‘Our Common Interest’: the report of the Commission for Africa

Piecemeal responses to African crises are not enough: the international community needs to mobilise behind a comprehensive plan of action, in partnership with Africa, for tackling poverty, hunger and disease and securing the continent’s future.

The report of the Commission for Africa sets out how this can be done.

On 11 March 2005, the British Prime Minister, Tony Blair, launched the Commission for Africa report, ‘Our Common Interest’, at the British Museum in London. The Commission, which comprised 17 people (the majority from Africa) drawn from politics, public service and the private sector, had been set an ambitious task: to define the challenges facing Africa, and to provide clear recommendations on how the developed world could support the changes needed to reduce poverty. Its report was widely welcomed as one of the most thorough and rigorous analyses of Africa’s problems ever undertaken. Its detailed and practical set of recommendations – directed, most immediately, to the G8 Summit in Gleneagles in July, the UN High Level Plenary on the Millennium Development Goals in New York in September, and the WTO Ministerial Conference in Hong Kong in December – constitutes a comprehensive programme for collective action to lift Africa from poverty, famine and disease, and to unlock its productive potential.

At the outset, the report makes a strong case for urgent action. It highlights the positive developments already underway in Africa, in areas such as governance and economic growth, and argues that rich countries should support this progress to ensure that precious gains are not reversed. While encouraged by these signs of progress, the Commission is realistic about the challenge facing many African countries. On current trends, Africa is set to halve poverty, not in 2015 as envisaged with the Millennium Development Goals, but in 2150. Referring to African poverty and stagnation as “the greatest tragedy of our time”, the Commission cautions that failure to act now could lead to irreversible damage to the prospects of future generations.

Summary of key recommendations

Building effective states, governance, and nations
Effective states – those that can promote and protect human rights and can deliver services to their people and a climate for entrepreneurship and growth – are the foundation of development. Without
Without progress in governance, all other reforms will have limited impact.

While there have been improvements in many African countries, weakness in governance and capacity is the central cause of Africa’s difficult experience over the last decades. Improvements in governance, including democracy, are first and foremost the responsibility of African countries and people, and they take time and commitment. But there are also actions that outsiders can take both to support and to avoid undermining good governance. Two areas are crucial: capacity (the ability to design and deliver policies) and accountability (how the state answers to its people). The Commission proposes:

• Providing strong political and financial support for the pan-African and regional organisations, particularly the African Union and its programme NEPAD;
• Making changes in donor behaviour, to get fully behind a comprehensive national strategy for capacity-building;
• Building up professional skills and knowledge, including by revitalising Africa’s higher education, especially in science, engineering and technology;
• Broadening participation and strengthening institutions that improve accountability, including parliaments, local authorities, the media, and the justice system;
• Increasing transparency of revenues and budgets, especially in countries rich in natural resources; this also makes a powerful contribution to conflict prevention;
• Tackling corruption, including repatriation of stolen state assets;
• Strengthening the quality and management of data.

Establishing peace and security
The right to life and security is the most basic of human rights. Without increased investment in conflict prevention, Africa will not make the rapid acceleration in development that its people seek. Investing in development is itself an investment in peace and security, but there is much more that should be done directly to strengthen conflict prevention:

• Building the capacity of African states and society to prevent and manage conflict by tackling its root causes, including steps to make aid more effective at building the foundations for durable peace, to improve the management of natural resource revenues, and to tackle the trade in small arms and ‘conflict resources’;
• Strengthening African regional organisations’ and the UN’s ability to prevent and resolve conflict through, for example, more effective early warning, mediation and peacekeeping. The Commission proposes to do this by providing flexible funding for African Union and regional organisations’ core capacity and operations; and by supporting the creation of a UN Peacebuilding Commission;
• Improving the co-ordination and financing of post-conflict peacebuilding and development, so that states emerging from violent conflict do not slide back into it.

Promoting human development
Strong and sustained progress in human development requires fundamental change.

That change will happen only if women and men are at the centre of the action. The world has made inspiring commitments, including Education for All and the UNGASS Declaration of Commitment on HIV and AIDS. Delivering on these commitments is fundamental to meeting the MDGs. But that should not be through yet more competing initiatives. Sustained advance requires financing that aligns behind national health and education systems and is harmonised with and complementary to other assistance. Effective use of the large new resource flows will require careful attention to mechanisms for delivering and monitoring results, and accountability to the poor communities that are being served.

Practical actions include:

• Providing the funding for all boys and girls in sub-Saharan Africa to receive free basic education that equips them with skills for contemporary Africa. Secondary, higher, vocational education, adult learning, and teacher training should receive appropriate emphasis within the overall education system;
• Strengthening health systems in Africa so all can obtain basic health care. This will involve major investment in human resources, in sexual and reproductive health services, in the development of new medicines, as well as supporting the removal of user fees. Through coherent, integrated strategies, this approach could effectively eliminate diseases that devastate poor people, such as tuberculosis and malaria and other parasites;
• Delivering the UNGASS
Declaration of Commitment on HIV and AIDS urgently and as a top priority to ensure that appropriate services are available to all; • Mobilising and integrating the international response behind coherent, comprehensive yet bold national strategies that take account of gender and power relationships; • Enabling families and communities to continue to protect orphans and vulnerable children, through providing predictable financing streams for national social protection strategies; • Meeting the G8 Water Action Plan commitments through increased funding for the Africa Water Vision to reduce by 75 per cent the number of people without access to safe water and basic sanitation by 2015, monitoring progress in 2007.

Of all the issues addressed in this report, the health, education and inclusion challenges are the most demanding in terms of resources. The Commission recommends that these resources be provided in predictable, long-term streams, with a carefully sequenced steady increase in step with improvements in African governments’ capacity to deliver effective services.

Accelerating growth and poverty reduction

Accelerating growth, and ensuring the participation of poor people in that growth, is fundamental for poverty reduction. The proposals across this Report – on infrastructure, investment climates, governance, peace and security, trade, human development, culture, the environment and the quality of aid – should both boost participation and contribute strongly to increasing sustainable growth, investment and employment. The goal should be to increase the average growth rate to seven per cent by the end of the decade, and sustain it thereafter. These growth rates have been attained across Asia and in parts of Africa and can be achieved across the continent – but only if the obstacles of a weak infrastructure and a discouraging investment climate are overcome, releasing Africa’s entrepreneurial energies. This will require:

• Committing to double infrastructure spending in Africa, with an initial increase in donor funding of US$10 billion a year up to 2010 and, subject to review, a further increase to US$20 billion a year in the following five years. This will require carefully managed build-up to avoid corruption and cost escalation, and should extend from rural roads, small-scale irrigation, and slum improvement to regional highways and larger power projects;
• Public and private sector working together to identify the obstacles to a favourable investment climate, together with outside support to fund the necessary actions;
• Fostering small enterprises through ensuring better access to markets, finance, and business linkages, with a particular focus on youth and women, as well as the family farms that employ so many people in Africa;
• Action by the business community to contribute in each of these areas and in other areas set out in this Report, working in partnerships with each other, with donors, with national governments and with civil society, as part of a sea change in the way it engages in the development process;
• Action to ensure that environmental sustainability is integral to donor interventions and to manage and build Africa’s resilience to climate change.

Breaking into world markets

Africa will fail to achieve sustainable growth and poverty reduction, and fail to meet the Millennium Development Goals, unless it increases its diminishing share of world trade. Growing global competition makes this even more challenging than in the past. African countries and the international community, working together, can make progress possible, by:

• Increasing Africa’s capacity to trade. The investments in infrastructure and the enabling climate for the private sector (described in Chapter 7 of the Report) are at the top of the agenda. Further measures described here focus on trade facilitation, including: customs reform; removal of regulatory barriers, especially in transport; improved governance; air and sea transport reform; and regional integration;
• Removing the trade barriers in developed and other developing-country markets that frustrate the fulfilment of Africa’s trade potential. Progress requires the successful completion of an ambitious Doha Round, with specific and timebound goals for ending appalling levels of developed-country protectionism and subsidies. Development must be the priority in all trade
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Financing and supporting Africa’s resurgence
To accelerate income growth towards 7 per cent, and to spur strong progress towards the Millennium Development Goals, the volume and quality of external aid to sub-Saharan Africa must change radically. To ensure effective absorption, increases in aid over the next three to five years should be strong and measured. They must also be accompanied by continued improvements in governance in aid-recipient countries, by substantial changes in donor behaviour, and by learning and evaluation. Past experience shows aid can be provided and used badly. But more and better aid can support positive changes, as demonstrated by recent advances in many African countries, including Senegal, Mali, Burkina Faso, Ghana, Benin, Ethiopia, Uganda, Tanzania, and Mozambique. The Commission proposes:

• Doubling aid levels over the next three to five years, to complement rising levels of domestic revenue from growth and from better governance;
• Financing increases in aid by meeting existing commitments to move toward the 0.7 per cent ODA/GNI target, by raising additional finance from an International Finance Facility (IFF), and by developing international levies (for example, a tax on airline tickets) with revenues dedicated to development;
• For poor countries in sub-Saharan Africa which need it, the objective must be 100 per cent debt cancellation as soon as possible. This must be part of a financing package for these countries – including those excluded from current debt schemes – to achieve the MDGs, as promised in Monterrey and Kananaskis. The key criterion should be that the money be used to deliver development, economic growth and the reduction of poverty for countries actively promoting good governance;
• Improving radically the quality of aid, by:
  – Strengthening the processes of accountability to citizens in aid-recipient countries;
  – Allocating aid to countries where poverty is deepest and where aid can be best used;
  – Providing much stronger support to advancing governance where conditions for effective use of aid are currently weak;
  – Channelling more aid through grants, to avoid the build-up of debt;
  – Aligning more closely with country priorities, procedures, systems, and practices;
  – Providing aid more predictably and flexibly over the longer term;
  – Protecting countries better against unanticipated shocks.
• Agreements, with liberalisation not forced on Africa;
  – Providing transitional support to Africa as global trade barriers are removed. First, this requires making current preferences work more effectively – expanding schemes to cover all low-income countries in sub-Saharan Africa, and ensuring that rules of origin requirements are not vexatiously applied. Second, the rich countries must finance ‘aid for trade’ to help meet the economic and social costs of adjusting to a new global trading environment.

Delivering and implementing
Effective and sustained action that can deliver results will come only if African countries and institutions and Africa’s external partners make and deliver on commitments. There are a number of complementary ingredients that are key to stronger implementation and delivery of results:

• Building a global partnership around African leadership;
• Setting out a clear programme of action, with responsibilities and timetables, based on sound evidence about what works and what does not;
• Strengthening institutions, both inside and outside Africa, so that they are capable of delivery. This must include reorienting the international financial institutions so that they give higher priority to accelerating African development and are more accountable, including to their clients and partners;
• Ensuring a stronger African voice in the multilateral organisations;
• Putting in place effective independent mechanisms to monitor and report on progress in implementation;
• Generating and sustaining strong commitment to Africa’s development and are more accountable, including to their clients and partners;
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A full list of the Commission’s recommendations can be downloaded and copies of the full Report can be ordered and downloaded from their website: www.commissionforafrica.org