

New book looks at 'Emerging Hubs of Excellence' in Africa

The book, 'Innovation Africa: Emerging Hubs of Excellence' has been described as "offering a refreshing alternative" to the "African Rising" narrative.



The book, through a medley of nine case studies - ranging from Nollywood's rise to Algeria's steel industry - advocates for "Pan-African narrative and prospective framework of development that includes innovation systems," which point to an African "practice of self-reliance as opposed to dependency".

The book was published this month by ECA/YaleOnline. AllAfrica.com carried an excerpt from the editor of YaleGlobal Online, **Nayan Chanda's** interview with Dr Carlos Lopes, executive secretary of the Economic Commission for Africa, on reviewing the book...

BOOK REVIEW

At a time when Africa has bold aspirations, through Agenda 2063, to confront large scale challenges like the ascendant demographic curve, green industrialization and domestic resource mobilization, it is imperative that innovation be inclusive order to facilitate the creation of decent jobs, generate investments, and contribute to the continent's structural transformation. As a late comer, Africa has the advantage to leapfrog technologies, learn from others mistakes and reinvent things differently in a way that promotes sustainability as well as inclusiveness. But to succeed, deliberate policies are back needed.

With this backdrop, the book 'Innovation Africa: Emerging Hubs of Excellence' is a must read. Authors, Olugbenga Adesig Geci Karuri-Sebina and João Resende-Santos not only illustrate Africa's experience with innovation to date but also point its power for transformation. From the very onset, one is reminded that, "Africa is no longer the place it was in the past ... the technological innovations taking place on the continent today offer the promise of transforming African countries from trading mainly in materials and commodities to trading in knowledge-intensive products."

The book posits that the popular "Africa rising" narrative originates from external (non-African) perspectives vis a vis what economic development and innovation systems means for the continent. By default, this perspective ignores many of the realities and opportunities that actually exist on the continent. The book however offers a refreshing alternative; a Pan-African narrative and prospective framework to address the challenges of development as well as underdevelopment to make the African context. For instance, the authors advocate for the development of inclusive innovation systems; the practice of self-reliance as opposed to dependency; and the importance for strengthened human and institutional capacity which includes the richness of the African culture and its endogenous potential.

"Africa needs to embrace the data revolution," argues Carlos Lopes, Executive Secretary of ECA. "The exponential increase in the volume and types of data available, ... is creating unprecedented opportunities to inform and transform societies."

Through a medley of nine case studies, from Nollywood's rise to Algeria's steel industry, sizeable innovations from hubs across different regions of the continent, are showcased. The success factors as well as lessons learned are analysed and concrete policy recommendations offered on what must be done differently going forward. It becomes clear to the reader that Africa has the ability as well as potential to innovate and that there are a multiplicity of the players driving innovation. For example, the study of Cape Verde's successful electronic government led by public sector, illustrates how policy driven innovation has reduced the costs and time of doing business and worked well in the context of a small island developing country.

An analysis of the mobile technology innovation ecosystem in Kenya demonstrates how a combination of deliberate policies, infrastructure development as well as having the government in the lead, have been instrumental in providing the enabling institutional and macroeconomic environment needed for the innovation to thrive. The story of Ghana's Suame Magazine illustrates how the informal sector and its artisans have been key in the emergence of one of the country's most important industrial zones specialising in engineering and manufacturing. While a study on the Palm Residue Industry in Egypt showcases how innovation has transformed agricultural by-products into a local treasure with social and economic benefit spearheaded by the academic sector in cooperation with the private sector and local community.

A clear take away is that for innovation to mature, thrive and be valued, it must be supported by a conducive ecosystem. More must be done if Africa is to fully harness innovation systems and compete in the new world economy. In turn the book offers a menu of the deliberate policies needed in order to step up the pace of innovation in Africa, making it a treasure trove for policy makers, academics, business leaders and the public at large.

There is an exciting opportunity just around the corner to make Africa the continent of the future if we just pay attention to messages of this book.

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