An answer.

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PART I: THE QUESTION

Chapter 1: The Paradox That Stares at the World

Let me start with numbers, because numbers are where sentiment ends.

The African continent holds approximately **30% of the world's mineral reserves**. It holds roughly **40% of the world's gold**. It holds about **12% of global oil reserves** and **8% of global natural gas**. It contains some of the largest deposits on Earth of cobalt, platinum, chromium, manganese, diamonds, bauxite, coltan, and lithium — the mineral that will power the electric-vehicle revolution this century. It has **60% of the world's uncultivated arable land**. It has the second-largest tropical rainforest on the planet and the youngest, fastest-urbanizing population of any continent. The Democratic Republic of Congo alone holds mineral wealth estimated by some analysts at **$24 trillion** — enough, on paper, to make every Congolese citizen a millionaire several times over.

And yet:

The World Bank estimates that **more than 460 million people in sub-Saharan Africa** — roughly

half the population — were living in extreme poverty in 2024, defined as living on less than $2.15 per day. Sub-Saharan Africa accounts for **most of the world's extremely poor people**, despite being home to only about 14% of the global population. Africa supplies roughly **12% of global mineral exports** but captures only about **4-6% of the value** in green-energy supply chains. Manufactured goods account for only **19% of Africa's exports** but **62% of its imports** — meaning the continent sells what it digs up and buys back what other people make from it.

In 2023, the entire continent of 54 nations and 1.4 billion people had a combined GDP smaller than that of Germany, a country of 84 million. Nigeria, Africa's largest economy and its most populous nation, has a GDP per capita of around $2,200 — less than one-tenth that of South Korea, a country that was at a comparable level of development at the end of the Korean War in 1953.

This is the paradox that stares at the world. It has spawned a thousand think-tank reports, a hundred books, and millions of arguments in bars, on buses, in parliaments, and across dinner tables from Lagos to London, from Nairobi to New York. It is a question that almost every African has asked at some point, and that almost every visitor to the continent has wondered:

If Africa has so much, why do so many of its people have so little?

This book is my attempt to answer that question honestly.

Not with slogans. Not with the tired binaries that dominate the conversation — the people who blame everything on colonialism and refuse to hold African leaders accountable, and the people who blame everything on corruption and act as if history and global power don't exist. Not with ideological commitments. Not with pity. Not with Afro-pessimism or Afro-optimism, both of which are substitutes for thinking.

With evidence. With history. With economics. With concrete examples. With a willingness to hold multiple truths at the same time — because any honest answer to this question requires holding multiple truths.

Let me name some of those truths up front, so you know where this book is going.

It is true that the transatlantic and trans-Saharan slave trades over four centuries depopulated, destabilized, and fragmented large parts of Africa in ways whose effects can still be measured statistically today. It is also true that some African elites actively participated in and profited from those trades.

It is true that colonial powers — Britain, France, Portugal, Belgium, Germany, Italy, Spain — drew arbitrary borders, built infrastructure designed for extraction rather than development, imposed extractive political and economic institutions, actively suppressed local industry, and treated African territories as sources of raw materials and captive markets. It is also true that independence came more than sixty years ago for most African nations, and that six decades is long enough for at least some nations to have turned the legacy around — as several demonstrably have.

It is true that many African leaders have been corrupt, authoritarian, incompetent, or catastrophically short-sighted, looting national treasuries, presiding over patronage networks, and treating state resources as personal property. It is also true that international systems — tax havens, mining-concession laws, trade rules, structural-adjustment programs, illicit financial networks, arms sales — have actively facilitated and profited from that corruption.

It is true that Africa receives roughly $50-60 billion a year in foreign aid. It is also true that Africa loses approximately **$88.6 billion per year** in illicit financial flows — more than it receives in aid and more than it receives in foreign direct investment combined — making the continent a net exporter of capital despite being, by every conventional measure, capital-scarce.

It is true that geography matters — that Africa has fewer navigable rivers than Europe or Asia, that large parts of the continent are landlocked, that tropical diseases create persistent health burdens, that colonial infrastructure connected mines to ports rather than cities to each other. It is also true that geography is not destiny, as Botswana, Switzerland, Japan, and Singapore have all demonstrated in different ways.

It is true that many African countries have badly managed their resource wealth, spending oil and mineral windfalls on consumption rather than investment, running up debts in booms that crush them in busts, failing to diversify. It is also true that the global commodities market is structured in ways that make diversification actively difficult, with tariff escalation that penalizes processed goods, price volatility that punishes long-term planning, and multinational companies that routinely shift profits out of producing countries.

A serious answer cannot pick one of these truths and ignore the others. A serious answer must show how they connect — how historical extraction shaped institutions, how institutions shape policy, how policy interacts with the global system, how the global system reinforces internal weakness, and how internal weakness invites external exploitation. A serious answer must also look at the exceptions — the African countries that have, to meaningful degrees, beaten the

odds — and ask what they did differently, because the exceptions are the proof that poverty is not inevitable.

That is what this book tries to do.

A note on framing. The question “Why is Africa poor?” can sound like it treats an entire continent of 54 countries, 2,000+ languages, and extraordinary diversity as if it were a single, uniform problem. That is not my intent. There is enormous variation across Africa. Seychelles has a higher GDP per capita than some European countries. South Africa has the most industrialized economy on the continent alongside one of the world’s highest inequality rates. The DRC is one of the richest countries in the world in natural resources and one of the poorest in income per person. Morocco is a middle-income country with a thriving automotive and aerospace sector. Niger, at the other extreme, has one of the lowest human development indices on Earth. When I write about “Africa” in this book, I am writing about the dominant patterns — the dynamics that affect enough of the continent often enough to warrant generalization — while noting exceptions wherever they matter.

Nor do I want this book to be read as a counsel of despair. The title asks why Africa is still poor — not why Africa is poor, full stop. The word “still” matters. It acknowledges that something is wrong, that the situation is not inevitable, and that the question is why it persists. That framing is itself an act of optimism,

because if the causes can be understood, they can be addressed. And across the continent, a generation of builders — entrepreneurs, reformers, technologists, artists, farmers, public servants — is already addressing them. The final chapters of this book are about them.

Let me also say something about the question in the subtitle: “We have resources, don’t we?” That question carries an edge of frustration, and for good reason. It is the question almost every African asks after encountering a certain kind of foreign narrative that treats African poverty as a mystery, as if the continent is a charity case with nothing to offer. Africans know, often intuitively, that they are sitting on enormous wealth and that something about the system doesn’t add up. They are right to feel that. But the frustration can be misleading if it stops at “we have resources.” Having resources is the beginning of the story, not the end. The harder question — the one this book spends most of its pages on — is: why do those resources not translate into broad prosperity, and what would it take to change that?

That is the real question. Let me try to answer it.