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Politics: the Missing Link in the G8 Africa Debate

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The political dimension of Africa's development is the most important and the least well treated in this year's G8 debate. Most important because in the sub-Saharan region all of the most significant obstacles to public and private investment in development (from preventive health to infrastructure, from nutrition to trade) can be traced back to policy inadequacies. And the policy inadequacies track back in their turn to the way politics is typically conducted in a 'soft' state with a highly clientelistic system of political competition.

Least well treated because our leaders in the North view development as largely about financial resources, and very little about institutions – forgetting some of the major lessons of our own history. The further one moves away from the experience of development workers, researchers and officials on the ground, the more marked the invisibility of institutions becomes. When it comes to global debates and big international policy initiatives, institutions completely disappear.

The Commission for Africa is decidedly timid when it comes to addressing the politics. How is it possible to say that when the report recognises the importance of building developmental states and contains several useful proposals for helping countries to observe good governance and build their capacity? The choice of words is significant. 'Good governance' tends to focus attention on effects rather than causes. It can and often does provide a way of not probing too deeply into why political systems function the way they do. 'Capacity building' tends to reduce institutional weakness to a shortage of technical skills. And the CfA does not go into why developmental states are in such short supply in Africa. Yet that is fundamental.

What are the things that need to be more clearly stated? They are principally two.

First, throughout the region (not just in a few anomalous cases like Zimbabwe) political competition is about servicing informal networks, enriching some and providing low-level protection to others. It does not, as a rule, operate to place pressures on incumbent governments to perform in the public interest. This has the effect that policies to achieve public objectives are never produced, or are written at the technocratic level but not given political support and therefore not properly implemented. Reforms that stop short of reforming politics are unlikely to address these obstacles.

Second, the prospects for countries to achieve an early transition out of this condition are limited by the character of the national states. In history, we have many cases of clientelist, 'patrimonial' and neopatrimonial systems turning into effective instruments of national development. However, nearly all of the recent examples are in (parts of) Asia and Latin America. There are obvious difficulties of generalisation, but it is surely relevant that the more successful countries are all 'historic' states, with quite high levels of cultural homogeneity. In sub-Saharan Africa, the colonial origin of the state still bears heavily on the beliefs and behaviour of the region's citizens even 50 years after the start of postcolonial 'nation building'.

Are these things that can be discussed on a public platform in 2005? Obviously, the discussion must not take the form of citizens of the North lecturing Africans about political realities. Africans who have lived in Africa know perfectly well what is being discussed here, and do not find it surprising. The problem of ignorance is mainly in the North. What the citizens of Africa need is not reminders on how things work now but ideas about how to move forward towards hard-headed yet culturally-appropriate ways of building effective national states. This is an intrinsically difficult challenge – in what are urbanising but still largely precapitalist and non-industrial societies, with low literacy and poor communications.

Can the North help? Yes, in three ways:

- The help that is needed is more moral and intellectual than material, but the way aid is provided is relevant. How aid is delivered now is in many ways unhelpful to coherent and effective policy making, not to speak of state building. Donors should adopt as a central objective doing less harm to the institutional fabric of recipient countries. If thoroughly implemented, the Rome-Paris commitments on aid harmonisation and alignment would take us some way in the right direction.

- On the bigger moral and intellectual issues, some building blocks exist. DFID and several other bilateral donors have started producing studies of the underlying political dynamics and incentive structures of the countries in which they work. These are primarily for improving the agencies' own programming. They are not usually published, and there is some nervousness about discussing them in public. A good start would be to reverse this policy, so that making a contribution to national debate on state-building options becomes the main objective of these exercises.

- In a year of global initiatives and stock-takings, it is not sufficient to do this sort of thing country by country. There is a clear need for a new global initiative that is really serious about partnerships to help in the building of developmental states. The idea of 'state-building compacts' between the international community and national elites in carefully selected countries is one of the options. A team under the former Finance Minister of Afghanistan is working on the details of such a proposal. This is an exciting idea that deserves a wide and serious hearing.

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