



Submission No 54

**Review of Australia's Relationship with the  
Countries of Africa**

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## **Revised and final version**

# **SUBMISSION TO THE INQUIRY INTO AUSTRALIA'S RELATIONSHIP WITH THE COUNTRIES OF AFRICA**

### **Summary of Comments:**

African states are many and diverse in their histories, culture, ecology and their state of modernization but have in common a number of characteristics which Australians need to understand and appreciate. Africa is not all bad news. If increasing its involvement, Australia needs to build its own capacity to do so effectively, to focus its development assistance very tightly and be very realistic about what can be achieved in the short term. Because Australia has not traditionally been focussed on the African region it has limited knowledge, experience and resources and in monetary terms, it is comparatively, a very minor player. Australian institutions need to work in ways which are non neo-colonialist and self-serving, especially regarding the education and research sectors. There should be a balanced package of assistance which also takes into account socio-cultural aspects of institutional life and such inputs are often not “glamorous” or short term.

A number of key issues are identified, namely water and sanitation, agriculture for nutrition and income, HIV and related health matters, education, mining impact, trade and economic development, research, support for anti-corruption efforts and involvement in regional organizations.

### **My Background:**

I write as a former teacher and commonwealth and international public servant who worked in the international development sector for twenty years. The latter included 7 years with AusAID and thirteen years with the UN in PNG, Zambia and the Pacific.

In particular, my knowledge largely comes from working for seven years as the UN Population Fund (UNFPA) country representative to Zambia. My work included intensive, on-going involvement with government, the university, NGOs, other UN and bilateral development partners, and to a lesser extent, with communities. The focus was on capacity building in the areas of: demography, collection of census data, use of data in planning at national and provincial levels, as well as matters related to sexual and reproductive health, including maternal health and adolescent reproductive health, family planning, STIs/HIV and gender empowerment (including addressing the subject of women in politics and gender based violence). Since retiring I have maintained an interest in matters related to Africa, especially southern Africa, including through the editing of documents, book reviews, the undertaking of African related historical research, writing papers, reading and attending of AFSAAP conferences.

### **Introductory Comments:**

It is encouraging that the Inquiry refers to “**the countries of Africa**” for so often “Africa” is taken to be one homogenous mass. It is far from being that, with significant economic, historical and social differences between regions and countries. Factors such as population size, extent of urbanization, type of resources, human

resource capacity, infrastructure, agricultural base, type of climate and geography and disease burden vary considerably.

What they **share** is a strong sense of tribalism, family and their own culture, including hierarchy, and a strong love of and pride in their country and continent (despite its challenges). They also share a deep sense of spiritualism, strong interests in politics (and soccer), and an impressive sense of survival in the face of many extreme challenges.

It is necessary to understand and appreciate the significant pressures exerted by:

a) ***A complex history, including outside interference***

It is important to appreciate the situation of African countries from a historical point of view and to put Africa into perspective (remembering, for example, that Europe was in the Dark Ages not so long ago and more recently wracked by the two ‘world’ wars). It will take many decades for some situations to ‘modernize’ and stabilise and be in a position to improve the basic quality of life for the majority. Also, many of Africa’s worst problems have been, and still are, greatly exacerbated by the “West” eg by the supply of guns, the demand for mining products and the manipulation of political leaders. However, it is also true that “westernization” has brought some advantages to what were often very troubled societies eg wracked by slavery and tribal wars.

b) ***Strong cultures***

Traditional culture, including spiritualism, is still very rich and a very important part of people’s lives. It influences many aspects of life eg values and sense of time and understanding of cause and effect (very different from ours), a strong sense of hierarchy (and not democracy), and there is little sense of multi-skilling. Westernization is often very superficial and clashes with traditional values, causing considerable tensions in day-to-day living and administration of services. The pace of change, in some countries particularly, has been very fast and modern developments, often uncomfortably and superficially, overlay traditional ways of life.

Consequently, to work there *effectively* takes experience, awareness of underlying complexities and understanding, a sense of respect and an accommodation of differences.

c) ***Often very challenging physical environments***

The physical environment in Africa is often harsh, with poor soils and regular floods and droughts. Wild life, and insects in particular, play a major role in influencing the success of agriculture and animal husbandry (eg locust plagues, Newcastle disease and brucellosis), as well as human health (eg malaria and sleeping sickness) – and therefore human well being.

These factors still play a major role in determining current situations and attitudes, especially a sense of fatalism. Life has almost always been a hard battle for survival in Africa.

By the same token, many African countries are well resourced in terms of water supplies and easy to farm topography – with much un-realised potential.

d) **Population growth and the youthful demographic bulge, rural neglect and urban drift** raise significant service provision and survival issues and affect aspects of the social and economic changes which many countries are experiencing.

e) **Economic** (and consequently nutritional) **poverty** drives just about everything ie life is a constant and stressful fight for survival for the majority. Consequently, with the change to a cash economy not yet able to be realised for many, the availability of cash influences almost everything, including acceptance of outside inputs and priorities. Related to this, the **constant diversion of funds, on** both a large and small scale, is widespread and reduces the effectiveness of service delivery. However, this is not necessarily perceived as corruption as we understand it, and to think positively, such practices demonstrate a strong survival mechanism and a considerable degree of smart thinking and energy – which has the potential to be re-directed along more positive lines.

f) Because of the ‘brain drain’ of many of the best educated, cultural attitudes and institutional poverty (including poor state of facilities, inadequately trained staff, poor management and low, de-motivating salaries) the **capacity to effectively manage** services is often limited. The private sector also tends to take the most proficient of those who have not left for overseas.

f) The overall **position of women** (education, health, economic, social and political) is poor and weakens the ability of countries to improve the condition of people’s lives. The lack of priority for maternal health illustrates an attitude of considering women as an expendable resource. The very low numbers of women in decision making positions, although improving, is another example.

Despite the prevailing publicity, the situation in Africa is **not all doom and gloom**. There have been some improvements in recent decades, including less wars, and the region is far richer in family and community spirit and culture than is Australia. People’s resilience and fortitude (and ability to laugh) in the face of so many widely prevailing difficulties is impressive and remarkable. However, their long experience of battling problems (including bad leadership) can breed an acceptance and resignation which means that feeling able to speak out and change things does not come easily. Some local NGOs are trying to address this issue. The reality is that, given the extent and depth of the problems, it will be many decades before most Africans will be in a position to affect and safely influence negative leadership and have their basic human needs met.

#### **What I See as Priority Issues:**

a) **Access to clean water and adequate sanitation** are basic needs (and closely related to adequate nutrition, as well as hygiene), absolutely essential to improving well being. However, the subject has not been a priority for governments or popular with donors for many decades – but without them other improvements will be undermined. The benefits of such access would accrue to all people and sectors.

b) **Agriculture for food and income generation** is also key to nutritional and economic well being and Australia has considerable experience in this area.

**b) HIV** (and its impact) is a significant economic and social issue in many countries. The disease not just a biological problem, it is also a psycho-social, economic and political issue. The virus thrives in situations of inequity and disadvantage eg where nutrition is poor, where STIs cannot be treated effectively, where women are economically and socially disadvantaged, where there is denial about the nature of sexual relationships and where certain social customs prevail. Dealing effectively with the disease is often inhibited by a bias towards medical approaches and a lack of understanding of, and inability to deal with, the economic and psycho-social aspects. There is little to be gained from throwing heaps of funds into HIV per se, as this diverts time, funds and staff away from other equally important and related problems such as **maternal health, including family planning** and other diseases such as **Malaria and TB**. There needs to be balance, as well as understanding of the connectedness of issues, especial psycho-social ones. Because of the huge increase in the amount of funds available, an HIV and AIDS “Industry” has developed, and which has become a magnet for cash and overseas trips seekers and self-aggrandisement, rather than those dedicated to improving the conditions of people’s lives. More socio-cultural inputs are required, as are provision of adequate salaries for health workers and administrators to encourage them to stay on the job and be well motivated – so that expensive international consultants are not required. Funding for the World Bank should ensure that its programmes do not undermine the HIV related work of other sectors such as they did in the 1990s and 2000s.

**c) Education:** The Education sector needs considerable support but not in the way envisaged by GoA (and the effectiveness of large inputs over the past decade need to be examined). Scholarships for study in Australia are largely self-serving and reflect a pathetic attempt by the Australian education tertiary sector to access additional GoA funding. The real need is for integrated, in-country institutional support. The same amount of money can provide benefits to far more students and lecturers ie be far more cost-effective. The current number of scholarships for study in Australia is an expensive drop in the ocean (and incidentally, compares very poorly to the number provided by China – approx. 10,000). The provision of scholarships, text books, technology and practical items such as decent student accommodation and refurbishment of post Independence buildings would also be necessary to provide a balanced package of support and enable more students to receive quality tertiary education. Some short term international inputs such as participation in professional development opportunities would help to support lecturers, as would modest topping up of their salaries where that is a major constraint. Consideration could be given to cooperating with other donors by agreeing that each donor focus on particular countries or institutions. The “glamorous” option of establishing branches of Australian universities in the continent is expensive and self-serving. Also, brain drain plays a significant role in reducing in-country human resource capacity and ways of reducing it (or compensating for it) are essential if educational benefits are to accrue to a country and not just an individual.

**d) Mining:** The doctor’s mantra should apply - do no harm. Internationally and historically, the mining industry has been notorious for its negative socio-economic impact on communities in mining areas (not to forget environmental impact). Their impact is especially problematic in countries with a high prevalence of STIs including HIV.

Australian mining companies should be monitored by GoA to ensure that their social and environmental impact policies are not just mouthed but practiced and that they are adequately and appropriately staffed to do so eg Community Development staff need to be creative and hard-nosed protectors of all aspects of human rights (eg provision of legal advice), not superficial, social do-gooders (eg providing knitting skills). Governments may need encouraging to ensure adequate measures are put in place and complied with; mining agreements should ensure equitable distribution of benefits to the local community, including women, as well as to the national government; environmental impact assessments should be independent and not superficial; socio-economic base-line and impact assessments should be undertaken, monitored and reported on (local university researchers could be employed to do such), and should include an “HIV potential” assessment and the addressing of any issues raised eg provision of housing for men’s families (to avoid “contaminating” the local town and inflating the rental market”); provision of social services to the affected community should be meaningful, not just superficial and include support for staffing, not just buildings; locals should be given every possible opportunity for training and employment, including women (and not just in traditional, lower level, domestic-type jobs) and for post mine economic opportunities. Scholarships for resource sector governance as mentioned in the Minister’s March speech sounds appropriate.

e) **Any efforts to increase trade and support economic development** should ensure that the welfare of Africans should be the prime focus. Creative and wide reaching economic empowerment must be the priority if the countries of the continent are to survive in the global economy, and this means support for both private and government sectors.

f) **Research** finds can be illuminating but much data already exists and the findings often not used, ie incorporated into policies and programmes. More effort should be placed on the latter, with local researchers and policy makers involved.

g) Institutional strengthening support for **Anti-Corruption** commissions and Audit capacity is much needed – but without reasonable jobs for the fast maturing and increasing youthful population inputs will be negligible.

h) Support for **regional bodies** is a useful mechanism for dealing with such a continent of so many countries and would obviously be best maintained through close involvement with the AU in Addis Ababa and organizations such as SADC to help facilitate development of cross-border and other trade initiatives.

i) Last but not least, if the **GoA** is serious about its increased involvement in Africa it needs to address the issue of government staff often having little or no depth of experience of African matters and the constant turn over of staff – with the consequence that institutional memory and decision making is less than optimal. Also, any development assistance needs to be very focussed and complementary to that provided by donors with much larger amounts of funds and much longer experience of working on the continent. Australia should not stretch its resources so that they become meaningless or tokenistic. That would do this remarkable and needy continent a major disservice, not to mention making Australia look naive.