

## **Europe's responsibility to Africa – 26 September 2002**

African governments seem to have a bi-polar view of their European ex-rulers. On the one hand, governments across the region are keen to affirm their anti-colonial credentials, and anything "neo-colonial". On the other hand, African governments continually blame the West for ignoring Africa's plight, and for allowing the continent to descent yet further into the abyss of instability, poverty, and underdevelopment.

Zimbabwe, sadly, illustrates many of the problems of an isolated and corrupt regime, cut off from the rest of the world. The economic and social situation continues to deteriorate in full view of the international media. Mugabe accuses outside powers of neo-colonialism, while he blames foreigners for withdrawing their investments.

In some ways, he is correct. Some problems in African societies are due to the direct influence of colonial rule - and European societies have a responsibility to repair the damage they have caused. Land confiscations, ill-adapted legal systems, overly-centralised bureaucracies and a lack of democracy can all be traced back to European rule. However, many of Africa's problems are due to their own societies and governments, and to blame the colonial powers is merely to excuse their own failures.

What is Europe's responsibility to Africa, where they see conditions deteriorating badly? And what does Europe have the right to demand in return?

### ***Social breakdown and communal violence***

An upsurge of popular violence is the most traditional cause for Western intervention, and one recently has been found in Sierra Leone and now Cote d'Ivoire. According to France, the current mission in Cote d'Ivoire is simply to protect French nationals - however, this excuse itself has a long history. Throughout the British and French empires in Africa, the protection of nationals and national interests was the most frequent cause of the assumption of direct imperial control by Europeans. It is not surprising that this makes governments wary of a return to foreign domination.

As in the colonial period, foreign interventions are often legitimated by an appeal from one side in a civil conflict - usually by the incumbent rulers. French Africa has a long tradition of seeing beleaguered presidents bailed out by France itself - and even in the recent Madagascar crisis, President Didier Ratsiraka was granted asylum in France - before the French came to a better deal with the *de facto* president Marc Ravalomanana. In some exceptional circumstances, the legitimating appeal can even come from higher sources than the governments involved in a conflict. The arrival of British forces in Sierra Leone in May 2000 was described by the Secretary-General of the UN as 'a pivotal factor in restoring stability... it is hoped that the UK will be able to maintain a military presence in the country until UNAMSIL has received the necessary reinforcements.' This is despite the fact that the British refused to serve in the UN force itself.

African leaders on the other hand can scarcely complain about interventions in security matters in Africa, since they themselves have an undistinguished record of economic plunder and profiting from the misery of their neighbours. Democratic Republic of Congo has suffered a four-year civil war, in which a staggering 2.5m civilians have died. In the process, its neighbours have plundered its vast natural resources: Rwanda and

Uganda sending troops to support the rebels, with Zimbabwe, Namibia and Angola 'helping' the government. The diamond-fields of Sierra Leone and Angola have also been pillaged by rapacious neighbours.

One cannot claim that intervention to prevent security breakdown is therefore necessarily classic European-style imperialism. In most cases there are none of the other elements of empire - trade links, significant white populations or strategic considerations. If one takes the example of the British intervention in Sierra Leone, one finds no significant reason for an intervention, except a sincere wish to bring civil conflict to an end. As the Foreign Secretary said on 11 September 2000, "British troops are in Sierra Leone for three reasons. First, the people of Sierra Leone still live under threat of a brutal rebel force whose trademark is lopping off the arms and the legs of those women and children they meet in their path. Secondly, we are there because the government of Sierra Leone is a democratically elected government. It is in Britain's interest that we should defend democracy where it is threatened by overthrow from terrorists. And thirdly, we are there because the UN will not have credibility in peace-keeping, nor authority in resolving conflict, if we are not successful in taking the Sierra Leone mission to a successful conclusion." Robert Cooper called this "a new kind of imperialism, one compatible with human rights and cosmopolitan values: an imperialism which aims to bring order and organisation but which rests today on the voluntary principle."

This should have little meaning for Europeans in Africa - there is no empire to be constructed by intervention in civil crises, and nor does anyone want them. Technical and logistic assistance with the sole aim of halting prolonged bloodshed can hardly be called imperialist, and so long as that intervention does not violate Article 7 of the UN Charter, is a binding obligation on the international community.

### ***Poverty***

African leaders frequently blame the colonial period for Africa's chronic poverty, and there are some elements of truth in this statement. Colonial economics, where there were any, depended on a global system of trade to and from the metropole. African colonies did tend to specialise in one or two primary resources, which could be processed in the metropole and resold - cocoa, coffee, rubber, tin, groundnuts etc. Since independence, free market liberalisation and the loss of preferential tariffs have made the price of most commodities crash, and thus has grievously damaged the incomes of African countries.

However, Africa's continued poverty comes from many other routes, mainly related to the miserable quantity of investment in the continent, leading to appalling levels of education, health, productivity, transportation and capital.

And why would anyone wish to put their money into Africa, seeing the massive risks on investment that remain? Corruption is endemic, and central Africa provides 5 of the top 10 most corrupt nations on the planet. Legal systems are far from robust, and investigation of crime is a luxury.

Yes, a lot more needs to be done by the West to make up the enormous and constantly growing economic gap between Africa and the developed world. However, throwing good money after bad is not acceptable, and nor does Africa have any God-given right to take European money and do what it wants with it. In return for greater assistance, African leaders must take steps to see that the legal and societal infrastructure exists for

them to develop endogenously, without permanent dependence. The basis of this must be a working legal system that inspires the confidence of all. After this must be a serious programme of investment into education and infrastructure that would allow greater competitiveness in the long term. Finally, Africa must take responsibility for its own political development, and not rely on the outside world to take the first steps.

### ***Land issues***

Land is a serious problem for many parts of Africa, and a problem often directly traceable to the European arrival. In Kenya, Tanzania, Zimbabwe and Zambia, for instance, arriving Europeans confiscated vast quantities of land for settlement. The injustice of arbitrary European land-grabs was and is still a scandal, for which former colonial powers must help find solutions. This they have consistently promised to do and rarely delivered. Indeed, as Robert Mugabe so often points out, at the 1979 Lancaster Gate talks on Zimbabwean independence, the British government promised greater help for redistribution of land back to landless blacks. However, they have not delivered. Much of the current crisis over land has been on the table for twenty years, and has conveniently been ignored by the British. Evicting the white farmers cannot possibly be the solution, since it renders them destitute, along with countless black farm-workers. This does not absolve the former colonial government of its responsibilities. Nor the French in AOF or Indochina. Or the US government vis-à-vis the Native Americans.

Africa's prosperity remains greatly tied to the fortunes of its rural communities, who continue to serve the industrialised world with commodities to be processed there and often resold. Due to this historical link, Europeans have consistently attempted to support their ex-colonies with tariff protection and privileged access to markets. However, the process of globalisation has forced this practise onto the defensive. The WTO recently condemned the EU for preferential tariffs on bananas from the ACP countries (ie their ex-colonies), as opposed to South American banana producers. This episode should lead us to the correct conclusion - developing countries should be given easy access to western markets, but colonialism is not an excuse for preference. Yes, ex-colonies *are* still dependent on their former masters for trade - but this situation has come about through economics rather than politics. There has always been a market for colonial products, and so export industries have developed to meet this demand: the export industries did not emerge before the consumer demand. Thus there is no reason why we should accept the need to buy from ACP producers at rates which are unfair to their non-ACP competitors. As the EU is currently claiming, the best way to allow the developing world to benefit from globalisation is to liberalise more, to reduce tariffs and to remove barriers to trade. It is not to subsidise inefficiency through discriminatory import duty mechanisms.

On the other hand, the pursuit of liberalisation can also allow the economically-powerful to attack legitimate interests. Trade law is an immensely powerful tool, and can often be used to overrule the democratic wishes of the public. An example is in public health, where the EU has refused to import American hormone-treated beef products, or genetically-modified crops. There are legitimate grounds for both sides to maintain their positions: for the USA, scientific progress is being blocked for selfish political ends by the Europeans; for the EU, the safety of its citizens is being jeopardised by unproved food technology. Yet the fact remains that due to their wealth, intransigence in this kind of dispute is possible. The EU can safely ignore the WTO condemnation over GM-crops, and pay the fine for non-compliance with the WTO decision. An impoverished

developing country cannot afford this luxury. The West maintain large networks of economic diplomacy, to "assist" developing countries to sign contracts with their companies - and Europe and the USA wield financial power that can easily force liberalisations from which only their companies can benefit.

### ***NEPAD***

In conclusion, we can see all of these elements of responsibility falling together into a scheme, promoted by several African statesmen, to try to engage the West more firmly in Africa's future. NEPAD, the New Economic Partnership for African Development, attempts to link a vast number of issues of concern to Africa's future. Among these are debt relief, future loans, private sector involvement, legal reform, anti-corruption, democratisation and collective responsibility for political instability. Under the scheme, in return for financial aid from the G7 and global institutions, African leaders will put in place concerted efforts to clean up the inefficiencies, brutality and corruption of their own societies.

African leaders for the first time will be expected to criticise the misdeeds of their neighbours - to ensure that the "dictators' club" that was the OAU would now intervene to criticise despotism such as Zimbabwe. Africans will henceforth take actions to prevent intra-state conflicts such as Sudan, Rwanda and Burundi - and at the very least, not enrich themselves on the misery of others, as in Angola, Sierra Leone and Democratic Republic of Congo. This is a very welcome development - for too long, African governments have ignored their responsibilities to and for one another. Africa spends roughly 3.5% of its GDP on arms and defence, a figure which masks blackspots such as defence accounting for 19.4% of Mozambique's budget, 23% of Zimbabwe's and up to 80% of Sudan's. The 'peace dividend' of successful regional cooperation against security breakdown would be enormous.

And what of Europe? Western capital is the one key factor which will aid Africa's development, and NEPAD depends on Europe playing ball. A first step would be through relieving Africa of its existing debt obligations. It is true that the levels of bad debt are crippling to poverty-stricken states - but this does not imply a moral case for cancelling debt. Previous governments took foreign money and squandered it: there must be safeguards against the present governments doing exactly the same. This is where NEPAD must be made to work, and Europe has a crucial role in policing the use of its money.

Secondly, NEPAD must succeed in its aim 'to reduce the risk profile of doing business in Africa'. With a working system of laws to protect the investor, private investment is surely more likely. This in itself would also help Africa emerge from the unequal and donor/recipient relationship with developed countries and multilateral institutions. Although much of African law is based on the previous colonial systems, they have fallen into disorder thanks to a lack of resources and scrutiny. Multilateral institutions in particular have an important role in using their influence to force greater transparency in the financial system.