

# Can Africa ever be saved?

**By David Pratt**

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“**T**he scar on the conscience of the world,” Tony Blair has called it. These days he might, of course, have been talking about Iraq, but he was in fact referring to Africa, that other beleaguered place for which he hopes to forge a new global consensus to tackle its immeasurable problems.

Blair’s latest mission – to save Africa – was given its official launch last Tuesday following the first meeting of his international task force, billed as a “strong and powerful agitator for change”.

Listening to the Prime Minister’s remarks at this inaugural get-together of the “Commission for Africa”, one could not help wondering what many ordinary Africans I have met in some of the continent’s most impoverished and violent places would have made of it all.

People such as 15-year-old Lorinda and her little brother Dani from Angola. Last year, when the truck in which her family was travelling hit a landmine, Lorinda regained consciousness with no parents, no home, and no legs – just sole responsibility for her little brother. Several times every week, Dani pushes Lorinda’s wheelchair five miles to a feeding centre in the town of Kuito. Not to make that journey is to starve.

Around the time that I last spoke with them, delegates at another conference in London were easing themselves into their seats to discuss the “blood diamond trade” that had helped bankroll the war in Angola and continues to do so in in other parts of Africa. One can only speculate on how the conference’s findings impacted, if at all, on the lives of Lorinda and Dani. They are far from alone.

What, for example, would 18-year-old Mwanyunta Ndarabo have thought of Blair’s latest blueprint for action? On realising how malnourished and sick her three-year-old son Kabemba was, Ndarabo strapped him to her back, braving marauding soldiers who are free to rape at will, and hiked 30 miles to a ramshackle hospital in northeast Congo.

Here, armies’ appetites for violence, are matched only by the voracious demands of multinational mining and oil companies keen to profit from Congo’s massive resources of

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gold, copper and – most recently – oil. According to specialists on the region, the latest escalation in fighting in the east of the country has been fuelled partly by a rush for this new-found oil wealth.

A vast swathe of eastern Congo, near Lake Albert on the Ugandan border, could hold reserves of up to one billion barrels, according to Canadian British Heritage Oil And Gas, the only company with significant investments and exploration contracts in the region.

Heritage has a history of operating in African conflict zones. Its founder and majority owner is Tony Buckingham, a former British military officer with links to South African mercenaries and the infamous Sandline affair in diamond-rich Sierra Leone in the 1990s; an operation of which Tony Blair's government tacitly approved.

According to Blair, the Commission for Africa “will put huge pressure on the developed world to do what they know they should be doing”. But try telling that to Caroline Mchena, blind, HIV positive and struggling to feed her children in a Lilongwe slum, while the International Monetary Fund (IMF) puts pressure on the government of Malawi to sell its emergency grain reserves to repay a paltry £9 million debt, and to pursue a disastrous policy of mass privatisation.

Blair's latest brainchild will, he says, “take a fresh look at the challenges Africa faces in the context of the global forces in play in the 21st century”.

A fresh look? Is it not the case that numerous respected and impartial bodies, from the Brandt Commission of the early 1980s, to the International Labour Organisation's commission on globalisation, which reported earlier this year, have been doing just that throughout their existence?

As for “challenges”, according to the commission, these include: the economy, education, conflict resolution, peace-building, health, the environment, HIV/Aids, governance and culture. Tomes of intellectual analyses already exist on these subjects, and have been the core themes of policy reviews and programmes by various African institutions, bilateral and multilateral agencies.

A myriad of United Nations (UN) agencies, the World Bank and the IMF have spent most of the past 25 years studying these problems. What can Blair's new commission possibly unearth on such issues in a mere 12 months?

What more can the commission tell us about the draconian international debt burden owed by African nations, estimated at \$300 billion by the American Friends Service Committee? Or how runaway agricultural subsidies give one cow in Europe more in benefits a day than the typical small-scale African farm?

Then there is the continued lack of fiscal transparency and accountability of many African governments, not to mention the loss of Africa's best minds, due to stifling professional,

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political, economic and social circumstances.

“This commission is creating legitimacy for a piece of work they don’t have the expertise to do,” insists Peter Hardstaff, head of policy at the World Development Movement. Such critics say the Blair government appears to have systematically ignored the findings of existing forums, and now prefers to sideline them in favour of an appointed commission of its own.

“The new commission is a diversionary tactic designed to draw attention away from 30 years of broken promises on Africa,” says Hardstaff.

Not all African leaders see it that way, it seems. Joining Blair at last Tuesday’s news conference were a number of African commissioners, including Ethiopian prime minister Meles Zenawi, and Tanzanian president Benjamin Mkapa.

Asked if there was any point in setting up a commission to examine problems and come up with solutions that were already widely known, Mkapa was quick to reply. “I would ask you why preachers every Sunday preach in spite of the fact that the Bible has been with us for 2000 years,” he said. “Sometimes inculcation can energise people to do something for a change.”

But despite such rebuttals, deep scepticism over the need for, and usefulness of, the Commission for Africa remains widespread. It is argued that the commission’s creation sends out a negative message, signalling that the British government does not have full confidence in the new African Union Commission, inaugurated last September, which is directly responsible for turning decisions made by African leaders into concrete policies and programmes.

Would greater possibilities not have presented themselves had the thrust of the new British government initiative been a joint collaboration between a fledgling African Union Commission and the office of Britain’s Prime Minister?

What’s more, the New Partnership for African Development (Nepad), the platform for Africa conceived by Africa and supported by the G8 industrial nations and UN, also comes off looking inadequate. Virtually every major theme of the new commission is already a major strategic objective of Nepad.

Is it perhaps the case that the British government is getting impatient with the pace of political and economic reforms in Africa? Is it signalling a new paradigm in Africa-G8 relations, whereby Western democracies bypass normal channels in Africa in the bid to assist Africans in need? Three African members of the commission – Prime Minister Zenawi of Ethiopia, South Africa’s finance minister Trevor Manuel, and UN Economic Commission for Africa executive secretary Kingsley Amoako of Ghana – are not only strong technocrats, but are also representative of the younger, urbane, pragmatic and extremely self-confident

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Africans who are simultaneously at home in Africa and in the West. The West may be already looking for Africans with whom to do business.

After all, by his own admission, Blair's desire to help the beleaguered continent is as much about Western self-interest as altruism. After September 11, he warned that deepening poverty and disillusionment in Africa could provide a fertile breeding ground for a new generation of terrorists.

So, if the last thing Africa needs is yet another talking shop, how best can the international community respond to its needs? Many Africa-watchers and independent humanitarian agencies say simply that Blair's energies would be better utilised ensuring a commitment to cancelling the UK's share of the remaining African multilateral debt owed to the World Bank and IMF.

The Prime Minister could also call for those organisations to stop imposing crippling trade liberalisation, privatisation and investment deregulation. Also vital are concrete legislative steps to make British multinationals accountable to British courts for their activities in African countries.

Above all, Blair, his commission, and the developed world, should understand that this process is not about "saving" Africa, any more than it is about exploiting it.

Africa is ready for change. All across the continent, ordinary people, not driven by profit or mercenary motives and fed up waiting for their politicians to care, are concentrating their lives on what matters most. Such initiative needs to be supported by less talk and more action – but above all the right kind of action.

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