

Africa 2005

The world's poorest continent is rightly at the top of the global agenda this year. But the agenda needs to be set by Africa, with the outside world in a supporting role — not the other way round.

Tackling the neglect of Africa is high on the list of priorities of the G8 — the world's eight largest industrialized nations — and the European Union (EU) in 2005. This neglect was once described as a “scar on the conscience of the world” by Tony Blair, Britain's prime minister, who this year chairs the G8. Chief among the items for action are a promise of debt relief for the poorest countries, improved terms of trade with the EU, and up to \$50 billion each year in aid through a planned fund known as the International Finance Facility.

It is likely that Blair and the UK chancellor, Gordon Brown, will succeed in getting endorsement for their plans from many G8 leaders. But that still leaves two bigger obstacles: raising the money, and deciding how to spend it. In a report published in January, Jeffrey Sachs, an adviser to the United Nations secretary-general Kofi Annan, said that to meet the Millennium Development Goals — a series of targets to halve global poverty, hunger and disease — rich countries will need to raise their annual aid in support of the goals by a factor of four to \$121 billion in 2006, rising still further to \$189 billion in 2015.

If additional aid cheques begin to flow, who will decide how the money is spent? To help Africans set their priorities, Blair and Bob Geldof set up the Commission for Africa — a group of 17 commissioners comprising world leaders and heads of UN agencies (mostly from Africa) who have been charged with asking people what they think international aid should be spent on.

Technology transfer

Over the past few months, the commission has organized meetings and online discussion groups, canvassing thousands of people, including politicians, professionals, the business community and non-governmental organizations in many countries. The results of this innovative exercise will be published in a report in March and handed to the G8 leaders when they meet in Scotland in July.

In one of the commission's interim reports seen by *Nature*, there is strong support for more international aid to be spent on strengthening science and technology in Africa, including the transfer of Western technology to the continent, as well as accelerated efforts towards a malaria vaccine. Some of these findings seem to have taken the commissioners by surprise: they didn't seem to think (at least initially) that Africans would consider boosting science and technology to be a priority.

To their credit, international aid donors are well aware that there is enthusiasm in Africa for more aid to be spent on science and technology. Of all the developing countries, those in Africa have found it hardest to absorb and adapt technology from abroad, and have lagged behind in setting up their own research institutions in sufficiently large numbers to create a critical mass of productive researchers. According to the Sachs report, African countries have on average only 18 scientists and engineers per million people, compared with 69 in southern Asia, 273 in Latin America, and 903 in eastern Asia.

Substantive action has already been taken. The Bill and Melinda Gates Foundation — already busy with an ambitious healthcare

research agenda — last week named the science academies of Nigeria, South Africa and Uganda as recipients of a US\$20-million grant. Britain's Department for International Development also has plans to increase its spending on boosting research and development in Africa, and in December it appointed Gordon Conway, former president of The Rockefeller Foundation in New York, to help it devise a new science and technology strategy.

Setting the agenda

All this should provide grounds for hope. Yet it is vital that as aid donors step forward with more money, they are faced with a plan based on meeting real needs on the ground; otherwise they may set the agenda themselves. At a meeting of aid agencies and scientists in London last month, for example, nearly every speaker promised to respond to the needs of Africa. But in reality, the meeting had been called by the Canadian and UK governments to see if they could coordinate their spending priorities. A select group of scientists from Africa were also present, but their status was merely that of invited guests to a party.

In public, few of the African delegates questioned this reversal of roles, perhaps not wanting to offend their hosts and risk cutting off future funding prospects. In private, however, they were more critical. One exception was John Mugabe, a scientific adviser to the New Partnership for Africa's Development (NEPAD), based in Pretoria, South Africa. Mugabe said that Africa is changing because Africans want to change, and that change will take place with or without international aid.

Mugabe is right. Multiparty government is at last taking root in Africa. It is early days still, but the leaders of Nigeria, South Africa and Ethiopia are showing a willingness to turn their countries around. African countries see the EU as a model for their own African Union, and under NEPAD they have also agreed to evaluate each other's performance in an effort to expose corruption.

The next generation

In the scientific community, a new generation of able and confident leaders is coming forward, despite the brain drain. Indigenous investment is taking place, too. Nigeria, for example, is in the midst of overhauling its colonial-era research infrastructure with the help of Japan and UNESCO. Kenya is hosting several initiatives to boost agricultural research. Mozambique and Tanzania are showing that centres of excellence in healthcare research can be set up and run in a resource-scarce environment.

Africa is clearly on the move. But so far it seems that aid donors in rich countries are a little confused as to how they should respond. This may be partly because, as they admit, they are historically used to telling people in Africa what is best for them, and then complaining when their plans go awry. Aid agencies are now encountering a different generation of Africans and must learn to change gear. They should empower many more Africans with the confidence to chart their own futures. And they must have the confidence themselves to trust the judgement of those who already have a clear idea of what they want. ■