

## The Africa Commission Report: What About the Politics?

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'New ideas and actions for a strong and prosperous Africa' – that is what Tony Blair's Africa Commission was aiming at in its Report of March this year. Did it succeed? Truly fresh ideas were always going to be a tall order. But what the Commission could reasonably have expected to achieve is a synthesis of the best current thinking on how to turn around Africa's development. Getting the G8 to act with new vigour on the range of known remedies for the continent's chronic sicknesses is a sufficiently inspiring objective on its own.

By this standard, how does the Report measure up? The answer has to be 'good but could have done better'. There are many excellent and some innovative things in it. There are also some quite significant blind spots and missed opportunities.

### 1 Concluding with the premise

The excellent things do not include the prominence given to spectacular financial targets ('doubling aid to Africa over the next three to five years'). Nor do they include the proposal to borrow extra money now in order to frontload aid disbursements. The rationale for both of these ideas is weak according to the Report's own evidence on the constraints to productive utilisation of development assistance under current conditions. It is to be hoped that this does not stand in the way of the worthy and realistic objectives of reversing the decline in aid flows that occurred during the 1990s, and improving the *quality* of aid.

The chapter on financing comes near the end. But the indications are that the opinions of Messrs Blair and Brown on that subject were never up for discussion. The technical work of the Commission was driven by the need to provide reasons for a greatly increased financial effort, and a rigorous selectivity was imposed on the topics that could be explored as a consequence.

Some good proposals survived this selectivity: doing much more on arms control and conflict prevention; a big boost to efforts to prevent or reverse pillage of natural resource rents by African leaders; and a bolder attack on double standards in trade policy. There are also some overdue but genuinely innovative correctives to the development orthodoxy of the last decade.

For example, the Report will help to restore the position of big infrastructure, and secondary and higher education, as appropriate targets for investment following a decade in which a rather narrow concept of poverty-focused public spending has tended to prevail. The footprint of senior DFID and former World Bank economists is clearly

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visible here, and these parts of the Report do articulate some of the best current thinking.

The biggest blind spot – about which the same cannot be said – is politics. Here too, the Report's content is mixed rather than absolutely deficient. But for every winning point there is an apparently wilful failure *not* to reflect the best current thinking on the subject. This happens at four levels.

## **2 Why are states incapable?**

First there is the handling of the state capacity question. On the credit side, the Report does say upfront that the weakness of governance is the key factor underlying the continent's inferior performance in economic growth and poverty reduction. The near-absence of effective states is stressed. But nowhere is it said plainly that the root of the problem is the nature of African political systems.

In other words, there is no examination of why African politicians are so little interested in building capable states, or why business people and voters are still so disinclined to punish leaders for poor performance. There is much talk about high-level corruption, but little sense of how pervasive corruption now is and why. The chapter on culture urges outsiders to appreciate the importance of informal networks and there is a mention in this context of patronage and the 'big-man syndrome'; however, this is not carried though into the governance chapter, or into the recommendations. There is a reference to the colonial settlement in establishing non-viable states, but it misses the main point, about how this has affected social attitudes.

Consistent with its evasions on politics, the Report does not address an African audience to any significant degree. There are several statements to the effect that building development-oriented states is something that can only be done by Africans. Some references are made to the diaspora and many to the African Union's NEPAD initiative, but these are tokens of the Commission's desire to 'listen to Africans', not hard-headed analysis of where change is likely to come from. The Report also repeats Nelson Mandela's plea that it is time for us (in the North) to persuade our politicians to make the commitments to the poor that will 'set them free' (p. 63). One suspects that, as with the impulse to throw more money at the problem, the view that Africa's problems pivot on Northern willpower is a premise and not a conclusion of the Commission's work.

## **3 The cop-out of capacity building**

One of the Report's leading proposals is a big aid-funded push on 'capacity building'. Like 'governance', capacity building is the kind of polite and non-threatening epithet that makes for easy conversation in any gathering of African and international leaders. In giving it so much prominence, this report is no worse than many others stretching back decades. However, granted that on some topics it offers a high standard of analysis, it is not obvious why it should be so inconsequential in this area.

Of course, the emphasis on capacity building is perfectly sound at one level. There are good reasons for trying to reverse the decline of the continent's professional and technical training institutions, and for doing something to halt the decimation of key

skill categories by emigration and AIDS. Investing in higher education and training is an old idea that has fallen on hard times. It is indeed due for a revival. But this begs the question why the huge post-Independence investment in these areas did so little to put Africa on a sustained development path.

That brings us up against the structure of social and political incentives, an issue that the concept of ‘capacity building’ nicely fudges. The incentives to put skills to good use within African public services are chronically weak, and this does not just mean that pay is low. African bureaucracies are shot through with a culture that defends mediocrity and punishes excellence. African politicians find it hard to get the necessary political backing to tackle this problem, even when they want to.

We know this because there is plenty of well-documented analysis of the subject in the literature, including studies for DFID and the World Bank. Although almost entirely unpublished, this work is not hard to access. But the Report makes limited use of this type of source material.

#### **4 Aid quality – Africa needs a broader agenda**

On the quality of aid, harmonisation and alignment with national systems are the themes that get most of the attention. This is welcome; but it involves a narrow interpretation of the aid quality issue. If it is true that the absence of capable states is the principal hurdle, surely a good test of the quality of aid is whether it is sufficiently informed by an understanding of ‘the way things work’ in the recipient country, including how aid influences the structure of incentives. There are good academic studies of this issue (Chabal and Daloz, 1999; van de Walle, 2001). DFID, the Swedish agency Sida and the World Bank are among those routinely making use of this sort of analysis – calling it respectively ‘drivers of change analysis’, ‘power analysis’ and ‘political economy of reform’ (DAC, 2004; Unsworth, 2004).

There is no mention of any of this work in the Commission’s Report. Instead, it flirts with an approach to reforming conditionality that is currently under discussion in DFID and that could be said to be seriously naïve about ‘the way things work’. This proposes that donors, including the IMF and World Bank, should stop micro-managing and hold partner governments responsible only for achieving improvements in development outcomes, and for maintaining a transparent budget process. In this way the partner will be able to formulate policies that are appropriate to the circumstances, policies will become locally owned and accountability to citizens of the country will be strengthened (pp. 62, 314)

This approach reflects, among other things, the correct perception that donor-driven reforms don’t work. However, it also assumes what the rest of the Report makes clear cannot be assumed: a genuine commitment to the enterprise of development on the part of Africa’s rulers and a hunger for accountability on the part of voters and parliaments. Quality aid for state building in Africa would need a better vehicle than this.

## 5 **Diversionsary effect of the focus on funding**

The Report recognises that the evidence on aid effectiveness and Africa's capacity to absorb more aid productively is not entirely discouraging. One could quibble with some of the detailed argument. For example, too much is made of improved economic growth rates in countries like Ghana, Mozambique and Tanzania, when it is known that there are big questions about the skewedness and limited social impact of this growth. The Report uses extremely low standards of performance in advancing the proposition that public financial management has significantly improved (p. 322). The treatment of the 'Dutch disease' danger (p. 326) is good but fails to follow through. Nonetheless, one can easily accept the Commission's conclusion that successful absorption of more aid 'should be possible' assuming '(a) continuing policy and governance improvements within Africa; (b) better allocation so that a broader range of countries can receive assistance, and ... (c) better quality assistance' (p. 362).

Such a tentative and qualified proposition is unobjectionable. However, it is surrounded by statements in which most of the caution and all of the qualifications are lost. Does this matter? Yes, because it means that the not inconsiderable political and diplomatic capital invested by Blair and company will only help to alleviate a partial sub-set of constraints on the creation of a strong and prosperous Africa.

In short, there will be too much talk about finding more money, as if raising money for good and well managed causes were really a problem. There will be no significant rethinking of why state capacity does not respond to 'capacity building' and how politics might be transformed faster. The discussion on improving democratic accountability will not question the absurdly unhistorical expectations that are often entertained about the capabilities and motivations of African voters. And a new generation of donor projects (albeit now in the framework of NEPAD or donor 'common baskets') will be set up to address the poor business climate, when simple policy changes would make more of a difference.

The Commission is an important and positive initiative. But if we are truly interested in meeting our moral obligations to Africa's poor, we are going to have to do a bit better than this.

## 6 **How might we do better?**

An alternative approach might include four elements:

- (i) Doing much more to engage Africa's intellectual and political leaders – in Africa as well as in the diaspora – in debate about the implications of the continent's failure to build developmental states. The engagement needs to be sympathetic and respectful, yet robust – different from both the discourteous outbursts about corruption that punctuate diplomatic relations in some countries, and the normal donor tendency to treat politics as a delicate matter impinging on national sovereignty, and therefore to be treated only behind closed doors.
- (ii) Rooting this dialogue in serious country-level political analysis, so that it is based on a clear, shared understanding that the way politicians and voters behave is at the core of the problem of state 'capacity'. A good start in this respect would be to lift

the ban that tends to be applied on the publication and dissemination of 'drivers of change' and other donor-supported studies of the moral and institutional foundations of today's politics in Africa.

- (iii) Being tough-minded about the degree and nature of the North's responsibility. The effect of colonialism on state formation is the relevant part of the history, not any of the more usual journalistic themes (export orientation, debt, etc.). It is time to subject Northern guilt feelings on these subjects to the discipline of rigorous comparative history and to be a lot less indulgent about the intellectually sub-standard arguments that still linger on in some quarters concerning the impacts of globalisation and 'how Europe underdeveloped Africa'. The excellent forthcoming book by Matthew Lockwood (2005) shows the way forward.
- (iv) Re-examining the ways in which aid is dispensed, so that in the future aid does less to undermine the formation of capable states and more to strengthen the political incentives on which state building depends. This does not mean political conditionality. As already suggested, it does mean being more open in discussing the politics of aid effectiveness with African leaders and publics. The most important and challenging question is whether this can be combined effectively with a new variant of the aid selectivity principle, one that avoids the pitfalls associated with all previous initiatives of this sort – up to and including George Bush's Millennium Challenge Account.

On selectivity, several new proposals have been thrown into the ring recently: an aid floor based on need plus a 'carrot' based on results (Lockwood, 2005); a co-ordinated boycott of multiple-term presidents (van de Walle, 2005); and long-term 'compacts' between the international community and national leaders who have political projects firmly centred on state building (Ghani and Lockhart, 2005). None of these avenues of approach is without its particular difficulties. But all deserve to be discussed in the most serious terms.

The task of reorienting the debate on Africa's development towards the core political issues on which so much else depends is going to be a massive undertaking. But it is not clear that anything less will do.

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