

**Speech to the Foreign Policy Centre
Malcolm Bruce MP
10 October 2005**

A Canadian friend – not an expert on international development I stress – recently suggested to me that he could solve poverty in Africa by sending a fleet of jumbo jets over the Continent dropping billions of dollar bills.

That way, he argued, at least all those people living on a dollar a day or less stood a fighting chance of seeing some of it. Were the money given through Governments or aid agencies he was less convinced they would benefit.

I am sure many of you here would take strenuous issue with this, and even he agreed when I pointed out that with guns readily available in Africa for only \$6 his proposal could easily make things in often conflict-torn Africa much worse.

I don't need to rehearse the damning statistics that attach to Africa today. Nor do I need to stress that the picture is not uniform and there are successes to highlight even if swamped by the scale of the statistics of failure.

The British Government has put Africa at the top of its development agenda and used its influence to persuade others to do the same. Tony Blair has said that Africa was for him "a passion". Gordon Brown has led the way in promoting the case for debt write offs.

Africa was to the forefront of the G8 agenda at Gleneagles under the UK presidency and is being promoted up the EU agenda during the British Presidency.

The Africa Commission, chaired by Tony Blair, is a fascinating, informative read with many interesting illustrations of good and bad practice and practical suggestions.

Nevertheless, I won't be the first or last to point that targets and good intentions achieve nothing unless they lead to practical action.

Debt write offs have been widely welcomed but most of these debts would never have been repaid anyway so a tidying up of the balance sheet must be followed by a new climate of partnership addressing the shortcomings of both donors and recipients.

As a politician I agree with Overseas Development Institute Research Fellow, David Booth in his question "What about politics?". Many African states clearly need stronger and better political institutions and the interaction between Parliamentarians in donor and recipient countries needs to be strengthened.

In particular corruption in all its manifestations needs to be confronted if we are to deliver clean water, health, education and the ability to conduct successful economic enterprise to many of the poorest people.

That, it seems to me, explains why 40% of private wealth is held outside Africa compared to 3% for South Asia.

Corruption is estimated to add 25% to the cost of procurement. It explains why in one of the most damning sentences in the Africa Commission report the poorest families “dare not risk ambition”.

So here is a challenge to the UK during its current Presidencies. Isn't it time we ratified the UN Convention Against Corruption?

We must ensure that British companies do not collude with the maintenance of bribery and corruption. We should prosecute British companies and individuals who engage in it. We should work with partners in Africa to expose and control it there. If necessary we should name and shame organisations that are tainted. We must not accept it as engrained and unchallengeable

No doubt I am one of the millions of people who have been charmed by Scots writer Alexander McCall Smith's books on Botswana in the series of the Number 1 Ladies detective agency.

It is reassuring to see that his rose tinted view of that country is born out by the Africa Commission's confirmation that this is a success story achieved through strong political leadership and sound management.

Poverty has diminished, growth has been sustained and the need for aid has reduced. Sadly, however, Botswana has been one of the countries most ravaged by AIDS.

The devastating effect of AIDS are on a scale comparable to the mediaeval plagues that swept Europe in the Fourteenth Century. And they have the same affect of undermining the potential for economic recovery and growth.

It is estimated that by 2010 one third of the children in Zambia will be orphans.

How can we achieve the basic health and education levels we need without tackling this head on? Teachers and doctors are dying or fleeing to countries where they are freed from the threat of AIDS and can prosper.

So health and education depend crucially on tackling AIDS.

There are no simple solutions but their must be practical ones. Bob Geldoff's cry “Just give them the effing money” is all very well but if it is stolen again or siphoned off in bribery and corruption the cycle will not be broken.

We must try and end destructive conflicts and improve governance but in so doing we cannot and must not deny people who have no responsibility for or power to prevent these circumstances, access to the basics that will give children a chance to grow up and thrive.

Increased aid will mean nothing to individuals and families unless they can secure the free health they desperately need and access to free education at all levels.

As a politician and a Liberal who has spent a lot of my time focussing on trade, finance and investment issues I am disturbed when people try to suggest that these are somehow inimical to the needs of the developing world.

I agree with Kofi Annan when he said “It is the absence of broad based activity, not its presence, that condemns much of humanity to suffering. Indeed, what is Utopian, is the notion that poverty can be overcome without the active engagement of business.”

Trade has driven the engine of growth in Asia. It can and must do in Africa. Of course, that doesn't mean immediate multilateral free trade. And, equally, given the still considerable importance of agricultural activity on the Continent we must challenge the distorting effects of export subsidies provided by the EU, USA and Japan.

The economies of many African countries need to diversify to escape the spiral of what one of my old economics lecturers called immiserising growth brought about by over-dependence on a narrow range of price-unpredictable commodities.

How can it be justified for us to continue to subsidise European sugar or US cotton, such vital commodities for developing countries?

The Commission identifies that poor infrastructure costs adds 80% to Ugandan textile exports. Aid can surely be targeted towards the kind of infrastructure investment that would enable internal and external trade to flourish.

The Hong Kong Trade talks in December have really got to achieve agreements that meet the needs of developing countries and help - not hinder - their ability to develop beneficial trade.

Growth will come from private investment and enterprise by small and medium as well as large enterprises. We need to unlock investment and trade by tackling corruption and investing in infrastructure, health and education so that African people can lead the way out of the cycle of stagnation.

My committee in the next few weeks will be asking the British Government, the World Bank, the IMF, the European Commission, the United Nations and the World Trade Organisation what changes they will be making to their programmes to achieve the ambitious targets of the G8 summit.

Global targets mean nothing unless broken down into manageable components. Targets are not a policy, only a framework for formulating policy.

So let's tackle AIDS and other health issues as practically as we can. Let's provide education and build infrastructure. Let's take responsibility for controlling the anarchic and destructive trade in small arms and let us tackle corruption at both ends of the spectrum

As Chair of GLOBE UK, I am campaigning hard for action to tackle climate change. The causes of climate change have been industrialisation in western countries. The main victims, as always are the vulnerable poor. Even in the USA, Hurricane Katrina demonstrated that.

However the effects of major flooding and desertification are seen at their most destructive in poor countries of Asia and Africa.

Also, in an increasingly urbanised society, tackling urban deprivation and encouraging economic diversification will all put pressure on the environment.

We cannot impose emissions restrictions on Africa that will stifle development. However, nor should we dump obsolete polluting technology. On the contrary, we should work to put Africa at the heart of green growth encouraging truly sustainable development both in the technology we apply and the way we organise society.

I was impressed when visiting Ivory City during the World Summit in Johannesburg to see a poverty alleviation scheme using the greenest of ideas – environmental design to maximise the sun in winter and the shade in summer, solar cooking, reed beds for sewage treatment, recycling initiatives for business opportunities.

So often the frustration in looking at aid and development and alternative energy is that it is all available and demonstrable and yet too often it is not happening.

Aim for the stars and you may reach the moon is an admirable proverb. But in aspiring to tackle global problems and meet ambitious targets too often we lose sight of the small scale the simple and the practical.

Much that will put Africa on the road to success will be done by the individual actions of millions of people.

Let us monitor success and spread best practice. Let us own up to failure so as not to repeat it.

Given the crucial role that women play in all the key areas they must be empowered in politics, in land reform and in the wider economy. I know I am a mere man but my party has seen the future in that the four youngest MPs at Westminster are Liberal Democrat women. In Africa it is time for the emergence of more influential women and that includes land ownership, enterprise and public administration – not just as teachers and nurses.

I wish today's proceedings success. Success will be judged by practical recommendations that can be implemented soon and show a real difference within a year or sooner. By the same token it will also require that what works is supported long term not cut short by changed priorities.

I have one child of six and two under five. My heart bleeds for the children of Africa. Let us strive each day for at least some of them to turn despair into hope and hope into fulfilment.