

Britain's Idealisation of Africa: Is 'Doing Good' Good Enough?

by Julia Gallagher, Department of Politics and International Studies, SOAS

Within Britain's political circles there is a largely uncontested assumption that Africa should be treated differently from the rest of the world. This unanimity stems from a shared tendency to idealise Africa and Africans—and to idealise, in turn, Britain's African policies.

When British politicians interact with Africa, they assume that their actions rise above their own national self-interest—that they are engaged in a 'noble cause', transcending politics and commercial interests. Why is such a view so prevalent? This Development Viewpoint explores the meaning of Britain's approach to Africa.

The idea of Britain 'doing good' in Africa was firmly established during Tony Blair's time in Downing Street, that is, 1997–2007. Aid nearly doubled; the bilateral debt of Africa's 18 poorest countries was written off; British forces intervened in Sierra Leone to restore order; Blair launched the Commission for Africa to develop a plan to help rescue the continent from its development impasse; and Britain made Africa the central theme of the UK presidencies of the EU and G8 in 2005.

In a speech on Africa in Addis Ababa, 7 October 2004, Blair epitomised the British view of Africa:

"In all the things that I deal with in politics, and the things that make people cynical and disengaged from the political process, when I come and see what is happening here [in Ethiopia] and see what could happen, I know that however difficult politics is, *there is at least one noble cause worth fighting for.*"

A Broad Consensus

The political consensus behind the Blair government's work in Africa was exceptionally broad: encompassing the Liberal Democrats and Conservatives as well as all wings of the Labour Party. While there were disagreements among these political groupings on many other areas of policy, on Africa there was a united front.

This consensus even seemed to extend to the international NGO community, other bilateral donors and multilateral institutions. As Clare Short, Secretary of State for International Development, explained, "... you can just get on with what's right: it's in Africa's interests, it's in Europe's interest, it's in the world's interests" (interview, 6 June 2007).

The notion that Britain is engaged in a 'moral crusade' in Africa derives from popular and historically deep-rooted conceptions of the continent as needy and helpless. The British role in this scenario is one of taking up the cause of the voiceless African poor in an honourable attempt to induce better governance behaviour from African leaders, who are usually described in either starkly 'good' or (more often) 'bad' terms (see Gallagher 2009).

This advocacy assumes, of course, a curious sense of a right or facility to speak *for* Africans. When the depiction of African actors is flattened in this way, the continent appears emptied of politics, and policy choices are reduced to the 'progressive' versus the 'corrupt'.

The Idealisation of Africa

British self-idealisation stems, at least, from two factors. The first, previously mentioned, is the remarkable consensus on what Britain should do in Africa and how it should behave. The most heady expression of this consensus came in 2005 during the Gleneagles G8 summit, when thousands of people, organised by religious and development groups, and supported by all the main political parties, loudly expressed their support for Blair's African initiatives.

The second factor is the tendency of Britain to write off or sanitise its self-interest in Africa. This position is plausible since Britain's economic and geopolitical interests in Africa are relatively modest. For example, in 2006 British exports to sub-Saharan Africa accounted for only 1.8% of its total exports, and two-thirds of these went to South Africa.

When politicians do talk about British interests, they are assumed to be 'enlightened' interests that accord with Africa's own development priorities. Politicians argue, for example, that eradicating poverty and conflict in the poor countries of the continent will prevent the disaffection and instability that drive people to migrate to Europe or turn towards terrorism.

But this apparent absence of selfish interests reinforces the sense that Britain's Africa policy is rooted in 'the good' rather than 'the political'. In this way, the perception that British policies are motivated purely by selfless concern for Africa remains unclouded by the complexity and ambiguity normally associated with more political relationships.



Make Poverty History Campaign Poster for the G8 Summit at Gleneagles in 2005

Overall, the intense idealisation of British engagement with Africa represents something like a 'sacred space' in the middle of profane, messy politics. Even now, with dramatic cuts in overall public spending being contemplated, international development has been singled out by the Government and opposition parties as untouchable. For example, DFID's bilateral aid allocation to Africa was set at £1.25 billion in 2008/9, £1.50 billion in 2009/10 and £1.75 billion in 2010/11.

Tellingly, British engagement with the continent appears to reflect a national self-image of competence, capacity and potency, which are more difficult to achieve in messier domestic policies or other more contentious foreign policies. Hence, it is plausible that Britain's Africa policy in recent years tells us far more about its widespread anxiety about recapturing a sense of the good British state than about the development needs and priorities of Africa.

More Modesty and Realism

A neglected but key question is the impact of such actions on the outcomes for African development. Much has been written about the ineffectiveness of aid to Africa. For example, a well-known recent critic, Dambisa Moyo, has argued that aid has kept Africa in a dependent state because it has undermined opportunities to build strong and accountable political systems and stimulate domestic economic activities that can ensure sustained development (Moyo 2009).

Others have pointed out the problems of attempting to impose policy prescriptions that run against the grain of African political culture. Tim Kelsall has suggested, for instance, that western ideals of democracy, law and redistribution have often failed in Africa because they do not fit with local political logics (Kelsall 2008).

Britain's development efforts in Africa are now focused on developing 'state capacity' and promoting 'good governance'. In this regard, its policy discourse projects a sense of British capability. In Africa, it is believed, things

can be done and Britain can do them. But this has led to ambitious and over-arching donor plans that are clumsily aligned with the complex, changeable and conflictual realities of African politics. Such mis-alignment of ambition and needs is more likely to arise when donor perceptions of African realities are flattened and idealised.

Moreover, meaningful strengthening of state capacity and accountability in Africa cannot be realised from outside, no matter how well-intentioned such efforts might be. By definition, the means to achieve such objectives need to be negotiated and resolved among African actors themselves.

These points underline the importance of recognising the complex and unavoidably political nature of African problems. They also highlight the fact that state strengthening is difficult and contentious, and substantially impervious to the influence of external donors.

In this context, donor support for African development requires, first, a more modest assessment of what a donor such as Britain can achieve and, second, an engagement that is rooted in a more complex and realistic understanding of African politics.

Unfortunately, Britain's recent fascination with Africa and its idealised view of how to address its problems is likely to be more related to anxieties about the capacity and potency of the British state than to any clear recognition of Africa's concrete development needs.

References:

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