

Series Introduction, to appear in every volume

In the 1950s and early 1960s, there was a great deal of optimism about the prospects for economic development in sub-Saharan Africa. By the early 2000s, the prevailing consensus had become much more negative – and for good reason. Decades of civil war, repeated state failure, corruption, and disappointing private sector performance characterized much of Africa’s post-independence experience. A wave of prominent papers in the economic literature tried to dig more deeply into the causes of these problems, with some scholars putting them in a broader comparative perspective and others focusing on the specifics of the African experience. There was no shortage of deep causes suggested as explanations for repeated African disappointments, including weak rule of law, a lack of democracy, colonial inheritance, the impact of the slave trade, the burden of tropical disease, some form of “resource curse,” and ethno-linguistic divisions among the population.

The NBER Africa project, conceived in the mid-2000s, took a different approach. Rather than trying to understand the causes of underperformance in Africa, we decided to focus on finding and understanding more positive aspects of what was happening on that continent south of the Sahara, along several different dimensions studied by economists. Our timing proved good for three reasons.

First, scholars were turning their attention increasingly to the details of what was working well or at least better with regard to African development. This new wave of research involved working with or, in many cases creating, datasets suited to careful analysis – including sophisticated use of econometrics. We are fortunate to have involved and supported many leading empirical researchers as they broke new ground in multiple directions. Most likely some of this work would have happened in any case, but at the very least we can claim to have provided an appropriate catalyst for many projects.

Second, Africa is changing – and the prospects for nearly a billion people are looking up. A decade or more of relatively good performance does not a miracle make, but across a wide range of countries there has been better economic growth, considerable progress with improving public health and other social indicators, and a range of attempts to improve the performance of the

state. Many of the papers in this series of four volumes address some aspect of this profound and important transformation.

Third, the study of Africa is becoming much more integrated with the rest of economics. Just as happened earlier with research on Japan and China, a line of work that previously might have been seen as of purely regional interest can now appear in top journals. The broader trend, of course, has been the resurrection of development economics as a vibrant field. But also encouraging – and a central part of the NBER Africa Project – has been the increase in interest among non-specialists regarding what is actually happening on this dynamic and fascinating continent.

It has been a great honor for us, as program directors and now as editors of these volumes, to participate in and help to facilitate this surge in serious interest. In terms of making this possible, we must thank, first and foremost, the Bill & Melinda Gates Foundation for their willingness to encourage economists in this endeavor. We have worked with a range of officials at the Foundations over the past decade; their support has been unstinting and their perspective on development is always refreshing. We would specifically like to thank Sara Sievers for many of our early interactions and Oliver Babson for his subsequent engagement. We also greatly appreciate the ideas and energy of Geoffrey Lamb, Kim Hamilton, Negar Akhavi, Adam Gerstenmier, and Mumukshu Patel.

We must also recognize the founding insight and energy of Martin Feldstein, who emphasized, among many other relevant and helpful points, that there is an important link between raising the quality of economic research on an issue and improving the odds that policy discussions will become more informed. Since becoming president of the NBER in 2008, James Poterba has also provided us with great leadership and encouragement – including with sage advice at every stage of the process.

Our four published volumes present results from 39 research teams, with the findings organized along thematic lines. Of the 100 authors whose names appear on one or more of the papers in our collection, 19 are from Africa and 32 are affiliated with the NBER as either Faculty Research Fellows or Research Associates. They range from experienced specialists on African

development to scholars who had never previously worked on the continent; in seniority they ran the gamut from newly-appointed assistant professors to distinguished, established thought leaders.

Every project included an on-the-ground component. Some research teams combined money we provided with other funds, for example to support the collection of very large field datasets. In other cases, funding from the NBER made it possible for researchers to interview policymakers, business people (both large and small), farmers, health workers, or others engaged in the process of economic development.

Results from the research project were presented at a series of conferences in the US and in Africa. Given the large size of our project and our explicit goal of including scholars who had not previously been working on Africa, we began with a background conference in February 2008, at the NBER in Cambridge, MA, bringing together researchers and policy makers from the US, Africa, and Europe. The conference featured presentations on current research and an overview of available data, aimed especially at scholars who were new to the area.

Our next meeting, also in Cambridge, MA, in February 2009 was a pre-conference at which preliminary findings from ten papers were presented. This was followed by a conference in December of the same year, again in Cambridge, MA, that took a hybrid form: final versions of five projects were presented, as were pre-conference versions of another twelve projects.

This was followed in July of 2010 by a conference in Accra, Ghana, held in cooperation with the Institute of Statistical, Social, and Economic Research (ISSER). Our final research conference was held in Zanzibar, Tanzania, in August 2011, in cooperation with the Bank of Tanzania.

One goal of our project from inception, with full support from the Gates Foundation, was to help connect economic research with the African policy community. We arranged some interactions along these lines throughout our project, but we were fortunate to be able to make a special effort at the end, with a meeting devoted specifically to the Next Macroeconomic Challenges in Africa, held again in Zanzibar, in December 2012, also in cooperation with the Bank of Tanzania.

There are many people to thank for the successful completion of this project. Benno Ndulu, governor of the Bank of Tanzania, provided wise guidance throughout the process and

particularly helped us to focus on narrowing the gap between research and policy, including our two fruitful meetings in Zanzibar. His team at the Bank of Tanzania was most helpful in many ways, and we have special thanks for Patricia Mlozi, Mechtilda Mugo, Msafiri Nampesya, and Pamella Lowassa-Solomon.

Our conference in Accra benefited greatly from the engagement and support provided by Ernest Aryeetey, Kwesi Botchwey, and Robert Osei. And we had great cooperation in many ways across the entire project with the African Economic Research Consortium (AERC); thanks to Olu Ajakaiye, William Lyakurwa, and Lemma Senbet for making this possible.

We would like to thank everyone who attended our various conferences and who worked hard on all dimensions of these research projects. We are also most grateful for all the inputs received from members of the Advisory Committee, formed especially for this project: Robert Bates, Paul Collier, Martin Feldstein, Benno Ndulu, Franklyn Prendergast, Antoinette Sayeh, Nicholas Stern, and John Taylor.

The entire project ran smoothly due to the hard work, precision, and attention to detail of Elisa Pepe at the NBER. Elisa was with us from beginning to end, and words cannot sufficiently express our gratitude for all she has done.

Others at the NBER provided outstanding help on a wide variety of tasks. Our meetings in the US and in Africa were organized with exemplary competence by Carl Beck of the NBER's conference department. For all their help in the production, management, and dissemination of research, we would also like to thank Alex Aminoff, Laura Bethard, Daniel Feenberg, Helena Fitz-Patrick, Wayne Gray, Steve Harriman, and Alterra Milone. And for their assistance with the data portal, we are grateful to Binh Thanh Le, Dimitry Legagneur, and C. Michelle Tejada.