

## What is sub-Saharan Africa?

It is not just a question of physical geography

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NINE THOUSAND years ago **the Sahara desert was a grassland**, inhabited by hunters who made rock paintings of hippos and giraffes. **For a millennium before the 16th century a flourishing trade carried salt, gold and slaves across the dunes, until Moroccan invasions and Atlantic shipping drove it into decline. Yet today the Sahara is more often seen as a barrier, cutting Africa in two.** Academics, policymakers and newspapers—including *The Economist*—routinely refer to part of the continent as **“sub-Saharan Africa”**. International institutions such as the World Bank and IMF are internally organised along the same lines. **It seems Africa is defined by a wall of sand. But what is “sub-Saharan Africa”?**

The answer might seem obvious. Anywhere south of the desert is, geographically, “sub-Saharan”. **The first problem is that some countries, like Mauritania, are mostly in the desert itself. And** the confusion runs deeper. Consider **Somalia and Djibouti**, both in the Horn of Africa. **They are south of the Sahara, but the IMF oversees them from its Middle East and Central Asia** department. The World Bank used to include both countries in sub-Saharan Africa, before moving Djibouti to the Middle East and North Africa in 2000. **Meanwhile Eritrea, to the north of both of them, is considered sub-Saharan.** And whereas the World Bank includes the Arabic-speaking states of Mauritania and Sudan in sub-Saharan Africa, the IMF does not.

**Clearly, “sub-Saharan Africa” is not just about physical geography, but has a cultural element too.** Outsiders have often regarded the region with a mixture of ignorance, fantasy and racism. **“Geographers in Afric-Maps, with Savage-Pictures fill their Gaps,” scoffed Jonathan Swift. Arab writers referred to the region south of the Sahara as *bilad al-sudan*, or “land of the blacks”.** The term was used to describe a larger area than modern-day Sudan, stretching roughly from Senegal to Ethiopia. **Some 18th-century British mapmakers simply translated it as “Negroland”.** Colonial administrators favoured the phrase **“tropical Africa”** for everything between the Sahara and the Limpopo river. **In the 1970s the term “black Africa” became popular among scholars,** including some in Africa. It was only **in the 1980s that the phrase “sub-Saharan Africa” gained purchase,** though it began circulating earlier (*The Economist* first used it in 1938). **All of these concepts were entangled with notions of race, language and the level of economic development.** In some cases this has been painfully obvious. In the 1960s and 1970s, the World Bank lumped white-ruled, apartheid-era South Africa together with the Middle East and North Africa. In the late 1990s, when the country was governed by a black majority government, and was once more receiving World Bank loans, it appeared in the sub-Saharan category.

**Many in Africa reject regional labels altogether. African-led institutions, such as the African Union (AU) and the African Development Bank, encompass the whole continent,** up to the Red Sea. They stand in a **tradition stretching back to the 1960s, when pan-Africanism was at its peak.** Ali Mazrui, a Kenyan intellectual, **later wrote about “Afrabia”,** arguing that Africa and the Arab world “are in the slow historic process of becoming one”. Some pan-Africanists cast the net still wider, to include the black Caribbean. These expansive definitions can quickly become bewildering. Binyavanga Wainaina, a Kenyan writer, laments the **Western tendency to “treat Africa as if it were one**

country”, something that may explain why tourism drops in Botswana when Ebola hits Sierra Leone. Yet some trends—from the spread of cross-border business to the geography of foreign aid—can only be understood on a regional scale. So “sub-Saharan Africa” will continue to appear, including in the pages of *The Economist*. Even if it is a little fuzzy around the edges.