

An Inside Journey Through
Five Decades of
African Development

KNOW THE BEGINNING WELL

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Prologue

Sixty Years On

Black Star Square, also known as Independence Square, sits on the edge of the ocean in Accra, the capital city of Ghana. It is one of the largest public squares in Africa, a vast expanse of pavement framed by permanent grandstands on three sides and two towering monuments: Independence Arch, and, across the plaza from it, Black Star Gate, which features the words “Freedom and Justice” inscribed below the four giant stars—black, of course—that sit atop it, each facing outward in a different direction.

The Black Star is seen generally as a symbol of African pride, but it’s also closely associated with Ghana, the first country in Africa to gain its freedom. After achieving independence from Great Britain in 1957, Ghana changed its name from Gold Coast and designed a national flag with the Black Star in the center. It was a nod to the Black Star Line, a shipping line founded in 1919 by the Jamaican-born Marcus Garvey to help black Americans return to Africa and the Caribbean. The Black Star Line failed, but Garvey, who died in 1940 and later was awarded Jamaica’s Order of National Hero, attracted thousands of supporters by encouraging blacks to be proud of their race and ancestry and return to their homeland, which at the time was under colonial rule. The same spirit of pan-Africanism propelled a young Ghanaian, Kwame Nkrumah, to help lead the push for Ghana’s emancipation from the British Empire.

Nkrumah became Ghana’s first president and a few years later he commissioned the Black Star Square ahead of a historic visit from the United Kingdom’s Queen Elizabeth II in 1961. The square was conceived as a grand display of independence and pride befitting all of Africa, not just Ghana. This reflected Nkrumah’s vision for a free but united Africa, so it is appropriate that Nkrumah’s legacy hovers all around. In addition to the two large memorials, the square also contains the Eternal Flame of African Liberation, first lit by Nkrumah and still burning. A little farther

north stands the Parliament House, designed and built under Nkrumah's direction. A little farther to the west is the Kwame Nkrumah Memorial Park, the centerpiece of which is a museum and the mausoleum that serves as the final resting place for Nkrumah and his wife. At the apex of the mausoleum's sweeping marble exterior sits, appropriately, a single Black Star.

The public square Nkrumah commissioned can accommodate crowds of 30,000 or more, and it is used primarily for special ceremonies and events. It is the memorial heart and soul of Ghana's identity as Africa's first free nation.

While it normally sits empty, the square fills up without fail at least one day every year—March 6, Ghana's Independence Day. The annual celebrations are a sight to behold. The plaza stands packed for what amounts to a national pep rally for a prideful country that has historically held its history in high regard.

So on March 6, 2017, the crowds gathered and filed into Independence Square as usual, but they had a little something extra to celebrate—Ghana's sixtieth anniversary. Normally, a milestone date like that would carry extra weight all alone, but this anniversary felt more compelling for other reasons. It happened to fall just a few months after a bruising, contentious presidential election, which itself fell in the midst of one of the country's worst economic crises.

Celebrated for decades as a pioneer of pan-African leadership and hailed for a quarter-century as a beacon of all that's right with Africa—reliable economic growth, peaceful transfers of power, strong education, and social services—Ghana had fallen on hard times in recent years, its difficulties fueled by major macroeconomic imbalances and development strategies that continued to fall short in planning, execution, or both. In May 2014, political leaders convened an emergency economic summit in Senchi, in the eastern region of Ghana, to try to chart a course for the future that would keep the country solvent and also begin to restore some of the lost luster, both abroad and at home, where citizens had grown increasingly negative over their country's direction and its institutions.

So a few years later, when newly elected President Nana Addo Dankwa Akufo-Addo appointed a 30-member committee to plan the anniversary celebration "Ghana@60," he acknowledged the occasion should be modest and take into account the current economic restraints. After all, he had just a few months prior defeated the incumbent, John Dramani Mahama, by promising to turn around Ghana's faltering economy and be a better

steward of state finances. But there would be no question as to whether the celebration would go on.

“Even though the country is going through difficult times, we still have a lot to celebrate as Ghanaians,” he said. “We should have good feelings about ourselves.”

For many of those raised in Ghana, myself included, the sentiment is familiar.

I was born on September 13, 1944. Still a young boy when my country achieved independence twelve and a half years later, I grew up on the optimism and certainty that Africans were destined for a good life. Such thinking seemed nothing less than inevitable. In my youth, two figures reinforced that perspective, and both towered over me—my father, and Kwame Nkrumah. My father was such a strong believer in Nkrumah’s vision of a free and united Africa, dependent only on itself, that it often seemed I was hearing the same voice at home that I heard on the radio. I knew even as a child that when Nkrumah spoke, he was speaking to all of Africa, not just to Ghana, and that when he talked about “raising up the lives of our people,” he meant all Africans, not just Ghanaians. Nkrumah spoke for Africa, but he was still Ghana’s leader, and there was a good deal of pride in knowing that. I left Ghana in 1969, and over the years lived in America, Ethiopia, and Zambia, traveling to myriad countries along the way. But the pride and optimism of being a Ghanaian—an African—never subsided.

In 2005, the University of Ghana at Legon invited me to deliver an alumni lecture on the country’s economic and political history. I used the opportunity to reflect on Ghana’s place at the forefront of African independence but also stressed the urgency of keeping Ghana at the forefront of economic and political reform. “In these endeavors,” I said, “the Black Star cannot wane.”

Almost 10 years later, I spoke at the economic summit in Senchi. It featured plenty of good policy ideas but also plenty of pro-Ghana rhetoric, and my contribution was no exception. “We are not just any nation,” I said. “We are the one others looked to for hope, as an example of independence to come. We show the world ‘a face of Africa’ that is too often overlooked.”

In other words, we should have good feelings about ourselves.

As the official Ghana@60 ceremony got underway, the grandstands around Black Star Square were packed with proud Ghanaians who were more than ready to feel good about themselves and their country, including an array of local and foreign dignitaries. On one side of the seats reserved for President Akufo-Addo and his wife Rebecca sat all three of Ghana’s

living former presidents: Jerry John Rawlings, John Agyekum Kufuor, and John Dramani Mahama, each of whom peacefully transferred power to his successor. On the other side sat Africa's oldest and longest tenured leader, Zimbabwe's Robert Mugabe, in power as prime minister or president since his country gained independence in 1980.

Before taking his seat, President Akufo-Addo, who arrived at the parade grounds in a simple white *batakari*, mounted the ceremonial vehicle to inspect contingents of the Ghanaian armed forces and other public security services, such as the police and fire service units. He moved past the Monument and Tomb of the Unknown Soldier, another of the square's iconic structures, and lit a torch from the eternal flame that burns nearby. He passed the torch to Azumah Nelson, a Ghanaian boxing legend who was going to carry the flame across Ghana's 10 state regions.

Radio and television commentators praised the rich pageantry on display. Dignitaries were dressed in their finest attire, many adorned in Ghana's signature *kente* cloth. A color-coordinated march of the security contingents as well as schoolchildren passed in front of the president before giving way to a feast of traditional dances, dramatic re-enactments and skits from each of the 10 regions. The ceremony reached its climax when a group of master drummers sounded the call for the president to give his maiden Independence Day speech.

The whole scene captured the colorful panoply of Ghana's political and cultural heritage, the kind of national celebration that Nkrumah no doubt envisioned Independence Square hosting long after he was gone. But I doubt he ever envisioned that the words spoken by Ghana's president 60 years later would sound so familiar.

In a speech that lasted about half an hour, Akufo-Addo recognized Ghana's historical roots and founding fathers before warmly paying tribute to "those who fought equally hard for our cultural integrity"—poets, composers, teachers, and others. It was an inspiring, uplifting journey through the past that, in some ways, made the second half of the speech that much harder to take.

Akufo-Addo pointed out that Nkrumah's pan-African vision tied Ghana's future to the rest of the continent, and unfortunately, the difficult times that Ghana went through after independence—one-party rule, military interventions, political instability, economic decline—have indeed been replicated across the continent. And while Ghana stabilized itself with the creation of its fourth (and current) republic in 1992, the economic dividend that was meant to accompany freedom had still not materialized.

“Sixty years after those heady days,” he said, “too many of our people continue to wallow in unacceptable poverty. After 60 years, we have run out of excuses. It is time to get our country where it should be.”

The challenge before Ghana, he added—though he just as easily could have meant all of Africa—is “to build our economy and generate a prosperous, progressive and dignified life for the mass of our people.”

The speech hit the mark, but it was tough to hear. Could this really be the message that the president of Ghana still had to convey, a full 60 years after our country gained its right to self-determination? Of course none of the remarks truly surprised; it had only been a few years since many of those in attendance had shone a light on Ghana’s deep structural problems at the Senchi summit. But to hear the president declare that it is “time to get our country where it should be” at a celebration marking *six decades* of our existence, I could not help but stop and think: how much more time do we need? Where was the Ghana that Nkrumah envisioned? Where was the Africa that I had spent my career working toward?

That afternoon, with tens of thousands of Ghanaians gathered to celebrate their country’s history and heritage on the grounds designed specifically for such festivities, I wondered what Nkrumah would make of some of the words spoken that day. Of the need for Ghana and the rest of Africa to get its affairs in order. Of the need to stop making excuses for our poverty and underdevelopment.

Nkrumah’s final resting place lies just a few hundred meters away from Black Star Square. I imagined he might be turning in his grave.



The message delivered by President Akufo-Addo stood out in part because it all felt so familiar to me, bringing to mind another time in Accra that a high-profile speaker used a high-profile event to lay down some hard truths about Africa’s slow progress in the independence era. In July 2009, US President Barack Obama, mere months from taking office after his historic election, visited Accra on a whirlwind tour capped by an address to a special session of Ghana’s parliament. The build-up had been enormous and that made the let-down all the more difficult.

Africa had welcomed American presidents before and Ghana in particular had hosted the previous two, Bill Clinton and George W. Bush.¹ But Obama was different. He was the first US president with the “blood of Africa” in him to set foot on the continent. When Ghanaians learned that his first visit to Sub-Saharan Africa would be to their country, they naturally

greeted the news with exuberance. Signs went up everywhere: “*Akwaaba to Ghana*,” or “Welcome to Ghana.” Billboards featuring giant photos of the president and his wife Michelle lined the streets and city walls were painted in their likeness. Street vendors and other traders hawked shirts, scarves, hats, buttons, and mugs—if an image of Obama could be put on it, it could be sold. And it was. The “Hotel Obama” even opened, an actual hotel with rooms named after different periods of the president’s life (the “Chicago” or “Harvard” rooms, for instance). The mood in Accra was electric. It was all people talked about.

Interest in Obama’s address far exceeded the capacity of the Parliament House, so the event was moved to the much larger Accra International Conference Center, which seats 1,600 and was packed. All the global news channels broadcast the address live and Africans gathered in large groups for viewing parties across the continent. Even the US Department of State got in on the act, taking advantage of the ubiquity of cell phones in Africa to offer speech highlights in English and French via text messaging.

Obama took the lectern to thunderous applause, but, flanked by national flags and seated dignitaries, delivered what could best be described as a “tough love” speech. It was less a celebration of African pride, heritage, and achievement and more about Africa accepting responsibility for the failures of the postcolonial period—for the corruption of its leaders, for the wars that plague the continent, for the diseases that ravage its children, and for the stagnation of economies that has kept Africans poor.

While acknowledging the considerable progress in parts of Africa, Obama pointed out that much of the extraordinary promise that awaited Africa when his father came of age decades before in Kenya had not been fulfilled. And to realize that promise, one must recognize a fundamental truth: development depends on good governance. “That is the ingredient which has been missing in far too many places, for far too long,” he said. “And that is a responsibility that can only be met by Africans.” The people of the continent must start from the simple premise, he continued, that “Africa’s future is up to Africans.”

What he was saying, in a sense, is that we Africans had better get our act together: we are here to help, but your development is not for us to decide. At the end of the day, it’s about ownership and accountability. Things may be better than before, but you guys have screwed up for too long.

Obama gave a powerful speech, but it wasn’t what many Africans expected, or wanted to hear. And I knew that from direct experience.

A few weeks before Obama’s arrival in Accra, I had the opportunity to discuss the Obama visit with a delegation of American political, business,

and philanthropic leaders, several of whom had served in Bill Clinton’s administration and had contacts in the Obama White House. The group, from the ONE Campaign, had come to Ghana to explore developmental issues and learn about what was working, what was not, and what more was needed to empower poor people.² I was a member of ONE’s policy advisory group, so I hosted a dinner for more than 20 eminent Ghanaians to exchange views with the visitors. During the course of our conversations, I learned that Obama planned to focus his “African message” on the need for improved governance to overcome social and economic problems. He would not be making any major policy pronouncements.

At the time, I sat on the Economic Advisory Council for Ghana’s then-president, John Atta Mills. I shared what I had learned with my fellow council members, but they all greeted the news with disbelief. There’s no way, they argued, that the first black president of the United States of America, a man of African descent, would make a trip to Ghana just to lecture us on good governance! One member of the council flatly dismissed my details as total hearsay. Surely Obama, a son of Africa, would arrive with a promise to boost aid and a bold new policy initiative, he said—perhaps even a long-awaited Marshall Plan for Africa. He was certain of it.

The call for a Marshall Plan for Africa has been a recurring postcolonial theme. To most, the Marshall Plan means a lot of foreign aid, but it was more sophisticated than that. The plan came about because Europe was at a crossroads. The Soviet Union’s political and economic system was a powerful force, endangering the spread of postwar democracy and free markets. The Marshall Plan’s grand bargain offered political and economic solidarity, including a strong aid program rooted in national planning, in exchange for which a core of Western European nations agreed to seek trade and monetary union. Those involved realized that the cost of the plan would be high, but that the costs of inaction would be far higher.

At the turn of the century, Africa had experienced only one such compact and that came in the midst of the debt crisis of the 1980s. The United Nations Economic Commission for Africa, or the ECA, proposed a grand bargain of aid to cushion the effects of structural adjustment programs carried out by dozens of African countries at the demands of their major creditors: the World Bank and International Monetary Fund. The Organization of African Unity, the precursor to today’s African Union, carried the proposal to a 1986 special session of the United Nations General Assembly, where it was adopted. But the too-frequent result was

ineffective adjustment policies supported by inefficient aid. It all added up to a lost period of development from which Africa had just begun to emerge at the dawn of the new millennium.

On November 21, 2000, I addressed the Conference of African Finance Ministers in Addis Ababa. I was midway through a 10-year tenure as the executive secretary of the ECA. My speech took up the call for another grand bargain—a New Global Compact with Africa. African countries would agree to put in place the necessary political and economic reforms to ensure that their economies would take off, while rich countries would agree to support these reforms by committing to invest the necessary resources—through aid, debt relief, and market access. Such a compact would be *with* Africa, not *for* it, and that small preposition conveyed a big meaning: a new sense of partnership.

Subsequent events put the issues raised in that speech at the center of the agenda for change in Africa. But the crux of the Global Compact came from extensive research and planning, and it picked up extra momentum at a groundbreaking meeting of African leaders and donor representatives that I chaired before the conference. We called that meeting the “Big Table” because we brought everyone together as equal participants in an open discussion, and it became a template for improving the dialogue between rich donors of the world and poor countries in Africa. Some of the most influential players in Africa’s development scene took part, and while we may not have changed history, we felt we were doing our part to chart a new course.

The principles of the Global Compact became a pillar of the evolving discourse on development, while the idea that African countries and donor countries should hold each other accountable became a key driver in the formation of NEPAD, the New Partnership for Africa’s Development, in the early 2000s. NEPAD was the biggest attempt yet by African countries to unite behind a single development framework that aimed to reduce aid dependency, promote debt relief, and rebalance trade while acknowledging the need for political reform through accountability, transparency, and good governance.

None of these events amounted to a Marshall Plan for Africa. But the various development initiatives that emerged in quick succession at the turn of the century altered the traditional North–South conversation in Africa. At the same time, the entire tone of the discussion around African development began to change for the better, because Africa was changing for the better. Economies across the continent surged, from large countries like South Africa and Nigeria to smaller but still stunning turnarounds like

Rwanda. Between 2005 and 2008, Africa enjoyed an average annual GDP growth of 5.5 percent, and by the time Obama came to Ghana in 2009, six of the world's 10 fastest-growing economies over the previous 10 years were in Sub-Saharan Africa.

Taken together, these changes once again renewed hope that African countries *finally* were on the right track toward economic self-sufficiency and fulfilling the promise that Nkrumah had made so long ago, in the first moments of independence—that Africa was ready to fight its own battles and manage its own affairs. It is the same promise that shaped so many African lives, mine included.

Often called the “father of African nationalism” or “father of pan-Africanism,” Nkrumah always wanted more than a free Ghana; he wanted “a new Africa in the world.” As a result, his influence extended far beyond Ghanaian borders. In 2000, BBC listeners in Africa named Nkrumah the greatest African of the twentieth century. In 2004, in a year-long poll conducted by the *New African* to choose the greatest African of all-time, Nkrumah placed second to Nelson Mandela—but only by 12 votes.

Nkrumah was born September 21, 1909, in the western region of the Gold Coast. He began his rise to international prominence in 1947 as the secretary-general of the United Gold Coast Convention, a group of African leaders united in their desire to end colonial rule. In 1949, Nkrumah, wanting to move faster and more urgently toward independence, founded his own political party, the Convention People's Party, or CPP, with the motto “Self Government Now.” He led boycotts and strikes and served time in prison. But he eventually formed the colony's first African government, paving the way for the independence vote in 1956 and the creation of Ghana as a self-governing state. After the clock struck midnight and March 6, 1957, officially arrived, Nkrumah delivered a brief, rousing address in the earliest hour of Ghana's first day as a free nation. He spoke not only as the leader of a single state but as the voice of a colonized continent. “Our independence is meaningless unless it is linked up with the total liberation of the African continent,” he famously said.

Nkrumah was outspoken and unrelenting in his drive for African autonomy, and he inspired multiple generations of young men and women to believe in Africa's potential in the hope that they might realize the potential in themselves. One man who bought fully into Nkrumah's vision was Akwasi Amoako, my father, who passed that same sense of African empowerment along to me. In fact, when I reflect on my upbringing,

it is hard to separate Nkrumah and my father as intertwined sources of knowledge and inspiration.

Akwasi, also known as Seth, was not a perfect man by any stretch—he often drank too much, and he could be unnecessarily stern. But he cared deeply about me and my older brother, Kwabena, and he was by far the dominant figure in our lives. My parents divorced when I was two years old and my father took me and Kwabena, while our younger sister Ama, who was six months old at the time of the divorce, went with my mother. As a child, I didn't even know my mother—she and I only formed a relationship many years later, when I went looking for her during my college years. My father remarried (more than once), and when I was young I would stay for short periods with my maternal grandmother Nana Birago, but mostly I grew up without much maternal stability or influence. As I got older, I regretted this missing part of my life, just as anyone might. But through my father's influence, I never felt I was at a loss for support or encouragement.

I knew from an early age that Papa was different from many others. A civil servant who started out as a nurse, he was ethical, educated, and very progressive. He eventually worked his way up to become a health center superintendent, a position few attained in his profession. In areas where they didn't have doctors, he worked in the whole district, often acting like an all-purpose physician. I remember people would come and wake him at three in the morning because someone needed medical attention, or a woman was ready to give birth. And my father would always go. He was a hard-working man but also a “modern” man—he took dance classes to learn how to foxtrot and do the calypso, he loved to have a drink while he smoked his cigarettes, and he read all the time. Much of his reading revolved around Ghana's politics and independence movement. He was very engaged in the process, and by extension, so was I.

Political discussions dominated the talk in local towns and villages. Not everyone backed independence from the beginning, though I am certain my father did. He supported Nkrumah and the CPP, and by the time I was 11 or 12 he would take me along with him to political rallies. I became familiar with the rhetoric about Africa, reading whatever newspaper I could get my hands on, listening to as many radio broadcasts as I could find. My father believed very much in Ghana, in Africa, in the development needed to make us an independent and thriving people. His beliefs greatly influenced my childhood.

At an age when most boys were far more interested in sports and games, I was interested in government and policy. At one point, I won a high-school essay contest arguing in favor of Nkrumah's Volta River development project in the early 1950s, a massive and controversial plan to build a dam and harness hydroelectric power. Papa expected me to be as well informed as he was, and although we also talked about history and literature, politics still seeped into those conversations. His favorite book was George Orwell's *Animal Farm*, and once he had given it to me to read, it became my favorite, too. Papa believed the story, an allegory for political independence, reflected Ghana's own situation at the time. We would recite our favorite passages.

Due to Papa's job, we moved around a lot, but our education always came first. Ghana boasted one of Africa's better school systems and Papa was adamant that we should not waste an opportunity that others less fortunate did not have. Kwabena and I knew that in order to ask our father for favors, we had to be able to show we had earned them. Displays of learning—good grades, stacks of books we had read—became our primary way of doing that. But also, I enjoyed it! I spent hours and hours in libraries, although I probably could have lightened up on my reading list every now and then. Most times, I chose to tear through political biographies that offered riveting examples of leadership: Winston Churchill, John F. Kennedy, and one of my personal favorites, World War II General George S. Patton. (I was such a fan, I must have watched the movie adaptation a dozen times.) I also loved to read great speeches for their messages of hope, empowerment, and optimism. When I was in high school, I became infamous among my friends for always wanting to recite Abraham Lincoln's Gettysburg Address. It may sound simplistic, but I was inspired by men of action, by a display of "can-do" spirit and determination. At home in Ghana, that's how we saw our first generation of independent leaders, too. We admired them. We were inspired by them.

When we were living in Accra, my brother and I would visit the Parliament House, just to stand outside. I was a teenager then, and we would show up in the mornings and watch as the parliamentarians drove up and exited their cars, ready for the day's session. We recognized the prominent politicians, especially those in Nkrumah's cabinet, and we shouted their names. This was the level of political awareness we had, that our father inspired. It is hard now to recall a time when people, much less children, held politicians in such high regard, but such was the pull of independence.

After all, Ghana was a new country. We had our freedom and we had our own destiny. I couldn't possibly have imagined a day when an American

president would come to Ghana, much less one of African descent. But if I had, I'm sure it would have seemed magnificent.

The Ghana and Africa that Nkrumah envisioned, stood for, and so passionately promoted, was very different from the reality that Obama described to Ghana's parliament. Nkrumah's goal was to propel Ghana into an industrialized and middle-income country, free of poverty and flush with development, within a few decades. His intent was to transform the economy; the days of over-reliance on smallholder cocoa production and extractive export enclaves bequeathed by the British colonial power, such as minerals and timber, would be over, replaced by an industrialized economy funding robust education, health, and infrastructure sectors. He was an ardent believer in the economic and political integration of Africa, realizing that sustainable development of the African continent would not be possible unless there was a common market or an integrated African economy.

In this way, Nkrumah was ahead of his time. So many of the policies he advocated are core tenets of economic transformation, now accepted as the global blueprint for shaping medium and long-term development strategies. Obama upset many during his first trip to Africa, but his speech in Accra, while arguably too harsh in its tone, nevertheless looked beyond positive growth numbers to emphasize long-term structural changes. And after his eight-year tenure, it became apparent, in retrospect, that he was previewing the new approach toward African development. No, there was no Marshall Plan; but more so than any previous Western leader, Obama promoted African policies that would emphasize the private sector, foreign investments, product diversification, skills development, and technology upgrades, among other things.

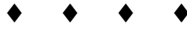
These issues matter to African countries. Yet the turnaround that saw so many African economies surge through the first decade of the twenty-first century began, in the second decade, to run up against a harsh reality—the structure of those economies had not changed much since independence. Commodity booms and macroeconomic adjustments had fueled GDP gains that could not be sustained, leaving countries as vulnerable as ever to external shocks. The surface-level growth numbers, paired with soaring interest in African labor and resources from multinational corporations and emerging economies like China, masked the inconvenient truth that Africa still lagged behind the rest of the world in most key economic indicators.

Sure enough, after slowing to 3 percent in 2015, economic growth in Sub-Saharan Africa decelerated in 2016 to its lowest level in years.

The global development community and Africa's leading institutions—the African Union, African Development Bank, and Economic Commission for Africa—all agree that if countries pursue a strategy to transform the structure of their economies, they will build on the growth of the past two decades. The industrialized economies Nkrumah envisioned—those powered by regional cooperation, robust markets, and an influential African middle class—have been slow to come. But they are core components of economic transformation. As such, they remain pillars of Africa's economic future.

Nkrumah inspired a generation of young Africans, including me, with his vision of our future. He told us that after colonial rule, Africa was going to be prosperous, strong, united, and respected. It was not rhetoric. He believed it and he made others believe it. Like my father. Like me. That is how I grew up envisioning Africa's future.

It's how I still do envision it.



So why *is* Africa still poor? The answer is not so clear-cut. The underlying issues that have long plagued Africa are complex, multifaceted, and the subject of countless books that are far more advanced in their arguments than anything I attempt to offer here. Still, I consider four broad explanations worth mentioning for the context they provide, both historically and for the following chapter in this book.

First, history, nature and the world in general have not been kind. Even as countries escaped the shackles of colonialism, African governments were forced to deal with factors they could do little about, such as inherited boundaries that make no sense, hindering regional trade and too often instigating civil strife. Meanwhile, despite Africa's abundance of natural resources, extreme weather wreaks havoc with economies and livelihoods. These are not excuses, just realities for the continent, and factors that must always be taken into account.

Second, Africa's complicated history with development assistance and debt, which reached up to 90 percent of GDP in many African countries, cannot be understated as a chronic impediment to economic progress. For too many years, the debt discussion was never on the table, with aid donors and multilateral institutions trying to reverse Africa's fortunes by simply throwing good money after bad—and often placing unrealistic

conditions on Africa in return. It wasn't until the late 1990s that changes in the dialogue around development aid and debt, good governance, and bad policy, all started to coalesce. By the early 2000s, the paradigm for effective African development began a seismic shift in favor of partnerships and greater African autonomy.

Third, inappropriate and short-sighted policies have kept most countries from getting ahead. While external factors have certainly compounded Africa's economic woes over the decades, the root causes usually can be traced back to poor policy choices at home. It is not just that state intervention has been too heavy-handed or market forces too unpredictable or multilateral conditions too unforgiving. It is that most policy structures have ignored the basics—investments in infrastructure, public administration, resource management, and human capital—for short-term, unsustainable gains.

This is one reason that Ghana, seen as one of Africa's most stable and enduring governments, was forced to convene an emergency economic summit. Buoyed by high commodity prices and booming production from oil and gas, Ghana's economy grew from an average of 5.3 percent in the 2000s to 14 percent in 2011—the same year *The Economist* magazine printed a good-time cover story, "Africa Rising," on the continent's seeming turnaround. Within three years, Ghana was seeking IMF assistance, its currency plunging amid rampant government spending and a current account deficit that exceeded 10 percent of its GDP. Despite the recovery in growth, Ghana's share of manufacturing was in decline, its state capacity had diminished, and its economic focus remained stubbornly stuck on extractives and primary products.

This brings me to my fourth and final explanation: strong, responsible, and visionary leadership has been in short supply, and basic governance has suffered because of it. Bad leadership at both the executive and legislative levels has underpinned so many of Africa's problems, from poor economic management to political instability to opaque institutions, that have too often put narrow interests—or worse still, personal prosperity—ahead of the common good. The independence era has produced a tortured history of dictators, despots, and oppressors who have shamefully exploited Africa's resources and people.

I wish I could say Nkrumah left office on his own terms. But that is not what happened. The early years after independence remained hopeful, but Nkrumah grew increasingly remote and authoritarian. In 1964, Nkrumah declared himself president-for-life and banned opposition political parties. In 1966, after years of political and economic turmoil,

Nkrumah was overthrown in a military coup—a devastating turn of events just seven years after he had proclaimed, “Ghana, your beloved country, is free forever!” Over the next quarter-century, Ghana alternated between military rule and republican government six different times.

When Nkrumah delivered his famous midnight address in 1957, he pointed out the hard work ahead; that the people of Ghana were ready to move beyond past difficulties and take charge of their future. “From now on, we are no more a colonial state but a free and independent people,” he said. “We are going to demonstrate to the world, to the other nations, young as we are, that we are prepared to lay our own foundation.”

When Akufo-Addo delivered his sixtieth anniversary address in 2017, he pointed out the hard work ahead, that the people of Ghana were ready to move beyond past difficulties and take charge of their future. “We will achieve [our] goals when we move and act as a united people,” he said. “Let us mobilize for the happy and prosperous Ghana of tomorrow, in which all of us will have equal opportunities to realize their potential. Then, our independence will be meaningful.”

It is easy to consider the strikingly similar message in those two passages and draw a depressing conclusion—that Ghana, like the rest of Africa, has been stuck in place for six decades. But that is not exactly true. Ghana, like the rest of Africa, is not where it *should* be, nor where it *needs* to be, but I refuse to believe that it will never get to where it *can* be—the free, prosperous, and stable homeland for which so many have fought, died, and dreamt.

The decades since independence offer us fascinating lessons in successes, failures, and efforts somewhere in between to tackle Africa’s endemic problems. It is our imperative to draw on those lessons as we apply new knowledge to old problems.

The immediate challenge, therefore, is to learn from the past and continue to move forward in a way that will fundamentally transform, not just grow, the African continent. So that in another 60 years, leaders no longer feel the need to tell us it’s time to get our act together but instead marvel at what we have accomplished. And so that on the occasion of future celebrations at Black Star Square or anywhere else in Africa, Kwame Nkrumah is no longer turning in his grave, but resting peacefully, content that we have laid our foundation, once and for all.

Notes

- 1 With Obama's visit, Ghana earned the distinction of being the only Sub-Saharan country to receive three successive American presidents.
- 2 The ONE Campaign is a global advocacy group formed to ensure that government funds continue to flow to poor countries to fight poverty and preventable disease, especially HIV/AIDS. The dinner I hosted in Ghana also included representatives from (RED), a division of ONE that focuses on raising private sector funds. ONE has played a large role in helping secure almost \$100 billion in debt relief for poor countries, many in Africa.