

The G8 summit: good for Africans?

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Defusing the people's passion

Is Africa better off after Gleneagles? The continent's profile is higher, debate about its crisis is better informed and more [vigorous](#) [2]. That can only be a good thing. And yes, there will be more money, though that is not necessarily beneficial – and we need to read the fine print that accompanies this largesse. Trade reform, which is vital to Africa's recovery, will have to wait until the WTO round in [Hong Kong in December](#) [3]. So it is too early for a confident assessment of what after all is a process, and not an event. Of just one thing do I feel certain: the politicians (Tony Blair and Gordon Brown) outmanoeuvred the pop stars (Bob Geldof and Bono).

Britain's prime minister and chancellor have shown that they are a class act. Following them at work was rather like watching an old movie in which a runaway train, hurtling down the track, is diverted to a siding. They smartly turned [Gleneagles](#) [3] into the station where the locomotive that represented the [people's passion](#) [4] sat, benignly belching huge clouds of steam. The wily pair did something far more important than that: they put the pop stars on the defensive.

By the end of the summit, Geldof and Bono were [defending](#) [5] an outcome that, whatever its merits, clearly fell short of their original demands. In doing so they emasculated themselves, cutting off their all-important "street cred" with the [non-government organisations](#) [5], who could only mutter angrily from the sidelines.

This may be no bad thing. The film is not over. But if, as Tony Blair turns to focus on the European Union or Iraq or the National Health Service, Britain's aid minister Hilary Benn is left in charge of turning Gleneagles's promises into deeds, I fear for the outcome. Listen to [Benn](#) [6] on the subject of one of the world's greatest development challenges:

"We want to find solutions which are sufficiently radical to make a real difference to the people of Africa, but which are not so radical that donors cannot politically deliver".

Expediency or what?

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[African Foundation for Development](#) [7]

A loveless marriage

African leaders have been popping along to G8 summits [8] for photo opportunities since 2000, so we might expect Gleneagles 2005 to reveal the fruits of the relationship. But this is a marriage without consummation, let alone the production of healthy bouncing babies. “Don’t *tell* me you love me, *show* me”, African leaders should be saying to their G8 partners.

Whose verdict on the summit are we to believe? Bob Geldof gives G8 leaders 10/10 on aid, 8/10 on debt; he calls protests by activists a disgrace. Kumi Naidoo of the Global Call to Action Against Poverty [9] says: “The people have roared but the G8 has whispered”. Civil-society activists seem genuinely disappointed [10], which is strange given the G8’s record of broken promises. They probably placed too many eggs in the Gleneagles basket.

It’s time now for a rethink of both strategy and tactics. After all, G8 2006 [11] takes place in Russia and while Tony Blair and Vladimir Putin may agree on the war on terror, Putin may not be so keen to prioritise [12] the concerns of a continent he believes is full of cannibals.

Given that remittances (money flows sent home by migrants and diasporas [13] abroad) – are so important to many African economies, African governments, African civil society and Africans in the diaspora [13] should seek ways to maximise these inflows and their beneficial developmental impact. This is not far-fetched but simply calls for innovation and creativity. Mexico [14] has what it calls the “3+1 scheme” whereby the three tiers of the state – federal, state, and local – match diaspora communities’ contributions. The way forward is to spend more energy on such high-leverage activities to kick-start African economies and waste less time on G8 summits.

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Gleneagles summit [15] communiqué. There is, for instance, no western arms ban on Africa. If Britain, the summit host, was really serious about confronting the crucial issue facing the continent, it should have declared a comprehensive arms embargo [15] on Africa. After all, Britain is Africa’s leading arms exporter, earning it the handsome sum of \$1.8 billion in 2004. 15 million Africans have been murdered in genocidal wars and other conflicts that ruthless African regimes, relying on British and other arms, have waged in Biafra, Rwanda, Darfur and elsewhere on the continent in the past forty years.

But in contrast to the understandable disappointment of the western “aid” industry [15] that “specialises” in Africa, the continent is not upset by the lack of “more [immediate] aid” from the west after Gleneagles. *This* outcome is no tragedy at all. “Aid” or handouts of any kind are never the way to transform the lives of any peoples, and Africans are no exception. The army of western NGOs operating in Africa [16] largely share with Africa’s corrupt leaderships the scandalous employment opportunities and largesse distributed by “aid” from the west to Africa. These NGOs increasingly oversee the implementation of a plethora of autarchic programmes on the ground with scant coordination and coherence in their region of operation, far less with the national context as a whole. In the end, the people are worse off.

Ironically, Tony Blair made an astonishing remark [17] at Gleneagles that challenged the abiding assumptions of paternalism central to western leaders’ approach to relations between Africa and the west. To the obvious consternation of the African leaders present (who had earlier been categorised pointedly as “beggars” by their Libyan colleague in a pre-Gleneagles African Union summit [18] in Sirte) and the visible irritation of the “aid” representatives, Blair said that “the only people who can change Africa ultimately are the Africans.” This home truth is undoubtedly a turning-point that will differentiate Gleneagles from past G8 summits.

Africans are already transforming their societies on the ground. The World Bank [19], which in alliance with the IMF and African leaderships of the past thirty years contributed to the virtual destruction of the African economy in its so-called “structural adjustment programme”, now acknowledges that Africans are the principal source of investment in Africa. In 2003, African émigrés transferred the gargantuan sum of \$200 billion to Africa – investing directly in their communities. Africans will achieve the task that they have set for themselves. This, surely, is what the world should be celebrating.

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congratulations [20] of Bob Geldof and Bono, could also have been scripted ahead of time.

I'm one of those who think that the formula of throwing aid and debt relief at Africa's problems [20] has not been proved effective and the Commission for Africa's proposals are therefore both experimental and risky. So I'm hoping that the groups and individuals who proved remarkably effective at whipping up so much public interest ahead of the G8 will work even harder to maintain interest ahead of the meeting that could really make a radical difference to African living standards: the World Trade Organisation ministerial in Hong Kong on 13-18 December 2005 [21].

That will mean confronting some sticky political questions, like the price the west's citizens are ready to demand of their own farmers for equitable trade. While Tony Blair and Gordon Brown have shown themselves happy to seize the moral high ground when the amorphous bill is picked up by an uncomplaining general taxpayer, I suspect they will be rather less generous when it comes to striking deals that could cost politicians actual votes in their constituencies.

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