

For Africa, a hand up

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When leaders of the world's seven richest nations and Russia meet in Okinawa from 20-21 July, Africa — the world's most disadvantaged continent — will be looking to them for a hand up and not a hand-out. What Africa looks for is an assertive partnership following up on increasingly progressive stances taken by the G-8 in past summits. Now is the time to make a difference.

The "greater prosperity, peace of mind and world stability" that Japanese Prime Minister Yoshiro Mori seeks from the first G-8 summit of the millennium is not possible so long as one continent is falling off the globe while much of the rest surges ahead at a dizzying pace. Equally, no one owes Africa a living; in the end, Africa's destiny is in Africa's hands. But the world's richest countries must translate into action their avowed support for Africa's efforts to break out of its vicious spiral of stunted economic growth and conflict.

Writing Africa off as the "hopeless continent" — as the Economist hyperbolically did in May — is neither accurate nor helpful. Following the acknowledged policy disasters of the eighties, the majority of African countries have implemented stabilisation and adjustment programmes, including liberalisation of prices and exchange rates, privatisation of state enterprises, and public sector reforms. Declines in per capita income have been reversed, albeit modestly. And, compared to fifteen years ago when only a handful of African countries claimed multiparty democracies, today the reverse is true. Moreover,

independent media and civil society organisations are mushrooming.

Still, close to half of Sub-Saharan Africa subsists below the poverty line and one fifth lives in countries affected by conflict. For Sub-Saharan Africa to achieve the internationally agreed target of reducing poverty by half by 2015, its economies would have to grow by eight per cent per annum; more than double the rate achieved last year.

Clearly, Africa needs to do much more, but its development partners

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also need to move faster in implementing new modalities of assistance, focused on commonly agreed, Africa-led development agenda with agreed priorities. These include improving Africa's competitiveness, the structural transformation of its economy, diversification of output and exports, and speeded up integration into the new global economy. And at the political level, governments and citizens alike must take a far firmer stance against corruption, build more democratic institutions and commit themselves to avoiding conflict.

So how can the G-8 help?

First, the Okinawa Summit must take decisive steps to follow up the recent acceptance that debt for the poorest countries must be cancelled, not rescheduled. The debt relief terms agreed last year in the G-8's cologne meeting for the highly Indebted Poor Countries (HIPC) need to be ex-

tended to more countries and the criteria made less stringent.

One example is Nigeria, Africa's most populous nation, now embarking on bold economic and political reforms. It is generally agreed that Nigeria's \$31 billion debt is not sustainable. The number of poor in Nigeria has risen to 66 million compared to 35 million a decade ago. Though counted among the world's thirty poorest nations, Nigeria is not eligible for relief under the HIPC initiative—one of many anomalies that

needs to be urgently corrected, as a step towards strengthening the nascent democratic processes now underway.

Second, as with debt, more decisive action is needed to support Africa's participation in global trade, including opening up markets in OECD countries to products that Africa has a comparative advantage in producing, particularly in agriculture and agroprocessing. Africa needs to access the OECD market, which is protected at a cost estimated by the World Bank at \$300 billion in yearly subsidies—an amount equal to Africa's GDP.

Third, the G-8 must send out a clear signal that the rich countries are committed to reversing a major slide in concessionary finance to poor countries. Net aid transfers per capita have fallen sharply, from \$32 in 1990

to \$19 in 1998. It is unpardonable that just at the point when a number of countries in Africa have cause for optimism, the help they desperately need is drying up.

Fourth, G-8 countries should support the United Nations and especially its capacity to respond speedily to conflict. It is a shame that the only institution we have for global governance is labouring under severe financial pressure at the very moment when we need it most. There will be neither international peace nor international equity so long as the United Nations is financially compromised.

Fifth, Africa seeks to urgently confront and eradicate infectious diseases, especially HIV/AIDS—a crisis in Africa of unimaginable proportions that is already reversing the continent's fragile social gains. The latest UNAIDS report estimates that Africa will need \$1.6 billion to \$2.6 billion annually just to contain the disease—not to mention the cost of treatment for 23 million Africans already dying from it.

Finally, Africa will be looking to the G-8 for tangible support for developing information technology, a centerpiece of the summit. Some have asked how the information superhighway is relevant to people who might not even have phones. I believe that for once Africa does not have to play catch up. It can use IT to leapfrog into the 21st century. It's time—to quote Prime Minister Mori—that we turn the "digital divide" into the "digital opportunity."

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