

Can we dare implement Blair Commission report?

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by Deogratias Mushi

The Blair Commission for Africa, last Friday released its report, which urges rich countries to increase their aid to the continent, raising it to US dollars 50bn a year over the next 10 years.

One of the main issues that the report has touched on is not really new to the ears of many, but the usual 'mantra' of corruption. It re-affirms that there is a need for African leaders to root out corruption and promote good governance. How many times has this been said?

The same account has urged that trade barriers against African producers be lifted and debts cancelled for the poorest states. In a pure layman's language, business priorities should not favour a particular nation or country.

Gordon Brown, the UK Finance Minister might have played a role in this report, taking into consideration his visit to rural areas of Kenya, Tanzania and Mozambique.

Tony Blair, the UK Prime Minister set up the Commission, which includes several African leaders in February 2004. Tanzania is lucky, since it has two delegates in the commission, namely, President Benjamin Mkapa and the UN-Habitat Executive Director, Anna Tibaijuka.

This major UK government initiative to deal with poverty in Africa, which the report calls "the greatest tragedy of our time", shows how things have changed in recent years.

Demands for a massive increase in aid for Africa, the abolition of unpayable debts and new rules to make trade fairer, were once painted on protesters' placards.

The report demands a doubling of development spending, with much of the increase going to health, and the emphasis on Aids spending and primary school funding. But there is a new demand for funds for university education, to create the workers needed for developed economies.

Out of the US dollars 50bn, which the report says Africa needs by 2010, US dollars 20bn should go to infrastructure - ports, roads, airports and telecommunications.

This is a new direction - spending on infrastructure has not been a fashionable development priority in recent years, partly because of corruption.

The report has radical proposals on corruption. While Africa needs to play its part in ensuring better and more transparent governance, there are calls for the developed world to play a much greater role in policing corrupt payments and giving back funds deposited by African dictators in European banks.

Just to be practical on the report. Can European Banks be transparent enough and publicly say how much money is deposited there by some greedy corrupt African leaders? Can they facilitate a

process whereby this money is re-invested in Africa?

Two corrupt African leaders for example, the late Mobutu Seseseko of the then Zaire (now the Democratic Republic of Congo), and the Nigerian military leader, Sanny Abacha had deposited millions of dollars in Europe, but no single European leader dared to speak about the money. Can they reveal such evil now after reading Blair Commission for Africa report?

When Tibaijuka was interviewed by Tido Mhando of BBC last Saturday, the UN-Habitat Director said that corruption is a two- way traffic because, she affirmed “For every bribe-taker, there is a bribe-giver.”

The seriousness of Europe in arresting corruption in Africa is awaited because, some African countries which have been in turmoil like Sierra Leone and Liberia have had their arms supplied by some European agents.

If Europe is serious in helping Africa get out of this mess, it should therefore promulgate tougher rules to prevent arms sales to countries in such internal conflicts.

On trade, the report sees the meeting of the World Trade Organisation in Hong Kong in December, as the last chance to fulfil a promise to make this round of negotiations a “developing world round”. It calls for more urgent action on trade-distorting export subsidies paid to farmers in the developed world, to allow a level playing field.

Looking at how an individual African country could be committed in implementing the report, one remains with a pessimistic mind especially when looking at the **level of corruption** in the Continent.

Most African countries have failed to deal with corruption alleging that it is difficult to look for enough proof before a culprit is brought before any court of law.

Though President Mkapa has struggled to eliminate corruption, his efforts have remained toothless due to lack of proof to arrest some of the corrupt officials in his government. “That, you need some kind of proof to accuse somebody”.

But with Blair’s Commission report now at hand, can African governments dare to arrest some of their officials who have been embezzling billions of public money for their own personal gains?

Can a young rich Treasury employee be questioned for example, as to where he/she got money to build mansions in Mbezi Beach, and buy expensive luxurious cars, while his/her monthly salary is known to be insufficient to accumulate such wealth?

Locally, the Blair Commission for Africa report, calls for people to be more accountable and responsible in any duty that they are involved in.

The report now calls for seriousness on local issues that every good citizen should participate in trimming down the gap between the haves and the have-nots, which keeps on widening every other day.

If African countries are serious in implementing the report, then committees from grassroots level should be established to foresee that each individual in his/her own capacity plays a role in making the country a better place to live in.

If such fundamental efforts are not made, then the same report might be shelved in offices, remaining to be only a document of reference, without a practical use to the intended people – the poor wananchi.

SOURCE: *THE GUARDIAN*