

THE DEVELOPMENT GROUP FOR ALTERNATIVE POLICIES, INC.

*The Development GAP*

1400 I Street, N.W. • Suite 520 • Washington, DC 20005

Telephone: (202) 898-1566

ARROGANCE AND IGNORANCE

(Development GAP Inter-Press Service Column #3: May 1991)

As the U.S. Congress proceeds with its annual deliberations on foreign assistance to Africa, one thing is for sure: aid money itself will not improve the current situation on that continent. In fact, it will continue to make matters worse until those responsible for making aid policy in Washington begin to listen to the people of Africa and heed their advice about what is good for their own societies.

A major element of recent U.S. Africa aid legislation is the requirement that the U.S. Agency for International Development consult with non-governmental organizations representative of a broad spectrum of local interests in its determination of the development programs and policies it will promote and support. Nonetheless, USAID continues, along with the World Bank, the IMF and other bilateral donors, to dictate national economic policies across Africa.

This, of course, is not the first time that we in the North have attempted to lay over our concept of how development should take place in Africa. The post-colonial period may have been marked in part by "poor governance" (a favorite term nowadays of the World Bank) on the part of some African elites. Yet, Western countries have supported many of these leaders, often for decades, and have contributed hundreds of millions of dollars to development programs that have not served the interests of the people.

Despite the emergence of a new generation of future leaders across Africa -- those who are attempting to combine what is traditionally African with what is relevant from the "modernization process" -- our own leaders are not paying attention. Instead, the Treasury and State Departments, with what can only be termed "the compliance" of the U.S. Congress, have called upon World Bank, IMF and USAID officials to continue to promote what have proven to be disastrous programs of structural adjustment from one end of the continent to the other. There exists an arrogant belief in these institutions that Northerners know what is best for Africans, typified by the claim of an USAID economist that "a revolution" is being "imposed from without" in Africa by a group of donors and international institutions.

"Imposed" is the operative word here, because there is little support and much distaste for adjustment policies in Africa. After as much as a decade of implementation in some countries, debt burdens have not diminished; growth has been uneven; export markets have not proven to be the salvation that was promised; investment has been slow; the availability of affordable food has diminished; small agricultural producers have been undercut by a lack of services and credit, higher input costs and competition from cheap imported grain; health care and education are increasingly out of reach of the poor; and women are now carrying additional burdens related to family welfare while, in the rural sector, often losing access to land for food crops for the family so their husbands can follow government incentives to grow cash crops for export.

Only in Washington and in a few other Northern capitals is the myth alive that adjustment is working in Africa, or, for that matter, elsewhere in the Third World. Any other set of development policies, after so prolonged a period of failure, would have been ridiculed and jettisoned by the assistance agencies.

How is it possible that a set of policies that had been so universally rejected in Africa by the end of the 1980s -- except by governments desperate for additional financing at any cost -- can continue to be promoted and imposed in the 1990s? The simple answer is a lack of accountability. In the case of the U.S. foreign aid program, this problem takes two forms. The first is the absence of sufficient analysis and oversight on the part of the U.S. Congress. The second has to do with the

nature of the U.S. official aid system, which like most donor programs, is open at the top to political and commercial influence and effectively closed at the bottom to the poor of the Third World who are the "objects" of our assistance.

On the first-point, the Congress has not been serious in analyzing what has been the major economic issue for people over half of our globe for the past decade, i.e., the imposition of debilitating structural and sector adjustment programs. It has been far too easy for Congress to take the word of Reagan and Bush Administration officials and to believe that the market will solve all problems. We are now learning even in Eastern Europe, where the playing field is infinitely more level than in the countries of the South, about the limitations of unregulated market mechanisms. With the additional flexibility that USAID now has to promote adjustment policies in Africa as a result of the establishment by Congress of a Development Fund for Africa, such analysis and oversight has never been more important.

As concerns the accountability of our aid agencies to those they are supposed to serve, there has recently developed an ironic twist. The World Bank and the U.S. government have suddenly become obsessed with the need for good governance, democracy and public accountability in Africa. These are all laudable values and goals, and there are few nowadays who would argue against the desirability of multi-party systems and fair elections. But for these newly converted advocates, democratic process and accountability appear to end on 19th Street at the doors of the Bank and the IMF. For when it comes to the making of the major economic decisions affecting all Africans, there is little, if any, room for the perspectives, knowledge and priorities of the people or even their governments. These decisions have become the prerogatives of the major international financial and aid institutions. This hypocrisy -- this arrogance -- is not lost on the people of Africa.

This "recolonization" of Africa has, of course, been facilitated by the willingness of many African leaders to look primarily outward for solutions to their countries' economic problems. Over the years, this process has been crippling for Africa, for it has robbed the continent of its ability to build on its own resources and the creativity of its own people, to invest in sustainable agricultural practices and other local activities that have traditionally served the people at grassroots levels, and to more fully integrate their economies nationally and regionally. Modest amounts of outside assistance, provided on a responsive and respectful basis, would help Africans make the transition to a more self-reliant economy that is less dependent on Northern capital, markets and all-too-often inappropriate expertise.

The Northern wisdom that brought structural adjustment to bear on Africa continues to perpetuate and compound its economic, social and environmental crises. It is time for the U.S. Congress and other legislatures in the North to take their responsibilities seriously and to oversee far more effectively, with systematic input from grassroots and other representative organizations, programs of economic assistance to Africa.

---

*Doug Hellinger is Managing Director of the Washington-based Development Group for Alternative Policies (The Development GAP), which aims to bring grassroots Third World perspectives, information and experience to bear on bilateral and multilateral economic policymaking and program development. He has acted as a consultant at the World Bank, advised Congressional committees and co-authored Aid for Just Development (1988). He and Steve Hellinger, Executive Director of The Development GAP, write a monthly column for Inter-Press Service.*