

## BOOK REVIEW

Erin Accampo Hern. *Explaining Successes in Africa: Things Don't Always Fall Apart*. Boulder, CO: Lynne Rienner, 2023. 189 pp. Illustrations. Notes. Appendix. Bibliography. Index. \$26.50. Paper. ISBN: 978-1-955055-79-6.

*Explaining Successes in Africa: Things Don't Always Fall Apart* takes a position rarely seen in books about the continent and development: what has gone right. Using the comparative method from political science, Hern tests various theories by analyzing similar and different cases of successful development in different countries in key areas: obstacles to economic growth, good governance, public health responses to malaria, city planning for climate adaptation, and advancing gender equality. To do this, she uses data from reputable sources that use a variety of methodologies, such as Afrobarometer and the World Bank. The book is divided into seven chapters: one for each of these areas of development, plus an introduction and conclusion.

Using the comparative method offers readers a data-driven, close look at different approaches to challenging issues on the continent. For example, she compares the obstacles to economic growth in Africa through a “most-different” case analysis of Seychelles and Gabon, and a “most-similar” case analysis of Seychelles and São Tomé and Príncipe. Using the Human Development Index as a measure of growth, she asks why Seychelles and Gabon have improved so much despite their many differences, and why São Tomé and Príncipe—despite the nation’s similarities to Seychelles—has not seen the same improvements in economic growth. In Seychelles, between 1976 and 2000 the country transformed itself from an impoverished economy reliant solely on coconut exports to one reaping the benefits of luxury tourism and tuna fishing. Hern takes us through the steps of this successful transition, showing how the country’s leadership recognized the inadequacy of coconut exports early and started investing in the long-term success of the tuna and tourism industries. By comparison, São Tomé and Príncipe, a country with many similarities to Seychelles (small island nation, originally a slave-based plantation economy, similar independence trajectory), chose not to pursue the same strategies of directed development as Seychelles and instead chose to nationalize the cocoa sector as part of a broader communist turn. Through a series of missteps, São Tomé and Príncipe’s leadership choices ended up seeing the collapse of the cocoa industry in the country. Today, the country suffers from a much lower score on the Human Development Index than Seychelles, despite its similar history and geography. Through this and other comparisons of similar and different cases, she concludes that the key factor to overcoming obstacles to economic growth is a government willing to institute beneficial policies of directed development. Hern’s thorough explanation of the

histories and contemporary realities of the countries in question such as these—combined with her in-depth discussion of various theoretical explanations for economic growth—make her conclusion here, and in her other case studies throughout the book, very convincing.

Given the abundance of negative portrayals of Africa and Africans, this work is a worthwhile and important contribution. Hern writes in an accessible style that is particularly well suited to both undergraduate and graduate classrooms across a variety of disciplines, as well as general audiences interested in this topic. I can personally envision using this text in my *Democracy in Africa* class, as it exposes students to a variety of development case studies across the continent in a way that they can understand and presents them with an important methodology they can apply in other contexts. At times, this method does feel overly simplistic: can we really say with confidence that Burundi and Guinea are similar enough for comparison on women's representation in politics just because they share historical and regional features? Are we confident that successful approaches to malaria on the continent can be boiled down to donors who partner with well-connected local actors? These are potential flaws of the comparative method. However, Hern addresses these shortcomings, insightfully and explicitly discussing them herself in the conclusion to the book. Overall, Hern concludes that success stories on the continent tend to share one driving factor in common more than any other: the importance of political leadership and individual agency. This is an interesting and impactful conclusion, and her detailed discussion of different realities across the continent provide a critical reminder of both the great diversity of African countries and their shared political, economic, and historical challenges.

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