

Shattering Myths about Africa: How Geography, Diseases, and Hunger Hinder Africa's Economic and Social Development

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Abstract

This article examines the influential role of geography and environmental conditions on the socioeconomic conditions that characterize much of Africa. Perhaps no other world realm has been more stigmatized by racial prejudice and discrimination, gross ignorance, stereotypes, and neglect. And while it is true that Africa is the least developed continent by a variety of socioeconomic indicators, it is not their racial or cultural inferiority (historically powerful myths) that hinders their development. Africa must confront a wide range of geographic problems and environmental challenges not faced by other geographic realms. The author will argue that while history, racism, politics, and culture play pivotal roles in explaining Africa's woes, geographic and environmental conditions (diseases and hunger) are major barriers to developing economically viable and socially stable modern societies. Given global realities, Americans can ill afford to remain geographically illiterate and hope to prosper in a rapidly changing world.

Key Words: Africa, geography, environment, diseases, racism, economic development

I. Introduction

Africa. The mere mention of this continent conjures up stark perceptions, misperceptions, images, moral judgments, and worldviews regarding the landmass that served as the cradle of human evolution and continues to be an enigma for many people. Historically, Africa has often been referred to as the “dark continent”; this implies that Africa suffers from a host of barbaric behaviors rooted in the biological and cultural inferiority of its population (Kimble, 1960; Yeboah, 2010). Indeed, there are some people in the United States – as well as others across the globe who still adhere to racist and ethnocentric ideas posited during colonialism – who believe that many Africans are primitive people living in jungles, constantly engaged in tribal warfare, violent cannibals impervious to the values and institutions of modern civilization – such as hard work, the rule of law, respect for contracts, and social equality – incapable of self-rule, bedeviled by endemic and unalterable corruption, and possessing a sexual immorality and promiscuity that is the primary cause of the AIDS epidemic that has impacted Africa more than any other world region (Diamond, 1999; Gordon & Gordon, 2001; Gould, 1996; Isichei, 2002; Rodney, Ndjakani, Ceesay, & Wilson, 2010; Sachs, 2005; UNAIDS Report, 2013).

Contemporary events in Africa, such as the ethnic violence and genocide occurring in Sudan, anarchy in the failed state of Somalia, the twenty year old civil war in the Congo, all serve to reinforce the overgeneralizations and stereotypes held by people outside of Africa. A wide range of symbiotic factors – physical geography, cultural practices, historical events, laws, and specific political and economic values, behaviors, and institutions – combine to determine the fate of a nation or region.

Perhaps no other continent has been more stigmatized by racial prejudice, ignorance, neglect, and stereotypes (deBlij & Muller, 2012; Sachs, 2005). It is important that people learn to reject the stereotypes, distortions, and myths that characterize Africa by adopting a multidisciplinary approach that recognizes several interacting factors are responsible for Africa's problems. Thus, while it is true that specific cultural practices and beliefs, poor governance, ethnic conflicts, and the legacy of colonialism play important roles in explaining Africa's miseries, it is their unique geography, endemic diseases, environmental conditions, and extreme poverty – and the synergetic relationship among all of these factors – that are the primary barriers to economic development, political stability, and social cohesion.

A focus on imperialism and its legacy, ethnic conflicts and civil wars, and authoritarian governments, while vital to understanding modern Africa, are only part of the analysis; too often, physical geography, infectious diseases, and malnutrition are downplayed in discussions of Africa's problems and solutions.

Unfortunately, what most Americans "know" about Africa is profoundly wrong, partially wrong, distorted, based on gross stereotypes, and often lacks a geographic perspective that is critical for understanding political, cultural, and socioeconomic conditions in the world's second largest continent (deBlij & Muller, 2012; Gordon & Gordon, 2001; Sachs, 2005). And while it is true that by most objective measures of socioeconomic well-being – infant mortality rates, life expectancies, maternal mortality rates, educational attainment, fertility rates, nutrition data, and Gross National Income (GNI) – Africa is the least developed realm on earth, it is not because of the racial inferiority of people who have demonstrated perseverance and courage in the face of incredible adversity throughout African history.

Thus, why is Africa the most impoverished and disease-ridden continent in the modern world? The answers, of course, are extremely complex and any holistic explanation must incorporate the interactions among history, economics, international relations, domestic politics, cultural perspectives, health issues, and geography. Unfortunately, the vast majority of secondary and university students do not take a single course in geography and possess very little knowledge of Africa and other realms and regions; simultaneously, most K-12 and college students do not take courses in international relations that are critical to understanding world affairs.

Thus, the primary purpose of this article is to provide a geographical analysis of contemporary Africa's problems and possibilities and dispel the entrenched myths, misconceptions, and racist beliefs that continue to unjustly plague the one billion people that inhabit Africa (Population Reference Bureau, World Population Data Sheet 2012; Sachs, 2005). An examination of Africa's physical geography and environmental hazards – location, climate, soils, topography, resources, environmental degradation, and diseases – will demonstrate that Africans must confront a wide range of challenges as they attempt to modernize their countries. It is important to note that these challenges are not insurmountable; Ghana, Botswana, Tanzania, and other countries have made remarkable progress despite their political problems, serious environmental issues, and the prevalence of tropical diseases (deBlij & Muller, 2012).

Many American citizens (including people who influence American foreign policies, engage in business in foreign countries, and teach in our schools), remain geographically illiterate; this is not surprising considering that geography has been eliminated or downsized in universities and secondary schools (deBlij & Muller, 2012; Diaz, Massialas, & Kanthopoulos, 1999). This is an untenable position given the forces of globalization, the rise of China, India, and other developing countries, and the importance of geographic literacy to America's long term geopolitical and economic interests (Zakaria, 2008). Moreover, one cannot possess a solid understanding of the history, political and socioeconomic conditions, and cultural characteristics of a country or region without a deep knowledge of the geography of the place they are studying or engaged in via politics, cultural interactions, or business.

Geographic illiteracy is a threat to our national security, economic health, and hinders the development of positive relationships with other countries. Thus, by focusing on Africa's geography and environmental challenges the author hopes to make the case for improving and expanding geographic education in K-12 schools and universities across the world. Furthermore, shattering many of the persistent myths about Africa and its peoples is vital as African countries continue to pursue economic and social development and contribute to the global economy.

II. Africa's Physical Geography and Its Impact on Development

Jared Diamond, writing in his 1999 opus *Guns, Germs, and Steel*, asserted that "History followed different courses for different peoples because of differences among peoples' environments, not because of biological differences among peoples themselves" (p. 25). Diamond argues that Africa's north-south axis, and its relationship to climate, topography, and disease, adversely impacted Africa's ability to engage in cultural diffusion, including the spread of crops, the domestication of animals, and technologies. Simply put, Africa, unlike Eurasia, did not possess the environments conducive to indigenous food production and the domestication of animals; both of these factors are critical for the development of advanced societies and explain the different paths taken by Africa and Eurasia.

An examination of Africa's unique physical geography and environment lends support to Diamond's major thesis and provides a comprehensive explanation for Africa's current developmental challenges.

Africa, which lay at the heart of *Pangaea* (the giant landmass fractured by tectonic forces responsible for all of the continents current locations), stretches 4800 miles north to south and 4500 miles east to west at its widest points and is positioned squarely astride the equator (deBlij & Muller, 2012). Thus, much of Africa lies in latitudes far from maritime sources of precipitation and where global climatic conditions create arid conditions; the Sahara and Kalahari Deserts cover about 30 percent of the African continent (deBlij & Muller, 2012) and Africa contains about 37% of the world's desert land (Osei, 2010). In fact, the expanding Sahara Desert – deserts grow due to overgrazing livestock, monocrop agriculture, inappropriate technology, deforestation, soil erosion, and climate change – is a devastating blow to the majority of Africans who make their living by farming and remains a major barrier separating sub-Saharan Africa from Eurasia (Diamond, 1999; Osei, 2010; Lappé, Collins, & Rosset, 1998; Sowell, 1994). Africa's growing population suffers from a lack of water, unpredictable and variable rainfall, and frequent droughts that often have tragic consequences – Africa has the highest percentage of malnourished children in the world (Population Reference Bureau, World Population Data Sheet, 2012).

Africa, because of its central location in *Pangaea*, developed numerous rift valleys (faults in the earth's surface as a result of continental drift), major waterfalls, and escarpments, and is basically a plateau continent with steep valleys. This rugged topography has important implications for development. First, Africa, unlike the United States, Ukraine, Argentina, the alluvial basins of China and India, and northern Europe, lacks large plains with high quality soil needed for farming. African soils are losing fertility faster than any other region in the world because of erosion, overuse, and a lack of fertilizers (Osei & Attoh, 2010). Farmers, lacking the resources to purchase fertilizers, high quality seeds, pesticides, and needed technology, are clearing forestlands and other marginal areas out of desperation (Gilbert, 2012). Poor internal transportation routes increase the costs of fertilizers, as does the overall political instability in African countries. Furthermore, the Sahara desert is expanding further south as a result of natural processes, climatic changes, overgrazing livestock and population pressures; this reduces arable land and exacerbates food production (Osei, 2010).

Second, it is difficult to build modern transportation systems – roads, bridges, river transport, and railroads – in a realm that is characterized by an extremely rugged plateau topography, infectious diseases that hinder land and water routes, silt-choked river mouths, shifting river channels, seasonal fluctuations in water levels, and a lack of natural harbors (Oppong, 2010a). This task is exacerbated by the lack of capital and the legacy of colonialism: transport systems were designed to export natural resources and ignored interregional transportation and communications. It is difficult for farmers to get their products to cities and markets without adequate roads and storage facilities in villages that are poor; thus large quantities of food are lost due to rot, pests, and theft (deBlij & Muller, 2012). In addition, the current railroad system cannot handle the world demand (primarily by China, which is offering to help with upgrading infrastructure) for metals and minerals.

Third, the rugged topography has produced great rivers that are not navigable and leaves much of Africa without intraregional connections and critical linkages to the world economy. The majority of Africans live in rural areas devoid of modern transportation and communication systems that leave them in extreme isolation, limited access to social and medical services, and absolute poverty (Oppong, 2010a; Sachs, 2005). Geographic isolation prevents the cultural diffusion – the exchange of people, goods, services, cultural products, and ideas – that is imperative for economic growth and social stability. Of course, the inhospitable topography and other environmental problems are not an absolute barrier to development and building efficient infrastructure; for example, good government in Japan and Switzerland demonstrate the ability of countries to overcome serious geographic limitations and environmental problems. With an infusion of capital and technology, as well as better governance, Africa can improve its agricultural, transportation and communication systems, which are vital components of the global economy.

Despite Africa's serious geographic problems with poor soils, rugged topography, frequent droughts, and climates hostile to productive agriculture, Africa possess enormous wealth in the form of minerals and raw materials crucial for industrialization and modernization (Gordon, 2010) These resources include gold, salt, oil, natural gas, copper, zinc, rubber, diamonds, platinum, uranium, iron ore, coal, tin, and cobalt; all of these are in demand by industrial and developing countries (Gordon, 2010). These natural resources are vital to the defense industry, as well as numerous industrial and medical concerns.

However, the historical pattern of extraction and exploitation of African human and natural resources, beginning with early colonialism in the 15th century and solidified by the partition of Africa at the 1884 Berlin Conference, continues today, albeit in different forms (Carmody, 2010).

Europe, the United States, Latin America, and China have all invested in infrastructure (mining, transportation routes) aimed at the extraction and export of these natural resources. While there are some benefits for Africans, they are engaged in the better-paying and more profitable activities of assembly and manufacturing (deBlij & Muller, 2012). The “curse of natural resources” denotes countries or regions rich with raw materials but poor economic and social development (Carmody, 2010). Historically, authoritarian and corrupt African leaders consorted with foreign governments or multinational corporations to exploit the resources for profit and not the benefit of the African people or social development (Gordon, 2010). Even though nature endowed Africa with enormous natural resources, imperialism and its powerful legacy have conspired with geographic limitations and authoritarian and corrupt governments to thwart Africa’s economic and social development (Gordon, 2010).

2.1 African Climates

Much of sub-Saharan Africa is characterized by tropical climates – very hot year-round and variable rainfall – that have an enormous impact on agriculture and human health (Osei & Attoh, 2010). According to the Köppen system of climate classification, much of Sub-Saharan Africa is characterized by *humid equatorial climates (Af)* that provide copious precipitation and very hot temperatures, this climate sustains the rainforest regions in Africa (Osei & Attoh, 2010). *Dry climates (B)* are the second most dominant classification in Africa; these climates have very little precipitation, wide temperature ranges – there are recorded instances of a daytime high of 122°F and a low of 50°F in the Sahara Desert – and very poor soils (de Blij & Muller, 2012). Both (A) and (B) climates are hostile to productive agriculture and present major barriers to food production in Africa. The best climates for highly productive agriculture – climatic regions with the optimal amount of precipitation and excellent soils that sustain rice, corn, wheat, fruits, and vegetable production – are humid temperate climates (C) and humid cold climates (D). Unfortunately, Africa has a very small area (centered in Zambia, Zimbabwe, and the southeast coast of South Africa) that has (C) climates and there are no areas in Africa with (D) climates (Osei & Attoh, 2010).

Many Africans live in savannas (a combination of grasslands and woods) where the poor soils and unreliable rainfall make farming very difficult (Neff, 1996; Obia, 2010). Globally, the most productive farmland is located in humid temperate climates (C) located in the mid-latitudes, such as the southeastern United States, most of Europe, eastern China, Argentina, and eastern Australia. Again, most of Africa has been disadvantaged regarding the optimal combination of topography, fertile soils, and climate needed for highly productive farming (Obia, 2010). In addition, the high temperatures aggravate working conditions in the fields for farmers already weak from poor health and a lack of nutrition. Unfortunately, Sub-Saharan Africa’s physiography – its total physical geography – provides an excellent environment for a plethora of diseases that have had a devastating impact on African peoples, as well as efforts to develop economically and socially stable modern societies (Oppong, 2010b).

III. 15,000 Africans Died Today: How Diseases, Hunger, and Death Devastate Africa

The Hunger Project (2012) estimates that 925 million people world-wide suffer from chronic hunger; 240 million Africans, or 25% of Africa’s total population, suffer from chronic hunger and associated diseases. Forty-five percent of Africans live on less than \$1 per day; this absolute poverty is the principal cause of hunger and death via starvation (Oppong, 2010b). Many people in the United States would be surprised to learn that circa 15,000 Africans, the majority of them are children, die every single day due to preventable and treatable diseases and hunger (Sachs, 2005). In fact, malaria, acute respiratory diseases, and diarrheal diseases account for 51% of childhood deaths in Africa (Oppong, 2010b).

The difficulties in producing staple foods in Africa – poor soils, variable rainfall, rugged topography, desert and semi-desert climates – are exacerbated by widespread political corruption, the legacy of imperialism, inefficient land tenure systems, farmers lacking access to markets, and dependence on subsistence agriculture (Obia, 2010).

A brief description of some of the diseases that afflict hundreds of millions of Africans will illustrate why economic development and social stability are so difficult in this geographic realm. Moreover, the linkages between poverty, geography, diseases, politics, and culture will demonstrate the difficulties in creating and implementing viable long term solutions.

There is a symbiotic relationship between poverty and infectious diseases that produce a major barrier to socioeconomic progress – the world's poor people cannot work themselves up from poverty if they are too sick or hungry to work or obtain an education (Sachs, 2005; Young, 1997). Sub-Saharan Africa is victimized by this vicious cycle more than any other realm and requires significant amounts of international aid and indigenous political reforms in their quest to build modern societies.

3.1 Tropical Diseases and Their Impact on Development

First, malaria – Africa's and the world's deadliest vectored disease – kills about 960,000 Africans annually, the vast majority of whom are children under five years of age and have no immunity to one of history's most fatal diseases (Oppong, 2010b). The very efficient *Anopheles gambiae* mosquito transmits the most lethal form of human malaria (the pathogen *Plasmodium falciparum*) to Africans and is responsible for the vast majority of deaths (Centers for Disease Control, 2012; Sachs, 2005). Africa, because of its very high temperatures, numerous breeding grounds, and a virulent mosquito that prefers humans to cattle, is much more vulnerable to malaria than any other region in the world. Indeed, 90% of the world's malaria cases are in Sub-Saharan Africa, the forest and savannah regions are especially vulnerable to malaria transmission (Oppong, 2010b). Furthermore, circa 30% of malarial deaths are in countries torn by civil wars, ethnic violence, or natural disasters (Oppong, 2010b).

It would be difficult to overstate the devastation malaria has on the African peoples and their societies. In addition to the almost one million annual deaths, Africans infected with malaria often develop cerebral malaria, kidney failure, severe anemia, and flu-like symptoms, which prevent them from working or going to school (Centers for Disease Control, 2012). Many development projects in agriculture, mining, building infrastructure, and industry have been stopped because the workforce is killed or too sick to work.

Thus, malaria is a major cause of poverty because of its adverse impact on education and economic development. Simultaneously, poverty causes malaria because poverty-stricken households and governments do not have the resources to obtain the tools that can control malaria. For example, antimalarial medications (such as quinine), widespread spraying of insecticides, window and door screens, expanding hospitals, and distributing insecticide-treated bed nets can significantly reduce the transmission of malaria (United Nations News Centre, 2011). While there has been progress, there is much more that can be done to ensure that the millions of afflicted Africans receive the treatments that can transform their lives and help them create economically viable societies. Auspiciously, the efforts to combat malaria are paying off in Africa where eleven countries have witnessed a 50% decline in mortality as a result of the global campaign to eradicate this scourge (United Nations News Centre, 2011).

Second, African sleeping sickness, transmitted by the tsetse fly, kills thousands of Africans annually and also kills cattle – an animal that could provide hungry Africans with much needed protein (deBlij & Muller, 2012). Individuals afflicted with this disease may not die, but may experience chronically poor health, hurting productivity. Until a remedy can be found for the tsetse fly (found only in Africa), Africa's savannas will not be able to support the livestock that can provide a viable commodity on the world market (as developing nations gain affluence, their demand for beef increases).

Third, yellow fever, also transmitted by a mosquito, is endemic in the wetter tropical areas (rainforests) and humid or semi-humid savannas. This disease, which can be prevented via vaccination, can be fatal when epidemics breakout in unvaccinated populations. While much of the world has eradicated yellow fever (the Panama Canal could not be built until yellow fever was conquered) it remains a threat in Africa (deBlij & Muller, 2012).

Fourth, many Africans suffer from a host of regional and endemic diseases that may not cause widespread fatalities, but saps their energy, overall health, and quality of life. For example, schistosomiasis is a debilitating disease transmitted by snails which allows the parasite to enter the body when standing or bathing in slow moving water (Oppong, 2010b). This disease kills almost 200,000 people annually, most of them in Africa. Another African malady, river blindness, which is caused by a parasitic worm transmitted by a small fly endemic to the savanna belt, is another disease that may kill people, but more often causes permanent blindness, which prevents people from working in several occupations (Oppong, 2010b). Then there are diseases, such as rinderpest, that kill cattle depriving Africans of their economic value, as well as decreasing their status in the community and ability to engage in trade.

Most Americans have little knowledge of these “erotic” (a term we use for people, places, and things we know little about) diseases that destroy lives in African countries and hinder the development of modern societies. Paradoxically, improved socioeconomic status and globalization for some affluent urban residents is increasing the prevalence of heart disease and obesity; simultaneously, cancer mortality is increasing because of tobacco use and the correlation between a Western diet (high in fats, salt, and sugars) and cancer (Oppong, 2010b).

3.2 HIV and AIDS: Biggest Killer in Africa

Finally, the HIV/AIDS pandemic has killed more people in Africa than any other realm. In 2005, AIDS killed 2.3 million people globally; 1.8 million of these deaths were Africans (Centers for Disease Control, 2013). This dreaded disease, which began in the equatorial forest of Africa and was probably transmitted to humans by monkeys, is currently the biggest killer in Africa and has had an apocalyptic impact on Africa (Rodney, Ndjakani, Ceesay, & Wilson, 2010). Consider that the realm has eleven percent of the world population but accounts for 67 percent of all people living with HIV/AIDS (Rodney, Ndjakani, Ceesay, & Wilson, 2010). In fact, we are just now beginning to see that the experts underestimated the prevalence of HIV/AIDS in sub-Saharan Africa and we can expect the death toll to increase, especially in the absence of widespread medical care and behavioral changes. It is estimated that more than 20 million people in Sub-Saharan Africa have died from AIDS in the past 28 years; in 2007, 1.5 million people in this realm died from a disease that continues to expand in the most impoverished continent on earth (United Nations Report on the AIDS Epidemic, 2008).

Of course, all estimates related to the morbidity and mortality rates associated with the HIV/AIDS pandemic need to be viewed with caution. Health officials and medical geographers argue the official data grossly underestimate the magnitude of the tragedy; in fact, some African doctors believe that AIDS cases are 80 to 90 percent underreported (deBlij & Muller, 2012). Governments may conceal the truthful dimensions of the pandemic out of shame, difficulties in collecting reliable data, and a fear that the truth will reduce investments and tourism.

The HIV/AIDS pandemic, like the 14th century Black Death in Europe, has devastated families, food production, medical systems, economic development, labor, and education (Oppong, 2010b). Many people cannot work or go to school because they are sick or caring for sick family members. The HIV/AIDS pandemic is a witch’s brew of emotional and economic misery: the emotional agony of watching loved ones die a horrifying death, the inability of people to work and provide the basic needs for their families, rapidly increasing medical and funeral bills, orphans forced into adult roles (head of the household, work, health care givers, produce food), governments that have less tax revenues to provide services, a significant decline in life expectancy – in Botswana it declined from 60 in 1994 to 34 in 2006 – and lower economic productivity (Rodney, Ndjakani, Ceesay, & Wilson, 2010).

Education, which is a crucial factor in developing human potential and preventing HIV infections, and the AIDS pandemic have a circular relationship – as the epidemic spreads, the education sector is severely damaged because children cannot attend school and gain knowledge regarding the prevention of HIV, which results in increases in the transmission of the disease. In short, every institution in HIV/AIDS afflicted countries has been adversely impacted by this pandemic that continues to kill Africans and hinders economic development in the world’s poorest realm.

And while some progress has been made – President Bush’s 2003 African AIDS Initiative provides \$10 billion U.S. dollars for prevention and treatment, and Uganda reduced its AIDS mortality rates by distributing condoms and educating people to change their attitudes and behaviors – much more can be done to help fight HIV/AIDS in African countries (UNAIDS Report, 2013). Happily, Africa has reduced mortality from AIDS and related diseases by 32% from 2005 and 2011 (Centers for Disease Control, 2013). In 2005, less than one million people were receiving antiretroviral treatments; in 2012, 7.1 million people are receiving these effective medications. However, continued progress will require African governments to honestly confront the disease, increase funding for prevention and treatment, and educate people that changes in sexual behaviors (reducing prostitution, the proper use of condoms, and monogamy will make a difference) can prevent HIV/AIDS.

In addition, African societies must confront the harmful stereotypes and entrenched myths regarding women, sexuality, power, and diseases. For example, many Africans believe that women are witches possessing the ability to castrate and destroy men; simultaneously, women are blamed for AIDS and are often victims of pervasive sex discrimination, including violence (Isichei, 2002). Finally, poverty remains a major barrier – the drugs that combat the pandemic are too expensive for the vast majority of African AIDS victims – in the fight against this scourge that is the greatest barrier to African development (Sachs, 2005).

Successfully reducing morbidity and mortality spawned by all of Africa's diseases and hunger will require a comprehensive economic plan that includes access to quality health care, medicines, and food, educating all Africans about the causes and prevention of AIDS and other diseases, and abolishing harmful cultural beliefs and practices.

IV. Conclusions

It is important that educators, policy-makers, health care providers, and politicians dispel the numerous and widespread myths that many students hold regarding Africa, as well as other realms and countries. Africa's unique and constraining geography limited productive agriculture and the domestication of animals, restricted trade, hindered cultural diffusion – a process that is critical to progress – and contributed to the cultural fragmentation that has been a primary barrier to economic development (Diamond, 1999). Moreover, Africa's climates have provided a hospitable environment for a variety of diseases that have devastated the continent for thousands of years. The combination of geography, diseases, hunger, and historical events has conspired to render Africa the world's most poverty-stricken and underdeveloped realm (deBlij & Muller, 2012).

The notion that Africans and other groups, artificially divided into "races" based on mind-boggling misunderstandings of biology and history, are innately inferior and therefore responsible for their poverty must be abolished for one simple, yet profound, reason: It is not true. Anthropologist Ashley Montagu (1997) called the concept of race "man's most dangerous myth"; a cursory historical examination of the past 500 years – slavery, segregation, discrimination, miscegenation laws, and genocide – validates Montagu's assertion. Simultaneously, ethnic conflicts continue to be the primary centrifugal force hindering the creation of stable multicultural democracies; ethnic politics in Africa is extremely complex and it will take considerable time ameliorating the challenges posed by ethnic tensions and violence (Berman, Eyoh, & Kymlicka, 2004).

None of this, however, implies that culture does not matter; and many African societies (like all societies at some point in history) have made poor cultural, socioeconomic, and political choices that have contributed to their poverty, instability, inability to overcome environmental limitations, and lack of progress. Corrupt regimes, incompetence, irrational laws and practices, discrimination, male-dominance, and genocide never bode well for economic development and social stability, regardless of geography. However, it is critical that we do not conflate cultural and historical explanations for a society's problems or failures with immutable racist explanations.

Fortunately, advances in science, particularly genetics and evolutionary biology, physical and cultural anthropology, archaeology, computer technologies, and more sophisticated historical methods have exposed entrenched racist explanations for differences in achievements among human cultures for what they are: a myth that has perpetuated injustices ranging from prejudice to slavery to genocide. The ability of Africans, as well as others burdened by harsh environments, to continue struggling to build viable societies testifies to their mental and physical courage in the face of adversity. Africa is capable of creating viable democratic and economically productive societies if given the resources to compensate for their geographic limitations and environmental hazards. If the United States, the world's richest and most powerful country is going to make a serious effort to help Africa, it is imperative that all citizens obtain an adequate understanding of geography, as well as history and culture.

The United States cannot afford to continue our collective ignorance about other geographic realms and countries; the world is changing rapidly owing to globalization, migration trends, and remarkable technological and scientific advances. Historically, American's geographic isolation has been a double-edged sword: it has offered protection from invasion and allowed us to develop our unique cultural characteristics; simultaneously, it has isolated us from learning about other cultures and world affairs (particularly from non-American perspectives). History testifies to the power of geographic isolation and cross-cultural illiteracy to spawn ethnocentrism, xenophobia, the perpetuation of harmful stereotypes and myths, and racism. Hence, improving and expanding geographic education is critical to our national security, international relations, and future economic well-being.

By studying the geography, as well as the history and cultures, of Africa and other realms, Americans can deepen their understanding of the multiple factors – physical geography, the prevalence of diseases, cultural attitudes and behaviors, social choices, historical forces, political and economic structures – that contribute to a country's/realms success or failure.

Ultimately, this may lead to significant reductions in racist and ethnocentric attitudes and behaviors, increase our economic productivity, maintain national security, increase global literacy, foster intercultural dialogue and communications, and demonstrate a powerful universal theme: that geography and environmental factors, while not destiny, play a substantial role in influencing human progress, culture, economics, and politics.

The benefits to improving and expanding geographic education across the globe should be clear to all educators; we must improve geographic education so that all people understand that economic and social development cannot occur if the majority of a country's population suffers from a multitude of diseases that kill, incapacitate, and thwart the dreams of its citizens. There is a symbiotic relationship between a nation's geography and its policies; creating prudent policies, providing equal opportunities to all citizens, abolishing harmful cultural practices, developing human and natural resources can help compensate for environmental limitations owing to location, topography, and climates. For centuries, Africans have persevered, despite a plethora of environmental issues, racial stereotyping, and the deleterious impact of imperialism on its political, social, and economic geography. Abolishing all of the myths that have stigmatized this realm will contribute to Africa's continued development.

While geography and environment are powerful influences on human development and social progress, Africa – with good government and effective international aid – can overcome its serious geographic and environmental problems and join the developed nations as a prosperous continent in a global era.

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