

Rethinking Canadian Aid to Africa

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The new strategies outlined by the Liberal government to improve the effectiveness of Canada's foreign aid, will have far reaching consequences for the African continent. My contention is that the living condition of the suffering masses of African people should be the basis for qualifying for aid and not some external conditionalities or internal considerations. On one hand, the new policy could provide more direct and extensive capital outlay for specific country-based projects and programs. In addition, it will lead to greater supervision and monitoring of Canada's international aid and promote her closer involvement in the social and economic life of particular countries chosen for assistance. On the other hand, the mode of selection of the countries to be assisted could at the end of day, isolate the people in most need of help because they live under corrupt and inefficient governments or because of internal structural obstacles, which make it impossible for international donors to realize their objectives in those countries. However, the question of qualifying for international help for most African countries appears to be flawed. This is based on the facts that most often than not, the categories for assessing and interpreting democracy and development in Africa are often predicated on a Western worldview.

Many African social scientists and political thinkers believe that the failure of international aid to Africa is because most donor countries and agencies do not understand the history, evolution, structure and cultures of the African continent. Any foreign assistance to Africa, that is predicated on some conditions, set outside Africa, will most certainly fail because the criteria for making such judgments are set outside the living conditions of Africans, without much input from the Africans themselves. The poverty of African countries, the internal political crisis in many others and the lack of good governance in some, are only symptoms of fundamental issues that lie at the root of the African condition. These fundamental issues constitute the macro level synthetic picture of Africa that relate to illiteracy, low level agricultural productivity, adverse climate and poor healthcare, ethnic and religious crises and broken social and political institutions.

What is of primary concern for most ordinary Africans today is that they should have access to clean water, enough food for their daily sustenance, an affordable healthcare system and basic education that introduces them to the riches of humanity and empowers them to maximize their natural and human resources. These needs are equally felt in many parts of Africa because they arise as effects of Africa's sad history. All countries of Africa suffer from the effects of slavery, colonialism, neo-colonial Western exploitation, apartheid, the debt burden and unfavorable international trade. In addition, they reel under the weight of the ongoing contagion of globalization, which is the culmination of the stifling of the economic progress of Africa that was presaged by the failed Structural Adjustment Program of the International Monetary Fund, which attempted to integrate Africa's economy into the global market. There are also the divisive geopolitical ethnic factors, which make it impossible to build integrated and stable societies in Africa. The United Nations Millennium Project Report has highlighted the fact that bad governance, corruption or institutional factors in Africa are not the main reasons for the failure of democracy and development. 'Well governed' African countries that have had no major political crisis with low level of corruption like Ghana, Madagascar, Tanzania and Senegal among others are not fairing better than 'badly governed' countries like Zimbabwe, Togo and Angola in overcoming poverty. This fact is also validated in the 2004 UN World Development Index. According to the Freedom House ranking on democracies in the world and the Corruption Perception Index of Transparency International, African countries compared to some other countries of the world are at par in terms of the democratic process and corruption in governments. The reasons for the poverty of Africa and the failure of international development effort in Africa, go beyond the failure of governments and corruption in Africa. They are connected to the unjust global economic system and international political scheming wherein the lives of millions of people in the developing countries are being determined and destroyed by decisions being made outside their immediate environment. No one should excuse the sprawling corruption in Africa or the failure of governments in Africa. But the question should be raised as to the motivation for corruption in Africa, the conditions that lead to and make corruption possible in Africa, as well as the wider global context within which governments in Africa operate. It is ironic that most African

dictators both dead and living were/are friends of Western governments; while the influential and visionary leaders dating back to Patrice Lumumba of Zaire are often eliminated with some Western connection.

The African condition is a complex reality. It demands what I have described in a forthcoming book as 'a total picture approach' model. This means that the African condition cannot be reduced to one causative factor or another nor can the appropriate response be predicated on one approach. On the contrary, the African condition demands a multi-faceted interpretation and multi-pronged response. Policy makers in Canada and other Western countries ought to take a look at the whole picture and not be deceived by the constant crises in particular African countries to define the failure of development in Africa within the purview of these crises. Each problem of a particular country in Africa is connected to every other problem in that country. For instance, bad governance in some African countries is only a symptom of the problem of the arbitrarily contrived ethnic composition of African countries by the colonialists. Faced with scarce resources and weather-beaten by poverty, Africans are desperate for survival. Power relations in African countries are determined by ethnic consideration, religious affinity and economic interest in that order. Because the whole wealth of the country is concentrated in the central government, accession to power has always been aggressive and violent and characterized by all kinds of unfair means; ethnic population becomes decisive in election. The winner takes all for himself and his ethnic referent group. Governance in Africa is often perceived as the consolidation and promotion of the interest of the ruling ethnic party. The corruption in government cannot therefore be addressed because what is at issue is not the responsibility and accountability of the government to the people, but its ability to indulge its ethnic power base. It is no wonder that ethnicity has become the greatest source of political crises in most African countries.

These problems ramify to every aspect of life in Africa. The crises in Darfur, Sudan is only the symptom of the deep-seated racial and religious animosity in the country that can only be resolved not simply by 'reacting' to the present humanitarian crisis through food supply and shelter, but by addressing the fundamental flaws in the constitution and geopolitical power equation in Sudan. The spread of HIV/AIDS in

Africa is for instance the symptom of the poverty of Africa that has left a greater majority of the people without any education and any health care. This particularly weakens the ability especially of women to make the right choices for themselves or even to understand the whole threat and dangers that the pandemic poses.

It is necessary therefore that policy makers in countries like Canada understand the nature of African society. The most fundamental need of Africa today is cultural and human development, which is at the heart of all authentic sustainable development strategies. These are more important and relevant to the Africans than any other variable. African societies should be helped from the base (grassroots) and then to the top. This is not paternalistic but realistic and pragmatic in that it can yield direct and immediate results for the ordinary people. The preoccupation with good governance as basis for foreign aid for Africa tends to ignore the fact that tribal heads and village chiefs have more influence than most presidents in Africa. These leaders are more accountable and responsible to the interests of ordinary people in Africa than the government officials in public offices. It is important that Canada rethinks her aid to Africa along this line. She should identify the areas of need which Canada wishes to be associated with in Africa, and the African countries where these needs are urgent and in most cases are a matter of life and death. Africans will be most grateful to Canada if it is one country that significantly raises its foreign aid to Africa (to reach about 0.7 % of her GDP) and channels it to areas of need that relates to human and cultural development. Canada should do this in partnership with Africans at all levels especially community-based groups, village co-operative movements, neighborhood support networks, women interest groups etc.

Many development initiatives in Africa end in failure not simply because the Africans lack the institutional framework for the country-projects to be implemented successfully, but because the donor countries and agencies used the donations as means to promote their political and economic interests in particular African countries. In addition, these donors fail sometimes to understand the context of the Africans and their specific need. Many donor agencies and governments have inadvertently thrown away the hard-earned donations of Westerners in Africa because they supported projects which ignored the immediate need of the people. This is the case in many countries of

Africa where millions of dollars are spent on democracy education and election monitoring instead of prioritizing basic education and healthcare. Aid given without regard to context and need ends up in private pockets, failed donor initiatives or phantom projects. Many Western donors fail for instance to understand that an African version of democracy will emerge when the basic necessities of the people are met and when a majority of the people are well educated to understand the dynamics of government and connect with the democratic process. Democracy in Africa cannot come about through an isolated political education, but the result of many other dynamics including well enlightened populace, vibrant civil society, open society, some level of economic development etc. Elections in Africa are the greatest sources of the disempowerment of the majority of Africans.

Canada has legitimacy in Africa and unlike many G7 countries has no imperial ambition; she is thus well positioned to lead the 'big powers' in redefining the way aid is given to countries especially in Africa. In order to do this, the first and primary step is to identify the needs of Africa not the countries of Africa that qualify for aid. The reason countries of Africa fail to qualify for aid is the greater reason why they should be helped. It is like saying that we can only give charity to the poor who are well dressed and who can use the charity to buy food and not cigarettes. The other step will be to engage Africans in identifying how these needs can be met. This step is what is being encouraged by the New Partnership for Development in Africa (NEPAD) and the African Commission set up by the British government. Finally, financing well-targeted and specific projects that touch the lives of people at the grassroots level and helping to build the human capital of Africa through scholarships, educational grants, building of schools etc. This might not necessarily involve particular African governments since foreign aid to Africa has been shown to be very successful if they are 'embedded' within the government, while working outside it. Helping the people at the grassroots level will strengthen them to help build their political and social institutions; waiting for these institutions to be built first before the suffering masses are helped might mean abandoning most Africans to their unfortunate lot. *It is not a better government that will bring a better Africa; it is rather better living conditions among the ordinary people that will bring about better government at all levels.* It is a reversal process that is different from the

Western model where good government brings better living conditions. This is what Stephen Lewis has succeeded in accomplishing with great success in many parts of Africa where his grassroots approach is yielding amazing results. In the final analysis, foreign aid to Africa can only be meaningful, if the policy and project they promote can be implemented in African villages, respect Africa's unique strengths and mode of social organization and transform the lives of the ordinary villagers in Africa.

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