

# The Cheetah Generation: The Birth of the Captains of Industry in Africa?

## Introduction

The debates about African entrepreneurs is not new. There have been scholarly efforts in the past to describe and analyse African entrepreneurs. But “much of what has been written about African entrepreneurship views it unfavourably” (Elkan 1988:172). At some point, we got used to the narrative that the reason why Africa has failed to make progress in terms of social and economic development is precisely because the continent lacked a class of entrepreneurs who can play a critical role in driving this process. It was suggested that what emerged in post-colonial Africa was a class of ‘bureaucratic bourgeoisie’ that relied mainly on access to state power, resources and influence to support their private business undertakings (see Arrighi and Saul 1968). While there are questions about whether the people who own food and clothing business ventures on the streets of African towns and cities should be recognised as entrepreneurs or as survivalists, there seem to be a change in the views about entrepreneurship in Africa today. The more recent stories about African entrepreneurs assert that there is a new generation of Africans (The Cheetah Generation) which is doing things differently. In this piece, I would like to reflect on this group of Africans, focusing on whether it is at all different from African entrepreneurs we have seen in the past.

## The Cheetah Generation in Africa Rising Narrative

If there is a good thing one can cite from the 2008/09 financial crisis, it is that Africa began to attract the attention of global media, not for the usual stories of starvation, diseases, civil wars, bad governance and despair. In the aftermath of the 2008/09 financial and economic crisis the world woke up to the ‘surprising’ fact that most African economies rebound quickly from the

**Horman Chitonge**  
Centre for African Studies  
University of Cape Town  
South Africa

crisis, the opposite of what many experts were predicting – a prolonged recession. This caught many ‘conventional’ analysts by surprise, and since then, there have been many narratives offered to explain this. One of the narratives that have become popular in global media houses is the ‘Africa Rising Narrative (ARN)’. The Economist magazine’s story in 2011 that seven of the ten fastest growing economies in the world were in Africa sparked some kind of media hype which popularised ARN. The ARN, for a change, confidently affirms an Africa that is resolutely rising from the ruins of civil wars, poverty, hopelessness, diseases and the ravage of the ‘big men’. While the ARN identifies several factors to have played an important role in this turn of events, it strongly associates the positive momentum to the emergence of a new generation of African entrepreneurs – the ‘Cheetah Generation’. This new generation of African entrepreneurs is said to be an independent class not relying on privileged access to state power and resources (Rotberg 2013); they are ‘making it’ on their own, as it were. There is the view that this generation is different from what we have seen before.

Although in the past the debate was about whether African entrepreneurs existed or not, the current discourse, riding on the Africa Rising hype, has brushed aside doubts about their existence. The debates have focused more on trying to describe and understand the key features of what is sometimes referred to as the ‘new generation of African entrepreneurs’ (McDade and Spring 2005) or more generally, the ‘Cheetah Generation’ (Ayitteh 2005). For example, an online Forbes publication, which profiles young African entrepreneurs, states that,

There has never been a more inspired generation of young Africans. These builders, innovators and risk takers are fervent in their resolve to transform the continent. They are solving critical socio-economic problems, exporting African culture to the world, creating job opportunities for Africans, re-telling Africa’s stories, and writing the future (Nsehe 2014).

The Kenyan Minister of Industrialisation and Enterprise Development, Adam Mohammed, talks about a ‘mind-set’ shift among young Africans who are now increasingly thinking not as prospective employees but as employers (Obonyo 2016:17). Creation of jobs, in the form of self-employment, but also jobs for others in the context where unemployment among the youth in Africa is high is seen as one of the greatest potentials that entrepreneurship offers: ‘Today, entrepreneurship is seen as one of the most sustainable job generation in Africa’ argues Obonyo (ibid 16).

But at this stage, we know very little about this group of Africans, whether it is new and different from the African entrepreneur we have encountered in the past, its size, how this group sees itself in relation to the rest of society and what motivates members of this group. In other words, there is need for a sociology of African entrepreneurs, to understand, not only their role in society, but their potential as an instrument for social, economic and political change on the continent. Just how much hope should Africa place on this group and why now?

Although there have been a number of studies done in the last decade about African entrepreneurs (Brixiova et al. 2013; Baumol 1968 Gelb et al. 2009 Ncube 2005), this area of study remains under-theorised with scarce scholarly literature that provides deep insights into

what constitutes this group, the different sub-groups, and how they operate in the African socioeconomic and political milieu. Most of the studies which have been conducted so far have focused on the role they (can) play in promoting job creation, sustainable and inclusive growth and development in Africa, with less attention given to understanding the social context which shapes what they do and who they are. If the claim is that this class of entrepreneurs is different from the past generations (for sure, Africa has not lacked entrepreneurs in the past), we then need to know what makes this group different.

Further, there is a growing need to study not just the personal traits of entrepreneurs, but also the broader context that shapes their activities and their business orientation. In this regard, there is still a huge gap in the scholarship, especially on the African entrepreneurs as a distinct group shaped by the specific social, political, economic, cultural and religious context on the continent. Given the different context in which the African entrepreneur operates, we should not expect him or her to behave in the same way as a Brazilian, Russian, Japanese or European entrepreneur. As Reivera-Santos and others have observed, 'characteristics of the environment are likely to affect not only the possible emergence of social enterprises, but also many of the characteristics of these ventures' (Rivera-Santos et al. 2015:73). Adrich and Martinez (2007:294) make a similar observation arguing that 'understanding entrepreneurial success requires that we consider the societal context in which entrepreneurs develop their efforts'.

To develop a richer understanding of entrepreneurs, the 'individual, the organisation and the development context need to be studied' (Lighthelm 2010:133). In this sense, entrepreneurship has to be seen as a product of the broader social, political, economic and cultural environment. It is not merely an economic phenomenon to which individuals or group actors are responding; entrepreneurs are

responding to all the different stimuli in the environment where they live. From my recent work among agro-processing enterprises in South Africa and Zambia, it has become apparent that the broader context has an immense impact on shaping the entrepreneur.

In this regard, the African entrepreneurship scholarship urgently needs a reorientation of the research approach to understand this allegedly nascent class of captains of industry in Africa. The resurgence of interest in African entrepreneurs is obviously highlighting the need to develop a 'sociology of African entrepreneurs', which locates this group of Africans in the broader African society. For instance, we have to ask, who is an African entrepreneur? How is he/she different from a European, Asian or American entrepreneur? What characteristics does the African entrepreneur have in common with entrepreneurs from other parts of the world? How does the African entrepreneur relate to African society broadly? What shapes the African entrepreneurs' world view? How does the African society perceive and relate to the African entrepreneur? These are important questions which need to be explored systematically in order to properly understand the African entrepreneurs and what sets them apart from the rest.

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