

Prisoners of Geography – Africa

Pupil booklet



Introduction

By the end of this unit, you will be able to answer the question:

Write a short summary of whether or not you agree that the physical geography of Africa has affected its social and economic development.

Each part has 3 resources to help you build your understanding of the continent of Africa.

1

A short recording to give some background

2

An extract from Tim Marshall's 'Prisoners of Geography'

3

An image to help us make links with the topic

Links to 'Prisoners of Geography' by Tim Marshall

Ebook [here](#)

Paper copy [here](#)



Knowledge organiser

Word	Explanation
Desert	An area, often covered with sand or rocks, that is extremely dry, there is very little rain and there are few plants.
Geopolitics	The study of the way a country's size and position influence its power and relationships with other countries.
Human geography	The study of societies, cultures and economies.
Inequality	Differences in the standard of living experienced by different groups of people. For example in wealth, healthcare, education or housing etc.
Mercator	A map projection first used in 1569 that is still commonly used today, that does not show an accurate representation of a country's size.
Natural resources	Materials or substances occurring in nature that can be extracted and exploited for economic benefit.
Physical geography	The study of natural landscapes and environments.
Rainforest	A forest in a tropical area characterised by high temperatures, high rainfall and extremely high abundance of plants and animals.
Region	An area of a country or continent that has particular characteristics.
Rural-urban migration	The movement of people from the countryside into cities and towns.

Knowledge organiser

Word	Explanation
Sahel	An area that extends from the west to the east coast of Africa, south of the Sahara desert and north of the Sudanian savanna.
Savanna	A vegetation type that grows under hot, seasonally dry climatic conditions and is characterised by an open tree canopy and continuous grassland.
Scarcity	The limited availability of resources such as food and water.
Semi-arid	A climate type that has little rain but is not completely dry.
Temperate	A temperate climate is one that is neither very hot nor very cold.
Tropical	Geographically linked to the area of the world that lies between the Tropic of Cancer and the Tropic of Capricorn on a map. A tropical climate is characterised by high temperatures and high rainfall.
Urbanisation	The process of growth in towns and cities.

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01

What is Africa really like?

CAPE POINT SOUTH AFRICA



1.1 Video

The video introduces you to the wide diversity of physical regions within Africa. Starting in Cape Town in South Africa, the video will describe the physical geography of different areas of the continent, emphasising the extremely large scale of Africa and the differences between its different landscapes and environments.



1.2 Text extract

Chapter 5 - Africa

Below is the start of Chapter 5

“Africa’s coastline? Great beaches, really, really, lovely beaches, but terrible natural harbours. Rivers? Amazing rivers, but most of them are rubbish for actually transporting anything, given that every few miles you go over a waterfall. These are just two in a long list of problems that help explain why Africa isn’t technologically or politically as successful as Western Europe or North America.”

1.3 Image



This image was taken by a NASA camera on July 6th 2025. It shows the sheer size and scale of Africa and creates a sense of awe and wonder from space. If you look carefully you can clearly identify the Sahara Desert and the Nile River flowing through Egypt to the Mediterranean Sea. Pupils can also clearly see the cloud patterns globally and should make the links between these and wind patterns.

1.4 Questions and reflections

It's helpful for you to make a summary of what you have learnt so far using the points below:

- What are the key physical features of Africa's geography you can identify?
- What has surprised you the most today?
- What questions do you have about Africa's physical geography?

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02

What are the key physical features of Africa's geography?



2.1 Video

The video will introduce you to the key features of the weather and climate of Africa. You will come to this part with varied knowledge and understanding of weather and climate depending on your previous geography lessons. If you have studied weather in some detail, you will be able to make strong links to your prior knowledge of rainfall and weather patterns.

If you have not studied weather in depth, you will be able to make links to the water cycle and gain an appreciation of the variety of weather and climate experienced across the continent.



2.2 Text extract

Chapter 5 - 5 Africa

Read from page 189 to page 190

“In addition to its natural mineral wealth, Africa is blessed with many great rivers; although most of them do not encourage trade, they are good for hydroelectricity. However, this too is a source of potential conflict...

...The Nile, the longest river in the world (4,100 miles), affects eleven countries considered to be in the proximity of its basin – Burundi, the DRC, Eritrea, Ethiopia, Kenya, Rwanda, Sudan, South Sudan, Tanzania, Uganda and Egypt.”



2.3 Image

This photograph shows the Nile River running through Egypt. Consider what influence you think the river has had on Egypt's development. In the image you can clearly see sand dunes depicting a desert landscape, adjacent to the banks of the river. In contrast there are pockets of vegetation with grass and trees visible. There is lots of economic activity taking place including buildings and boats, that are linked to the economic development in the area.

2.4 Questions and reflections

On your blank map, and using an Atlas if you have one, identify and label the key features you have come across so far in part 1 and 2, including:

- The countries identified
- The rivers
- The key climate regions (e.g Sahara)
- The surrounding oceans and seas

Lined area for notes.

03

How does the physical geography of Africa affect the availability of water?



3.1 Video

The video focuses on the challenge of water availability and scarcity in Egypt. Egypt is experiencing high levels of water scarcity and it is increasingly affecting every day life for those who live there. The River Nile runs through Egypt to the Mediterranean Sea and this is highly significant for the country.

The building of the Grand Renaissance Dam (GERD) is taking place in Ethiopia and is Africa's largest dam project. This means large amounts of water from the River Nile is held in the Dam, in Ethiopia. This in turn affects water supply in Egypt. This has the potential for serious social, economic and political implications in Africa.



3.2 Text extract

Chapter 5 - Africa

Extract from page 190 to page 192

“Despite having fought five wars with Israel, and the tensions caused by the war in Gaza, the country that Egypt is most likely to come into conflict with is Ethiopia and the issue is the Nile. Two of the continent’s oldest countries, with the largest armies, have at times edged towards war over the region’s major source of water...”

...The Blue Nile, which begins in Ethiopia, and the White Nile meet in the Sudanese capital, Khartoum, before flowing through the Nubian Desert and into Egypt. By this point most of the water is from the Blue Nile.”



3.3 Image

The image shows part of the Grand Ethiopian Renaissance Dam, which is being built on the Blue Nile. In the photograph you can clearly see how the water is filling up behind the dam. Consider the social, economic and environmental impacts of the dam for people living in Ethiopia, as well as those living down stream in Egypt. What would it be like to live in a country with insecure access to clean water?

3.4 Questions and reflections

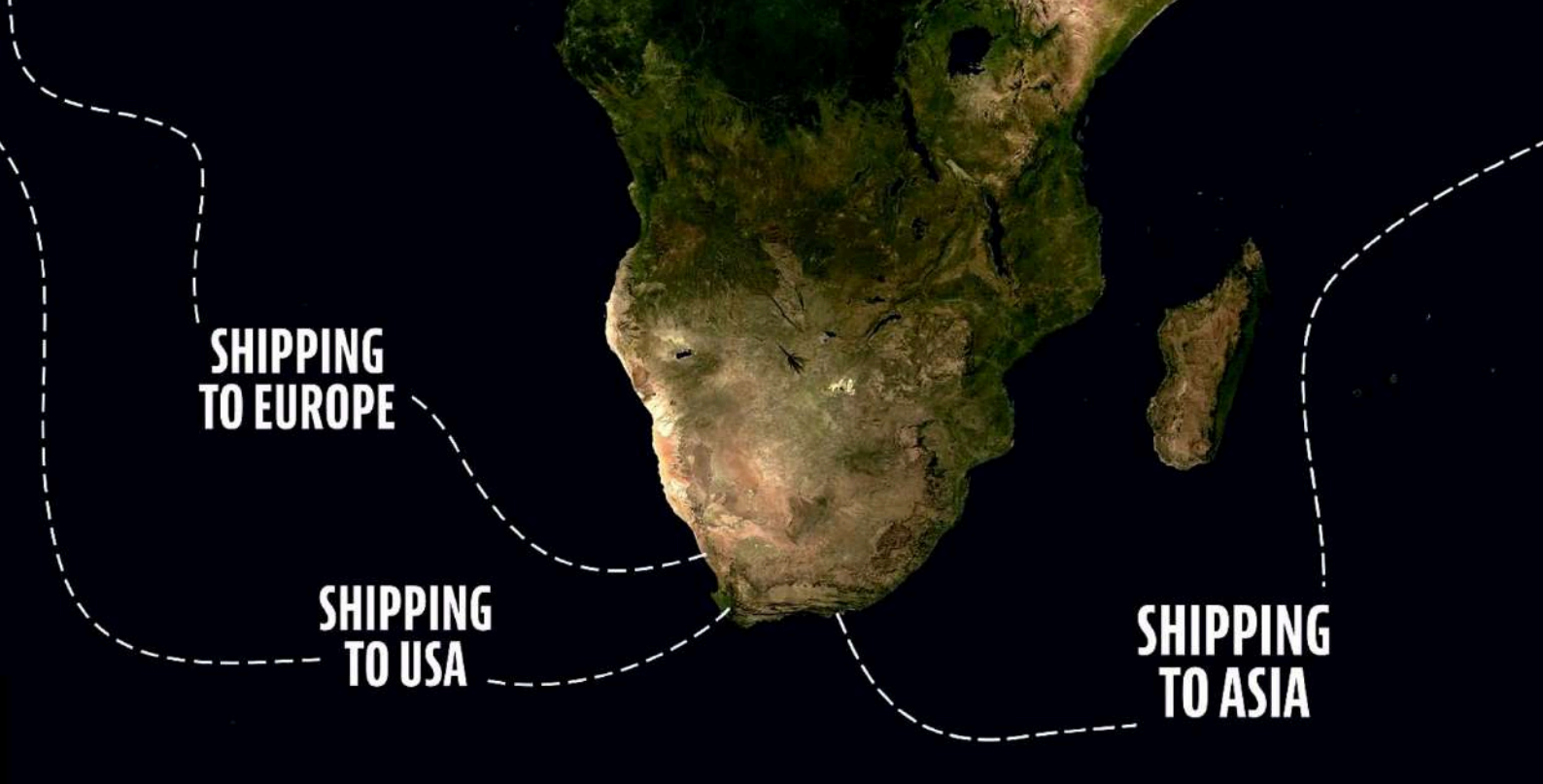
It's helpful for you to make a summary of what you have learnt so far using the points below:

- Why is water scarce in Egypt?
- What problems does water scarcity cause for the population?
- Why is the Dam project causing conflict between countries?

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04

What are the challenges associated with the trading of resources in Africa?



4.1 Video

Africa has an abundance of natural resources across the continent. Access to these resources is highly desirable because they are able to be traded around the world, potentially leading to significant economic gains for a country and the people living there. However access to these resources is unequal and highly political. The availability and extraction of these resources has shaped Africa's history and its social and economic development.

The history of resource trading is rooted in the history of the slave trade and the devastating impact of colonialism across African countries. The video discusses some of these implications and how the future of Africa's development is linked to its ability to consider how to best utilise these resources going forward.



4.2 Text extract

Chapter 5 - Africa

Read from page 215 to page 127

“The Africa of the past was given no choice – its geography shaped it – and then the Europeans engineered most of today’s borders. Now, with its booming populations and developing mega-cities, it has no choice but to embrace the modern globalised world to which it is so connected. In this, despite all the problems we have seen, it is making huge strides...”

...The same rivers that hampered trade are now harnessed for hydroelectric power. From the earth that struggled to sustain large-scale food production come minerals and oil, making some nations rich even if little of the wealth reaches the people.”



4.3 Image

The image shows environmental activists protesting outside Shell's headquarters in May, 2025. They poured oil over other activists' heads to highlight the devastating impact of oil spills in Nigeria, from Shell's operations there. One of these oil spills took place in 2008 and caused serious environmental and economic consequences, but it wasn't until 2014 that Shell paid £55m to help the local communities and the projects to repair the environmental damage. Think about the wider consequences of the extraction of natural resources in African countries, often by multi national companies whose profits do not stay in the country that the resources are extracted from.

4.4 Questions and reflections

It's helpful for you to make a summary of what you have learnt so far using the points below:

- Which natural resources can be found in Africa? Give examples from at least two different countries.
- Why has the trading of resources led to inequality?
- What are some of the challenges of large oil companies operating in Africa?

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05

What are the opportunities and challenges for people living in cities in Africa?



5.1 Video

Urbanisation in African cities is leading to large amounts of rural-urban migration, which in turn places high demands on cities. Using the example of Johannesburg, the video shows you how there are inequalities in cities and unique challenges linked to these. The development of cities today is linked to the colonial history of the continent, for example the history of Apartheid and its legacy today.

Cities face a number of challenges including employment and housing. The challenge for the future is to consider how best to develop the cities to reduce inequality and boost development for all.



5.2 Text extract

Chapter 5 - Africa

Read from page 218 to end of chapter.

“In 2015, 191 world leaders came together in New York to launch the UN’s Sustainable Development Goals for 2030. Among them were then UK Prime Minister David Cameron, Indian Prime Minister Narendra Modi, US President Barack Obama and Chinese President Xi Jinping. The meeting was full of the usual high-flying platitudes such events promote. It was, as it so often is, ‘a defining moment in human history.’”



5.3 Image

The image shows the stark contrast between a wealthy neighbourhood in Johannesburg with large properties, lush gardens and swimming pools directly adjacent to a neighbourhood of tin roofed shacks and informal development. The two contrasting areas are separated by a road.

5.4 Questions and reflections

It's helpful for you to make a summary of what you have learnt so far using the points below:

- Give some examples of inequalities found in Africa.
- What problems are inequalities causing in cities?
- How are African countries trying to address inequalities for future generations?

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06

How does Africa's physical geography affect its development?

Conclusion

Let's draw together the threads of what we've learnt so that you can write a response to this question:

“Africa's physical geography has affected its social and economic development.”

Do you agree or disagree with this statement? Give reasons for your decision and examples from the unit of work.

The headlines of what pupils have learnt in this unit:

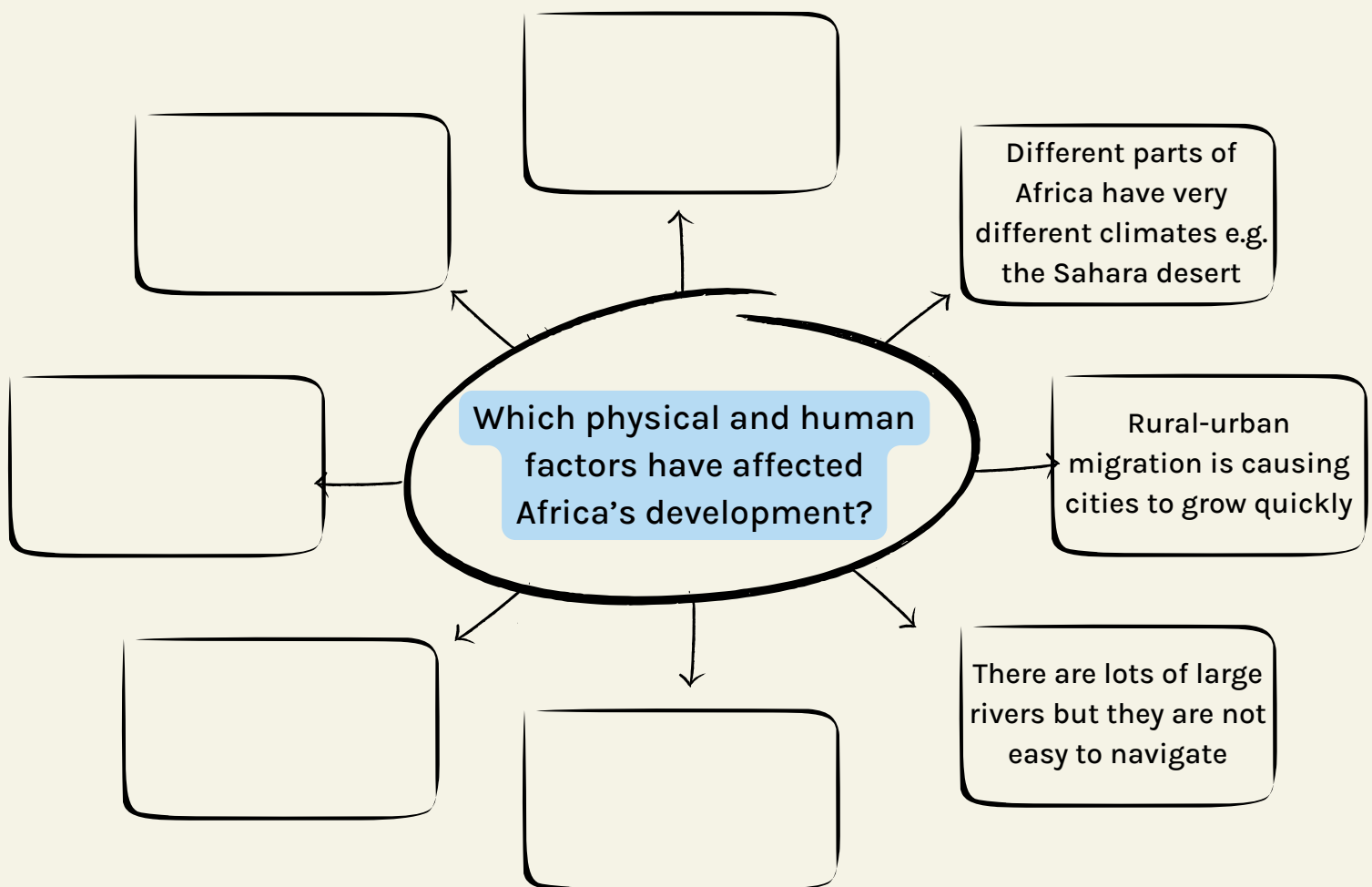
- Africa is a large continent with many different physical features including deserts, rivers and rainforests.
- Africa is an extremely diverse continent in terms of both its physical and human geography.
- Access to water is a key challenge in parts of Africa.
- Natural resources are found in abundance across Africa. They are also the cause of conflict and disagreement and the industries that extract them are often owned by companies that are not based in Africa.
- Cities are growing rapidly across Africa and this presents unique opportunities and challenges.
- The future of Africa's development is dependent on each country's ability to harness the opportunities that arise from social and economic development and to address the challenges of inequality.

Conclusion

Here is a suggested structure for your paragraphs in your response:

1. What are the reasons why you might agree with the statement? Give two examples.
2. What are the reasons why you might not agree with the statement? Give two examples.
3. Summarise overall what your opinion is and why.

Mind Map



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**Salina Ventress**

I started my career as a geography teacher and have always been inspired by the world around us. Making sense of our world, its environments and communities can sometimes feel tricky and I love to help pupils understand some of the complexities that exist so that you are able to make sense of the world and form your own opinions about its future. One of the best ways to do that is by reading a wide range of different, challenging texts, from a range of perspectives, and then using them to help you piece together some of the trickier concepts. I hope you enjoy doing that in this unit of work!

