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'Economic growth in Sub-Saharan Africa, 1885-2008'

This paper provides a quantitative overview of economic growth in Sub-Saharan Africa (SSA) over the long twentieth century, including the colonial era as well as the post-independence period. Patterns of African growth over the long run and its extent before World War II have been the subject of much debate, but little systematic measurement. However, working carefully with disaggregated data, it is possible to reconstruct the path of economic activity on an annual basis through the colonial period. These estimates can be linked to postwar data to provide an annual database covering the period 1885-2008. We then use this database to show that while growth experienced by most countries in SSA since the mid-1990s does have historical precedents, there have been many episodes of negative growth or "shrinking", so that overall progress has been limited.

We provide annual series of GDP per capita for eight former British colonies covering southern, west, east and central Africa. The data show that, overall, growth in these African countries was tightly tied to foreign trade and the market for exports. However, the timing and scale of growth in export production varied both within and between countries owing to a range of factors, from local endowments to transport costs. Political dynamics also affected growth performance, with internal conflicts and instability often linked to periods of shrinking.

Over the course of this period, leading African economies in this sample made few gains in terms of their position relative to the UK economy. South Africa succeeded in closing the per capita GDP gap with the United Kingdom substantially from under 20 per cent in the 1880s to over 35 per cent by the 1950s, but the catching-up process then stalled until the 1970s, before going decisively into reverse during the 1980s and 1990s. Although there are signs of a return to catching up in the 2000s, the level of GDP per capita in 2008 was only just about back to 20 per cent of the UK level, where it had been in the 1880s. The long run comparative position was even more disappointing in Nigeria and Kenya, where the gap with UK GDP per capita increased substantially over the twentieth century.

An important factor behind the disappointing long run economic performance of sub-Saharan Africa during the twentieth century has been the continued importance of shrinking or negative economic growth. Here, we apply the analysis of Broadberry and Wallis (2017) to the eight sub-Saharan African economies and the United Kingdom. Not only have African economies typically experienced much higher rates of shrinking when they experience negative economic growth, but they have also tended to shrink more frequently than developed economies such as the United Kingdom. Whereas the United Kingdom shrank in just 17 per cent of years in 1926-1938 and 1950-1980, falling to 11 per cent of years between 1980 and 2002, most African economies continued to shrink in a much higher proportion of years throughout the period.