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Outlook

A CHANGING CONTINENT

The Africa You Never See

By Carol Pineau

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In the waiting area of a large office complex in Accra, Ghana, it's standing room only as citizens with bundles of cash line up to buy shares of a mutual fund that has yielded an average 60 percent annually for the past seven years. They're entrusting their hard-earned cash to a local company called Databank, which invests in stock markets in Ghana, Nigeria, Botswana and Kenya that consistently rank among the world's top growth markets.

Chances are you haven't read or heard anything about Databank in your daily newspaper or on the evening news, where the little coverage of Africa that's offered focuses almost exclusively on the negative -- the virulent spread of HIV/AIDS, genocide in Darfur and the chaos of Zimbabwe.

Yes, Africa is a land of wars, poverty and corruption. The situation in places like Darfur, Sudan, desperately cries out for more media attention and international action. But Africa is also a land of stock markets, high rises, Internet cafes and a growing middle class. This is the part of Africa that functions. And this Africa also needs media attention, if it's to have any chance of fully joining the global economy.

Africa's media image comes at a high cost, even, at the extreme, the cost of lives. Stories about hardship and tragedy aim to tug at our heartstrings, getting us to dig into our pockets or urge Congress to send more aid. But no country or region ever developed thanks to aid alone. Investment, and the job and wealth creation it generates, is the only road to lasting development. That's how China, India and the Asian Tigers did it.

Yet while Africa, according to the U.S. government's Overseas Private Investment Corp., offers the highest return in the world on direct foreign investment, it attracts the least. Unless investors see the Africa that's worthy of investment, they won't put their money into it. And that lack of investment translates into job stagnation, continued poverty and limited access to education and health care.

Consider a few facts: The Ghana Stock Exchange regularly tops the list of the world's highest-performing stock markets. Botswana, with its A+ credit rating, boasts one of the

highest per capita government savings rates in the world, topped only by Singapore and a handful of other fiscally prudent nations. Cell phones are making phenomenal profits on the continent. Brand-name companies like Coca-Cola, GM, Caterpillar and Citibank have invested in Africa for years and are quite bullish on the future.

The failure to show this side of Africa creates a one-dimensional caricature of a complex continent. Imagine if 9/11, the Oklahoma City bombing and school shootings were all that the rest of the world knew about America.

I recently produced a documentary on entrepreneurship and private enterprise in Africa. Throughout the year-long process, I came to realize how all of us in the media -- even those with a true love of the continent -- portray it in a way that's truly to its detriment.

The first cameraman I called to film the documentary laughed and said, "Business and Africa, aren't those contradictory terms?" The second got excited imagining heart-warming images of women's co-ops and market stalls brimming with rustic crafts. Several friends simply assumed I was doing a documentary on AIDS. After all, what else does one film in Africa?

The little-known fact is that businesses are thriving throughout Africa. With good governance and sound fiscal policies, countries like Botswana, Ghana, Uganda, Senegal and many more are bustling, their economies growing at surprisingly robust rates.

Private enterprise is not just limited to the well-behaved nations. You can't find a more war-ravaged land than Somalia, which has been without a central government for more than a decade. The big surprise? Private enterprise is flourishing. Mogadishu has the cheapest cell phone rates on the continent, mostly due to no government intervention. In the northern city of Hargeysa, the markets sell the latest satellite phone technology. The electricity works. When the state collapsed in 1991, the national airline went out of business. Today, there are five private carriers and price wars keep the cost of tickets down. This is not the Somalia you see in the media.

Obviously life there would be dramatically improved by good governance -- or even just some governance -- but it's also true that, through resilience and resourcefulness, Somalis have been able to create a functioning society.

Most African businesses suffer from an extreme lack of infrastructure, but the people I met were too determined to let this stop them. It just costs them more. Without reliable electricity, most businesses have to use generators. They have to dig bore-holes for a dependable water source. Telephone lines are notoriously out of service, but cell phones are filling the gap.

Throughout Africa, what I found was a private sector working hard to find African solutions to African problems. One example that will always stick in my mind is the CEO of Vodacom Congo, the largest cell phone company in that country. Alieu Conteh started his business while the civil war was still raging. With rebel troops closing in on the

airport in Kinshasa, no foreign manufacturer would send in a cell phone tower, so Conteh got locals to collect scrap metal, which they welded together to build one. That tower still stands today.

As I interviewed successful entrepreneurs, I was continually astounded by their ingenuity, creativity and steadfastness. These people are the future of the continent. They are the ones we should be talking to about how to move Africa forward. Instead, the media concentrates on victims or government officials, and as anyone who has worked in Africa knows, government is more often a part of the problem than of the solution.

When the foreign media descend on the latest crisis, the person they look to interview is invariably the foreign savior, an aid worker from the United States or Europe. African saviors are everywhere, delivering aid on the ground. But they don't seem to be in our cultural belief system. It's not just the media, either. Look at the literature put out by almost any nongovernmental organization. The better ones show images of smiling African children -- smiling because they have been helped by the NGO. The worst promote the extended-belly, flies-on-the-face cliché of Africa, hoping that the pain of seeing those images will fill their coffers. "We hawk poverty," one NGO worker admitted to me.

Last November, ABC's "Primetime Live" aired a special on Britain's Prince Harry and his work with AIDS children in Lesotho. The segment, titled "The Forgotten Kingdom: Prince Harry in Lesotho," painted the tiny nation as a desperate, desolate place. The program's message was clear: This helpless nation at last had a knight -- or prince -- in shining armor.

By the time the charity addresses came up at the end, you were ready to give, and that's good. Lesotho needs help with its AIDS problem. But would it really have hurt the story to add that this land-locked nation with few natural resources has jump-started its economy by aggressively courting foreign investment? The reality is that it's anything but a "forgotten kingdom," as a dramatic increase in exports has made it the top beneficiary of the African Growth and Opportunity Act (AGOA), a duty-free, quota-free U.S.-Africa trade agreement. More than 50,000 people have gotten jobs through the country's initiatives. Couldn't the program have portrayed an African country that was in need of assistance, but was neither helpless nor a victim?

Still the simplistic portrayals come. A recent episode of the popular NBC drama "Medical Investigation" was about an anthrax scare in Philadelphia. The source of the deadly spores? Some illegal immigrants from Africa playing their drums in a local market, unknowingly infecting innocent passersby. Typical: If it's a deadly disease, the scriptwriters make it come from Africa.

Most of the time, Africa is simply not on the map. The continent's booming stock markets are almost never mentioned in newspaper financial pages. How often is an African country -- apart, perhaps, from South Africa or Egypt or Morocco -- featured in a

newspaper travel section? Even the listing of worldwide weather includes only a few African cities.

The result of this portrait is an Africa we can't relate to. It seems so foreign to us, so different and incomprehensible. Since we can't relate to it, we ignore it.

There are lots of reasons for the media's neglect of Africa: bean counters in the newsroom and the high cost of international coverage, the belief that American viewers aren't interested in international stories, and the infotainment of news. There's also journalists' reluctance to pursue so-called "positive stories." We all know that such stories don't win awards or get front-page, above-the-fold placement. But what's happening in Africa doesn't need to be cast in any special light. The Ghana Stock Exchange was the fastest-growing exchange in the world in 2003. That's not a "positive" story, that's news, just like reports on the London Stock Exchange. I imagine a lot of consumers would have found it newsworthy to learn where they could have made a 144 percent return on their money.

My independent film was made possible by funding from the World Bank, for which I am extremely grateful. But the bank wouldn't have had to step in if the media had been doing their job -- showing all Africans in all facets of their lives. In a business that's supposed to cover man-bites-dog stories, the idea that Africa doesn't work is a dog-bites-man story. If the media are really looking for news, they'd look at the ways that Africa, despite all the odds, does work.

Author's e-mail: capineau@aol.com

Carol Pineau, a journalist with more than 10 years of experience reporting on Africa, is the producer and director of the film "Africa: Open for Business," which premiered last week at the U.S. Chamber of Commerce.