



*Action for a strong
and prosperous
Africa: the response*

Executive summary of an open electronic discussion in response to the Commission's Consultation Document, '**Action for a strong and prosperous Africa**', November 2004

December 2004



Preface

Between 15 November and 3 December 2004, later extended to 17 December, an open electronic discussion of the Commission's Consultation Document, *Action for a strong and prosperous Africa*, was held.

In total 203 participants registered, including 104 located in the UK, and 69 in twenty-one African countries. They were asked to respond to issues raised in the document, with contributions invited on three broad themes: financing for development and opportunities for economic growth; human development, culture and participation; and, governance, peace and security.

Some 276 postings in all were made. This report summarises them. The main body covers the three themes, with comments and proposals sorted by the sub-themes or 'threads' identified in advance. Many direct quotes have been included to capture the flavour of the discussion. The original postings, arranged by theme and thread, can be seen at:

http://www.odi.org.uk/africaconsultation/africa_cgi_bin/discus/discus.cgi.

The discussion was managed for the Commission by a team from the Overseas Development Institute, co-ordinated by David Sunderland and made up by Ed Anderson, Daniel Demie, John Lakeman, Peter Gee, Chris Taylor, Victoria Wheeler and Steve Wiggins.

The Commission for Africa

The Commission for Africa is an initiative of the UK Prime Minister, Tony Blair, to provide a coherent set of policies to accelerate progress towards a strong and prosperous Africa. It will report in spring 2005, including recommendations to the G8, EU and other wealthy countries, as well as African countries.

<http://www.commissionforafrica.org>

Overseas Development Institute

ODI is Britain's leading independent think-tank on international development and humanitarian issues. Its mission is to inspire and inform policy and practice which lead to the reduction of poverty, the alleviation of suffering and the achievement of sustainable livelihoods in developing countries. It does this by locking together high-quality applied research, practical policy advice, and policy-focused dissemination and debate. It works with partners in the public and private sectors, in both developing and developed countries.

<http://www.odi.org.uk>

Executive summary

Financing for development and opportunities for economic growth

To improve the **investment climate** for Africa, contributors stressed advertising the opportunities of Africa, to counter the frequent negative images of the continent. A slogan was suggested:

"Every one of us is an African".

But in addition Africans themselves need to invest in Africa, both by mobilising internal savings and by attracting funds from expatriate Africans.

Trade preferences were debated. Some had allowed industries to develop: sugar was a case where there were strong employment multipliers. Proposals to eliminate EU preferences were thus to be resisted. But others pointed out that to rely on preferences was risky. Preferences to African countries were, moreover, possibly unfair to poor countries in the rest of the world.

Value could be added to traded goods by processing raw materials, but learning to develop and market such produce required support.

Relaxing strict rules of origin that apply to some trade agreements would allow new manufacturing industry to export to lucrative markets in the North.

Opinions were sharply divided on **debt** relief. For some, much of the debt was the result of result of Western impositions, and mistaken development advice: was it then fair to insist on repayment?

'Do not make the global poor pay for the follies of the world's sophisticated financiers.'

But others were concerned that countries that had misused funds or borrowed recklessly should gain from debt relief, while more prudent states did not.

Was more **aid** needed? Some thought its value was marginal compared to the benefits of more trade and private investment. Others believed that much good could be done with aid used wisely, but noted that the quality of aid left much to be desired; both in the way some donors lavished funds on expatriate staff and consultants, and in the corrupt use of aid by some countries.

Aid could be increased by getting the industrialised countries to live up to their promise of transferring 0.7% of GNP. The UK, it was proposed, should hold a referendum on achieving the target by 2006.

For some, investment in agriculture was central, given the ability of farming to generate jobs and reduce the cost of food. But others disagreed, seeing low returns in the sector.

Several writers stressed the value of improved finance for small business development, through micro-finance, 'mini-finance' for larger businesses, and 'muni-finance' to local authorities for community programmes.

An intriguing way to harness the skills of the multi-nationals to local development was proposed:

'The large multi-national corporations that have African subsidiaries should be encouraged each to foster at least 25 small African entrepreneurs and if necessary to establish Small Enterprise Promotion Centres ... where small entrepreneurs can get the advice and help they need to make their venture a success.'

Investment in **physical infrastructure** — including water resources and supply, roads, telecommunications, and electricity — was also supported. Not only would this help draw in foreign investment, but also it was a feasible and ethical use of aid monies.

The possibilities of telecommunications and information technology were commended; sectors where there was much scope for private investment and public-private partnerships.

Concern was repeatedly expressed that the Commission had not taken natural resources and environmental issues seriously enough. It had, moreover, a narrow focus on selected problems, ignoring other salient matters — such as desertification. The consequent loss of land, water and vegetation gives rise to ‘rural exodus, poverty, famine and growing conflicts.’

Poor governance was cited a major reason for loss or degradation of natural resources. A new development was the export of resources, including logs, to China and East Asia, some of which had been extracted unscrupulously.

Working with local people to conserve their resources in their immediate locality, and finding livelihoods that conserve, rather than degrade, resources was widely recommended. Local had to be empowered to take control over their resources. Eco-tourism was an example: it had the potential to create jobs and conserve resources.

Organic, low till farming, with minimal use of external inputs, and conservation farming, that makes full use of soil moisture, were seen as ways to feed Africa.

Climate change provoked sharp differences of opinion. Some saw it as ‘irrelevant’, while others saw it as critical threat. That Africa had contributed little to the problem did not mean it would not suffer the consequences:

‘... the effects of global warming will soon undo any advantage that may have been gained in Africa from debt relief.’

Responses suggested were to make full use of the potential of irrigation, and to develop renewable energy sources — a measure that would also foster new skills.

Human development, culture and participation

Culture, in the widest sense, attracted much attention. Given the acknowledged diversity of cultures, was there such a thing as ‘African’ culture? Or even national culture?

Many saw local cultures as having been subordinated, first to cultures brought in by colonial powers, and now by a globalised, international media. This has not only impoverished the cultural life of Africa, but has also impeded economic and social development.

Remedies suggested included rediscovering, revaluing and reinvigorating indigenous elements. This would be the foundation for more appropriate development practice, based on appreciation of diversity, participation and dialogue.

‘It has been said that development without culture is “growth without a soul”.’

More specific recommendations included that of promotion of indigenous languages, of books printed in the vernacular; and of the value of drama.

‘Performing artists have produced excellent work in diverse fields such as the fight against AIDS infection, in developing national identities, and discussing gender issues; they can be encouraged also to engage with peace issues and conflict resolution.’

Turning to culture more narrowly defined as the arts, several postings noted that, quite apart from their intrinsic value, the arts had economic value. Culture was an international industry and Africa should make full use of its riches. Contributors lamented the weak support that most states offered to art and artists of all kinds.

In **primary and secondary education**, more attention to vocational and specialised training was recommended, perhaps using apprenticeships within secondary schooling, so that fee-paying parents can be reassured that their children will get work as a result.

Education could be improved by encouraging more participation by parents in education provision, by twinning African schools with counterparts in the North, and by using child-to-child teaching.

The issue of the language of instruction came up, with clear recommendations for multi-lingual education that would allow primary pupils to be educated in their vernacular.

Expatriate Africans can assist education:

‘The least Africans in the Diaspora can do is support education back in their countries.’

African **universities** would benefit from partnerships with their Northern counterparts. The potential of electronic learning and distance education were stressed.

Much support was expressed for **vocational and adult education**: seen as vital for generating the skills for development, within a framework of life-long education:

‘Skills empower individuals, enabling them to contribute to the economy and support the local community and the family. We tend to place too much emphasis on degree level learning and neglect skills learning.’

Discussion of **health** was dominated by HIV/AIDS. In stemming this, cultural norms, including sexual behaviour needed changing. Grandmothers have a key role in transmitting norms to their grandchildren: work with them.

Some were concerned that important dimensions of the HIV/AIDS crisis did not get the attention they deserved. Included were the fate of women and girls who bore the brunt of the epidemic, the rising rates of child malnutrition, the plight of Africa’s 12 million orphans, and hospice and palliative care.

To improve the delivery of health services, handing over services to local providers and communities was suggested. Transport affects health: it gives access to fixed health facilities, and facilitates immunisation, surveillance and education. User fees for health services were condemned, one writer remarking:

‘... taking money off poor people when they are sick is not a good idea.’

There was a strong plea for giving attention to **water and sanitation**, however mundane activities in these areas may be.

‘Water and sanitation aren’t particularly ... newsworthy, but they are the priorities of poor people.’

There was clear support for encouraging more **participation**, through more consultation and encouraging the voices of those not usually heard when decisions are made. Women’s exclusion from decision-making was especially worrying, leading to a proposal for a ‘Gender Equality Development Fund.’ Theatre can give people voices, make use of indigenous knowledge and include those usually left out.

The economic motivations for **migration** were emphasised: creating jobs back in home areas was the way to curb excessive migration. The international ‘brain drain’ was particularly worrying:

‘The best of Africa’s intellectual capital is outside ... the continent proper. ... We have to find new ways of harnessing Africa’s global intellectual capital.’

Proposals included reverse migration as well as job swaps between Africa and the industrialised countries.

Governance, peace and security

General proposals to **build more effective states** included constitutional reform, with electoral democracy, free media, independent judiciary, etc. Some recommended work with local government, a level not only close to people but also one that may function even when the national administration does not. Twinning towns in Africa with those in the industrialised world can help build capacity and raise aspirations.

There was support for the use of electronic media for governance ('e-government'):

Several voices noted how *not* to build states. Dependency on aid was particular danger.

A lively debate broke out over the causes of **conflict**. Poverty and starvation were blamed by some contributors: they led to struggles over resources. Water was a particular concern. In contrast, others saw ethnicity and tribalism as the main culprits, observing that conflicts break out even in the more prosperous parts of Africa.

Some contributions also noted the role of neighbouring countries in stirring up conflict, and recommended that aid should be suspended to such states. Large conflicts may result from small disputes, so that these need to be monitored before they expand.

Several contributions noted the importance of democracy and better governance in providing security. More specifically, the scope for civil society was noted, observing the good work done by:

'... growing networks of peace activists in Africa, for example the Coalition for Peace in Africa and West African Network for Peace.

Some states, however, wary of domestic and international NGOs, as well those that represent Africans in the Diaspora, discourage such work, or set up 'official' NGOs.

Including women and youth in peace talks was another suggestion:

'Women are often inextricably connected to conflict and to processes of conflict resolution but yet are disempowered once peace talks begin.'

Where international mediation was involved, the demands on time and patience are heavy, but worthwhile:

'... dialogue is inevitable for success and will have to take place before crises break out. It is particularly challenging given the asymmetry in analytical capacity [between international agencies and African bodies]. ... There is no replacement for political will to support endogenous African initiatives.'

Peace settlements are often fragile, raising the risk that conflict recurs is high as the transition to peace is made. Effective reconstruction after conflict is vital.

Most agreed that **corruption** is a scourge for Africa and its development. Political and civil service appointments were often seen as a way to enrichment — for life. A distinction was, however, drawn between large-scale embezzlement that some elites carried out, and the more everyday bribes taken by low-level functionaries such as police and customs officers:

'corruption caused by greed has to be tackled differently to actions to provide for family and community, which can sometimes be perceived as corruption.'

Remedies were seen generally in independent media and judiciary. More specific, additional action was to pay civil servants living wages, audit donor funds rigorously, publicise tax returns from public figures, and generally encourage civil society to scrutinise government — community radio was invaluable in this. The value of learning from experiences in other parts of the world in tackling corruption was commended. Funds sent to the industrialised countries that were proceeds of illicit activities should be frozen.

On **social protection and vulnerability**, a contrast was drawn between the present lack of provision, and the past when

‘ ... many African countries did have social security systems such as universal free health care system and pension. After structural adjustment was introduced, those schemes were almost wiped away.’

Lack of insurance makes people unwilling to take on the risks of investment. Recent initiatives to re-introduce social welfare, such as Ghana’s health insurance scheme and Tanzania’s pensions, were thus welcome.