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African economies barely benefit from each other

Historian Ewout Frankema has secured a Vici grant to investigate why economic development has stagnated in Africa in the past 50 years, while that of Southeast Asia has flourished.

While there are big differences between African countries, we can still see a general pattern in their faltering economic development, argues Frankema, who is professor of Rural and Environmental History. 'African economies do not seem to propel each other forwards. There is no mechanism making sure they can benefit from one another.' This is precisely what did happen in other parts of the world.

He wants to use the Vici grant of 1.5 million euros to explore the underlying historical reasons for the explosive economic development in Southeast Asia since 1970, a period in which growth was sluggish in nearly all African countries.

'Remarkably, African countries export less than 10 per cent of their products to neighbouring countries, which is an extremely low percentage. In many cases, regional trade was choked off during the colonial period.'

He is also looking at migration patterns. 'That is a hugely underestimated factor. In Southeast Asia, large groups of labour migrants from China and India settled in tropical areas with a demand for labour from the mid-nineteenth century. They brought knowledge and set up businesses and commercial networks fed by their connections with their home country.'

In contrast, many African countries expelled 'foreigners' after they gained independence. In Nigeria, for example, three million people left in the early 1980s. Uganda and Tanzania deported their Indian communities, who had played a key role in their economies. 'That did not help trade and development.'

Frankema will soon be publishing a book on aspects of that migration history.

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