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Australia's aid to Africa

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Whoever we choose to take in, it is not widely recognised that as a country Australia is giving out less and less. In the 2002–03 Budget, Official Development Assistance will account for only a quarter of one per cent of Australia's Gross National Product. This is the lowest level ever, and well below the United Nations target of seven per cent for a country of our level of development. Consequently, Australia has slipped two places to fifteenth in the OECD aid donors table (ACFOA 2002, p. 12).

Africa also seems to exist only on the periphery of Australian consciousness. This is unsurprising, given our inevitable Asia-Pacific focus. Existing perceptions of Africa are negative, imagining a homogenous entity in perpetual crisis and virtually beyond help (JSC 1996). However, Africans are now making renewed and united efforts towards forging their own path to development. What are Africans doing differently for themselves? How is Australia aiding them? Why does it matter?

The context is broadly familiar: huge debt, famine, drought, ethnic conflict, HIV/AIDS, poor governance, corruption, and generalised instability. Africa suffers from minimal integration in the world economy, a comparatively poor rate of growth, and excessive reliance on primary products. The continent contributes less than one per cent of total world trade, but receives 31 per cent of all aid from all sources (Downer 2002). Many governments depend on aid for half of their recurrent expenditure.

Moreover, until recently the broad approach taken by African countries to sustainable development has not been promising. Their desperate state may explain why many African countries still perceive a tension between 'development' and 'environment'. But this is short-sighted: environmental precaution is not just a Western luxury. Any long-term progress requires sustainable practices from the outset, practices that need not be inefficient in the shorter term.

It is now possible, however, to speak of some degree of coherent, positive pan-African policy on sustainable development. At the recent United Nations Earth Summit, African countries adopted the position already outlined in the ambitious New Partnership for Africa's Development (NEPAD), accepted by African leaders in 2001. The New Partnership emphasises increased investment, rather than increased aid, and asks Africans to 'take ownership and responsibility for the sustainable economic development of the continent' (DFA 2001). The new African Union, launched in July, is meanwhile intended to give unity and thus weight to Africa's voice in world affairs. More concretely, various intergovernmental bodies are working with the UN Economic Commission for Africa to marry environmental controls to development targets, although this needs to be entrenched in environmental practices at a national level. South Africa's progress is illustrative, and cynicism about such efforts is misplaced. New laws such as the National Environmental Management Act really are models for the region of inclusive, workable legislation. Recent water resources legislation and the

Land Claims Court are receiving praise and imitation internationally, and help to avoid the chaotic, destructive 'solutions' adopted in Zimbabwe. South Africa's stability and growth will dictate that of the region generally. Australia, which has yet to realise the potential of African trading links, should further support measures aimed at achieving urgently needed social equity in a sustainable and systematic manner, if not out of concern for African people alone, then to realise this trading potential.

There are three aspects to current Australian engagement with Africa: aid, trade, and wider political issues concerning our own interests and the British Commonwealth.

Most actual contact is in a trade context, although Australia has been most visible in Africa itself through aid projects and non-government organisations (NGOs). Australia's principal policy towards Africa aims to promote economic reform and capacity-building through 'partnerships with selected African countries' so as to 'improve the material conditions of Africans' (JSC 1996). In tandem with this is the quite acceptable aim of developing viable markets in Australia's own interests.

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The official objectives of Australia's aid program in Africa include food security, health, capacity-building, and governance. Australian expertise in education, water and sanitation, drought management, land care, and labour markets is valued (JSC 1996). A total aid flow for 2002–03 of \$60 million to Africa (and the Middle East) will focus on governance, with some attention to education and HIV/AIDS (Treasury 2002). In 2001, official aid to the region accounted for only \$37 million of AusAid's total \$900 million outlay (Downer 2002). Australia's official aid should remain directed at capacity-building and longer-term development goals, leaving NGOs and global agencies to deal with the current food crisis. A larger slice of the aid budget would of course help, but more important is how creatively we can assist Africans to do things for themselves. Wider events bear out this analysis. The NEPAD idea was put to the Group of Eight (G8) leaders' meeting in July. African countries received some substantial aid commitments (half of the total G8 aid budget, and a commitment to African input on development policy), but progress was disappointing on what Africans see as the interrelated issues of debt relief, primary product subsidies, and trade barriers. From the African perspective, development debate as a whole is too focused on how existing volumes of aid might be more effectively structured or delivered. However, aid in the form of donation is only one form of development assistance, and even when directed to longer-term capacity building, it can only go so far.

The removal of legal-economic barriers to African participation in the global economy holds vastly greater potential for African growth, empowerment, and self-respect. Australia's most recent aid policy statements appear to recognise this (Downer 2002). It is fitting, meanwhile, that Australia's aid program to Africa is expressly largely devoted to governance projects. Poor governance post-independence is usually cited as a primary reason for Africa's ongoing marginalisation.

At the core of the NEPAD vision is the 'Democracy and Political Governance Initiative', a peer review and censure mechanism presently under heavy criticism in the light of the treatment of Zimbabwe. Outright isolation of Prime Minister Robert Mugabe might have had serious unpredictable consequences for the region, which may

explain African leaders' 'soft', reluctant approach. But Zimbabwe is clearly a test case of Africa's sincerity in its struggle to be taken seriously on NEPAD. If the idea is to attract world support and so deliver actual benefits to African people, credibility is paramount. Fidelity to NEPAD's adopted democratic principles and to South Africa's own recent past must at some point become the basis of explicit debate. In his Commonwealth troika role, John Howard has commendably noted that the land reform issue obscures the issue of ordinary Zimbabweans' suppressed democratic aspirations, whatever their race.

How might our government approach Africa differently overall? Recent Department of Foreign Affairs and Trade (DFAT) reports are revealing of the paucity—and potential—of the relationship. The reports show, for instance, that DFAT convened meetings in 2000–2001 with eleven 'key developing countries' to highlight common interests in agricultural trade reform (DFAT 2001). Only one of these countries was African.

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Additionally, there has been little recent official contact. A great deal of goodwill exists in Africa towards Australia, partly a legacy of our anti-Apartheid stance. While Australia will now concentrate in Africa on indirect, selective assistance (Downer 2002), direct official initiatives leading to mutually beneficial trade and investment (including increased diplomatic presence) should be considered so as to capitalise on this goodwill. Creative assistance need not cost a great deal. Invitations could be given to African officials, for example, to experience Australian governance practice. An Australia-Africa Council should be established, modelled on the existing DFAT-run Australia-India Council. Indirect provision of official aid might be suitable where the imperative to assist ordinary people clashes with political disapproval of African leadership.

It is seldom appreciated that Australia's engagement with African countries is largely directed at garnering African support for united action on global issues of particular concern to Australia herself, such as agricultural trade. Australia's desire to build African consensus for a new World Trade Organization round in support of Australian policy objectives is behind much DFAT policy. Australia is now actively involved in assisting African governments to develop converging views on trade liberalisation, for example, by training in trade negotiation techniques (Downer 2002). However, the fact that Australia's self-interest may drive this focus does not detract from the valuable empowering effect it potentially has for Africans.

There is a further, more subtle, aspect to the relationship. In Australia's own 'arc of instability' in the South Pacific, it is important that Australia be seen, by its response even to events in far away Africa, to have a developed, consistent and credible notion of acceptable standards of democratic governance and constitutionalism. Australia's performance in Africa is important to our image nearer home as a trustworthy but firm and consistent partner in wobbly times. Engagement with Africa is also a training ground for developing Australia's capacity to successfully carry off stabilisation and aid outcomes.

Finally, most Commonwealth countries are African or, for whatever reason, identify

strongly with African issues. It is one forum where they have some voice. Australian policy generally on issues concerning Commonwealth African countries will go some way towards determining what is the real purpose, character and future of the Commonwealth, and whether it is an organisation of any wider significance and meaning (beyond sport and historical culture), by the time, in 2006, that Melbourne hosts the next Commonwealth Games.

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