What Development Does Africa Want?

Richard Dowden*

What development does Africa want? If you want a very simple answer, you can look at the most recent survey by Globescan. It asks Africans what issues affect them and their villages, and the answer, overwhelmingly, is: jobs. Now this tells us two things: firstly, that Africans are the same as everyone else in their concerns; and, secondly, that our image of Africa – an image of poverty, wars and disease – is not how Africans see themselves. All these issues were actually listed alongside jobs in the survey questions, but apparently what we think of as the most desperate concerns for Africans are not the ones they think of. For them it is jobs.

So what sort of development does Africa want? I would ask the question: Africa or Africans? Because, again, outsiders do not often distinguish between the two and they are quite distinct, particularly when you look at the past engagement of outsiders with Africa, where the needs of the people have sometimes come very much second to what lies on or under the soil, which is what outsiders see as valuable.

Whenever I hear: ‘What Africa needs is’ or ‘African solutions to African problems’, I reply: ‘Which Africans? Are you talking about Egyptians or South Africans? Are you talking about Somalia, Malawi or Morocco?’ Africa is a very big and varied place, it is very differentiated, and it has never been more so than now. So it is very difficult ever to state something like: ‘Africa is …’. There is always an exception. Africa is not just divided by nationalities, ethnicity and languages, it is also deeply divided by class: the ruling elite and everyone else. The image of Africa that still strikes me most forcibly is one that was written in the middle of the independence period, or just after, when there was immense international and African optimism about the future of the continent. Except among African novelists. If you read the novels of that

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time, they are deeply pessimistic, especially those of Chinua Achebe, the Nigerian writer. His book, *A Man of the People*, contains a description of a house. He writes: ‘We were all out in the rain; and there was the house, the colonial house, that the white man had left behind. And the lucky, the brightest, but not always the best’ – if I can quote from memory – ‘ran towards that house, and ran into it, and then slammed the door, and then broadcast to the rest of us, still outside in the rain, that all agitation must cease, that we had won.’ That was his vision of the way Africa had been captured by African elites who have kept everyone else out. And I think they have remained in that house to this day.

It is very hard not to want to respond to the images of hunger on television or, if you actually go to Africa, to actually confront people who are poor, hungry and have diseases that are curable. But I would say that, in most of Africa, starvation is almost always the result of war. There are very few countries where it is simply the case that God has not provided enough food. Such cases are very, very rare indeed. In almost every situation where there is hunger, there has been displacement, and this displacement has been the result of war. It is important to tell the truth in this regard. The wars themselves may not be very dramatic, with major battles, but the victims are always the people who run, who leave their homes and their livelihoods, and then suffer and die. When British journalists Jonathan Dimbleby and Michael Buerk covered famines in Ethiopia – Dimbleby in Ethiopia in 1973 and Michael Buerk ten years later in 1984 – they did not mention the war. Their reason was that if they had said the famine was caused by war, people would not be sympathetic to the plight of the victims and would not send money. They presented the famine as a cataclysmic event of biblical proportions and the people as pure victims. In fact, they were victims of their own government and the rebel movement that together had caught them in the middle and forced them to leave their homes. Some were being forcibly removed by the government.

Although the prime causes of Africa’s worst famines are not natural, there is a lack of development in Africa. There is a sense that things do not have to be this way, because Africa is a very rich continent, and that it is a mystery why Africa has not developed. Maybe now things are changing. Maybe this is a conversation that we will not need to have in five years’ time. The economy of the whole continent has been growing at a rate of approximately 5% a year since 2000, which is above the global average. In fact, some people believe that it has reached take-off point. The Evening Standard of 17 October 2007 featured a full-page advert with a picture of a lion, and the title was: ‘Africa – Get Ahead of the Investment Pack!’ This was an advertisement for the new