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Africa on the Rise

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MASERU, Lesotho

GENERATIONS of Americans have learned to pity Africa. It's mainly seen as a quagmire of famine and genocide, a destination only for a sybaritic safari or a masochistic aid mission.

So here's another way to think of Africa: an economic dynamo. Is it time to prepare for the African tiger economy? Six of the world's 10 fastest-growing economies between 2001 and 2010 were in Africa, according to [The Economist](#). The International Monetary Fund says that between 2011 and 2015, African countries will account for 7 of the top 10 spots.

Africa isn't just a place for safaris or humanitarian aid. It's also a place to make money. Global companies are expanding in Africa; vast deposits of oil, gas and minerals are being discovered; and Goldman Sachs recently issued a report, "Africa's Turn," comparing business opportunities in Africa with those in China in the early 1990s.

I'm writing this column in Lesotho, a mountainous kingdom (it was snowing the day I arrived!) in southern Africa, on my annual win-a-trip journey. [The winner this year](#), Jordan Schermerhorn, an engineering student at Rice University, and I visited garment factories that make clothing for American stores. This country is [Africa's biggest apparel exporter to America](#).

One set of factories we visited, belonging to [the Nien Hsing Textile Company](#), a giant Taiwanese corporation, employs 10,000 people in Lesotho, making this its biggest operation in the world. Workers turn out bluejeans for Levi's and other American companies, and Alan Han, a senior company official, said quality is comparable to that of factories in Asia.

While America may largely misperceive Africa as a disaster zone, China does get the promise on the continent. Everywhere you turn in Africa these days there are Chinese businesspeople seeking to invest in raw materials and agriculture. But American businesses seem to be only beginning to wake up to the economic potential here.

Why does that matter? Because trade often benefits a country more than aid. I'm a strong

supporter of foreign aid, but economic growth and jobs are ultimately the most sustainable way to raise living standards.

The American Congress has badly bungled the picture this year by delaying renewal of a provision of the Africa Growth and Opportunity Act, or AGOA. This promotes trade by providing duty-free access to the American market. It's one of the best aid programs you've never heard of — except that it isn't an aid program but an initiative to help Africa lift itself up and create jobs through exports.

Some 300,000 jobs in Africa **have been created because of AGOA**, according to the Brookings Institution, but, in the last few months, countless Africans have been laid off because of the delay in renewal. American importers don't want to place orders unless they are sure that the provision will be renewed and the clothing can enter duty-free. In Lesotho alone, about 5,000 garment workers have lost their jobs because of this maddening Congressional delay.

Granted, African countries themselves have botched trade because of corruption, onerous rules and uncompetitive minimum wages. The minimum wage for garment workers is about \$37 per month in Bangladesh, compared with about \$120 in Lesotho.

Or consider infuriating red tape. In Swaziland, it takes 12 procedures and 56 days to start a company, according to the World Bank's superb "**Doing Business**" report for 2012. In Niger, it takes 326 days to build a warehouse. In Senegal, it takes 43 procedures and more than two years to enforce a legal claim.

Some of the otherwise most impressive countries in Africa, like Rwanda, also undermine themselves with their political repression. Ethiopia's dictator, Meles Zenawi, is doing an excellent job of raising health and living standards, but he also presides over a security service that kills and rapes with impunity — and imprisons journalists who report on abuses. Last week, a sham trial in Ethiopia found one such brave journalist, **Eskinder Nega**, guilty of terrorism.

All in all, though, Africa is becoming more democratic, more technocratic and more market-friendly. Yet Americans are largely oblivious to the idea of Africa as a success story.

One of the problems with journalism is that we focus on disasters. We cover planes that crash, not those that take off. In Africa, that means we cover famine in Somalia and genocide in Sudan, terrorism in Nigeria and warlords in Congo. Those are important stories — deserving more attention, not less — but they can also leave a casual reader convinced that all of Africa is lurching between genocide and famine.

So that's why I decided to start this win-a-trip journey in a delightful country like Lesotho that just had a democratic change of power. Its streets are safe, and it is working on becoming one of the first countries in the world with an electric grid 100 percent reliant on renewable energy.

It's a symbol of an Africa that is rising.

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