

Conference of 24/11/2006: Is Africa suffering from too much aid?

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Africa has itself to blame.

The Africa blues of non-Africans

In the wake of the discussions surrounding the UN Millennium Development Goals (MDGs), international debate has again flared up over the sense and utility of development cooperation. Critics maintain that official development aid is not reaching the intended recipients, is failing to reduce poverty and is hampering the reforms needed to enable economic development. Africa, above all, is suffering not from too little, but from too much aid. In the context of this debate and to mark its 35th anniversary, Alliance Sud held a conference on 24 November 2006 with the theme «Is Africa suffering from too much aid?». It drew some 300 participants. Speakers¹ pointed out that the African continent was suffering not from too much aid, but from bogus aid often motivated by power politics and economic considerations. The following pages reproduce the conference presentation by Peter Niggli, Director Alliance Sud.

I am not an African, but a European who knows Africa from the outside. As a free journalist, I followed political developments in the Horn of Africa from 1982 to 1992. I got to know the representatives of many mostly illegal political movements in Ethiopia and Sudan; I interviewed dozens of small farmers who had fled the programmes of the revolutionary regime in Addis Ababa. In Khartoum I met the clandestine representatives of several southern Sudanese groups who were then preparing the second guerrilla offensive. All this made me look like an expert on the region at the time. Since then, I have stayed in touch with the continent through personal friendships and reading.

These few remarks show the limits of my knowledge of Africa and just how much it needs to be put into perspective. Nobody is regarded as an expert on Europe just for having studied the Northern Ireland conflict and in the process getting to know England and Ireland, even though the conflict does say something about Europe.

It is non-Africans with such limited knowledge who are always leading heated discussions about Africa. Mostly it is more about our own notions than about Africa itself. Switzerland is now in the midst of just such a debate. It was triggered by our Minister for Justice and Police, Christoph Blocher, who is also an expert on Africa. For many years he maintained links with the apartheid regime in South Africa and, true to principle, remained loyal to it up to the bitter end in 1994. It is from this experience that he draws his knowledge, which he communicated to a parliamentary commission and the media this autumn. First he is at a loss and does not know how things can be improved in Africa. Second, he believes that development aid is simply going up in smoke in

¹ Presenters at the conference included Peter Niggli (Director Alliance Sud), Jürg Kruppenacher (President of Alliance Sud and Director Caritas Switzerland), Swiss Foreign Minister and Federal Councillor Micheline Calmy-Rey, Huguette Akplogan-Dossa (Coordinator of the Social Watch Network in Benin) and Charles Abugre (Head of Global Advocacy and Policy Division, Christian Aid, London/Ghana).

Africa. He draws two conclusions from this: Africa could be abandoned to its own destiny. Or, «the African countries could be recolonised».²

The Afro-pessimistic discourse: we bear no blame

Blocher is thus continuing the Afro-pessimistic current that became fashionable in the USA and Europe after the Cold War. Afro-pessimists believe that Africa's problems are not a consequence of colonialism. On the contrary, a weak colonial state had only partly penetrated the traditions of African societies and changed them too little. Careful colonial masters had been too respectful of African traditions and had allowed inherited structures to survive. Africa is possibly suffering from the fact that Europe failed to complete its mission in Africa. That is why Africa cannot move forward on its own steam and remains trapped in backward traditions. Must we, they ask, complete the unfinished task and recolonise Africa?³

The tone of the Swiss debate is somewhat more restrained. It turns on the following propositions. First, Africa is suffering not from too little, but from too much development aid. Second, aid is enabling African governments to drag out free market reforms, with the corresponding negative implications for economic development. Third, in Africa, informal and personal relations take precedence over rational/formal rules. It is easier to get wealth through personal connections than through investment. This is why special privileges, nepotism and corruption are the dominant model of social behaviour in Africa. To sum up, neither good governance nor capitalism can thrive under such cultural conditions. Instead, the beggar mentality is taking hold. These propositions are not the outcome of a survey taken at the regulars' table, but come instead from our leading daily, the *Neue Zürcher Zeitung*.

The Africa-pessimistic discourse is popular. Why is this so? Because it makes Africa bear the responsibility for its own misery. It is a huge consolation to know that Africa itself is to blame. After all, one is not entirely sure whether Europe and North America do not carry some part of the blame. The Afro-pessimism comes within the context of the special history that links Africa, Europe and North America: the transatlantic slave trade and colonisation. This is why there are no Afro-pessimists outside Europe and its settler states. No one in Latin America or Asia feels like a possible accessory to Africa's plight.

The blind spots of Afro-pessimism

But does the discourse of Afro-pessimism go to the heart of the matter, does it elucidate Africa's special situation?

1. Internal and external explanatory factors

The allocation of blame is generating fruitless discussions. We are being asked to choose between binary explanatory approaches. Can the situation of African countries be explained by internal factors or by the actions of outside players? In my view, we should include internal and external factors in the analysis. Ultimately, Africa's destiny will be decided by political and social processes in the African countries themselves. Its elite therefore bear a major responsibility in that regard. But the intervention of outside powers, and international circumstances such as the world market and its rules naturally play a role. It is common knowledge that all states enjoy

² *Sonntagszeitung*, 22 October 2006

³ Here I am following Mahmood Mamdani's portrayal (1996): *Citizen and Subject. Contemporary Africa and the Legacy of Late Colonialism*. Princeton. N. J. p. 285

equal sovereignty only technically. In reality, their sovereignty varies with the economic, military and political clout they can wield. Independence brought only feather-light sovereignty to most African countries, which leaves them subject to very real outside interference.

2. Which history marks Africa?

Colonial factors cannot simply be left out of an analysis of Africa, even when the role of post-independence developments and influences from pre-colonial history are acknowledged. Independence does not yet lie as far back as the various participants in the dispute over development aid would have it. Franz Steinegger wrote in the major Swiss tabloid that one could not blame Africa's poverty on colonialism. After all, Liberia, for instance, has been independent since 1847.⁴ And writing in *Weltwoche*, former commentator Max Frenkel denies that «19th century colonialism» accounts for the situation in developing countries.⁵ Frenkel confuses the century so as to underpin his argument. He has obviously forgotten that he was in his journalistic prime when the Portuguese colonies became the last to gain their independence in 1975. Of course, historic events from the very distant past still play only a very ancillary role. But no one would explain Europe's most recent history without referring back to the two world wars, the rise and fall of European imperialism, or the French Revolution. The same goes for Africa: its recent history cannot be understood without colonialism and the transatlantic slave trade.

3. The most important legacy of colonialism – modern autocracy

It can hardly be denied that the colonial legacy is still playing itself out. It is well-known that the economies of the newly independent countries were very much structured to suit the needs of the metropolises. And what of the political legacy? The Afro-pessimists see Africa's ills as concentrated within its ruling elites. They are alternately kleptocratic, corrupt, brutal and despotic. Who would contest this? Until recently, the exceptions could be counted on the fingers of your hands. But why is this so? The legacy of the colonial state plays a defining role in this connection. The colonial powers created a «bifurcated state» as Mahmood Mamdani describes it in his major study on the political and institutional legacy of colonialism.⁶ On the one hand, policy in the colony's cities and economic institutions was dictated by racial separation and the equality of all «civilised» citizens before the law. On the other, rural farmers were subject to newly created organs of indirect rule. Indirect rule rested on three pillars. First, the colonial masters divided up the rural population into «tribes», even where none existed, and set «tribal» frontiers, where African peoples had been very open when it came to adopting other ethnic groups or intermixing. Second, they appointed chiefs over peoples, even in cases where African peoples had no chiefs. They invested the chiefs with full powers over their subjects, even though the African kings or political leaders that did previously exist had been subject to checks and balances. Lastly, the crowning move by the colonial rulers was to codify and invent «customary law», which the protagonists of indirect rule had to apply. Mamdani calls the resulting system of rule «decentralised despotism». Amongst other things, the «decentralised despots» had the right to allocate (and seize) land, to levy taxes and charges, to order forced labour, to pass judgement and inflict punishment. They were also the ones who had to safeguard domination, by brute force. The only authority they had to submit to was the «white man». The kleptocratic and dictatorial traditions that the Afro-pessimistic discourse situates in Africa's grey prehistory therefore lie much closer to us, and are a creation of indirect rule.

⁴ Blick, 18.10.2006

⁵ *Weltwoche*, 24.8.2006

⁶ See footnote 2

4. Historical disruption in Africa – historical continuity in Asia

A comparison between Africa and Asia is enlightening in this regard. Colonialism cut off the autonomous evolution of states in Africa. In Asia, colonialism briefly interrupted the development of already existing states. Today's black African states are no more than a century old – they are pure creations of European intervention. In contrast, China, Japan, Korea, Taiwan, Vietnam, Thailand and India can all look back over a broad sweep of several hundred or even thousand years of history. Japan was able to escape colonialism entirely. China and Thailand to a great extent. It is untrue that there was no state building in pre-colonial Africa (examples are the Ashanti state, the Congo state in what is now Central Africa, or Dahomey). Yet no modern African state is built on a pre-colonial state. They were all destroyed. It is therefore no surprise that political passions, the struggle for dignity and for a voice in the coexistence of various peoples in an externally imposed territorial state have been, continue to be and will be central for some time to come. All this is hardly conducive to vigorous economic development.

What is the role of development cooperation?

1. Putting the significance of aid into perspective

We should start by putting the role of aid into perspective. The African countries (and other developing countries) will not recover on aid alone. Only Africans themselves can resolve the political conflicts. Their economic development and above all their industrialisation can only be carried forward based on their own strategies and efforts, not least of all on the part of the governments, and tailored to suit their specific circumstances. Aid can at best play a supporting role. But this process is not being advanced by the fact that in formulating such strategies, African governments are in fact currently dependent on the World Bank and on economic recipes and concepts from donor countries. This constitutes yet another important difference between the African countries and the successful Asian countries, which managed to extract themselves from the dictates of the Washington Consensus. Alliance Sud has dealt extensively with this point in its book «After Globalisation».

2. Development aid and geopolitical payments

Not all that goes by the name of aid is intended to serve development. A considerable portion of officially declared aid either never enters developing countries at all, or flows back into the North thanks to overpriced services. Yet it is almost more significant that in the last 50 years or so, a major part of development aid has been granted for reasons of power politics. Africa has been and continues to be the ideal terrain for geopolitically motivated pseudo-assistance. To this day, France goes to great lengths to keep its former colonies and other French-speaking countries of Africa such as Zaire within a close political and economic relationship with the motherland. Frequently, so-called development aid merely supplies the palm grease needed to keep the «friendships» alive. The USA and United Kingdom engage in similar practices. Even EU assistance is often oriented more toward enhancing the influence its big members can wield rather than satisfying the development needs of African countries.

3. Development aid plays a subordinate role in foreign policy dealings with Africa

When the Afro-pessimists complain that Africa is suffering from too much aid, they give the impression that the world has a purely altruistic interest in Africa and is only present as a helper. This is not so. Africa has been and continues to be of interest to the major players in the international arena, above all for geostrategic reasons and on account of its wealth of natural resources. These interests are being served by an entire apparatus for outside intervention, of which pseudo-assistance is just a part. Strong action has also been taken against governments

that have incurred the displeasure of the former colonial powers and the USA. This is why Angola spent 27 of its 31 years of independence in civil war. Mozambique fared slightly better. Its war-free independence began 12 years ago. Donor countries have kept good friends of the West in power for ages, amongst other things by means of pseudo-assistance. The most glaring case was that of Mobutu, who was first an ally against communism, and then for the USA the guarantor of «stability». His rule systematically undermined Zaire and fell apart only in 1997. Thereafter, various foreign-backed groups fought for the power. There has been a kind of peace for one year now, and whether the current political solution will hold is an open question. Is the Congo, we must ask, really an independent country? And since when? When the Afro-pessimists complain that development aid is tightening the grip of kleptocratic elites, they would be right if they were referring to pseudo-assistance. But that is precisely the point that we miss from the Afro-pessimists. Never they raise their voice against foreign interference in African affairs – they remain silent on that score.

4. Genuine development cooperation still something of a scarce commodity

Alongside all these negatives, there is of course genuine development aid in Africa as well. It has enabled millions of people to survive armed conflicts and hunger. Considerable headway has been made against dangerous diseases such as river blindness or leprosy, with the support of aid. Many projects and programmes have helped strengthen and ensure the survival of small farmers and people in the informal sector. Progress has also been made in education. Yet in her presentation, Huguette Akplogan-Dossa from the Social Watch Network Benin did point out that donor-country investments have not been abundant in these fields, although that would be in line with declared intentions (millennium goals).

5. Did the Asian tigers receive no aid?

The whole Africa discussion creates the impression that most of the aid in the world has gone to Africa. This is not so. Of the 2,300 billion so far declared as official development assistance worldwide (geopolitical aid included), only some 400 billion went to Africa. You are all familiar with the comparison between Ghana and South Korea. Both countries were considered about equally poor at the end of the 1950s, the argument goes, with Ghana even regarded as richer thanks to its natural resources. South Korea transformed itself into a wealthy industrial country virtually without aid. Ghana has remained at a standstill even with a lot of aid. But is that true? Between 1946 and 2000, USA provided South Korea with altogether 30.3 billion dollars in development aid, the bulk of which was before 1970. Between 1957 and 2000, Ghana received 2.6 billion in aid, or just about nine per cent of the amount going to South Korea. To take another comparison, up to 1975 the USA declared assistance payments (not including military aid) of some 77 billions for its three Asian bulwarks in the fight against communism, namely South Korea, Taiwan and South Vietnam.⁷ Up to the year 2000, the whole of subsaharan Africa together had received only 54 billion dollars in aid from the USA.

Disengagement or recolonisation: no real prospects

Let us go back to the beginning. The Afro-pessimists are suggesting two things: leaving Africa to itself, or recolonisation. The second suggestion is foolhardy. In large measure, the first colonisation helped spawn the severe problems plaguing Africa today. It is not clear why a second colonisation should be any more successful. At present the community of western states is rehearsing the «modern protectorate» in Afghanistan and Iraq. The results so far range from

⁷ For the same period, military aid amounted to over 120 billion.

hardly convincing to disastrous, and there has been tough resistance. Sparing Africa such a fate would be a worthwhile contribution to its prosperity.

The first proposal – abandoning Africa to its own fate – is not meant seriously. Nobody is considering leaving Africa to itself. Every economic power of any significance at all is jockeying for its share of Africa's resources. The USA and the European Union's security strategists moreover see Africa as a potential hotbed of terrorism and as a factor of geostrategic instability. If development aid were to be eliminated, the major players would be cancelling only the useful aid. To secure oil concessions, economic advantages and political and military cooperation, however, the requisite palm grease would keep flowing.

We therefore believe that a critical examination of development aid should not become fixated on the question of continuing or scrapping it. The argument should be rather about which development aid is useful and which merely serves for the cynical refinement of harmful foreign policy practices by industrialised countries. Realistically, one can hardly eliminate such practices. But we should denounce them and strive to have them removed from development budgets, and for real aid to be increased instead. And we at Alliance Sud do advocate this.