



NEPAD: The Plan in Fashion

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On April 11, 2002, the great and the good of Ethiopian political society gathered at the UN Economic Commission for Africa headquarters in Addis Ababa. The Patriarch of the Orthodox Church, the owner of the Sheraton Addis, various ministers and countless ambassadors, along with the Secretary General of the Organization of African Unity, anxiously awaited the day's keynote speaker: the Prime Minister of Canada. That day, Jean Chretien spoke of "the renewal of real hope for Africa", an idea "powered by progressive vision and values and global partnership", and an opportunity to "transform the relationship of Africans with each other and with the world".

Chretien has not been the only leader with such travel plans and rhetoric. Tony Blair visited four African countries in February 2002, and hailed Africa's "best chance in a generation to make progress". At the same time, Jacques Chirac hosted several African leaders and proclaimed that "a new approach to Africa's development is emerging". US treasury secretary Paul O'Neill (and Irish rock star Bono) dropped in on Ethiopia and three other African countries in May, and George Bush himself will tour Africa in 2003. Lately, it seems that Africa is high on the G8 leaders' agenda, and that G8 leaders are high on the prospects for Africa.

The source of all of this optimism goes by the name of the New Partnership for African Development, or the acronym NEPAD. Drafted by the presidents of Nigeria, Senegal, South Africa, Algeria and Egypt, NEPAD is a response to a dilemma. African governments, faced with dwindling levels of development aid and worsening terms of trade, want more money. The developed world, on the other hand, wants guarantees of stability and democracy from states that their home constituencies often perceive as corrupt. Enter NEPAD, which proposes that African countries will promptly create conditions of good governance and sound economic management. In return, rich



countries will build a new development relationship of increased aid, trade, debt relief and private investment with the African states that are successful.

Developed countries seem to be sold on NEPAD, and the G8 has been at the forefront of that enthusiasm. On the invitation of Italy, NEPAD's founding five presidents presented the strategy (then called the New African Initiative) at the 2001 G8 summit in Genoa. The G8 leaders agreed to formulate a response, their 'Africa Action Plan', in time for the 2002 Kananaskis Summit. Each of them appointed Personal Representatives for Africa to draft the plan over the course of the following year. As the drafters got to work, various observers and academics lauded what many called 'Africa's Marshall Plan', and praised the New African Initiative/NEPAD as Africa's great new hope.

Is NEPAD, then, the plan that will save Africa? Unfortunately, it seems not. NEPAD would be a strange saviour: a confused and confusing document, which, over 60-odd pages, mixes together detailed plans to develop almost every conceivable sector. Agriculture and tourism, mining and information technologies jockey for attention without any clear list of top priorities. More distressingly, among the few missing or barely mentioned sectors in NEPAD are two of Africa's most urgent problems: AIDS and exploitation. NEPAD also ignores the continent's diversity by proposing a single development framework for the entire continent, failing to distinguish between African states' very different problems.

Why are the G8 countries so excited about such a dubious document? Because it is a rare example of an initiative made in Africa; according to Jean Chretien, "a renewal conceived by Africans for Africans". Its credibility is based on its unique status as a plan hatched by those closest to the problems. In fact, however, the plan was formulated behind closed doors by a few African leaders and their domestic and foreign consultants, and was then swiftly taken to the developed world for comments. African civil society was excluded from the process. It is difficult to believe that a document composed by five African leaders and their assistants is really from those 'closest to the problems', given the enormous distance of African leaders' lifestyles from those of Africa's poor. Not surprisingly, most African support for the document comes from elites such as those who attended Chretien's Addis Ababa speech, rather than the general public.

Even if a plan written by African leaders is something new, NEPAD's central idea looks very familiar. The adoption of structural reforms in order to secure investment was also the main plank of the World Bank and International Monetary Fund's structural adjustment programmes. Sadly, those programs, criticized in retrospect by the



international financial institutions themselves, did little to save Africa and much to harm it.

One new idea in NEPAD is its much-heralded Peer Review Mechanism, by which African leaders are to evaluate the quality of governance in one another's countries every few years. Those countries with positive grades will receive better aid arrangements from donors, and should have greater credibility among private investors. This proposal fits comfortably into the growing movement among aid donors towards differential treatment for 'good' and 'bad' countries, or, as Jean Chretien's Personal Representative for Africa puts it, "rewarding success rather than rewarding failure". The United States has already announced that its new Millennium Fund will be available only to countries "ruling justly, investing in their people, and encouraging economic freedom". Even debt relief is to be allocated based on indebted countries' behaviour. It seems that those living in poor countries with repressive political conditions should expect their economic situation to worsen as well.

Unfortunately, though it might condemn some 'bad' countries to a new, negative partnership with donors, the Peer Review Mechanism is unlikely to have any real impact on governance. It cannot produce the progress in skill, resources and transparency at all levels of government that will be required for the achievement of truly good governance in African countries. Even with good intentions, it is impossible to impose real democracy from above, particularly in countries with deep systemic weaknesses. At best, then, the Peer Review Mechanism might help secure a few 'top-down' reforms such as more regular and fairer elections. Even this is in doubt, however, after African leaders' failure to condemn Zimbabwe's 2002 election.

Jean Chretien noted in Addis Ababa that "rarely, if ever, has a single political initiative sought to transform an entire continent." NEPAD specifically mentions seven current proposals: "the United Nations New Agenda for the Development of Africa in the 1990s, the Africa-Europe Summit's Cairo Plan of Action, the World Bank-led Strategic Partnership with Africa, the International Monetary Fund-led Poverty Reduction Strategy Papers, the Japan-led Tokyo Agenda for Action, the Africa Growth and Opportunity Act of the United States, and the Economic Commission on Africa-led Global Compact with Africa". Perhaps not all of these plans (or the countless previous initiatives) seek to "transform an entire continent", but it is clear that NEPAD is only the latest in a long tradition of 'golden bullet' schemes. Judging by the current state of African development, NEPAD will not have to work hard to match the level of success of the others.

NEPAD has already been successful in at least one sense, however; it has helped put Africa back on the agenda of the richest countries, and should soon lead to increased



levels of aid and debt relief from the G8. Even this would not really represent progress; significant improvements in these areas would simply bring Africa back to its circumstances of earlier decades, the days before huge debts and Western aid fatigue. Unfortunately for Africa, G8 countries are far less likely to implement more groundbreaking reforms, such as structural changes to their trade regimes that would let African products compete fairly.

In the end, NEPAD's level of success will depend on one's perspective. As an attention-getting volley against Western aid fatigue, NEPAD may accomplish the task of replenishing Africa's coffers. As an ambitious framework to transform the continent, however, it will surely fail.