



**The Brookings Institution
Africa Growth Initiative
*Foresight Africa Podcast***

**“Nobel laureate in economics explains why African societies are ready
for rapid economic development”**

Wednesday, March 5, 2025

Guest:

JAMES ROBINSON
Institute Director of The Pearson Institute
Reverend Dr. Richard L. Pearson Professor
University Professor, Harris School of Public Policy
The University of Chicago

Host:

LANDRY SIGNÉ
Senior Fellow, Global Economy and Development, Africa Growth Initiative
The Brookings Institution

Episode Summary:

Host Landry Signé speaks with James Robinson, 2024 Nobel Laureate in economics and University Professor at the University of Chicago’s Harris School of Public Policy, about the critical importance of societal institutions in driving economic prosperity in Africa and the imperative of homegrown solutions in unlocking the continent’s potential.

[music]

SIGNÉ: Hello, I am Landry Signé, senior fellow in the Global Economy and Development Program and the Africa Growth Initiative at the Brookings Institution. Welcome to *Foresight Africa* podcast, where I engage with contributors to our annual flagship *Foresight Africa* report and other experts who share their unique insight and innovative solutions to Africa's most complex development challenges while highlighting the continent's opportunities to advance impactful engagements between Africa, the United States, and the global community. You can learn more about this show and our work at Brookings dot edu slash Foresight Africa podcast.

Today, I welcome Dr. James Robinson, University Professor at the Harris School of Public Policy at the University of Chicago. Dr. Robinson is an economist and a political scientist who has conducted influential research in the field of political and economic development and the relationships between political power and institutions and prosperity. And in fact, Dr. Robinson is one of the 2024 winners of the Nobel Prize in Economics.

Thank you so much for joining the podcast today, Dr. Robinson.

ROBINSON: My pleasure.

SIGNÉ: First, let me congratulate you on being awarded the Nobel Prize in Economics, the profession's highest honor and one of the most prestigious recognitions in the world.

ROBINSON: Thank you.

SIGNÉ: That's amazing. And with this incredible achievement in mind, Professor Robinson, what inspired you to choose economics and political science as your areas of study?

[2:27]

ROBINSON: Well, that's a good question. You know, I think when I was a kid, I was very interested in the world. My mother she was a sort of socialist, she was a teacher. She was very actively engaged in social issues and political issues. And we used to sit every night discussing what was going on in the world and what was going on in Britain. So I was always very passionate about social issues and thinking about why did the world work the way it did?

And then I went to study political science at the London School of Economics. And I switched from political science to economics because I had a very inspiring professor called Michio Morishima, who was a Japanese mathematical economist who talked about everything, you know, like the first book we read was Max Weber's *Protestant Ethic and the Spirit of Capitalism*. So he just talked about all these big questions about world history and comparative development, why Japan had succeeded, why did the Industrial Revolution happen in Britain? And I got very excited about that.

And so that set me off on this path, I suppose. And I've never looked back, really. It's been so much fun.

SIGNÉ: That's incredibly amazing. And I read those books. They are really inspirational and offer very powerful insight. As a Nobel Prize winner, your work has had a profound impact on the fields of economics and political science. What inspired you to become a scholar and what led you to choose this discipline as your area of study?

[4:09]

ROBINSON: I'm not sure I ever chose to be a scholar. I just found it so fascinating and interesting. And you just sort of take one step at a time. I mean, when you're young, you have no idea what it even means to be a researcher or a scholar. I mean, I didn't. You just sort of see, okay, I just want to keep on reading books and thinking about these things. So the next thing I do is a master's degree. And then the next thing I do is a Ph.D. And then I need to get a job, which is very difficult, by the way. But so I just went along this path in some sense. I never really thought like "scholar," I'm going to be a scholar. And I think that's sort of the way I operate.

Think about Africa. So my father used to work in Africa. I grew up in a house full of books about Africa and maps. But if you think I'm going to start studying Africa, you think like, how on earth can I do that? Where do I start? Well, you start you just pick up one book and then you just read one book and then you pick up another book and you read another book and then you read another book and then you go to Africa, and you go to ...

So you just one step and then it accumulates. So I think, why did I choose political science? I chose economics because I had this great teacher who sort of made me think that economics was about all these big questions. But then it turned out economics wasn't mostly about those big questions at all. And economists ignored tons of things that were relevant like politics. So I became a political scientist kind of accidentally because I realized that the political science profession was actually a much better place for me to be intellectually than economics. So I bailed out of the economics profession.

But honestly, most of the time nowadays, I read books by historians and anthropologists. So especially if you're studying Africa, like for me, you know, most of the wisdom about Africa, African society, African history, African institutions is actually not in economics books or even political science books, but in books by historians and anthropologists.

SIGNÉ: Fantastic, Dr. Robinson. I see the connection between your love in answering some of the questions related to the biggest transformation that Africa and the world are facing. And in a working paper titled "Tax Aversion and the Social Contract in Africa," you argue that Africans prefer limited taxes and minimal public goods as they are concerned that it may encroach on their autonomy. Given that we are five years away from the deadline for achieving the Sustainable Development Goals, how can you envision such goal be implemented, be successfully achieved without these services being provided extensively by government entities?

[7:01]

ROBINSON: Well, what I was trying to do in that paper is just to get people to take seriously the ideas and political philosophy of Africans. You know, if we were talking about the difference between the nature of state institutions in the United States or France or Sweden or Britain, we'd take seriously different people's ideas about the role of the state in society and people's attitudes towards redistribution, et cetera.

But when we start talking about Africa, like, who cares? We don't pay any attention to what the Africans think or like what their ideas might be. We just sort of say, oh, you know, they're poor countries, blah, blah, blah. No, you should be taking seriously the ideas of Africans. So that was really a plea for doing that, and trying to distill some lessons from the history of Africa that might explain some otherwise curious evidence from the Afrobarometer about people's attitudes toward taxation.

And I think the answer to your question in the Sustainable Development Goals is you don't necessarily need to do things with taxation. Let me give you an example, which is Rwanda. How does President Kagame implement policy? A lot of policy is implemented through basically, you know, what I would describe as reciprocity, by using traditional mechanisms like Imihigo, which is the biggest system of policy implementation they have. And many of these other what they call homegrown initiatives where people voluntarily contribute labor, they voluntarily contribute resources. You know, if you want to get your street paved in Kigali, the government will give you money, but you have to contribute money as well. So I think there's many ways of doing things which don't involve a kind of Western style fiscal state.

SIGNÉ: Incredibly wonderful, Dr. Robinson, I really like how you bring the notion of nuances and indigenous consideration, traditional mechanism and also just considering the contribution of Africa to the broader understanding of economics and political science.

And you have another working paper titled "African Political Institutions and the Impact of Colonialism" that discusses the connection between colonialism and modern day authoritarianism in Africa. This is particularly interesting, given that the Mo Ibrahim Index is showing a continued movement away from democratic principle on the continent. And Afrobarometer has noted that less than 50 percent of respondents on the newest survey will choose democracy as their preferred form of government. So in the previous surveys, we had a percentage higher than half of Africans. Why are these colonial influences arising at this current time and seemingly so many decades after the colonial era?

[10:12]

ROBINSON: Well, you know, I still think there's the biggest challenge for me—this is something we could discuss—but for me, the biggest challenge in post-colonial Africa is creating functional and accountable national institutions. The great Nigerian sociologist Peter Ekeh had this concept of like the two publics. You know, there was the public of the village, of the traditional institutions or whatever. And then there was the national public. And the problem is there was morality at one level, but the morality of the local society and the traditional society was never projected onto the

post-colonial nation state. So it's been so difficult to get the nation state to work in the collective interest. Of course, the collective interest is a complicated thing.

But, why now? Well, you know, you could say, isn't this a fallout of the transition to democracy in the 1990s? You know, many African countries started creating democratic governments in the 1990s. They made transitions in Kenya, in Nigeria, many other places. But those transitions have been very disappointing for ordinary Africans in many ways, I suppose. And now they're looking for something else. You know, I think all of these military coups across francophone West Africa is there does seem to be a lot of support, and there's some searching for an alternative. I don't know if that's a realistic alternative, but obviously people are disillusioned and desperate.

SIGNÉ: Thank you for sharing those important insights. Often the discussions on Africa focus on its challenges. However, there are many reasons to be optimistic for the continent's future, and many of which are also explained in my recent book on *Realizing Africa's Potential* published by the Brookings Institution Press. One thing which has particularly of interest for me is your working paper that focuses also exactly on many reasons to be optimistic about Africa's future. What are the latent assets that you have identified and how can Africa benefit from them?

[12:29]

ROBINSON: Yes, absolutely, I think that's a great question. I started working on that project just because self-reflection that when I'm in Africa, of course there's lots of challenges, there's lots of problems. People are poor, people are suffering, people lack services and things that we take for granted in the Western world.

But what I've experienced or what I feel when I'm there is just all this energy and potential and just like, if you ask me, is there one country in the world that I could imagine growing at 10% a year for the next 50 years in the way China has done? I would say, yeah, Nigeria.

So the idea in that project was just to sort of say, like, why? What could drive that? Because if you look at the data, it just seems Africa is poor and there's all these problems. And I point out, well, yeah, but that's true in any kind of country that's about to take off, you know, whether it be South Korea in the 1960s or China in the late 1970s. If you looked at it, it would look like a disaster, but actually underneath that, there was all this potential.

[13:32]

And so what potential? Well, one thing I point out is that, you know, there's dramatically high rates of social mobility in Africa. In African society, I think, like, sociologically, African society doesn't have many of these distinctions of class and of caste. And everyone can get ahead, and everybody has a role to play, and everybody can be useful. I think anyone who's worked in Africa has this experience of just, like, everybody wants to know you, everyone wants to help you, they want to know what can they do for you. Like, everyone wants to make connections. And if you look at the data, there's dramatically high rates of social mobility in Africa. So that's very much associated with entrepreneurship and innovation.

I think if you look at Africans' attitudes towards hard work, effort, Africans have very similar attitudes to Americans. They think hard work is the way to get ahead, effort is the way to get ahead. So that I think, like, sociologically, Africa is waiting to explode.

[14:32]

I think in other ways, also I find African society very interesting. We're at a moment where we're retreating from globalization, but it's a globalized world. Technologically, we're all connected. I don't think that's gonna go away. Who's prepared for globalization? Every African I know speaks five languages, like, Africans are so used to dealing with diversity, different histories, different cultures, different languages, who's equipped to deal with globalization? Not British people, you know, we can't even stand the French, we have to get out of Europe. You know, Americans? Let's build a big wall on the Rio Grande—it's not gonna work.

So for me, Africans are just, again, they're sociologically equipped to deal with a globalized world. So what we try to do in that project is just to point out these fundamental aspects of African society that I think are really synergetic with rapid economic development.

SIGNÉ: Professor Robinson, I love your enthusiasm and the powerful insights that you are sharing. And as a professor, you are both a researcher and a teacher. One of the courses you teach is a workshop with Professor Pierre Nguimkeu, and the course description says that the course seeks to understand African development on its own terms. What do you mean by this? And how is this different from how Africa is often evaluated?

[16:09]

ROBINSON: Well, I think one could talk about Africa as underdeveloped or whatever, but, you know, for me, the starting point is that actually Africa, *Africans* made different decisions historically than Western societies did. They organized their societies in different ways, they made different choices. Many of those choices turned out to be unfortunate when Africa collided with mercantile capitalism, with the slave trade, with European colonialism—many of those choices that Africans made in terms of how they structured their political institutions and their societies made Africans very vulnerable to the pernicious effects of European capitalism and European colonialism.

But that doesn't have to be true in the future. So what Pierre and I were doing, you know, in the kind of research agenda that we have is to sort of try to talk about how Africans organized their societies and how they had agency and how they made decisions and to try to think through the consequences of some of those decisions.

And those decisions are not necessarily negative. Maybe they were in the past, but think of that example of Rwanda, or think of Botswana. You know, why has Botswana been so successful since independence? Because it was able to take the traditional institutions in society, the traditional political institutions, and merge them with a modern liberal democratic, post-colonial state. They solved this problem of the two publics. And so they forged a social contract. Somaliland in the last 30 years has been trying to do the same thing.

So you can also work with those traditions, but you have to understand those traditions. You have to take seriously the way African society is organized and Africans' ideas about the world and Africans' political philosophy and culture. So I think what Pierre and I are trying to do is to get people to be conscious about this and start thinking about it and start dreaming of how this can work to build a different Africa.

SIGNÉ: Fantastic! I always like to end each interview by asking the guest two questions. First, building on your work and experience, your phenomenal achievements, what is one piece of advice you would give to African or global policy makers to ensure the best outcomes on the continent?

[18:36]

ROBINSON: I think one of the biggest problems of outsiders engaging in Africa is exactly this issue of not taking Africans' ideas and history and society kind of seriously. I remember teaching, I was teaching in Nairobi a few years ago. I teach ... one thing that Pierre and I also do is we teach every year for the AERC, the African Economic Research Consortium in Kenya in their sort of collaborative Ph.D. Program. And I was teaching in Nairobi, and I had this absolutely brilliant student, this lady who was Maasai from Southwestern Kenya. And I was talking about African institutions and culture and at one point she looks at me and says, are you telling me that Maasai society was not backward? And I said, where did you learn that? And she said, in school. And I said, no, Maasai society was not backward. Maasai people made choices, they built an institution, they built culture. We have to take that seriously and respect that if we want to understand Kenyan society and Kenyan economic possibilities.

But for her, that was kind of mind blowing. And I felt, oh man, there's so much work to do here. So I think that's respect people's culture and respect people's history and institutions and don't patronize them or just look down at them and think of them as underdeveloped and No, they're not, they're differently developed. Africans made different choices. Many of them turned out to be unfortunate. So what? So did the Chinese—they had a communist revolution, they had the Great Leap Forward, they had the Cultural Revolution, whatever. Okay? The future is not like the past.

SIGNÉ: Powerful, Professor Robinson. And given your successful career and impact, what advice will you give to youth hoping to follow in your footsteps?

[20:30]

ROBINSON: I think be curious. Every day I pick up a book, and I'm obsessed with books. I pick up a book and I think, like Malcolm X said, a book can change your life. It's true; books have changed my life. You open a book, it's a mystery to me. Like what's in it, something about the world, some new idea, some new fact, some new context, a piece of history, you know, you didn't understand before. It's just, be curious about the world. Don't accept conventional wisdom and whatever other people say is interesting. You decide what's interesting and what's important about the world. Like, at the end of the day it's about people and people's lives and building a better future, and that's where it's at.

[music]

SIGNÉ: That is fantastic. Thank you so much for joining me today, Professor Robinson.

ROBINSON: Okay, my pleasure.

SIGNÉ: I am Landry Signé, and this has been *Foresight Africa*. Thank you, listeners, for joining me today. I will be back in two weeks with another episode, and I hope you will join me and my next guest.

The *Foresight Africa* podcast is brought to you by the Brookings Podcast Network. Send your feedback and questions to podcasts at Brookings dot edu. My special thanks to the production team including Fred Dews, producer; Nichole Grossman and Nicole Ntungire, associate producers; and Gastón Reboredo, audio engineer. The show's art was designed by Shavanthi Mendis. Additional promotional support for this podcast comes from my colleagues in Brookings Global and the Office of Communications at Brookings.