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Africa Unleashed: Explaining the Secret of a Belated Boom

IPA Research Affiliate **Edward Miguel** reviews Steven Radelet's new book **Emerging Africa** in Foreign Affairs, a publication by the Council on Foreign Relations:

Summary: "Steven Radelet's accessible new book argues that much of the credit for Africa's recent economic boom goes to its increasingly open political systems. But Radelet fails to answer the deeper question: why some countries have managed to develop successful democracies while others have tried but failed."

Excerpt:

It is well known that the 1970s, 1980s, and 1990s were a disaster for the countries of sub-Saharan Africa. In a period when other underdeveloped regions, especially Asia, were experiencing steady economic growth, Africa as a whole saw its living standards plummet. Nearly all Africans lived under dictatorships, and millions suffered through brutal civil wars. Then, in the 1990s, the HIV/AIDS epidemic exploded, slashing life expectancy and heightening the sense that the region had reached rock bottom. It was no surprise when an intellectual cottage industry of Afro-pessimists emerged, churning out a stream of plausible-sounding explanations for Africa's stunning decline. The verdict was simple: Africa equaled failure.

What is less well known is that Africa's prospects have changed radically over the past decade or so. Across the continent, economic growth rates (in per capita terms) have been positive since the late 1990s. And it is not just the economy that has seen rapid improvement: in the 1990s, the majority of African countries held multiparty elections for the first time since the heady postindependence 1960s, and the extent of civic and media freedom on the continent today is unprecedented. Even though Africa's economic growth rates still fall far short of Asia's stratospheric levels, the steady progress that most African countries have experienced has come as welcome news after decades of despair. But that progress raises a critical question: what happened?

Steven Radelet's accessible and insightful new book, *Emerging Africa*, joins a growing chorus of voices explaining how and why Africa has turned the corner.

Radelet, who joined the U.S. State Department to work on international development issues last year, was a fellow at the Center for Global Development and has served as a policymaker in both the United States and Liberia, where he advised President Ellen Johnson-Sirleaf. He does a remarkable job of weaving together hard statistical patterns, case studies, and a coherent narrative that explains both Africa's decline and its recent rebound. The book is useful reading both for specialists in the field, who will gain from its detailed description of the experiences of numerous countries, and for those newly interested in Africa, including non-economists, who will find their preexisting notions about the continent overturned. *Emerging Africa* crystallizes the new conventional wisdom on Africa's recovery. But it also highlights gaps in experts' understanding about its underlying causes.

Read the full review [here](#).

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