

AFRICAN LION CITIES

*Deflating the MDG success of East Asian Tigers
to a worldwide success story of dense urban
areas with greater capacity*

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Abstract

In analysing the latest cross-country and household survey data, the paper finds that the MDG performance of African coastal capitals and island states is more like that of East Asian Tigers (which also have relatively small land size) compared to the national averages in mainland African countries. This is largely explained by the ease of the public sector to deliver basic social services in highly concentrated, urban areas. Policy responses—depending on the idiosyncratic conditions in each country—range from improving urban planning to ensure the absorptive capacity of cities is not overstretched, while increasing agricultural productivity, to building up the systemic public sector capability to better manage policies, systems, processes and results in order to improve service delivery not only in urban areas but also on a national scale.

Résumé

En analysant les plus récentes données d'enquêtes de recensement effectuées à travers le pays, et en explorant un nouveau point de vue comparatif, cet article démontre que les accomplissements des Objectifs du Millénaire pour le Développement (OMD) dans les capitales africaines littorales et dans les pays insulaires ressemblent plus à celle des «quatre dragons asiatiques» (qui ont aussi relativement une faible superficie) par rapport aux moyennes nationales des pays africains de l'intérieur du continent. Cela s'explique en grande partie par la facilité du secteur public à offrir les services sociaux élémentaires dans les zones urbaines à forte concentration. Le plan d'action primordial est d'accroître la capacité du secteur public des pays africains en vue d'atteindre les niveaux d'accomplissements des OMD déjà atteint par les «villes lionnes africaines».

[#] I am thankful for comments from Corinna Peters and Sarah Brierley.

Introduction

The advancement of the MDGs among the East Asian Tigers is a story of the advancement of MDGs among highly concentrated, urban areas anywhere in the world. High urban density—in East Asia, sub-Saharan Africa or elsewhere—makes it much easier for governments, even those with very limited implementation capacity, to deliver services in health or education or provide basic road infrastructure. If African countries were formed as small coastal states, especially like the East Asian Tigers of Hong Kong or Singapore but even Taiwan or South Korea, then one could speak of high MDG-performing African Lion states. That is, if the city limits of Maputo (the capital of Mozambique) were the national administrative borders, like in Hong Kong, the country of Maputo would have reached a net primary school attendance rate of 91.5 percent similar to 93.5 percent for Hong Kong, compared to only 59.7 percent for the entire country of Mozambique. The African island states of Mauritius and Seychelles have however surpassed Hong Kong while Sao Tome and Principe has even reached a net attendance rate of 98.4 percent at the primary level. If Accra (the capital of Ghana) constituted its own country, the national fertility rate (births per woman) would be 2.5 in contrast to 4.2 for Ghana as a whole and nearly every 17 year old would have already attained universal primary completion (97.5 percent) based on 2008/09 GDHS data calculations. If Dakar (the capital of Senegal) formed its own country, 92.1 percent of all births would have been attended by skilled health staff, compared to 51.9 percent for the entire country of Senegal, whereas Mauritius reaches a share of 99.2 percent (see figure below).

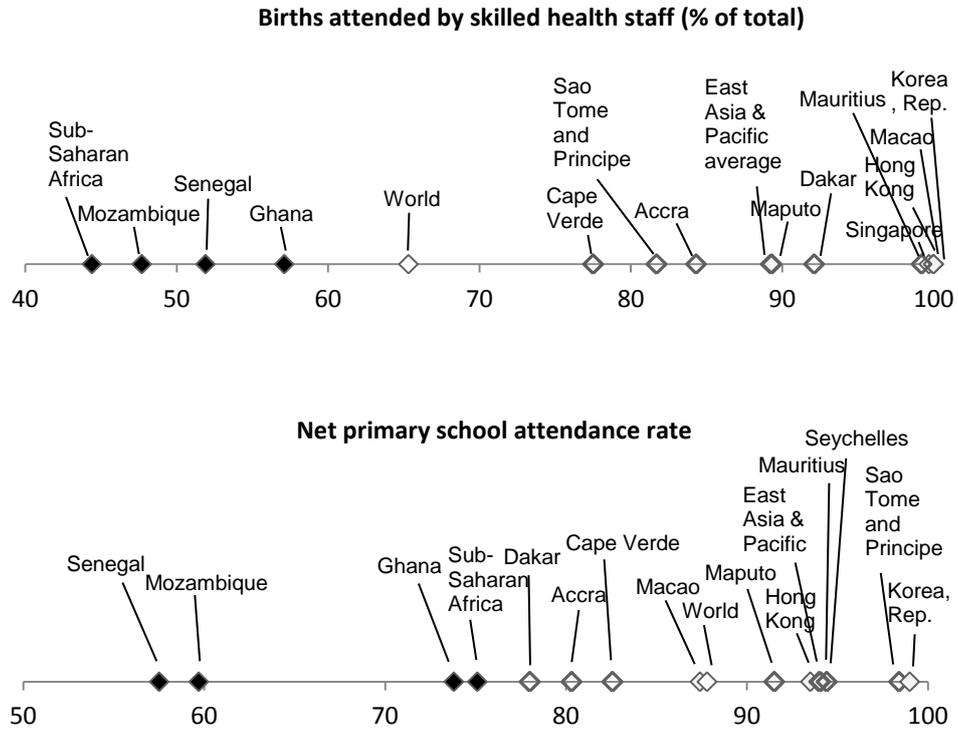
Discussion and results

Taking this geography-contingent perspective, some aspects of development appear to be a consequence of defining political borders, of urban density and of the administrative ease of the public sector to deliver basic social services in cities. The figure below provides data-driven evidence that the overall performance of these African coastal capitals on various basic development indicators is often closer to that of East Asian Tiger countries than to the national averages in mainland African countries.¹ An example is that the share of births attended by skilled health staff in the analysed mainland African countries is at or below 57 percent while their capital cities and African island states reach levels between 77 and 100 percent. Another example is the overall high adult literacy rates of

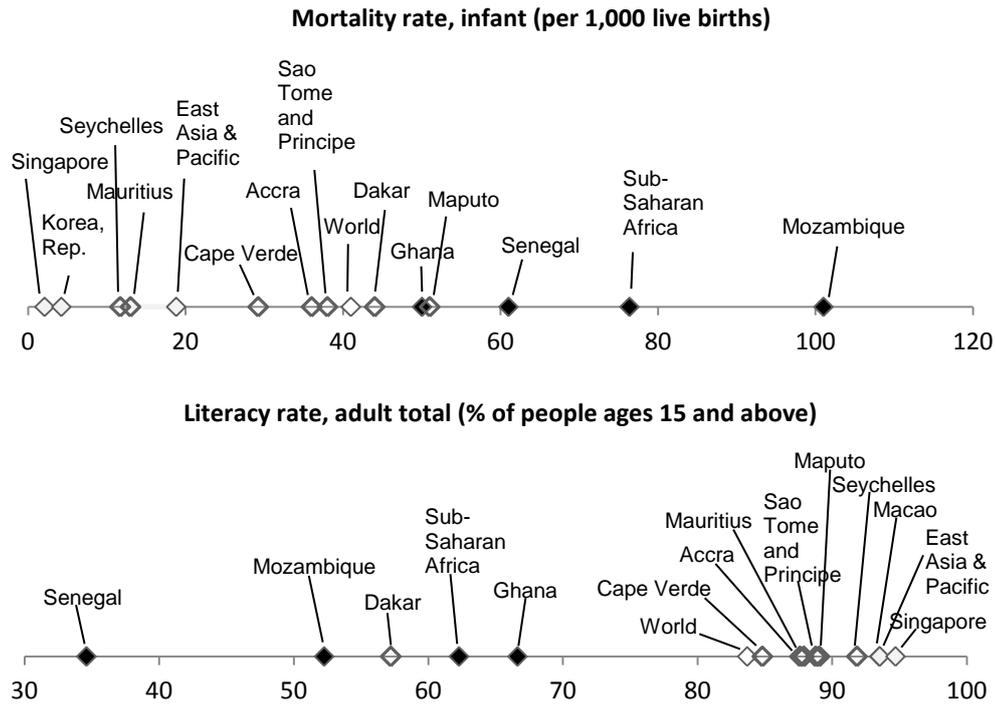
¹ Since most MDGs focus on health and education targets, these are also the focus of the paper.

African coastal capitals and island states that are comparable to East Asian Tiger countries, as illustrated below. Like many East Asian Tigers, many African Lion cities and islands have already attained many MDGs (see World Development Indicators Database: 2011).²

Figure 1: African Lion cities/countries vs. East Asian Tiger cities/countries by various development indicators, latest year between 2005-2010



² The term ‘African lions’ is used metaphorically here (given the high relative prevalence of lions in sub-Saharan Africa) in contrast to the widely accepted term of ‘East Asian tigers’ (given the high relative prevalence of tigers in East Asia) which describe the highly developed countries of Hong Kong, Singapore, South Korea, and Taiwan.



Source: Author's illustration based on data calculations from the World Development Indicators Database; largely using data from the latest round of the Demographic and Health Surveys. Note: African countries have been selected on the basis of whether an internationally comparable Demographic and Health Survey was conducted in the respective country (see <http://www.measuredhs.com>) and if the country's capital city is located on the coast. Mainland African countries are specified in the figure with a solid black symbol, African coastal capitals and island states are denoted with an outlined dark grey symbol and East Asian countries are represented with a solid light grey symbol. Data - where available - is shown for all four East Asian Tigers with the exception of Taiwan, for which internationally comparable data is not available. Data for Macao have been included. The share of births attended by skilled health staff reflects 2004 data for Singapore and Macao, and 2003 data for the Republic of Korea. Data for Mozambique reflects the year 2003.

Densely populated cities with coastal access have a number of comparative geographic advantages. They promote productivity through agglomeration economies. They allow for easier access to global trade markets. They have lower financial costs for the supply of basic social services and infrastructure, whereas areas where living settlements are small and sparsely populated are also where typically it is most politically and financially difficult to build schools and health

facilities, deliver services, including deploying teachers and health practitioners, and increase demand for these services due to higher opportunity costs in rural areas (Krauss 2012). They reduce the number of challenges associated with the organisation and management of education, health and infrastructure provision, and require much lower levels of public sector capacity. In Mozambique, for instance, where people live dispersed over large areas and often in very small community settlements, the vast geographic territory of the country (786,380 sq. km) requires enormous state capabilities to meet the needs of its citizens with basic public services—while the land area in Hong Kong (1,042 sq. km) and Singapore (700 sq. km) is similar to that in African Lion cities and islands such as Accra (894 sq. km) and Sao Tome and Principe (960 sq. km). It is important to emphasise that the larger a country is, the more state capabilities are required to implement and administer public policies, programmes and services efficiently and effectively.

While disparities in MDG performance appear small in relative terms between East Asian Tiger economies and these African coastal capitals, disparities between these two groups are very large in terms of their economic diversification, the sophistication of their international financial centres and the capacity to manufacture information technology, among many other factors. At the same time however, it is clear that the ‘East Asian miracles’ have relatively small geographic territories (partly with the exception of South Korea) and do not require high levels of decentralised government capacity or public pressure to provide basic public services across vast geographic areas, including to agriculturally dependent households, but rather have highly concentrated, urban areas that have relatively fewer implementation costs to government interventions. Birth place in a densely populated area appears therefore to be a very strong predictor of the opportunities of individuals to receive education and health services later in life, whether in East Asian Tiger countries or in African Lion cities and islands. With the same logic, if the city borders of Rio de Janeiro, Buenos Aires or Sao Paulo were their own national borders, these city-states would just as likely have been coined ‘South American miracles’.

Conclusion and policy responses

In efforts to improve basic service delivery in health and education, governments of poor countries could help drive the underlying determinants of urbanisation, above all by increasing agricultural productivity but also by improving urban planning to ensure the absorptive capacity of cities is not overstretched. On the other hand, governments could build up their capabilities to better manage policies, systems, processes and results in order to provide improved public services not only in urban areas but also on a national scale—through, for example, various training workshops for government officials to enhance

administrative and managerial skills and improve implementation know-how. Such policy measures could help drive more spatially even development, for which there are social, economic and political arguments and without which achieving social cohesion and equity in a number of sub-Saharan African countries would be very difficult—Cote d'Ivoire and Nigeria are examples. Finally, the implied finding is not to support secession and independence movements towards urban, coastal city-states but rather above all to expand the systemic public sector capability of African countries to achieve levels of MDG performance already attained by African Lion cities.

References

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