

Tony Blair's Africa Commission – Does Africa need yet another commission?

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British Prime Minister Tony Blair may have a tough job on his hands trying to find a way to stand out from the crowd of current and previous commissions and agencies with a mission to save Africa. At the time of writing, the list of both well-meaning and half-hearted attempts to 'help' the continent and its people include:

- ILO World Commission on Social Dimensions of Globalisation 2004.
- Britain's Emerging Africa (200 million \$) Infrastructure Fund.
- Heavily Indebted Poor Countries (HIPC)
- UN Global Fund to Fight AIDS, TB and Malaria,
- Millennium Challenge Account (USA), 2001
- NEPAD, 2001
- Jubilee Debt Campaign, 2000
- The Millennium Development Goals.
- The UN Economic Commission for Africa
- Arusha Charter, 1990
- Live Aid, 1985
- Brandt Commission, 1982
- The Africa Growth and Opportunity Act (AGOA),
- Johannesburg Summit on Sustainable Development, 2002

There is no doubt that acute and multidimensional crises in Africa call for massive and urgent international support. However, Prime Minister Tony Blair's proclamation to 'help' the continent has been received with scepticism, if not outright hostility in some quarters. Some even see it as a ploy to re-colonise Africa.

For the past five centuries Africa has been open and free for all to come with their potions, remedies and ideologies to save the Africans from themselves. In the past there were the explorers, the missionaries, the merchants, the slave pirates, the colonial officers, the development experts, the World Bank/IMF missions – among others. Now we have the anti-terrorist crusaders, the coltan miners and others who all claim to have come to 'help' Africa. With a desire to 'help' Africa becoming a highly competitive (some would say lucrative) industry, the Blair Commission for Africa, irrespective of the genuineness of its intentions, is going to struggle for elbow room in the crowded room of western initiatives, commissions and omissions to 'help' Africa.

Strong Reactions

The ink was barely dry on Mr Blair's initiative before harsh words were being uttered about it. Africans' long experience with numerous western-inspired projects to 'help' them sometimes justifies scepticism. For instance on the eve of the inauguration of Tony Blair's Africa Commission, Peter Hardstaff of the World Development Movement said: "The commission is a diversionary tactic designed to draw attention away from the 30 years of broken promises for Africa. It could even undermine other international forums such as next year's planned United Nations summit on the Millennium Development Goals, where African countries have a genuine stake and the right to sit at the table." Ruth Butaumocho of the Zimbabwe Herald also noted, rather cynically, that Mr Blair was determined to 'solve' African problems in the way he sees fit even if he has to go against the wishes of the Africans. Ms. Butaumocho quoted one delegate to the Blair Commission meeting in Addis Ababa as saying, "This is the same logic that powered 20 years of disastrous IMF and

World Bank structural adjustment policies in Africa." The list of sceptics and doubters is long - and understandably so. The crucial challenge for Tony Blair's is to do something that others have failed to do, and that is to make his Africa Commission work for Africans.

What is said and what is done

Prime Minister Tony Blair has rightly identified the following as some of the main problems in Africa - HIV/AIDS, bad governance, corruption, debts and conflicts etc. Africans would agree with him that these are grave problems, however, it is important not to confuse the underlying problem with the symptoms it generates.

Although disease, bad governance, conflicts and massive debts pose serious threats to the lives, livelihoods and security of millions of Africans, they are merely the symptoms of a deeper malaise. The creeping sickness is the unfair structural relationship between Africa and the West. Among its features is the unhealed trauma of the past that has never been acknowledged and closed. Another is the seemingly unbreakable and unfair trade bond between various African countries and their respective former colonial masters. This unhealthy relationship has made many African countries develop the "battered wife syndrome": The more they are abused, the more they try to please their abusers. And this at a time when their focus should be on trading productively with their neighbours and not being caught up in tugging the forelock to their former masters.

Bad governance and corruption

Bad governance and corruption in Africa is largely a matter of small and big fish. The small fish are the petty bureaucrats who steal public money and take bribes because their wages do not cover their most basic needs. The worst and most destructive bad governance and corruption is found in the ranks of the big officials, directors, ministers, prime ministers, presidents and military officers. They steal big money not to feed their extended families but to hide them in western banks to live on in the future if they are lucky enough to survive losing power. These big corrupt guys are often in close cooperation with foreign economic and political interests. This is why no African political thief ever got arrested and sent back home with the money he stacked away. They thrive in luxurious exile.

Mr Blair can help locate some of the stolen money in British and western banks and return them to their rightful owners. Or if he does not trust African leaders, he can put the money in a special fund to deal with some of the acute African crises he has identified.

The debts

One of the most absurd things about African debts is that the most indebted countries are also the least developed, most corrupt and have the worst dictatorships. But to understand the scope of the problem it is important to understand how Africa fell into the debt trap. In the wake of formal independence, post colonial African elites blindly believed that development was universal and evolutionary. The West was way ahead in the evolutionary development race. For African countries to develop, they had to catch up with the West as soon as possible. To reach that goal they were willing to sell their souls and trample on the most basic human rights of their people. Where once the elites were the white administrators and merchants, now they were the black rulers and their cronies. The clowns changed their make-up, but the circus remained the same. Investment, direct economic assistance and experts came in from the West to build the new regimes in the very image of their former colonial masters. This created a symbiotic dependency between African countries and their Western partners. When the oil crisis struck in the early 1970s, oil prices hiked from 12 US dollars to 45 dollars a barrel within a month. The oil rich Arab countries amassed a lot of money which they did not trust to invest in their countries or Africa. Their massive petrodollars were deposited instead in western commercial banks. The banks recycled this money into loans to African and other third world countries thus baiting the debt trap with cheap and plentiful funds. When the debt burden became unbearable and countries started to default beginning with Mexico in 1982, the IMF and the World Bank

were brought in to bail out the banks and use the SAP to force African governments to pawn their economies to keep paying the mounting interest on their mounting debts. Public services were privatised, employment frozen, people laid off, investments in education, healthcare and other social services were drastically reduced, national currencies were massively devalued or allowed to depreciate - to stimulate exports of raw materials to pay the debts and buy weapons to maintain law and order. The debt payments became like dealing with a witch doctor. The more you paid the more they asked for to appease the insatiable spirits.

The conflicts

The current armed conflicts in Africa are not only among the most deadly in the world but also among the most absurd. In many of these conflicts there are no religious values, hard core political ideologies, territorial disputes or even sharp ethnic rivalries driving the mutual destruction. Many of the warring gangs in West African countries for example, have no political agenda or any idea of what to do with the country should they take over power. The conflicts are about who gets how much of the national cake that is accessible mainly through the political control or by the gun. Most of the conflicts have foreign interests behind them. Most of the weapons come from abroad. Here Mr Blair can help by making sure that no British weapons manufacturers, mercenaries, or so called security firms will be involved or benefit from the killing fields of Africa. He can also freeze any account and return money hidden by African war criminals and warlords in British banks and persuade his EU and G8 colleagues to do the same.

Can Tony Blair's Commission really make any difference in Africa?

Despite Africa's disappointment with the numerous 'help-Africa' Commissions and projects around, Prime Minister Tony Blair has a chance to convince the world that his own Commission is out to be different, and not just one of those public relations stunts and 'do-gooder' projects. The prime Minister may consider focusing on some of the following:

1. Publicly and formally acknowledge and apologise for the British role in slavery, colonialism and apartheid against Africans as a crime against humanity.
2. Set up an independent commission and compensation fund to help in the fight against disease and illiteracy. The prime Minister can also encourage British companies to ethically invest in Africa.
3. Encourage the practice fair trade between Africa and Britain by biased agricultural export and import subsidies and barriers in favour of fair trade.
4. Ensure corporate good governance across the globe among British corporations. This include asking British oil companies like Shell to take more responsibility and pay compensation for environmental damages in places like Nigeria's Niger Delta region.
5. Put an end to the virtual embargo against Africans' entry to Britain. Insist on the scrapping of the EU black list that makes it nearly impossible for Africans to visit Europe while Europeans can visit and Safari in Africa as they wish.
6. Use the British influence in the UN system to insist on the democratisation of the UN Security Council so that each continent will be proportionally represented in the council according to its demographic power (e.g. Asia-Oceania will have 3 reps, Africa 2, Europe 2 and the North America 1, the Caribbean 1 and South America 1.)
7. Insist on a global nuclear moratorium or decentralise nuclear capabilities so that each region has one to protect itself from being bullied by others.

Some of the above are do-able now; others will require a longer time frame and coordination with other developed countries.

Conclusion

The Blair Commission for Africa has been received in some quarters with suspicion and outright rejection because of Africa's disappointment with similar commissions. The problems in Africa are however real and acute and they need a concerted global approach. What is not needed is a repeat of past mistakes and broken promises. Therefore, Mr Blair can do a lot to help Africa with or without his Commission. What is absolutely necessary is the harnessing of real political will to act for the sake of preserving lives and building peace and stability whose benefits will resonate beyond Africa. The above recommendations could be a good starting point to truly 'help' Africa.