

KÖLNER FORUM
FÜR
INTERNATIONALE BEZIEHUNGEN
UND
SICHERHEITSPOLITIK



KFIBS • ANALYSIS • ENGLISH VERSION

Edition: 3/05

Whose Interest is it anyway? Blair's "Commission for Africa" and the Continuing Appeal of Poverty Alleviation

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In March 2004 the British Prime Minister Tony Blair established the so-called “Commission for Africa”, consisting of 17 members. The declared aim of the panel was to “take a fresh look at Africa’s past and present and the international community’s role in its development path” (cf. <http://www.commissionforafrica.org>). The commission was therefore a crucial part of the Prime Minister’s strategy to use the British presidencies of the EU and the G8 to promote what the Chancellor of the Exchequer Gordon Brown termed a “moral crusade” for Africa (McGreal 2004). Roughly a year later, the commission published its widely advertised and several hundred pages thick report “Our Common Interest”.¹

The paper argues that, far from offering a fresh look on global relations of aid and development, the Commission stands in a long tradition of Western perspectives on Africa as a “problem” that needs to be “fixed”, partly because of a deeply felt moral duty, but increasingly out of national interest as underdevelopment is now considered to be the principal cause for regional instability and ultimately for global terrorism. As it will be argued, this perspective on Africa as object of (developmental) intervention rather than as serious political actor led the Commission and similar initiatives assume rather than investigate “African interests” and ultimately mistake the neo-liberal orthodoxy as “fresh look” on and the policies of economic reform as panacea for the “problem continent”.

THE COMMISSION

At the 2005 G8 summit in Gleneagles the British Prime Minister put two issues high on the agenda he saw as major global problems in the coming decade: “climate change” and “Africa”.² “Africa” in general had become a “problem” that could be fixed if just experts defined a viable course of action and the most influential states in the international system could be recruited into compliance with the plan in turn. One of the common responses of policy makers to a problem, once it had been identified as such, is

¹ Commission for Africa 2005.

² See Tony Blair’s speech at the opening of the summit at <http://www.g8.utoronto.ca/summit/2005gleneagles/blair-parliament.html>

to set up a panel of “expert” whose recommendations should be widely published and might function as incentive for decision makers to implement the recommended policy reforms.

Tony Blair therefore set up an “expert” Commission for Africa whose recommendations he presented to the heads of states at the G8. The Commission had been established the year before, consisting of 17 members, nine of which, the Commission was eager to point out, were African.³

The Members

The vast majority of the Commissioners were representatives of national and international finance, socialised into and well familiar with the orthodoxy of the neo-liberal market economy. The commission consisted of, among others, four state finance ministers, one head of a national bank, four private business people, one professor of economics and three heads of state. Remarkable absent were Africans outside the business sector and below the governmental level, political scientists and delegates from the development industry.⁴

The recruitment pattern of the Commissioners therefore gave already a clear indication that the “fresh look” on the “Africa problem” would be based on the same perspectives on “development” the international financial institutions had been promoting for the last three decades.

The six sub-panels of the commission consequently revolved around themes of “development”, including economic growth, “governance”⁵, natural resources, “human development” and “peace and security” with particular focus on its meaning for development.

Processes

The entire commission met three times in sum, setting its objectives at the first meeting in London on 4 May 2004, debating possibilities of consultations in Africa at its second

³ See <http://www.commissionforafrica.org/english/about/story.html>

⁴ The only “expert” with no connection at all to either business or government was Bob Geldorf who sat on the panel for African “culture”.

⁵ On the rather vague concept of “good governance” in World Bank policies cf. Williams/Young 1994 and Steiner 2005.

convention in Addis Ababa on 7/8 October 2004 and agreeing on the final draft for the report again in London on 24 February 2005.

The subunits all held several hearings in different parts of Africa and accepted submissions in writing from individuals and organisations. It is impossible to establish *ex post* how much or which particular input was incorporated in the different panels, however few points indicate that the much advertised involvement of the “people” in Africa was rather shallow.

Firstly, the meetings were extremely short, none exceeded one afternoon, and held in selected urban centres, therefore inaccessible for the majority of Africa’s rural population. Representatives at these meetings were normally NGOs or groups considered to be part of “civil society” in Africa. Whoever wanted to participate and be heard had to be therefore urban based and a member of an organisation that was regarded as part of “civil society” by the commission.

Submissions were only accepted if they were tailored according to one of the predetermined topics of the panel. What lay in the interest [range] of Africa was therefore pre-defined by the commission.⁶ Participation in and the frame of discussion of the hearings were therefore severely limited.⁷

THE REPORT OR HOW COMMON IS THE “COMMON INTEREST”?

The 464 pages report sums up the commission’s findings and recommendations. In the tradition of an “expert commission”, it makes authoritative statements about what exactly the “problems with Africa” are and how they can be addressed. Bad governance, exclusion of parts of society from power, unfair terms of trade and an overburden of debt are identified as the most important obstacles (Commission for Africa 2005b: 2-4) to economic growth, which is identified as the principle solution to alleviate poverty (ibid: 3). The main way to address these root causes for economic decline are policy reforms to

⁶ Many petitioners for example complained that the commission did not pay enough attention to the role of the drug industry in the fight against HIV/AIDS, and indeed the commission’s recommendations only address donor countries which, however, should give “incentives” for the pharmaceutical industry to provide cheaper and more accessible drugs to African countries (Commission for Africa 2005).

⁷ The same argument holds for the written submissions as these also had to address one of the predefined topics and equally presupposed an at least semi-urban environment with access to the internet or postal services.

achieve a system of “good governance” (to be undertaken by Africans) and scaling up aid, including debt relief (to be done by donor countries).

This “fresh look” on Africa strikingly resembles the old neo-liberal orthodoxy that has defined international aid policy since the 1980s. The perspectives from Africa, if they had been included, are, as if by a miracle, identical with dominant perceptions at the international financial institutions and most Western donors.⁸

The article argues that this was because the Blair Commission, far from articulating a common cause or universal perspectives on poverty and development, stood in a long tradition of Western attempts to “fix” Africa. The continent had been long come to be seen as legitimate platform for Western leaders to display moral commitments and intervene in the name of a recently transformed understanding of global security. The failure to see Africa as a complex political actor in its own right let the Commission ultimately to assume rather than investigate the “common interest” and let it uncritical repeat the mantra of neo-liberal economic policies as the only viable solution for the “problem Africa”.

Plus ça change...

At the beginning of one of the Commission’s much advertised African consultation sessions, it was asked what exactly distinguished the Commission from previous failed attempts to bring long lasting change for Africa to which the chairman of the meeting could only respond that they “may not have all the answers at the moment” (Commission for Africa 2005c: 9).

This might have been down to the fact that there was no real difference between previous initiatives and the Blair Commission. Comparing...

[o]n January 14, 1977, Robert McNamara, the president of the World Bank, announced the idea of establishing a commission of experienced, respected politicians and economists. He proposed that the members of this new

⁸ The only part of the report that explicitly mentions a “view from Africa” is the section on culture which quite uncritical repeats old assumptions about Africans as enmeshed in lumps of culture and kinship.

international panel should not be official representatives of governments, but would work independently to formulate 'basic proposals on which global agreement is both essential and possible'. The commission was to make recommendations on ways of breaking through the existing international political impasse in North-South negotiations for global development...⁹

...with...

[i]n the spring of 2004 the British Prime Minister Tony Blair convened 17 people to form the Commission for Africa. Most of the Commissioners are African. [...]. This unique collection of individuals brought a highly relevant and varied experience to the Commission's debate and to the crafting of its report. All have wide experience in public life and crucially most of them will continue, following the publication of the Commission's report, to have a stake in Africa's development. All of the Commissioners have worked in a personal capacity – not as representatives of states...¹⁰

...almost reads like history repeating itself. Interestingly, even the Blair Commission's claim that now finally voices from the South were heard were already present in the panel the former German Chancellor Willy Brandt came to chair thirty years ago.

More recently, initiatives like the *United Nations Millennium Development Goals*, Bush's \$5 billion *Millennium Challenge* and the *New Partnership for Africa's Development* (NEPAD) were all set up to address poverty alleviation in Africa before the Blair Commission was established. With the exception of the US project, which is a rather blunt form of conditioned aid, all initiatives sought to establish some form of "partnership" between North and South, in which the South is supposed to reform its (economic) policies and gets closely monitored and eventually rewarded by the North.¹¹

⁹ See <http://www.brandt21forum.info/BrandtCommission2.htm>

¹⁰ See <http://www.commissionforafrica.org/english/commissioners/bios/introduction.html>

¹¹ This is for sure a very rough description of the different initiatives and much better accounts have been published on the entire project, above all on NEPAD. For the new prominence of "partnership" in the international development discourse see Abrahamsen 2004; for a more intensive discussion of NEPAD see Taylor 2002; for the Millennium Challenge Account see <http://www.whitehouse.gov/infocus/developingnations/millennium.html>

Blair's "Commission for Africa" is no exception as even the panel's most prominent recommendation, its call for the cancellation of Africa's debts was essentially in line with this pattern. The Commission proposed that debt should be written off as part of a larger financial package "to help those countries to achieve the Millennium Development Goals" (Commission for Africa 2005b: 5), a goal which is generally seen as only being achievable through neo-liberal economic reform. A debt cancellation would therefore only benefit the countries that have fully implemented the structural reforms pressed for by the international financial institutions. The Commission's recommendations thus did not differ essentially from the HIPC (Heavily Indebted Countries) initiative set up by the Bretton Woods institutions in the mid-1990s.

In sum, the Commission for Africa was nothing particular new or unheard of in the international politics of Africa. It did not bring a distinctively new perspective on the international economy of debt and poverty. Therefore it might be debatable in how far the Commission served "African interests" any better than its predecessors of conditioned aid had done. How come then that both the Commissioners and the British government promoted the panel in all earnest to present an unprecedented look on Africa's problems?

The Commission as Development Tool and as bulwark against global terror

The British Prime Minister took great pains to present the commission as the first sincere attempt to tackle Africa's problems in what he saw as comprehensive plan involving both African commitment to reform and Western (ethical) commitment to stock up aid.¹² Tony Blair, Gordon Brown and the other Commissioners surely believed in their moral duty to help the African poor.¹³ The British Prime Minister spoke more than once of "the moral obligation of the West" in connection with "his" Commission

¹² See <http://www.number-10.gov.uk/output/Page7577.asp>

¹³ Some scholars argue that "ethical foreign policy" has become the primary area in which Western governments seek to gain a distinct profile given that their domestic policies are often not very different from their political opponents. See Chandler 2003; Dixon/ Williams 2001.

and Gordon Brown has repeatedly called the fight against poverty as the “greatest moral crusade of our times...to tackle the greatest evil of our time” (Vidal 2005).

Additionally, poverty and “underdevelopment” have come to be seen as intrinsically linked to chronic conflict, instability and ultimately as harbouring, if not actively promoting, global terrorism (Commission for Africa 2005a: 48). As Duffield (2001) has argued, the administration of “development” has become more than altruistic delivery to the needy as it has moved to the heart of states’ security agenda. In the introduction to his Report “In Larger Freedom” the UN Secretary-General Kofi Annan stated that “humanity will not enjoy security without development [and] it will not enjoy development without security” (Annan 2005) and in national governments foreign ministries have recently joined up with development departments to co-author reports on global security (cf. http://www.hm-treasury.gov.uk/media/5EADA/sr2004_ch6.pdf). In a press conference on the Commission for Africa Blair made the commonly assumed connection between the Commission’s work and the global war on terrorism explicit:

[W]e will not manage to extinguish the threat of terrorism simply by security means, but we also have to make sure that people have some hope in place of despair in their lives, and that some of the recruiting causes, which terrorism allies itself to, are eliminated. And that is why it is important that we are discussing Africa today.¹⁴

If development and security had become so intertwined and if the Commission was supposed to address Africa as the “scar on the world’s conscience” (McGreal 2002), the “interest” to be promoted by the Commission’s report is inseparably concerning ethics and security at the same time.

¹⁴ See <http://www.number-10.gov.uk/output/Page7220.asp>

Whose interest is it anyway?

By way of concluding the title question may be repeated: whose interests are these anyway? Without attempting to sum up a highly complex and ongoing debate about the consequences of international aid policies for Africa,¹⁵ it might be safe to state at least that it is quite hard to imagine that Africans enthusiastically promoted the Commissions findings that look so similar to the international financial institutions' policies of economic austerity that led to mass unemployment and a rapid decrease in standards of urban life from the 1980s onwards. Tony Blair's Africa Commission might be credited with bringing the issue of debt cancellation once more onto the agenda of powerful states and into the Western public debate, its view on Africa and the solutions it advances, however, repeat the well-known pattern in international aid to prescribe ready-made economic policies instead of trying to find truly innovative approaches to North-South relations.

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