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SA envoy compares Zambia to Botswana

By [John Hood](#)

Despite the onset of near-global recession in 2008, the past few decades have still brought [the single-greatest leap in human wellbeing and happiness in the history of the world](#).

Since 1970, the spread of technology, the rule of law, and market economics have helped pull billions of people out of poverty in East Asia, South Asia, Latin America and elsewhere. The fall of the Soviet empire led to freedom for hundreds of millions of people – and eventually to their economic betterment, as well.

Unfortunately, there has been a major regional outlier in the global trend towards greater freedom and prosperity: sub-Saharan Africa. It alone has experienced a significant *increase* in poverty since 1970. Its post-colonial history has been rife with tyranny, corruption, and chronic warfare. Disease, rickety infrastructure, inadequate education, and political malfeasance have conspired to hamper economic growth.

There is hope, however. While many promising experiments in political and economic liberalization have foundered – in places as disparate as Nigeria, Kenya, and South Africa – there are some success stories from which reformers and well-wishers can learn.

The current South African ambassador to Argentina, former Parliamentarian Tony Leon, writes about the failures and successes of African liberalization in [a new paper for the Cato Institute](#). His most compelling example is the differing fates of Zambia and Botswana, both former British colonies rich in resources and lacking direct access to the sea.

After winning their independence in the mid-1960s, the two countries chose separate paths. Zambia was far richer at the beginning. But a combination of policy choices and misfortunes – the nationalization of Zambian copper mines, the adoption of socialist economics, the adoption of one-party dictatorship, and the misrule of corrupt politicians – ruined the country's tradition of enterprise and productivity. By contrast, Botswana chose a path of free, competitive elections and market-friendly economic policies such as free trade, low and broad-based taxes, and trustworthy courts of law.

The two paths led to markedly different destinations. From 1960 to 2007, Zambia's real per-capita income rose only slightly, from \$984 to \$1,220. During the same period, Botswana's per-capita income soared from \$167 to \$12,420. Botswana is one of the freest countries in Africa, and on par with the level of freedom in such developed countries as Belgium and the Czech Republic. Zambia isn't.

What must other African countries – and outsiders who want to be of actual help rather than just making themselves feel good – do in order to see the success of Botswana replicated elsewhere on the continent? James Robinson, a professor of government at Harvard and faculty associate at the Whitehead Center for International Affairs, sketched out a strategy for reform in [a recent essay](#). To start with, Robinson says, don't count on foreign aid to do the trick. Except for very short-term aid in response to emergencies, he says, foreign aid often does more harm than good. Instead:

- Give Africans more economic opportunities. That means establishing market institutions and the rule of law within African countries. It also means eliminating tariff barriers so that Africans can sell their wares to consumers in America, Europe, and the rest of the world.
- Stop supporting “friendly” dictators who suppress liberty. There is no path out of Africa's chronic poverty, dependence, and misery that does not start with and preserve individual freedom in all forms.
- Encourage civil society, federalism, and decentralization. Given Africa's political and social history, strong central governments are typically tyrannical and corrupt. They favor some ethnic groups at the expense of others. It would be better to devolve power to local communities and nongovernment institutions. Reduce the potential spoils of winning national elections, and you just might reduce the corruption and strife that have plagued African governments for decades.

There is hope for Africa. But it doesn't lie in fanciful thinking, the soft bigotry of low expectations, or massive projects funded by outsiders. It requires an African equivalent to the waves of political and economic liberalization that have already spread through most of the rest of the world.

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