

Cautious Optimism for Africa Report

The Commission for Africa published its report earlier this month. I was quite skeptical about it, and wondered which document this was that dared announce a cure for every one of the problems plaguing Africa's 52 countries, just like that. But I opted to read it. Surely there had to be something of note in 453 pages.

The introduction gave reason for guarded optimism. The report was authored by 17 people, whom according to the Commission's website, acted in their private capacities, and not as heads of state or private bodies. I was particularly interested in who had been chosen to articulate Africa's position, and the names of Benjamin Mkapa and Meles Zenawi stood out immediately. Others included Anna Tibaijuka, the Executive Director of UN-Habitat and Linah Mohohlo, the Governor of the Bank of Botswana. Finally there was a sprinkling of other leading figures from around the globe that included Irish singer Bob Geldof, Gordon Brown and Ralph Goodale, and of course, Tony Blair. No Bono this time.

The commissioners claim to "have done their best to face up to unpalatable truths wherever they have found them," to have been frank about corruption, incompetence and conflict in Africa, and direct in their criticism of developed nations. I was looking for proof that this report was different from others before it, for proof that dialogue, and not merely the chastisement of an innocent, yet unruly schoolboy, had taken place. And, interestingly, I found it.

The effects of colonialism were well documented. For instance, juxtaposing a map of Africa's railways with those of India reveals that while India's railways link the subcontinent together, Africa's railways were designed to transport raw materials from the interior to Europe. According to the report, shipping a car from Japan to Abidjan, Ivory Coast costs \$1500, whereas shipping the same car from Abidjan to Addis Ababa (Ethiopia) costs \$5000.

Do you know how the border between Kenya and Tanzania came to be? "Let them each have a big mountain," Queen Victoria is said to have commanded. And so it was. Just like in Genesis. The national boundaries that exist today were mapped out in Berlin in the 1880s. Traditional enemies lacking a common language were confined with each other, and traditional communities were divided between two or more countries. Colonialism favoured some groups above others, leading to heightened rivalries, some of which would later culminate in bloodbaths such as the Rwanda genocide of 1994.

Thus it was that Africa emerged from colonialism deeply disadvantaged. As if that were not enough, it was also a battleground for many proxy conflicts of the Cold War. Many despotic African rulers, having the backing of either side, took the liberty to pillage and plunder their countries' resources, siphoning billions of dollars into Swiss bank accounts.

Africa experiences big trading barriers. Huge tariffs are imposed on African produce, in addition to the huge agricultural subsidies that make African produce uncompetitive in world markets.

Debt is another wound that festers continually. There is cause for resentment here given that much of it was incurred by leaders who were unelected, yet supported by the very governments to whom these debts are repaid. Debt, African countries allege, is used as leverage to dictate policy to Africans. Much of it, it is felt, is unreasonable, and has in practice been repaid many times over. Sub-Saharan Africa, to this day, still pays more to service debts than it spends on health, and for every \$2 received in aid, Africa gives back nearly \$1 in debt repayments.

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The commissioners expressed a need to understand African culture. In pre-colonial Africa, society was based on clans. There was a strong sense of kinship ties and members of the community felt a strong sense of responsibility for each other. The commission found that “not least here is the ‘big man’ culture which requires a successful member of the clan to offer patronage to other members -- a phenomenon which is rarely taken with sufficient seriousness by development policymakers. Patron-client relations should not be dismissed as temptations to nepotism and corruption; they reveal something about African senses of community.”

Africa is certainly not without blame, and must do much in order to rise above its problems, especially in fighting corruption. The report makes several other key recommendations. Aid flows must increase, as must funds to improve healthcare, and western countries should fund primary education and peacekeeping operations, return funds stolen by corrupt officials and stop arms sales to conflict zones.

Many of these good intentions require that billions of dollars in donor funding be infused into the continent. That may not be the case if recent events are anything to go by. Donors frequently pledge large sums of money, and then fork out far less. And many times, pledges for one disaster may be funded by diverting funds intended for another, with Africa often losing out.

Implementing these resolutions will always be difficult, and the maxim ‘easier said than done’ is especially germane to Africa’s case, more so since the United States has opted out of this particular initiative. Indeed, a lot will depend on the result of the G8 meeting in Gleneagles, Scotland, which will take place this July, and where, it is understood, this Commission’s findings will be an important part of the agenda. The report shows a commendable desire to understand Africa more intimately than has hitherto been the case. On paper, it all looks very, very good. Too good to be true.

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