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Book Review 'Technology Futures in Africa'
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Technology remains a complex and multifaceted field, often approached with mismanagement, as sources indicate. The technological trends in Africa, particularly in engineering, science, and emerging technologies, provide a prominent arena for innovation. Despite the challenges, the optimistic approach of the book "Technology Futures in Africa" by Jasper Grosskurth (ed.) offers a different perspective. The authors aim to explore Africa’s science and technology neither with pessimism nor with optimism, but with realism. This book presents a different approach to understanding what is actually happening in Africa, thus providing a lesson on how and why stereotyping must be avoided to achieve more realistic and analytical approaches.

The book discusses the ‘Futures of Technology in Africa’ and how this perspective differs from conventional wisdom. The authors take a broader brushstroke approach, providing an overview of the developments in Africa, contrary to the conventional wisdom that puts Africa on the bottom of the pyramid in all indicators of economic, social, and scientific advancement. The book claims that there are some technologies developed in Africa that exhibit the highest growth rates in the world and are advancing mobile communication. This perspective challenges the conventional view of Africa as an underdeveloped region.

Despite the attempt to go beyond the crisscross stereotypes, the book emphasizes the importance of sustainable development focused on an inclusive, smart, and sustainable growth. The main objective of the authors is to change the perception about how Africa is thought of and to present a more realistic and non-pessimistic new journey. The authors explore and question the reader’s and others’ ideas about Africa by adding to the global conversation and technological reading of Africa’s future. Interviews from Africa, including Rwanda, Kenya, Uganda, Nigeria, Ghana, and South Africa, have been collected and used in the book. These interviews, along with the literature survey, provide a comprehensive view of Africa’s future, focusing on socio-economic aspects and the potential for innovation and sustainable development.
The first part broaches the problem of Africa’s futures for the 21st century. Chapter one addresses the problem of how to see Africa beyond the stereotypes and tries to show that there is much uneducated representation or misrepresentation of Africa. Africa has “widespread vibrant entrepreneurship, sophisticated intellectual elites and the ambition to be seen as a respected partner in the global community” (p.18). The author gives uplifting stories claiming that some African economies score the highest growth rates in the world. Improvement in political stability and a Cheetah generation of young high entrepreneurs are rising. It is Africans that must solve African problems. It is not anywhere else but from Africa that African solutions to Africa’s problems come. The population growth is projected to move from its current 820 million in Sub-Saharan Africa to 1.7 billion by 2050 making the current 12% share to rise to 19% by 2050. The challenge of making this population productive by increasing education and skills and raising the ratio of the population that can work as opposed to those that remain idle is critically important. Population growth is a challenge, but if the rate of economic growth continues as projected by all the international institutions that Africa is the second most dynamic economic region in the world next to Asia, the opportunity to turn the rise of population numbers into factors for more economic growth is likely to grow higher. “If Africa can provide its young people with education and skills they need, this large workforce could account for a significant share of both global consumption and production” (MGI, 2010). It is expected that well before the year 2050 Nigeria might overtake South Africa by becoming the largest African economy (p.21).

Economic growth in Africa is correlated with political stability, reduction of conflicts, political reform, rule of law, elimination of corruption and sustained improvement in governance. The number of peaceful change is growing. Through better governance there can be macroeconomic stability, micro-economic reforms and maintaining better budgetary discipline. Many countries are recording reforms for doing better business as reported by World Bank. Some 67 reforms have been reported. At the centre of all these improvements lies technology making Africa’s 21st century a technology driven change. The next two chapters on African future studies by Geci Karui-Sebina (Chapter 2) and Exploring Technology Futures (Chapter 3) basically introduce futures thinking in Africa and how from being a ‘white spot on the world map’ of futures and foresight thinking that Africa has come to the forefront receiving attention by futurologists. None of the global futures issues such as climate, population, economic growth, food and agriculture, energy, resources and social trends can be studied with the exclusion of Africa’s presence. Geci says: “Africa’s future matters globally” (p.27) and outlines an inventory of African foresight and scenarios. On technology futures both the negative and positive contributions have been outlined by advising Africa to navigate thoughtfully in making the Africa century being driven by technological change.

Chapter 4 describes how mobile telephone will make Africa flat taking the example of Thomas Friedman. Chapter 5 describes the energy futures and the way to meet this. Currently, 70% of Africa’s electricity is in South Africa. Energy is very unevenly distributed and a serious energy futures is needed to electrify Africa. Chapter 6 describes the infrastructure deficits and how the infrastructure futures of road, rail, air and sea can be developed and streamlined. Chapter 7 discusses the use of technology, ICTs and others to modernise agriculture. Chapter 8 explores a variety of futures by exploring opportunities, ambitions, threats and fears based on interviews of what the next 20 years holds for Africa. It discusses the diversity of possible futures based on technology, politics, economics, culture, life style and other factors (p.100).

Chapter 9 addresses technology in context of both as opportunities and threats. Chapter 10 reverses the learning not as always Africa learning from the rest of the world, but the opposite, the rest of the world learning from Africa. This was also based on interviews. The Author concluded: “Africa will have a lot more to teach the West and the West would be wise to listen as much to Africa as to any other world region” (p.131). Chapter 11 dealt with a guide for African futures by taking infrastructure, electricity, global technology, agriculture, regional diversity, knowledge and
information and explores the future of technology in Africa showing both the challenges and the promises (p.138). The last chapter is a science fiction story by the Kenyan Wambura Kimunu, an African writer, observer, thinker and dreamer. This is an excellent way to close the chapter of the book with a dreamer. Finally, this study puts technology at the centre for imagining Africa’s futures. Where the work suffers is from the need to still prove to the West that things in Africa are working. The best way to demonstrate this to Africans is not to tell the West how good things are going to be in Africa, but to be able to do them. The only way this message will be powerful is when Africans learn to unite using technology to build African futures. So let Africans make their futures.