

Review – Lagos to Mombasa

Written by Jorich Johann Loubser

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JORICH JOHANN LOUBSER, OCT 28 2022

Lagos to Mombasa: The Trans-Africa Podcast from the CGD
By the Center for Global Development (CGD), hosted by Gyude Moore
Podcast, Season 1, 2021-2022

The rise in popularity of podcasts has unfortunately not been accompanied by a similar increase in the number of podcasts focused on Africa. In a world of under-representation, the Center for Global Development's (CGD) *Lagos to Mombasa* podcast is a welcome addition. The podcast is hosted by Gyude Moore, a senior policy fellow at the CGD. The self-proclaimed goal of the podcast is to provide a platform for researchers (including the CGD's own research) and practitioners to share their insights on African policy issues. This, Moore argues, is an important intervention, as ideas are crucial to structuring the assumptions we make. He argues that they shape policy, and govern budgetary and resource allocation.

The first season of the podcast includes 10 episodes, each dealing with a specific African (policy) issue, as well as an introductory and recap episode. Moore, whose own work focuses on infrastructure, hosts two guests per episode. The use of expert guests allows the podcast to cover a wide array of issues ranging from vaccine manufacturing to climate-change adjustment. Guests are sometimes also key actors within the private sector. Moore and most of his guests are knowledgeable on the issues they cover, and Moore has a good habit of nudging guests away from technical jargon. Thus, the podcast is valuable to all those who are interested in African development, regardless of their own level of expertise.

The quality of each episode largely depends on the guest selection. The podcast is at its strongest when policy experts speak about specific country experiences, relying on their first-hand experience. A good example of this is Episode 7, which draws on its guests' involvement in using technological innovations to distribute social protection during the COVID-19 pandemic, or in setting up centralised digital identification systems. The podcast does a good job of identifying specific technocratic solutions to policy issues, and it rightly seeks to understand technical challenges holistically. For instance, Episode 1 on vaccine manufacturing looks at issues ranging from production (how to build sufficient productive capacity) to sales (the need to provide guarantees of purchases when costs will be slightly higher as benefits of scale have not yet been reached), and provides insightful advice on what states need to do to develop domestic capacity.

Some guests offer cutting-edge insights. For example, in Episode 7 on the role of digital ID systems in social protection, drawing on innovative African policies during the COVID-19 pandemic, there is a call to shift from policy approaches that "scale what works" to "what works at scale". A strong general theme in the series is that African states need to be braver in their policy approaches – a call that I support.

There remain two issues with the podcast. The first is that Moore seldom pushes back against his guests, which leaves listeners with many unanswered questions. For instance, Episode 8 investigates whether African countries can increase migration opportunities for skilled youth. Despite mentioning the possibility that encouraging skilled migration may increase 'brain drain', a significant issue in Africa (see for example Stella and Marfouk, 2013; Kaplan, and Höppli, 2017), Moore does not challenge his guests on how to deal with this issue, and instead quickly moves on.

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Episode 2 asks what Africa can do to attract foreign investment. The two guests are Abebe Aemro Selassie, the Director of the IMF's African Department, and Charlie Robertson, Global Chief Economist at Renaissance Capital, an investment group. As is often the case, Robertson cites the need for states to address the 'riskiness', using the language of "unexpected regulatory issues" associated with African investment if they are to encourage economic development. Moore does not ask Charlie to defend this position, taking what he says at face value. Thankfully, Selassie directly challenges this narrative:

I have a little bit of a sense that somebody's balance sheet is going to have to be put at some risk. And risk tolerance towards projects in Africa tends to be limited. I hear the same anecdotes being trotted out again and again and again. So, on electricity it's Uganda with Bujagali, on telecoms it is always Nigeria. That thing about investors having very long memories is really true, and they will use something that happened in one country to try and extract higher returns in another country.

Both guests cite the Bujagali Hydroelectric Power Station project when referring to "Bujagali". The Nigerian example, which he also uses, refers to a \$1.5 billion fine given to MTN, the South African telecommunications giant, for failure to cut off users with unregistered SIM cards from its network in 2015 (the fine was initially reported as amounting to \$5.2 billion, then set to \$3.9 billion in 2015 which was then negotiated down to \$1.5 billion). While other providers complied with an earlier directive to cut off unregistered SIM cards, for fear that they were being used by insurgency groups such as Boko Haram, MTN had not. Fining a company for not complying with national security laws is clearly a reasonable state action. A call for African states to be braver in their policymaking must also be accompanied by an approach that directly challenges guests on their own ideas.

This leads to my second critique of the podcast: its apolitical nature. The podcast provides technocratic solutions to Africa's challenges, but never engages with the political economy which explains whether these policies would be adopted or not. In his concluding episode, Moore speaks to how often those who lead discussions on Africa are not decided through meritocratic means, but instead those with the most resources – something that the podcast attempts to correct. The result of the apolitical nature of the series is that it reduces the process of development down to contestation over ideas – the right ideas and policies will drive development in Africa.

This is not to say that ideas do not matter, but it is to say that a podcast dealing with African development does need to develop an analysis of the politics, especially domestic political analysis, that explains why certain policies are adopted and the efficacy of their implementation. As Ferguson (1994) illustrated in *The Anti-Politics Machine*, this solely technocratic approach to development only serves to 'de-politicize' inherently political issues such as resource allocation, often to the detriment of weaker groups.

This shortcoming could be addressed in future seasons by having guests that have a more 'critical' development background. For example, Episode 3 on the role of agriculture in African development could have benefitted significantly from a guest who had expertise on land conflict among smallholder farmers. In this episode, the private-sector guest from Standard Bank offers little insight outside of using the podcast as a platform for the bank's services.

All in all, providing a platform for insightful Africanists such as Zainab Usman and Olumide Abimbola should always be applauded. Further, Moore is a good host, who develops interesting discussions. However, global platforms must ensure that they provide adequate space to complex political dynamics. On a final note, I have already recommended this podcast to everyone who will listen. I hope you do the same!

References

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Jorich Johann Loubser is a PhD student at the London School of Economics' (LSE) department of International Development. His research addresses the comparative political economy of the relationship between African states and mining TNCs, with a focus on Southern Africa. Previously, he has studied at the University of Cape Town, the LSE and Oxford University. He is also on Twitter.