

# African Economic Development: Measuring Success and Failure

A conference organized by [Morten Jerven](#) at the School for International Studies,  
Simon Fraser University, Vancouver, Canada

Funding from Simon Fraser University, School for International Studies and [the African Economic History Network](#)

April 18 – 20, 2013  
Simon Fraser University, Harbour Centre

The conference runs over three days with three specific themes:

**April 18, Day 1:** Statistical Tragedy in Africa? Evaluating the Data Base for African Economic Development

**April 19, Day 2:** Measurement, Planning and the State in Sub-Saharan Africa: Historical Perspectives

**April 20, Day 3:** New African Economic History: Sources and Methods in Analyzing Long Term African Economic Development

Special Events:

**Friday April 19, 6 pm:** Book launch. Morten Jerven, [Poor Numbers. How We Are Misled by African Development Statistics and What to Do about It.](#)

**Saturday April 20, 9 am:** Keynote. Anthony Hopkins, New African Economic History.

Paper proposals should be submitted to Morten Jerven ([mjerven@sfu.ca](mailto:mjerven@sfu.ca)) and should contain a title, a 100 word abstract and a 500 word summary. The specific theme (Day 1, 2 or 3) should be clearly identified. Papers on Day 1 will be considered for a special issue in the *Journal of Development Studies*. Papers on Day 2 will be considered for a special issue in the *Canadian Journal of Development Studies*. Papers on Day 3 will be considered for publication in the African Economic History Network Working Paper Series.

Paper proposals are due **March 1**. There will be financial support available for paper givers, and you will be notified right away. Full papers are due **April 1**. The remainder of this document sets out the details of the themes.

## ***African Economic Development: Measuring Success and Failure***

The World Bank Chief Economist for Africa, Shanta Devarajan, recently declared that the state of development data in Africa amounts to nothing less than a statistical tragedy. Indeed, it is no exaggeration to say that, due to data unreliability, we currently know little about the growth and income of African economies. Yet institutions and scholars routinely make statements regarding the pace and direction of development in Africa.

Recently, there has been an increased focus on the weakness of statistical systems in sub-Saharan Africa. The remarkable upward revision causing a doubling in GDP in Ghana has just been confirmed, and reports suggest that a similar upward revision of GDP is pending in Nigeria. These very visible events have raised the attention given to African statistics, especially for the measurement of growth, poverty and also for development in African economies in a broader sense.

The conference seeks to establish the extent of the data problems and the implications for both academic interpretations and policy advice. As well as fully setting out the problems, the main task is then to suggest improvements or alternatives that can advance our understanding of African economic development and provide active guidance for policy makers. Specifically this conference invites producers of data (the local statistical offices in African countries); disseminators of data (representatives from World Bank and the IMF); and data users such as development scholars and International development organizations. The conference also unique brings together scholars from different disciplines, including history, economics, economic historians, political scientists, anthropology and sociology. Bringing these types of data users together will generate a productive and innovative basis for remedying the problems of development statistics.

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**April 20, Day 3:** New African Economic History: Sources and Methods in Analyzing Long Term African Economic Development

**Keynote:** Anthony Hopkins New African Economic History.

**Thursday 18 April, 2013**

***The Data Base for African Economic Development 20 years on: What have we learned?***

It has been generally acknowledged that there are serious problems of measurement relating to developing economies. Recently, however, there has been an increased focus on the weakness of statistical systems in sub-Saharan Africa in particular. The remarkable upward revision of GDP in Ghana has just been confirmed, and reports suggest that a similar upward revision of GDP is pending in Nigeria. These very visible events have raised the attention given to African statistics, especially for the measurement of growth, poverty and also for development in African economies in a broader sense. The gravity of these concerns has led the Chief Economist for Africa at the World Bank, Shanta Devarajan, to recently declare a statistical tragedy in Africa. Further indication of the widespread concern is that the issue has been taken up in the popular media. There is currently a vigorous scholarly debate regarding whether our current indicators are misrepresenting trends in growth, poverty and wealth, particularly of the past two decades. In sum, this calls for an evaluation of the database for development in sub-Saharan Africa. This selection of papers by scholarly experts and policy practitioners clearly describes the extent of the problem, discusses how it affects our current understanding and interpretation of African development, and finally, the papers all consider how the problem should be addressed – in terms of how to use the current data, how to develop alternative data methods, and finally how statistical capacity in African economies can be improved.

**Confirmed papers by:** Morten Jerven (SFU), Sara Randall (UC London), Ernestina Coast (LSE), Rodrigo Garcia Verdu (IMF), Deborah Johnston (SOAS), Alexandre Abreu (University Technique of Lisbon), Kathleen Beegle (World Bank), Matteo Rizzo (SOAS), Gero Carletto (World Bank), Roy Carr Hill (Institute of Education, London), Alex Moradi (Sussex), Magnus Ebo Duncan (Ghana Statistical Services), Ben Kiregyera (African Centre for Statistics), Andrew Dabalen (World Bank), Dimitri Sanga (UNECA), Robert McCaa (Minnesota).

**Friday 19 April, 2013**

***Measurement, Planning and the State in Sub-Saharan Africa: Historical Perspectives***

Do African States have the capacity for 'Development'? In the contemporary literature African states are either described as incapable or uninterested in development, but these notions have not been fully historicized. This panel discusses the role of planning and measurement in African development in historical perspective. The employment of planning techniques and statistical tools, both during colonialism and after independence, has been and still is, crucial for designing and implementing development policies and assessing the economic performance of African countries. Specifically, drawing both on the historical experience of Ghana, Sudan, Burkina Faso, Mauritania, and Tanzania and on more general reflections on the changing role of economics and statistics to represent African economies and govern them, the panel, composed by economic historians and historians of science, assesses the economic, political and cultural implications of planning and statistics. It is claimed that a historical analysis of planning and statistics in Africa is an important step in building a bridge between area studies and other disciplines such as economics and economic history, and that these historical experiences have bearings on contemporary development policy.

**Confirmed papers by:** Morten Jerven (SFU), Gerardo Serra (LSE), Joseph Morgan Hodge (West Virginia University), Alden Young (Princeton), Stephanie Decker (Aston), Felicitas Becker (Cambridge), Boris Samuel (Sciences Po)

**Saturday 20 April, 2013**

***New African Economic History: Sources and Methods in Analyzing Long Term African Economic Development***

African Economic History has been invigorated by new and innovative studies of Africa's long-term development, particularly from the work of economists. The aim of this session is to stimulate discussion on future challenges and opportunities in the field African economic history. The lack of reliable and consistent data over time is perhaps the most fundamental challenge for the practice of African economic history. The paucity of reliable time series data on African economic development complicates the evaluation of the economic importance of key historical events such as the slave trade, the colonial impact, as compared to 'initial conditions' of geography. Furthermore, when considering the relative importance of types of 'legacy', a lack of comparable evidence further impairs our ability to assess the impact of different paths of development taken since independence.

Economic growth or development can be measured by conventional methods like historical national accounts or external trade data, but may carry different types of bias and measurement problems. In response different proxies have been suggested like data on rainfall or heights, while yet another route is to gauge development through documented institutional change, like property rights in land and labour. We are calling for research that offers ways of interpreting of long-term economic development in pre-colonial, colonial and post-colonial Africa. We also welcome papers of a historiographical nature, focussing on the disentangling of causal mechanisms of economic development and social change. Innovative approaches to existing empirical data or new research that unravels new sources of data for analysis are particularly welcome.

**Keynote by:** Anthony Hopkins (Austin Texas)

**Confirmed papers by:** Gareth Austin (Geneva), Dwayne Woods (Purdue), Patrick Manning (Pittsburgh), Ewout Frankema (Utrecht), Marlous van Waijenburg (Northwestern), Morten Jerven (SFU), Erik Green (Lund), Ellen Hillbom (Lund), Jutta Bolt (Groningen), Chibuike Uche (Enugu), Joseph Inikori (Rochester)