ECONOMIC GROWTH IN SUB-SAHARAN AFRICA, 1885-2008

Stephen Broadberry, Nuffield College, Oxford, CEPR and CAGE
stephen.broadberry@nuffield.ox.ac.uk

and

Leigh Gardner, London School of Economics and Stellenbosch University
l.a.gardner@lse.ac.uk

Abstract: Sub-Saharan Africa (SSA) is often absent from discussions of long-run growth owing to the lack of data on aggregate economic performance before 1950. This paper provides estimates of GDP per capita on an annual basis for eight African economies for the period since 1885. Although the growth experienced in most of SSA since the mid-1990s has had historical precedents, there have also been episodes of negative growth or "shrinking", so that long run progress has been limited. Despite some heterogeneity across countries, this must be seen as a disappointing performance for the region as a whole, given the possibilities of catch-up growth, although African performance was not notably worse than other non-western regions before the 1980s. Avoiding episodes of shrinking needs to be given a higher priority in understanding the transition to sustained economic growth.

JEL classification: E01, N37, O10
Keywords: GDP per capita, economic growth, Africa, shrinking

Acknowledgements: We are grateful to Gareth Austin, Ewout Frankema and Patrick Manning, for helpful comments on an earlier draft. We also thank participants at the European Historical Economics Conference, Paris, the African Economic History Network Meeting, Barcelona, and (virtual) seminars at Humboldt University and UC3M for their comments and suggestions.