

Dear Colleague,

Forgive the impersonal nature of this letter, but I need to reach quickly as many Directors as possible of think-tanks and research institutes in Africa. The reason is that we at ODI have been asked to organize a very quick e-mail consultation on behalf of the Africa Commission. We are going to launch this formally next week, but to set things up I would like to ask you whether or not you are interested in participating – and to confirm your contact details for our database. You can register your interest simply by replying to this e-mail with the word ‘yes’.

I need to explain one or two things, of which the most important is to say that our philosophical position is that consultation with the Africa Commission should be led by Africans, and not intermediated by a think-tank in London, just because we happen to have an office down the road from the Secretariat. The Commission Secretariat think the same, of course, and we hope that one of the outcomes of this preliminary exercise will be to set up a contact group led from Africa. All the timetables are tight, but later in the year there will be at least four policy workshops organized in Africa to provide more serious input to the work of the Commission. In the meantime, we hope you won't mind that we have stuck our nose into the dialogue.

You will certainly have read about the Africa Commission, which was established by Tony Blair in February, with the intention of providing high-level strategic input to next year's G8, to the New York Summit on the Millennium Development Goals, and to other events and processes, like the UK Presidency of the EU in the second half of next year. There are lots of interesting questions to debate about how the Commission will relate to other initiatives, as well as about the content of its report, but it is certain that 2005 does offer important opportunities and that there is a political opportunity here that we should seize. The Commission has a good balance of active political and other personalities from inside and outside Africa. Its website (www.commissionforafrica.org) provides more detail about membership, process and timing. The Commission will meet next in September, and needs to have a report completed by the first quarter of next year.

In terms of substance, the Commission has identified six main themes. These are listed on the Commission website, but include economy, governance, human development, natural resources, peace and security, and culture and participation.

At this stage, we will be asked to answer four questions. These lie somewhere between substance and process, and are:

1. What do you wish to see the Commission achieve?
2. What are the main obstacles to the Commission achieving these things?
3. How would you like to see the Commission conduct the consultation and who do you wish to see involved that you think might be overlooked?
4. How can you help the Commission achieve what you want to see done, and what events and other initiatives are you already involved in which could help the Commission?

We will need to have these questions answered by the end of July, at least in preliminary form, hence the rush. We hope, however, that more considered dialogue on substance will be possible in the next stage.

At this point, I am not asking for more than an expression of interest. As indicated above, a simple ‘yes’ will do. Do note, however, that we want this exercise to be institutional rather than personal – in other words, please liaise so that we have one contact person per institution. Thus, please ensure the details of your organization, along with the name of the contact person and their email address (if different) are also included in your reply.

Within the next few days, we will provide more detail on how we will proceed. If in the meantime, if you wish to start thinking about your key messages to the Commission, well, that's fine!

I look forward to working with you.

With best wishes,

Simon Maxwell

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