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## **From Failure to Progress?**

By Zack Gross

The blame game was revved up into high gear this week as the Standing Senate Committee on Foreign Affairs and International Trade tabled its Report on Canada's Role in African development (or under-development).

"Overcoming Forty Years of Failure: A New Road Map for Sub-Saharan Africa" is about 200 pages long and not a difficult read, although anyone implicated in Africa's continuing impoverishment or disagreeing with the Committee's recommendations, may not be happy.

The main message of Forty Years of Failure is that since 1965, generally the time when African countries emerged from colonial rule, Africa has regressed in terms of economic improvement. In 1965, the per capita Gross Domestic Product in Sub-Saharan Africa was 17.1% of the world average. In 2004, it had receded to only 9.7% of the world average. Mostly, what we hear about Africa's recent history and its present situation is not economic well-being, but about disease, conflict and corruption.

This particular Senate Committee is chaired by Hugh Segal, a veteran strategist in the Progressive Conservative and Conservative parties, and seen as a moderate voice from the Right. His Committee was authorized last May to examine security and development challenges in Africa, the response of the international community and the role of Canadian foreign and development assistance policy.

To that end, 400 "witnesses" were interviewed in Africa, Canada, the US and Europe, with the result that the Committee determined that all players have failed the poorest continent and that a new "road map" must be established to bring about economic growth.

Forty Years of Failure lays blame on a global trade regime that does not support economic growth in Africa, at aid programs that do not create sustainable improvements for people, and at African governments that are unrepresentative and unaccountable.

The Senate Committee lays out three general areas of solutions – private sector development that would create and sustain vibrant economies, a wholesale attack on African diseases, such as HIV/AIDS and malaria in order to harness the human resources on the continent, and significant improvement in the governance of African leadership through the maintenance of stable, peaceful, uncorrupt government. Indeed, says the Report, if countries don't adhere to these guidelines, we should have nothing to do with them.

Details in the Recommendations include reviewing the work and future status of the Canadian International Development Agency (CIDA) – our federal foreign aid office - which has much of the blame for our aid failures laid at its feet. Some media outlets and organizations who have long opposed Canadian foreign aid have twisted this point to call for CIDA's abolition. In fact, much of our aid shortcomings can be attributed to a lack of support from government, as there have been twelve aid ministers over the past eighteen years with that position seen as being extremely junior. There have also been numerous fluctuations in funding allotted to CIDA's bilateral program, Canada's NGO community and international development institutions.

The Committee also recommends that Canada create an Africa Office, comprising of aid, trade, security and foreign affairs staff, at least 80% of whom would be decentralized to Africa and would work together toward improved economic development on that continent. Currently, by contrast, 80% of CIDA's employees work in our National Capital Region. To what extent putting more Canadians in the field – we are still talking about pretty small numbers – would help Africa development is a point for debate.

The Senate Committee may be showing its political colours in calling for economic development almost exclusively through the private sector. While entrepreneurship is a better option than dependence on government, it is really the world's private sector that has helped to exacerbate African poverty, as much as indigenous greedy governments.

The appetite of the Western world for African resources, in “partnership” with often corrupt or factional leadership in countries like Nigeria, Congo and Angola, has led to this misery of child slavery, armed conflict and refugee camps. Governments and corporations – from Europe, North America, and the Far East – have used, and continue to use, Africa to extract oil, diamonds and other minerals, tropical foods, cut flowers and much more, leaving behind a legacy of poverty, environmental damage and failed states. No aid program can withstand, let alone make progress in the face of, our relentless selfishness.

There are some very good recommendations in the Report as well. It calls for disease fighting drugs to be made available to Africans at drastically reduced prices. It is about time! It calls for an end to “tied aid,” the practice of dictating to recipient nations that they must buy certain products from the donor countries. It calls for food aid to be scrutinized to make sure it doesn't depress local markets and thereby create dependencies.

It calls for beefed up security for unstable parts of Africa, such as Congo. History sadly shows that humans are not above massacring their own kind. The Report says that we need to foster the “never again” attitude that has been articulated since the Rwandan Genocide. So, let's try.

Reports don't always lead to action. Forty Years of Failure needs to be used as the background paper for discussion by all those concerned about our world. Beyond the finger pointing, we need to work with Africans, who are remarkably hardworking and resilient in the face of all their challenges, and we need to put them at the centre of our efforts.

We cannot do this to make a profit, or to grab more territory or to pay back someone for a wrong done in the past. For too long, more than forty years, that has been the way of the world.

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