



Current Path

Africa – progressing slower than the rest of the world

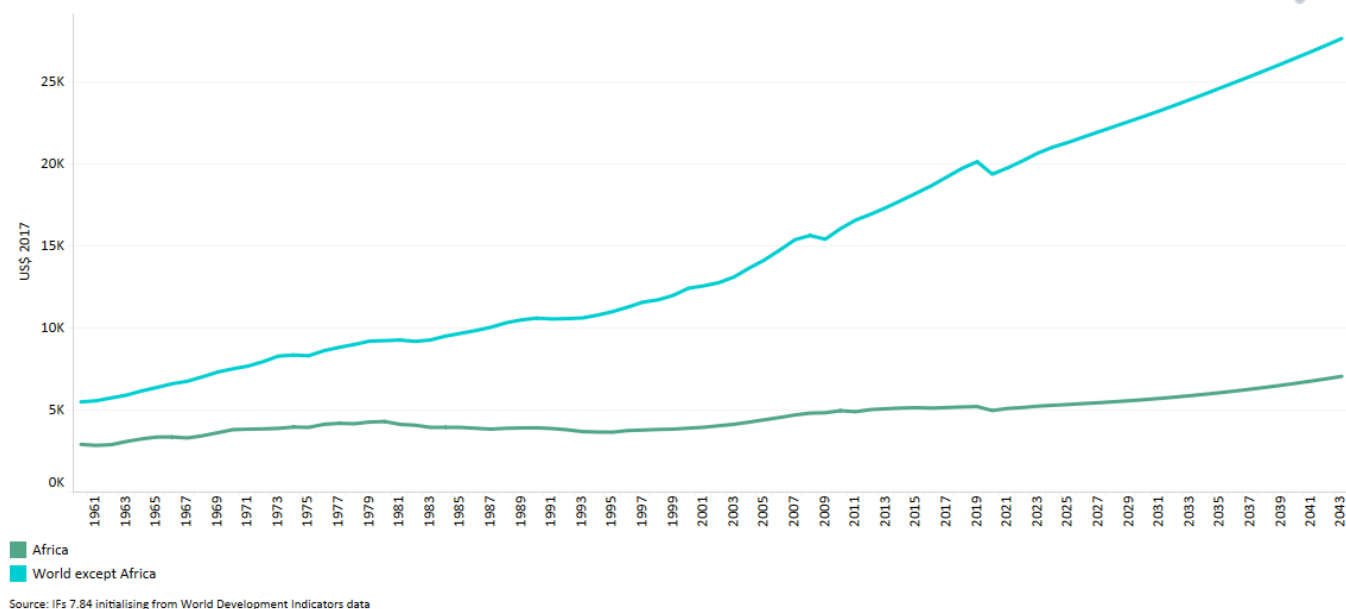
Jakkie Cilliers

Last updated 02 May 2024 using IFs v7.84

Africa – progressing slower than the rest of the world

In 1960, generally considered the start of the post-colonial era, gross domestic product (GDP) per capita in Africa was about half of the average in the rest of the world. More than half a century later, in 2019, the year before the COVID-19 pandemic upended things, GDP per capita in Africa had declined to only 26% of the average in the rest of the world. It will likely remain at this mediocre level for the next two decades. The gap is forecast to increase towards 2043, as shown in Chart 1.

Chart 1: GDP per capita for Africa and the rest of the world, 1960–2043



GDP per capita is a blunt measure of development progress. It often comes in for criticism because it does not take the quality of life or the distribution of economic output among the population into account. But it remains popular given its simplicity and reliance upon readily available data. It also allows for easy comparisons between different countries and regions.

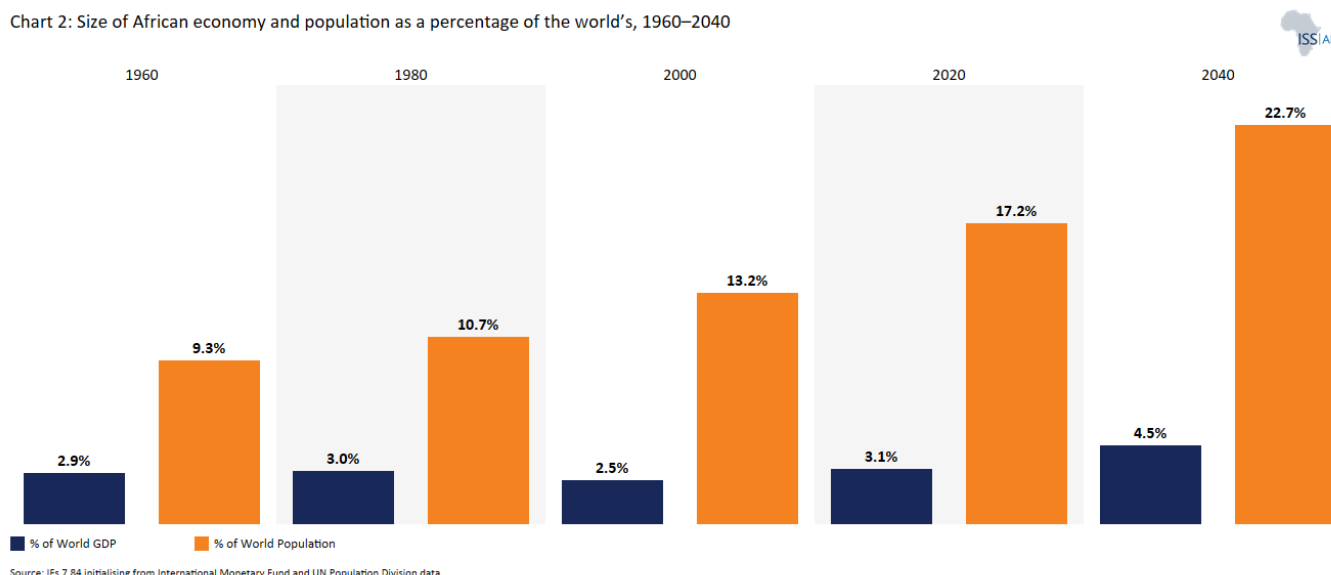
Africa's comparative performance has been dismal even for comparable regions around the world, such as South America and South Asia.[1] In 1960, the GDP per capita of Africa was more than double that of South Asia and 46% of South America's GDP. This gap has since widened. By 2019, Africa had lagged behind these developing regions of the world, putting its GDP per capita at only 73% of South Asia and 34% of South America's GDP.

There are, of course, significant country variations. Some countries, such as the Democratic Republic of the Congo (DR Congo) and Zimbabwe, have seen a generational loss of wealth and prosperity. In contrast, Botswana's current GDP per capita is 20 times larger than it was in 1960 and Equatorial Guinea has similarly seen an ostensibly large increase due to its oil wealth, much of it going to a single family. The impact of the COVID-19 pandemic means that GDP per capita for Africa only recovers to its 2019 average in 2022 meaning that, in 2024 when our forecasts start, GDP per capita will still be US\$74 lower than it would have been without the pandemic. And that shock has subsequently been amplified by the fallout from Russia's invasion of Ukraine.

The increasing divergence between the trend in GDP per capita in Africa versus the average for the rest of the world correlates with many other indices of human development or well-being, such as average levels of education and various health measures. Global events, such as the 2007/08 financial crisis, the 2020/21 COVID-19 pandemic and Russia's invasion of Ukraine, have had significant impacts, particularly in poor countries where people live precariously.

The challenge of the growing divergence between Africa and the rest of the world is reflected in Africa's marginal role in the global economy (Chart 2). In 1960, Africa accounted for 3% of the global economy. Sixty years later, that share remains unchanged, even though Africa's share of the global population has almost doubled: from 283 million (9% of the world's population) to 1.34 billion (17%) in 2020. By 2047, Africa's population will likely account for almost a quarter of the world's (2.4 billion out of 9.7 billion) but represent just 8% of the global economy.

Chart 2: Size of African economy and population as a percentage of the world's, 1960–2040



Compare this to East Asia,[2] a region that increased its share of global economic output from about 9% in 1960 to more than 25% today and is set to increase that portion to 30% by 2043. However, East Asia's share of the global population has shrunk from 27% in 1960 to 22% in 2019. It will decline to below 18% by 2043, pointing to its much more productive economies.

We, therefore, find ourselves in a situation where things are improving in Africa. Still, the continent is progressing slower than other comparable developing regions such as South America[3] and South Asia.[4]

Something drastic is needed to change this rather dismal forecast. Doing more of the same will not lead to tangible progress. Some health indicators—such as declining rates of infant mortality, improvements in life expectancy and so on—show that Africa is experiencing a broad-based improvement in human well-being and is even catching up with global averages to some extent. However, this is largely because rapid improvements at lower levels of development are easier to achieve, while continued improvements in rich countries are more difficult at their much higher levels. On most other well-being indicators, the gap between Africa and the rest of the world is either static or widening.

This website models and presents Africa's likely development trajectory (the Current Path) and the potential for ambitious improvements across various sectors to 2043. Each sector is presented as a separate theme in the navigation structure of the website, namely better governance ; getting more rapidly to a demographic dividend ; better health and basic water/sanitation (WaSH) infrastructure; an agricultural revolution ; more and better education ; a low-end manufacturing growth path; leapfrogging and investments in bulk infrastructure ; implementation of the African Continental Free Trade Area (AfCFTA); and leveraging more inward financial flows . The Combined Agenda 2063 scenario combines these sectoral scenarios to provide a likely ceiling or upper limit of Africa's development potential. We also review the impact of each scenario on jobs , carbon emissions/climate change and the impact of global developments on Africa's development potential in separate themes.

We use 2019, the year before COVID-19 spread globally, to compare levels of development. We then model each scenario

from 2024 to 2033 and review the impact by 2043— i.e. the end of the third ten-year implementation plan of Agenda 2063.

We apply each of the scenarios to every African country[5] to Africa's various regions and Africa as a whole) and to the eight regional economic communities (RECs) recognised by the African Union, as well as to Africa's country income groups as defined by the World Bank.

More information on the modelling platform and the scenarios is available in the [About](#) section and in the scenario section in each theme.

Endnotes

1. See the About section for the composition of South America and South Asia.
2. See the About section for the composition of East Asia.
3. Consisting of Argentina, Bolivia, Brazil, Chile, Colombia, Ecuador, Guyana, Paraguay, Peru, Suriname, Uruguay and Venezuela.
4. Consisting of Afghanistan, Bangladesh, Bhutan, India, Iran, Maldives, Nepal, Pakistan and Sri Lanka.
5. The IFs forecasting platform does not include separate data for Western Sahara, the 55th member of the African Union.

Donors and sponsors



Reuse our work

- All visualizations, data, and text produced by African Futures are completely open access under the [Creative Commons BY license](#). You have the permission to use, distribute, and reproduce these in any medium, provided the source and authors are credited.
- The data produced by third parties and made available by African Futures is subject to the license terms from the original third-party authors. We will always indicate the original source of the data in our documentation, so you should always check the license of any such third-party data before use and redistribution.
- All of our charts [can be embedded](#) in any site.

Cite this research

Jakkie Cilliers (2024) Current Path. Published online at futures.issafrica.org. Retrieved from <https://futures.issafrica.org/thematic/01-africas-current-path/> [Online Resource] Updated 02 May 2024.

About the authors

Dr Jakkie Cilliers is the ISS's founder and former executive director. He currently serves as chair of the ISS Board of Trustees and head of the African Futures and Innovation (AFI) programme at the Pretoria office of the Institute. His 2017 best-seller *Fate of the Nation* addresses South Africa's futures from political, economic and social perspectives. His three most recent books, *Africa First! Igniting a Growth Revolution* (March 2020), *The Future of Africa: Challenges and Opportunities* (April 2021), and *Africa Tomorrow: Pathways to Prosperity* (June 2022) take a rigorous look at the continent as a whole.

About African Futures & Innovation

Scenarios and forecasting can help Africa identify and respond to opportunities and threats. The work of the African Futures & Innovation (AFI) program at the Institute for Security Studies aims to understand and address a widening gap between indices of wellbeing in Africa and elsewhere in the world. The AFI helps stakeholders understand likely future developments. Research findings and their policy implications are widely disseminated, often in collaboration with in-country partners. Forecasting tools inspire debate and provide insights into possible trajectories that inform planning, prioritisation and effective resource allocation. Africa's future depends on today's choices and actions by governments and their non-governmental and international partners. The AFI provides empirical data that informs short- and medium-term decisions with long-term implications. The AFI enhances Africa's capacity to prepare for and respond to future challenges. The program is headed by Dr Jakkie Cilliers.