



Africa: a continent of contrasts

Lesson 2: Dealing with common misconceptions about Africa

Key Ideas:

- a) Africa is a continent not a country
- b) The countries of Africa have a wide range of opportunities, challenges and lifestyles. There is no 'one size fits all' stereotype that can be applied to the people of Africa.

Starter activity: 'Africa or not?' slideshow. All except one of the photos is taken somewhere in an African country. Although there is a bias towards Morocco and South Africa, eight countries are represented in the images. All of the images have been chosen to challenge the traditional misconception of life in Africa as 'backward' and poverty-stricken. When discussing these images, there is, as always, a delicate balance to be found between providing an alternative distorted view of life in African countries and understanding the realities of life for the majority of people in many of these countries.

It would not be difficult to make this set of images the basis of a whole lesson. There is scope for a great deal of discussion which with teacher support, should help inform student's understanding of this complex continent. A good example of this would be using the question – *why are adverts in some African countries written in French?*

Main activity:

Suggestion 1 – this could be done as the starter activity with the 'Africa or not?' exercise incorporated into the main part of the lesson as a follow-up. Students brainstorm the word **Africa** doing a word association exercise. Everyone has to write down 5-10 words that they think is linked to the word Africa. This is done within a tight time limit (2-3 minutes maximum). Students then read out their words and share them with the rest of the class. Each student ticks off words as they are read out until no-one has any words left to share. If a student hears a new word, they write it down (or the teacher records the words on the board or the IWB for everyone to see).

The list of words can be discussed, perhaps dividing them up into groups in various ways – names of places, adjectives, negative words, etc.

Suggestion 2 – (*Perceptions of Africa* worksheet) This sheet has an introduction (which could be given verbally) about the word '**perception**' and the way in which we build up information about a place. It is designed to stimulate discussion but could be done as a practical exercise. More able students may recognise that the exercise itself contains bias.

An attempt was made to source 'good news' about Africa but this was very thin on the ground except for media stories relating to sports. It is perhaps ironic that relatively large numbers of talented and well-known footballers, athletes, etc. come from some of the poorest countries in Africa.

Suggestion 3 – if we are to argue with students against the general use (misuse?) of the label 'Africa', we have to provide at least a basic understanding of the differences that exist across the 53 countries within the continent. A starting point for this might be to relate the discussion at first to Europe (where it could be argued that the use of the label

'Europe' is also increasingly inappropriate as a way of describing life and living conditions across a very broad range of countries).

So, is life in the **UK** the same as life in **France**? More or less....apart from language differences?

Is life in these two countries, the same as life in **Germany**, **Belgium** and the **Netherlands**? Pretty much....apart again from language differences?

What about if we compare these countries to **Spain** and **Italy**? Or to **Greece**? Mmmm...

So where do we start drawing lines? **Poland**? **Albania**? **Moldova**?

This could be a worthwhile but tricky exercise to attempt as our general knowledge and understanding of life in some of the countries within our own continent leaves a lot to be desired in most cases. (Although it should be noted that London is actually nearer to Morocco, Algeria and Tunisia than it is to Moldova or Greece!)

If this task is not chosen, then another possibility is start looking at some so-called 'hard-facts' about the 53 countries within Africa. Facts that reflect life and living standards. The standard place to start is by looking at wealth as measured by total GDP and then by dividing the wealth by the number of people to give GDP per capita (*wealth hdi data file.xls*). All figures used have been adjusted to reflect purchasing power within each country.

The third set of data in the file uses the **HDI** or **Human Development Index** which although it has been criticised for not including a broad enough range of data, is the most commonly available source of data on living standards.

"The United Nations Development Programme (UNDP) has created a composite index that measures the quality of life in United Nations member countries on an annual basis. This index is based on three aspects of human development: **longevity** (measured by life expectancy at birth), **knowledge** (measured by a combination of adult literacy and school enrolment), and **standard of living** (measured by GDP per capita in US\$ PPP). A HDI **below 0.5** is considered to represent "low development". All 22 countries in that category are located in Africa."

Some of this data can be mapped or graphed either by hand or by using ICT facilities.

Whether the data is examined as is or whether it is mapped/graphed, it is important to question the validity of this data with students from a number of viewpoints. How accurate is the data? What does it tell us about the lives of individual people living in these countries?

The quality of people's lives tends to correlate with whether they live in urban or rural areas although there are many exceptions to this generalisation. Certainly access to basic services such as clean water, sewerage systems and electricity plus the opportunity to find paid work depends very much on whether people live in urban or rural areas. The data for the percentages of people living in urban areas show that there are huge variations from 85% urban in Libya to just 10% in Burundi. The average figure for the whole of Africa is 37%.

Detailed data is available at the following URL:
<http://www.globalhealthfacts.org/topic.jsp?i=66#table>

The EarthTrends website takes this aspect much further by providing data for the percentage of urban people that live in squatter settlements in the cities:
<http://earthtrends.wri.org/>

It doesn't take long before you become immersed with even young KS3 students in trying to understand the tricky concept of **development** - but it might be a good time with say Year 9 students to start probing this important geographical concept a little more deeply. It is also worth, particularly with young students, taking an alternative view of what makes a good life (other than having lots of money) – questions about happiness, family cohesion and stability, stress (or lack of it), clean air, friendships, etc make for some interesting discussions.

A further useful website for looking in some detail at the differences between countries is provided by the Canadian Development Agency. There is also the useful facility to compare any two of the countries in Africa or with the data for the UK.

URL: <http://www.canadiangeographic.ca/worldmap/cida/cidaworldmap.aspx>

Information

Ghana
GH

Surface area: 238,533 km²
 Population (2007): 23,478,000
 Life expectancy at birth (women/men): 60/60 years
 Net primary enrolment rate (women/men): 70%/69%
 Gross domestic product per capita (2005): 2,480 \$

[More about this country](#)

Legend

Percentage of population undernourished

- 35% and over (18 Countries)
- 20–34% (32 Countries)
- 10–19% (29 Countries)
- 5–9% (28 Countries)
- Less than 5% (61 Countries)
- Not available (66 Countries)

Comparison Charts

Compare with: Sudan

Surface area (km²): GH, SD
 Population (2007): GH, SD
 Life expectancy at birth: GH, SD (Women, Men)
 Net primary enrolment rate: GH, SD (Women, Men)
 GDP per capita: GH, SD

Indicator Description

Poverty and hunger are inextricably linked. In a world with more than enough food, the problem is not supply, but access. Food production in developing countries has actually tripled since the early 1970s, exceeding population growth. Yet about 854 million people still go hungry every day.

Today, about 1 billion people—nearly one in six—live in extreme poverty, on less than a dollar a day. But, overall, poverty is decreasing. There were at least

Plenary:

The continent of Africa has many problems and faces many challenges. One of those challenges is to get people in Europe to understand that each of the 53 countries in Africa is unique. In order to consolidate their thoughts, get students to imagine that they were travelling across the continent either east to west or north to south. Get them to say briefly, in words or writing, some of the differences they might see on their journey. They should try to highlight equal amounts of positive and negative things. There is scope to look at landscapes, the environment, resources and people.