The Commission for Africa: now for the follow-through

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The Commission for Africa's work was widely applauded for its scope, rigour and outreach, and for the comprehensiveness of its recommendations. Will the warm words of the international community now be matched by a credible programme of action?

I have been asked many times over the past year how I would define the success of the Commission for Africa. My answer is that we should be able to look back in 2015 and say that Africa had in the previous decade made huge strides towards the achievement of the Millennium Development Goals (MDGs); that 2005 was the year that changed forever – and for the better – the nature of the relationship between Africa and the rest of the international community; and that the Commission for Africa proved to be a key instrument in developing the political will to bring that about.

Guaranteed? By no means. Plausible? Absolutely. And I think the way the Commission set about its work has greatly enhanced the prospects of success. The period leading up to the drafting and publication of the Report, Our Common Interest, earlier this year was characterised by an extraordinary consultation process – in Africa and outside Africa, with governments and civil society, with the African diaspora and with the multilateral institutions, with academics and with the private sector. The Report reflects what they told us, and the general reaction has been warmly positive. We know, because this is what they told us when we went back and consulted them again after the Report was published. And this enthusiastic support is not just about what Africans or people from the G8 countries want their governments to do. It is also about what they are ready to do themselves – developing partnerships and links, working together, as parliamentarians or health specialists or businesses. Working together as members of the global community.

The Report comes at a time when there is irrefutable evidence to show that Africa is making strong and responsible steps to take charge of its own destiny. The creation of the New Partnership for Africa’s Development (NEPAD); the coming into being of the African Union; improving governance and the Africa Peer Review Mechanism (APRM); greater peace and security. Without this clear demonstration of progress, the basis for many of the Commission’s recommendations would be undermined. As it is, the impetus for positive change which is coming from within Africa provides the strongest possible justification for increased international support.

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The critical path
It is thus Africa’s progress that provides the basis for a significant and permanent shift in the relationship between Africa and the rest of the world. It is the sequence of events over the coming months which provides the opportunity. The Gleneagles Summit will be the first big test of whether the political will exists to get behind the Commission’s Recommendations.

Several G8 countries have already agreed to increase substantially their development assistance to Africa. This is very welcome – but it is not enough by itself. The Commission’s Report argues for a comprehensive approach by the international community, supporting Africa’s efforts to improve governance and peace and security; helping to build capacity, education and health systems, and to tackle those diseases which kill and debilitate; encouraging economic growth, not least by changing distortionary trade policies and agricultural subsidies; delivering aid more effectively, as well as giving more of it; and addressing the debt problem.

The forthcoming UK Presidency of the EU presents another enormous opportunity; not just because the UK will ensure that Africa remains high on the agenda, but because – as we know from our consultations – there is a strengthening coalition between many member states and the European Commission that development policies must focus increasingly on Africa, and that distortionary trade and agricultural policies must go, as being in the best interests of neither African producers and growers, nor of European consumers and taxpayers. The agreement reached in May 2005 under the Luxembourg Presidency for member states to attain the 0.7 per cent oda/GNI ratio by 2015, with a (stretching) interim target by 2010 and a separate commitment for those countries which joined the Union a year ago of 0.17 per cent by 2015, provides an excellent springboard for further progress (half of the G8 countries are, of course, also members of the EU).

And then there is the Millennium Review Summit in September. The analytical work done in preparation for this – likely to be the largest meeting of heads of government ever held – will show very clearly that, whilst many parts of the developing world are making good progress towards the MDGs, a whole continent is being left behind. That is in nobody’s interest, whether you look at it through the prism of morality, world prosperity (and let us not forget the important meeting of the WTO in Hong Kong in December) or global security. Our consultation process makes it clear that this view is widely shared. There is, too, a remarkable degree of synergy between the Commission for Africa Report and other reports which will feed directly or indirectly into that Summit – the Report of the Millennium Project; the High Level Panel on Threats, Challenges and Change; and ‘In Larger Freedom’ (which interestingly refers in its second paragraph to “the glue of common interest”). This seems to provide another reason for optimism that significant decisions could be just around the corner.

The Commission: rising to the challenge
Was the establishment of a Commission the best way of ensuring that Africa was at the top of the international agenda for 2005? Undoubtedly. First, it
provided the opportunity to produce a Report setting out clear, strong evidence of Africa’s progress and why the international community should support it. Second, it allowed the energies of a powerful and active group to be harnessed behind a common agenda – not just to write a Report but to advocate for action. It is hard to overstate the commitment and passion of the Commissioners – Africans and non-Africans united by their determination to make a difference. This was clearly not going to be a Commission that met from time to time and instructed the Secretariat to get on with the thinking and the drafting. The Commissioners were deeply engaged in the analysis, and those working on particular themes kept in close touch throughout with their colleagues as well as with the Secretariat. The second meeting in Addis Ababa in October 2004 was quite simply one of the best discussions on development that my colleague as Director of Policy and Research, Sir Nicholas Stern, or I have ever witnessed – and we have witnessed many! And the willingness of the Commissioners to participate in outreach and advocacy work was, under the circumstances, extraordinary. These were people with serious day-jobs, like running countries or international organisations. The commitment they showed was very powerful and stemmed from a very real sense that they were engaged in a common endeavour which could really change the world for the better.

If not now, when?
Will it do so? History will be the judge of that. All of the Commissioners are clear that, unless action follows from the Commission Recommendations, the Commission will have failed to achieve what it set out to do. I know that they will spend all the time they have available leading up to the Summit in doing everything they can to ensure that action does indeed follow. With my colleagues in the Secretariat – who have demonstrated extraordinary commitment and resilience – I applaud their efforts. It has been a pleasure and a privilege to work with them.

The Commissioners deserve to be heard. So do the 10,000 African children who will die in Africa tomorrow, and the day after, and the day after that, unless the world’s leaders demonstrate the political will to prevent it happening. It can be done and it must be done if poverty is to be made history and if Africa is not to be left further behind. I know that all the Commissioners, and all of us who have worked with them, will want to look back on the Gleneagles meeting from the vantage point of 2015, in the recognition that this was a pivotal moment in the history of the world, when the G8 leaders took the decisions, based on the recommendations of the Commission for Africa Report, which at last allowed Africa to take its rightful place in the global community.

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