Action for Africa: our European imperative

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History, geography and hard-edged considerations of trade and security – to say nothing of moral obligation – demand a bold response to Africa’s predicament from the European Union.

Let us look at what is happening. The depressing facts are well documented. 25,000 people die of hunger in the world every day. In sub-Saharan Africa, nurses and teachers are dying from AIDS faster than they can be trained. 25 million people have died there so far of AIDS, and another 25 million are HIV-positive. Life expectancy has collapsed to near-medieval levels. What should be the response? Firstly, I reject the image of Africa as a series of failures. It is an image which does not fit with its dynamic, diverse and vibrant culture. Nor does it fit the reality of increasing political choice in Africa; a process which, once started, is hard to stop. Nor does the image of failure sit well with the strong economic growth of recent years – up to 4.5 per cent on average in 2004.

But there is no denying the challenges, well described in the recent report by the Commission for Africa. Crucially, there is an African response, coming from within that continent. It is African leaders who launched the African Union in 2002, to promote democratic principles and sustainable development. The African Union has launched the New Partnership for Africa’s Development (NEPAD). This is a programme designed by Africans, for Africans to promote growth, reduce poverty and halt Africa’s marginalisation.

Why we must act
What about the European response to the challenges? Let us be clear about the importance and urgency of that response. Why should we act? Because it is both part of our values as Europeans to do so, and because it is in our interests to do so. Why in our interests? Firstly, look at a map. Africa is on our doorstep; less than 10 miles from mainland Europe. Secondly, because a resurgent Africa means potentially a geo-strategic partner for Europe, given its wealth in natural resources, and huge markets for European goods and services, as well as more secure supplies of energy and commodities. Thirdly, a more stable and secure Africa would be a key contribution to destroying safe havens for terrorists. And stability and security would help to reduce large refugee flows both within the continent and to Europe.

Fourthly, and crucially, there is a moral, historical and cultural element to the need for a European response. We should not pretend otherwise. Europe has unique ties to Africa. The histories of the two continents have long been connected, sometimes with not very happy results. The present day borders of African countries, and the weak infrastructure between countries, are in part colonial legacies. European policy towards Africa should not be driven by guilt. But it should be underpinned by shared responsibility between African and European.
Our response
So the European case for action is a strong one. That is why Africa must be a flagship issue for Europe, and for the European Commission. What is our response? Firstly, it is not always realised how much the EU and its members are doing already. We are the world’s biggest aid donor – responsible for 55 per cent of all overseas development aid. We are the biggest trading partner for developing countries. Half of Africa’s exports go to the EU. The EU’s Everything But Arms initiative gives the poorest countries duty- and quota-free access to our enormous market of over 450 million people for all their exports except arms.

Europe has been the major driver of the WTO’s Doha Development Agenda from the start. The EU took the lead in proposing the abolition of export subsidies for agricultural products last summer; we now look to other leading trading nations to join our position. The EU is trying to help developing countries integrate into the world economy; it is the world’s biggest provider of trade-related assistance, at around 700 million euro per year. It is negotiating the Economic Partnership Agreements; these are not traditional liberalisation agreements, but development tools. They are intended not, as in the caricature of some, to force liberalisation on some of the world’s poorest countries. They put trade at the service of development by marrying ‘aid for trade’ with progressive market opening, at a gradual and appropriate pace.

Our proposals
Our proposals focus firstly on money. We have proposed that Europe spend €20 billion more on aid per year by 2010: put another way, we have proposed a new intermediate target for development aid of 0.56 per cent of gross national income by 2010. That puts Europe on course to reach, by 2015, the UN’s 0.7 per cent target. I applaud the four EU members – Denmark, Luxembourg, the Netherlands and Sweden – who have already reached the 0.7 per cent target, and the other six, including France and the UK, who have pledged to reach it before the 2015 deadline.

This is not gesture politics – it is putting our money where our mouth is. But it is not easy to find more money, quickly, when budgets are tight. So there is a lively search for innovative ways of financing development, including the proposed International Finance Facility. I personally support the idea of a voluntary contribution to development by airline passengers. For example a contribution of just one euro by each passenger would be a real collective effort by Europeans to the campaign to tackle poverty, disease and hunger. The European Commission will come forward soon with a paper on this subject.

But we can only ask citizens to make further contributions to solidarity if European governments show that they also use taxpayers’ money in this spirit and provide an adequate share of public budgets for development assistance.

That is why the EU needs to agree ambitious new targets for aid and go to the G8 meeting in Gleneagles in July and the UN Summit in September with a strong, unified and powerful voice, which will help encourage the rest of the richer nations of the world to match our effort. In particular any extra money that can go to ‘aid for trade’ will put poor, soundly governed countries on a much more positive development path and act as examples of success to their peers. I very much hope the G8 meeting in Gleneagles, where I will be representing the European Commission, will be able to make a real breakthrough on this.

As well as more aid, we also need better aid. This means, amongst other things, greater predictability. That would help recipient countries commit to the investments necessary to achieve the UN’s Millennium Development Goals. The guarantee of stable aid flows will encourage a finance ministry, for example, to recruit teachers and doctors.

We also need greater coherence; coherence between policies, and between donors. The EU’s track
As well as more aid, we also need better aid

record has not been the best. But the European Commission is determined to improve it. The EU has an enormous range of policies, from trade to the environment, which can and should work for, rather than against, development. Europe must become more than the sum of its parts.

That is why, for the first time, the Commission has identified, as part of the April package prepared by Development Commissioner Louis Michel, commitments which should help accelerate progress towards the Millennium Development Goals, for example on the environment or on trade preferences. In return, developing countries need to adopt the right policies, and ensure adequate governance and respect for human rights. The final theme of the Commission's April package is giving priority to sub-Saharan Africa. "Without sustained support", a UN Millennium Project Report concluded in January, "sub-Saharan Africa is unlikely to meet any of the goals."

That is why the European Commission proposes that a greater share of the rise in overall aid should go to sub-Saharan Africa. It proposes to apply all its other ideas on policy coherence and quality of aid to Africa first, as a matter of priority. And it proposes a number of concrete actions in areas identified by Africans themselves as crucial to their development. These include financial support to develop the African Union's capacity, including the €250 million support for African peacekeeping missions, for example in Darfur; reconnecting Africa's infrastructure to tackle its transport costs – twice as high as Asia's; and measures to support the social sectors such as health and education.

Security and good governance
There is another consideration which should inform our approach: in the last few years we have understood better than before that there is no real development without security and that security depends on political stability. Assistance in these fields is of the utmost importance and the European Union will keep providing it. Often carried on through the good offices of the African Union and other regional organisations, conflict prevention, crisis management, peacekeeping and post-conflict reconstruction are necessary tasks in many parts of sub-Saharan Africa. So are the efforts to stimulate and support good governance – the civilian components of conflict prevention, ranging from women's education to judicial expertise. Here again, the European Union is well placed to make a difference.

Africa can't wait
So there is already a European response. But we can, and must, go further. We must act now. The international calendar for 2005 is one for Africa, and for development. The UK has made Africa one of the main themes of both its G8 and its EU Presidency this year. September will see the United Nations Summit, which will review progress towards the Millennium Development Goals. And in December, there is the crucial Hong Kong Ministerial of the World Trade Organisation. Meanwhile, grassroots movements like the Make Poverty History coalition are also helping to build momentum.

What is almost as shocking as the facts of hunger, poverty and disease is that my generation has become so used to them. We are in danger of taking for granted the images of dying children; of letting them, to use a very inappropriate phrase, become 'a fact of life'. We must fight this; and I mean "we" – all of us in Africa, in Europe and elsewhere. The fight against poverty, hunger and disease is perhaps the issue for my generation. We must follow the energy and dynamism of the younger generation, who are leading on this issue, ahead of governments and large organisations.

We have the resources. We have the strength of popular feeling, as the huge response to the Tsunami showed. What we need now is political will and organisation to turn this into action.