*Development Policy Review*, 2005, 23 (4): 483-498

# Book Review Symposium

*Our Common Interest: The Report of the Africa Commission.* By the Commission for Africa. London: Commission for Africa, 2005. 462pp. £10.00 pb. (forthcoming in June 2005 from Penguin Books Ltd, *Our Common Interest: An Argument*. 192pp. £5.00 pb.).

## *Exhilarating, Exhausting, Intriguing: The Report of the Africa Commission*

Simon Maxwell*

The Africa Commission Report is an exhilarating, exhausting and intriguing read. Exhilarating because of its breadth and political impetus. Exhausting because of its ambition and the comprehensive nature of its proposals. Intriguing because of the new twists embedded in its narratives, and the intellectual challenges they pose. It is these – the intellectual challenges – which will extend the life of the Report beyond its immediate political span.

Exhilarating need not detain us. There have been many reports over the years on Africa. Few have been signed by as many practising leaders, from North and South. And few have seen their recommendations translated so quickly onto the agenda of the G8, the EU Presidency and the UN. Few, it might also be said, have been as well written.

Exhausting can also be covered in short order – certainly in shorter order than the 462 pages of the Report. The extended summary alone, called here 'the argument', extends to 58 pages. There are five substantive chapters, dealing respectively with: (i) governance and capacity building; (ii) peace and security; (iii) investing in people; (iv) growth; and (v) trade. A substantial chapter deals with resources. Other chapters set the scene, talk about the importance of culture, and discuss implementation. The substantive chapters are strongly research-based, and are packed with examples and 'killer facts', some of them literally so: corruption adds 25% to the cost of public procurement; an AK47 can be bought for US$6; poor infrastructure in Uganda amounts to an 80% tax on textile exports; in Zambia, by 2010, every third child will be an orphan.

The recommendations run to 13 pages. They include many actions to be taken by African governments and people, especially in the area of governance and accountability, and many to be taken by developed countries or the international

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Published by Blackwell Publishing, Oxford OX4 2DQ, UK and 350 Main Street, Malden, MA 02148, USA.

community as a whole. Among the latter are recommendations to reduce tariffs and subsidies, of course, but also fund the African Union's Peace Fund, agree a treaty on arms trading, support health and education programmes, create an African Enterprise Challenge Fund, and generally provide more aid. The total cost of the programme is estimated at an additional US$37.5 billion per annum in the first five years, rising to $75 billion p.a. in the second five. Aid should provide an additional $25 billion in the first phase and $50 billion in the second. This is an immediate doubling from the 2004 level.

## 1 The Report's main themes

What then of the narratives and the new twists? There are many points of interest along the way, but the main challenge relates to the idea of a big push underpinning the overall package. We shall come to that.

In terms of governance, the strictures on African governments concerning accountability and capacity building are familiar. So are the complaints about corruption, both large- and small-scale. As elsewhere, great hopes are placed on the NEPAD peer review mechanism to marshal defectors. More unusual, perhaps, is the strong endorsement of measures that developed countries need to take: identification, confiscation and repatriation of looted assets; a crackdown on bribery, especially in public procurement; and publish-what-you-pay initiatives in natural resource extraction.

When it comes to peace and security, there is again a balance of actions by African countries and the rest of the world. The Report has important things to say about the way in which some companies have fuelled conflict, and about the pernicious impact of trade in small arms. At the same time, it places the primary responsibility for resolving conflict in African hands, for example through its own peace-keeping forces – though with support from outsiders, including the EU's new battlegroups, and with active intervention by the proposed UN Peacebuilding Commission. The key point, of course, is that Africa has been devastated by conflict.

In health and education, 'investing in people', there are some surprises. In education, the surprise is not the emphasis on primary services, including well established priorities like getting more girls into school, but rather that on secondary and higher education. Highlighting the shortage of teachers is one aspect: Ghana has only a quarter of the teachers it needs, Lesotho only a fifth. What is described as 'the health worker crisis' tells the same story: some health workers abandon their profession, sometimes their country, out of frustration, but in general there are just not enough of them to meet needs. More generally, the Report trumpets the importance of science and of universities: US$2.5 billion a year is earmarked for these sectors in the spending proposals. This part of the Report is also strong on social protection: for example, paying cash allowances to orphans, widows, people with disabilities, or the elderly. This is another innovation.

With regard to growth, the unambiguous message is that growth is needed to reduce poverty – at an annual rate of 7%. Africa's growth record is poor, but 16 countries in sub-Saharan Africa have managed to grow at 4% p.a. or more in the last decade. Different countries in this group have found different routes to growth (natural resources, manufacturing, agriculture, services), but across Africa the priorities are agriculture – especially small farms, small businesses in general, and jobs in urban areas to help cope with what is described as 'premature urbanisation'. Many factors contribute to growth, but the surprise in the Report is the emphasis given to infrastructure. This is probably the main innovation of the Africa Commission, though it is consistent here with some of the work of the UN Millennium Project, published early in 2005 as the Sachs Report (Millennium Project, 2005). Investment is needed in roads, rail, ports, air transport, energy, telecommunications, and irrigation – building up to US$20 billion a year by 2015. The rediscovery of infrastructure is probably the biggest single development story of 2005.

Finally, on trade, and in addition to the reduction of developed country barriers, the Report emphasises internal barriers to trade. Customs delays, for example, add over 10% to the cost of African exports. Exports to other African countries are constrained by poor infrastructure and high tariffs, and amount to only 12% of total African exports. And, in general, African countries just do not have the capacity to trade.

There is much more in the Report, for example on history, on the role of culture, on the impact of new technology like mobile phones, on how to manage absorptive capacity, on alternative ways to raise the money needed. The paragraphs above give only a flavour.

## 2 The immediate debates

Many will want to debate the specific findings and recommendations. For example, there is already an active debate on whether African countries can absorb double the amount of aid they currently receive (ODI, 2004b; de Renzio, 2005a, b). Sceptics point to the macroeconomic risk of Dutch disease, but also to evidence that aid suffers from declining marginal returns, which turn negative at aid dependency ratios not much higher than currently prevail. The Report tackles this issue head on, and with some plausibility: there are several relevant appendices, including country case studies of Ghana, Mali and Ethiopia, which examine how aid has successfully been scaled up.

There is also an emerging debate about whether the recommendations on governance are sufficiently robust to deal with the pervasive problems of clientelism and patronage in Africa, a phenomenon often described as neo-patrimonialism (Lockwood, 2005). In its mild form, this school of critics calls for more attention to politics, and for a greater engagement with political incentives and constraints. In its more forceful incarnation, the argument is that aid, never mind more aid, acts to decapitate African political systems: it breaks the link between governments and their people, creating alternative structures of accountability which tie governments to their donors (Moore, 2004). The Report doesn't quite tackle this issue head on, but there are many recommendations which concern accountability and state building. There would be little disagreement from either side regarding the proposition that African countries need strong, developmental states and that donors should contribute more to building both capacity and accountability.

A further debate concerns openness to trade (Oxfam International, 2002). The Report makes the case for trade and attacks protectionism in the North. It doesn't quite bring itself to address the widespread view that African economies should be considered 'infant economies' which need protection on their own account in order to develop. The British government, perhaps surprisingly, has been sympathetic to this argument: in the

2004 White Paper on globalisation, it explicitly recognised the argument for 'same destination, different speeds' (DTI, 2004a, b).

Finally, there is an interesting discussion to be had about the role of the state in service provision (ODI, 2004c). In one part of its text, the Report calls, rightly, for rapid expansion of primary health and education provision. However, some observers argue that it is not easy to expand public expenditure quickly without productivity falling (Roberts, 2005). In other sections, the Report discusses the growing role of faith organisations and also the importance of business. It would have been interesting to discuss in more detail the role of these non-state actors in delivering public services. Should governments in Africa pause before they begin a headlong expansion, and ask whether it would be sensible to separate payment from provision of public goods?

## 3 The 'big push'

All this makes the Report of the Africa Commission intriguing, but there is one further issue which should really take pride of place – the model of the big push. Consider: the Report is exhilarating and exhausting precisely because it is so comprehensive. Culture; faith; politics; governance; human development; social protection; agriculture; industry; rural development; urban development; trade... There are even pages on reform of the international financial system. The ambition is great. So is the bill: US$75 billion a year. The observer may ask: are there no priorities? No sequences? Is everything equally important? If this question is to be answered, there are two possible ways in.

### *3.1 Geographical qualifications*

The first is geographical, asking about 'Africa' as a unit of analysis. Many have questioned how sensible it is to talk of Africa as a whole, rather than about individual countries, or even regions within them (ODI, 2004a). There is indeed good reason, to take one example, to examine the impact of trade liberalisation on different countries: the phenomenon of preference erosion means that there are many losers in Africa, as well as many winners, from market access initiatives like the EU's Everything But Arms (Page, 2005; ODI, 2004d). The Report does recognise heterogeneity, but it could have gone further. Are there some countries which are better bets for a big push than others?

The Millennium Project certainly thinks so. It explicitly identifies a range of countries which should be first on the list (Millennium Project, 2005). These should be countries which meet a minimum test in terms of qualifying as developmental states: for example, participants in the NEPAD peer review process, or countries qualified under the criteria established by the US Millennium Challenge Corporation. South Africa, Senegal or Tanzania might qualify under these criteria; DRC, Zimbabwe or Sudan would not.

Alternatively, a criterion for selection might be the prospects for growth in different countries. Should the same priority be given to well endowed and well connected countries, for example on the coast, as to poorly endowed and poorly connected countries, for example in the hinterland? The Report is optimistic about the availability of diverse routes to growth, and about the extent to which investment in infrastructure can overcome geographical handicaps. However, some observers, indeed some observers close to the Commission, have argued in the past for greater geographical discrimination. Paul Collier, for one, has called for the move away from primary commodity dependence in Africa to begin in small enclaves along the coast: not exactly export processing zones, but areas where producers can be guaranteed infrastructure and services (Collier, 1999, 2002). Growth poles, one might say, or clusters.

To a certain extent this is already happening, with the draining of the West African population from the hinterland towards the coast, and from rural to urban areas. The urban population in the region is projected to rise from 70 million in 1990 to 270 million in 2020, with 30 cities of one million or more (Snrech, 1995). Should development policy recognise and try to manage this form of natural selection?

### *3.2 Sectoral qualifications*

The second approach to disaggregation might be to argue that some interventions are more urgent or important than others. Educate primary school children first, for example, then worry about scientific research capacity. Or provide medicine for victims of HIV/AIDS, then spend money on roads and harbours. The Sachs Report does take a similar approach to this by identifying 'quick wins': anti-malarial bednets, nutrition support for young children, fertiliser for African farmers. These might kickstart longer-term processes, but are also attractive because they can be easily explained and marketed to non-specialist audiences – something at which Jeff Sachs excels. The Africa Commission has no headlines of this kind.

In fact, the Commission's Report is strongly reminiscent of the big push approach which characterised the earliest debates around economic development. A key text was Paul Rosenstein-Rodan's contribution to the *Economic Journal* in 1943, on the problems of industrialisation in Eastern and South-Eastern Europe. Rosenstein-Rodan argued for large-scale, planned industrialisation, partly because of the complementarity of different industries within a national economy, an argument which was somewhat undermined by introducing the possibility of trade. However, he also made some important points about indivisibilities and external economies in the provision of social overhead capital, which lead to increasing not declining returns to investment. These include the need for infrastructure to be in place before other, private, investments can happen, and also the need for a critical mass: 'an irreducible minimum social overhead capital industry mix is a condition for getting off the dead-end' (Rosenstein-Rodan, 1943, in Meier, 1970: 397). Allow a generous definition of what might be included under the rubric of social overhead capital, to include health and education as well as infrastructure, and this begins to sound very familiar.

Indeed, the legacy of Rosenstein-Rodan is not just found in the pages of the Sachs Report or the Africa Commission. The latest thinking on agricultural development, for example, makes great play of co-ordination failures: failures to invest in one part of the agricultural supply chain because complementary investments in other parts have not been made (Kydd and Dorward, 2001; Dorward et al., 2004). A potential supplier might not invest in increased production, for example, because there is no market infrastructure; on the other hand, a potential provider of market infrastructure might not invest because there is apparently no supply. But if co-ordination can be managed, then both could benefit. The Sachs and Africa Commission reports can be read as an extension of this idea. Invest in all sectors because this is the only way to kickstart growth.

The reasoning sounds plausible, but it is worth remembering the debates triggered by Rosenstein-Rodan, with critics like Hirschmann arguing for unbalanced growth: favouring early investment in sectors with high linkages to other sectors as the best way of stimulating growth (Hirschmann, 1958). These ideas, too, have had resonance down the decades. For example, many argue that agricultural development is a precondition for long-term growth and diversification (Mellor, 1976). Others argue that human development investments should come first, partly because people have rights to health and education, but also because human development is a precondition for investment and growth (Ramirez et al., 1997).

A further set of ideas on this topic comes from the debates about macroeconomic stabilisation and the sequencing of structural adjustment. Institutions before market liberalisation is the best-known proposition, associated with Stiglitz' work on a post-Washington consensus (Stiglitz, 2002). This idea itself was a reaction to earlier thinking on the desirability of big bang reform, as practised in Russia for example. Is the big push related to the big bang?

## 3.3 The way forward

These are not trivial issues for the implementation of the Report of the Africa Commission. What happens, for example, if governance reforms don't quite produce developmental states in the Zimbabwes or the Sudans? What happens if the political drive to increase aid falters and there is only enough money to increase aid by a quarter or a half? What happens, indeed, if all the money needed is raised: is it really sensible to push forward on all fronts and in all countries at once?

There is a debate to be had about this question. My own take has been to develop the idea of a 'meta-narrative', pushing forward from the argument about the Washington and post-Washington consensuses to update the analysis and bring in new issues, particularly about aid (Maxwell, 2005). This work suggests three main conclusions with respect to the big push.

First, there can be no compromise on basic human rights with respect to food, health and education (Maxwell, 1999; Piron, 2004). This means giving these sectors priority, and in all countries. Tackling malnutrition should be top of the list (ACC/SCN, 2000; James et al., 2000). We sometimes forget how widespread is malnutrition. The best indicator is the level of stunting, which measures children who fail to grow. For the developing world as a whole, over a quarter of children under five years old are severely stunted. In Africa, the figure is over a third. In Eastern Africa, including Ethiopia, it is over 44%. Malnutrition increases the probability of illness and of death: half of all child deaths in Africa are associated with malnutrition, and those children who survive to adulthood have an increased risk of heart disease, diabetes and renal damage. There is also now evidence to show that poor nutrition affects cognitive development, psychomotor development, fine motor skills, skill acquisition, activity level, and social interaction. The consequences are seen in school performance: malnourished children start school later, progress less rapidly, and achieve worse results. Yet malnutrition can be dealt with for less than US$20 per child per year. The

Sachs Report rightly identifies better nutrition as a high priority quick win. The Africa Commission would have done well to do the same.

Second, there can be no governance threshold below which developed countries turn their backs – but their actions and interventions should be different in conflict situations or in fragile states, compared with places which are well governed. In this case, and despite the continuing debate about how it handles politics, the Africa Commission is ahead of Sachs. Fragile states cannot be left to a second phase: the big commitment, if not the detail of the big push, needs genuinely to be universal. Quite what this means in practice in different kinds of country will be case-specific. A range of interventions is possible, from military at one extreme (as in Sierra Leone) to subtle (sometimes not so subtle) nudges in domestic political space, for example funding human rights commissions or parliamentary review processes (DFID, 2005; Prime Minister's Strategy Unit, 2005; OECD, 2005). A number of donors have been investing heavily in political analysis in Africa, for example DFID's Drivers of Change initiative. The challenge will be to turn resulting better understanding into concrete action: not necessarily to produce the formal trappings of democracy, but certainly to underpin medium-term programmes which support the evolution of developmental states. Post-conflict situations, like Southern Sudan, are likely to feature prominently. In the meantime, however, and this is a key point, the provision of basic services needs to be assured everywhere, including in conflict, if necessary by NGOs.

Third, a new generation of Poverty Reduction Strategy Papers is needed – or, as Sachs recommends, Millennium Development Goal plans – which make the business climate central and adjudicate between the investment options. PRSPs historically have not paid enough attention to the productive sectors, and certainly not to infrastructure (Maxwell, 2003). Perhaps one of the benefits of the Africa Commission will be to encourage governments to rectify this particular anomaly.

Some of the content is straightforward: Stiglitz is surely right on the dangers of a big bang liberalisation and on the importance of fundamentals like contract law and a banking system as preconditions for enterprise development. Some, however, is much more difficult. Most of Africa lags far behind most of Asia in the basic capabilities required to produce and trade internationally. As Sanjaya Lall has emphasised, Africa as a continent lacks many of the factors needed for rapid industrialisation, especially in the face of competition from low-cost production in East Asia. Issues include the lack of skilled labour, technological capacity and institutions. For example, in most of East Asia, over 50% of the cohort is in tertiary education. In sub-Saharan Africa excluding South Africa, the figure is more like 5% (Lall, 2004).

For industry read food and agriculture, sectors which are also subject to competitive pressure. The food and agriculture sectors are undergoing rapid change as a result of urbanisation, the development of global supply chains, and the industrialisation of the food industry (Maxwell and Slater, 2004). In South Africa, for example, over 50% of food purchases by value are now made in supermarkets, with multinational chains controlling a large share of the market and imposing high standards of quality and timeliness (Weatherspoon and Reardon, 2003). Similar pressures arise in export agriculture, of course, particularly horticulture. This presents major challenges to small producers.

The scale of the productive challenge is such that selectivity is bound to be necessary. Picking winners is out of fashion, but Collier's idea of concentrated zones appears attractive: this is Rosenstein-Rodan, but on a discretionary scale.

### *3.4 An unanswered question: regional priorities*

This leaves open the question of country or regional priorities as best bets for growth, and therefore for public sector investment. Despite recent interest in the different problems of high- and low-potential areas (Farrington et al., 2003), this is relatively little studied on a continental scale. There does seem to be a case for more detailed working out of the geography of change in Africa. Perhaps the UN Economic Commission for Africa or the African Development Bank should take the lead.

So – we haven't reached the end of history with regard to thinking about African development. The Report of the Africa Commission has advanced the debate and given political impetus to one set of solutions. It is exhilarating for that reason. It also forces onto the agenda some important questions about selectivity and sequencing. That makes it intriguing.

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