

Is Tony Blair's legacy on Africa at risk?

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With the trade talks failing and aid volume way below target, is Tony Blair's legacy on Africa at risk? The G8 meeting in Heiligendamm, Germany, in June, provides a last opportunity to persuade the most powerful leaders in the world to deliver on their promises. Angela Merkel will need to show some muscle.

Africa is only on the agenda in Germany because Blair won Merkel over. He persuaded her not to focus exclusively on her preferred topic, energy security (for which read relations with Vladimir Putin). This was a brave decision, because Germany is one of the countries in the firing line for not meeting pledges made at Blair's own G8, at Gleneagles, in 2005.

Gleneagles marked a high point in the international commitment to Africa, and was the result of a sustained campaign by UK Prime Minister Tony Blair and other members of the Government. Remember - and celebrate - Clare Short, battling for the Millennium Development Goals in the late 1990s. Remember Blair's 'scar on the conscience of the world speech', at the Labour Party Conference in 2001. Remember Gordon Brown's initiatives on debt relief, on HIV/AIDS, on education. And remember Hilary Benn, helping to build the grand bargain of 2005, in which the West promised more aid and a better trade deal, and in return, Africa promised democracy, good governance and the rule of law. No government has given this issue such profile and such priority, both at home and internationally.

Tony Blair set up the Africa Commission, which reported two years ago and which provided the intellectual framework for a 'big push' on Africa. It recommended doubling aid by 2010, from \$50bn to \$100bn, of which an extra \$25bn for Africa, along with a deal on debt and agreement on trade. These were the key 'asks' of Make Poverty History, and were faithfully reflected at Gleneagles. Africa was promised its aid, also debt relief for 18 of the poorest countries, an end to export subsidies, and universal access to treatment for HIV/AIDS and malaria.

Two years on, the UK and some others have delivered, but many have not. Debt relief matters and has made a difference. In December, Sierra Leone became the 21st country, and the 17th in Africa, to reach 'completion point' under the Heavily Indebted Poor Countries scheme, becoming eligible for 100% debt cancellation from the IMF, World Bank and African Development Bank. As Hilary Benn is fond of pointing out, millions of children in Africa are now at school, because debt relief has given governments the resources to pay for teachers and school buildings.

The aid picture is less encouraging. The latest figures, issued by the Development Assistance Committee of the OECD, show that aid to Africa increased by only 2 per cent last year. Italy's aid fell by 30 per cent; US aid fell by 20 per cent; Japanese aid fell by 10 per cent. Germany's went up, but by less than 1 per cent. UK aid rose by 13 per cent. The Africa Progress Panel, chaired by Kofi Annan, was right to sound a note of alarm. Pledges may or may not be met by a last minute surge as 2010

approaches – but rapid increases at the last minute are hard to manage. Africa needs a gradual and predictable scaling up.

Despite the shortfall, Africa is growing faster than at any time since the 1960s, partly boosted by debt relief and aid, but more by the impact of China's demand for natural resources, which has driven the terms of trade sharply in Africa's favour. Growth in per capita income is 4 per cent, faster than developed countries. Poverty is falling, too: down from 46 per cent to 41 per cent in the past five years. The numbers are still too high, of course, and with population rising, the absolute number of poor people has barely changed, at 300 million living below one dollar a day. Nevertheless, it is better to have growth and relative poverty reduction than not. At the same time, democracy is spreading and governance standards are rising, though too slowly.

Africa's own institutions are getting stronger, especially through the African Union. Africa remains the poorest continent. Darfur is a real scar on the conscience of the world. But there is good news in Africa.

Job done? Not yet. Growth needs to reach Asian levels. Health and education standards are still woeful by global standards. Infrastructure remains poor. And Africa's skills base has been eroded by under-investment in universities and research. Make Poverty History has been re-born as The World Can't Wait, and the list of demands is as long as ever. A rally in London on 2 June will call for full debt cancellation for all countries that need it, binding timetables for delivering 0.7% of GNP as aid, free health services, and a commitment to cut G8 carbon emissions by 80% by 2050.

Indeed, Africa faces the new challenge of global warming. Climate change has been another Blair campaign of great relevance to Africa. As Nick Stern discovered, and as the Inter-Governmental Panel on Climate Change has reported, Africa is especially at risk. A rise of 2 degrees in average temperature could decimate the coffee industry in Uganda, for example. Across the continent, according to the IPCC, yields from rainfed agriculture could fall by 50% by as early as 2020. Across the world, at least 250 million people will be exposed to water stress.

The poorest are always most at risk. That is why Tony Blair has been right to keep pressing Africa's case in the international arena, and why Gordon Brown will want and need to continue. There is a legacy - of vision, of will, and of UK action. One final effort may deliver an international legacy of collective responsibility.