CARNEGIE ENDOWMENT for International Peace

Volume 1/Number 2
December 2000

Policy Brief

summary

In the 1990s, the Clinton administration led the international community in pursuit of a grand vision of reforming African countries into modern free-market democracies. That vision, however, was a poor match for the reality of conflict and stagnation on the ground. U.S. resources fell short of the rhetoric, and the policy yielded few results.

The next U.S. administration should acknowledge that immediate transformation of the continent is impossible. It should work first to create a better environment by providing debt relief, streamlining conflicting and unfunded financial-community mandates, concentrating assistance on stable countries, and assessing the negative impacts of single-interest NGOs. Africa will be helped most by a narrower U.S. policy focused on realistic goals. ■

Less Is Better: An Agenda for Africa

Marina Ottaway
Senior Associate, Carnegie Endowment for International Peace

During the 1990s, the international community, led by the United States, developed an increasingly ambitious policy toward Sub-Saharan Africa. The limited goals of the Cold War era—maintaining stability and keeping Africa out of Soviet clutches—were replaced by the far-reaching ambition to remake African countries into accountable and transparent modern democracies respectful of human rights, with free market systems open to the global economy.

A decade of efforts has yielded few results. Conditions in Africa today are dismal. War rages across a wide swath of the continent from Sudan in the northeast to Angola in the southwest, with another flash point in Sierra Leone that is beginning to spill into neighboring countries. Many states have collapsed, with no government capable of discharging even minimal functions; others, including Nigeria, teeter on the brink of a breakdown. A widening chasm separates Africa from the global economy. In a final blow, an estimated 24 million Africans, including a disproportionate share of the urban educated population, are infected with HIV.

The international community has not caused the crises Africa faces, which have domestic roots. International policies of the last few years, however, have not addressed these crises realistically. Given the magnitude of the problems, the goals have been too far-reaching and the resources too inadequate to attain them. Paradoxically, the goals are so ambitious not because Africa is considered important by foreign powers, but because it is not. In the absence of overriding economic and security interests, the international community, led by the Clinton administration, has been driven by a missionary zeal to reform Africa, pursuing a grand vision of what the continent should become rather than developing a policy to address in a realistic manner the problems that exist now.

To actually help, the next administration should lead the international community in formulating a far more modest set of goals. It will require courage and determination to resist the demands of non-governmental organizations (NGOs) and other pro-Africa constituencies. Doing so will generate domestic criticism, but to do otherwise will hurt African countries by con-

Marina Ottaway is a senior associate and codirector of the Democracy and Rule of Law Project. She is currently working on a comparative study of semi-authoritarian regimes in Africa, Central Asia, and the Middle East. She also is a professorial lecturer in African Studies at the Nitze School for Advanced International Studies at Johns Hopkins University.

Her most recent books are *Funding Virtue: Civil Society Aid and Democracy Promotion* (Carnegie Endowment for International Peace, 2000) and *Africa's New Leaders: Democracy or State Reconstruction?* (Carnegie Endowment for International Peace, 1999).

The Democracy and Rule of Law Project analyzes efforts by the United States and other international actors to promote democracy worldwide. The project also examines the state of democracy, looking at patterns of success and failure in democratic transitions. It is part of the Global Policy Program at the Carnegie Endowment.

fronting them with demands they cannot possibly meet. Setting less ambitious goals would not mean lowering standards for Africa, but increasing the probability of concrete success.

Assessing Available Resources

The first step in developing a new policy is to take a hard look at the resources that the international community can be expected to invest in Africa in the next few years, because setting policy goals without reference to resources is a recipe for failure. Peace plans that require the deployment of unavailable peacekeepers or economic reforms that will only bear fruit if accompanied by foreign investment that is unlikely to materialize can worsen a crisis rather than defuse it. Presently, resources for Africa fall into three categories: money, peacekeepers, and mediation and policy advice.

Money comes in the form of aid from international financial institutions, bilateral donors, and NGOs, with foreign direct investment adding little to the total. In 1998, official bilateral and multilateral development assistance to Africa amounted to about $13 billion or about 4 percent of Sub-Saharan Africa's GNP. It was almost 10 percent of GNP in 1990. Furthermore, net transfers are considerably lower, because African countries return substantial amounts of money in the form of debt service. In 1998, for example, debt repayment to the IMF and the World Bank amounted to over half the new transfers from those institutions. Resources available for Africa would thus increase substantially if the international community moved quickly on debt reduction or, even better, cancellation. Foreign direct investment in Africa, on the other hand, is minimal. It amounted to only $4.4 billion in 1998, with about half that amount concentrated on South Africa and the oil industries of Nigeria and Angola.

The second type of resource, the deployment of international peacekeepers, is in extremely short supply, while demand is growing exponentially. The failed humanitarian intervention in Somalia has made many countries reluctant to contribute troops to peacekeeping missions on the continent. The United States is training troops from African countries but will not contribute its own personnel to peacekeeping missions. Recent efforts to make the UN peacekeeping efforts in Sierra Leone more effective are faltering because of the difficulty of getting countries to commit sufficient troops. Even if more countries were willing to supply troops, there would never be enough peacekeepers to saturate Africa's vast conflict areas as the international community did in Bosnia and Kosovo. The outcome at present is the deployment of missions that are far too small to do the job, as in Angola in the past and in Sierra Leone now. A similar situation looms dangerously in the Democratic Republic of the Congo, where current plans call for the deployment of 5,500 monitors and peacekeepers in a country larger than the United States east of the Mississippi, torn by interlocking conflicts that involve nine African countries and at least a dozen Congolese and foreign rebel groups.

The third resource, the only one the international community supplies abundantly to Africa, consists of mediation efforts and policy advice, which are cheap and entail little risk to the providers. Unfortunately, neither is risk-free to the recipients, particularly when they are not backed up by other resources.

Mediation is constantly offered and rarely successful. Such efforts grow in part from some policy makers' conviction that African conflicts are "stupid," as U.S. Ambassador to the UN Richard Holbrooke said of the war between Ethiopia and Eritrea. It is not clear which intelligent wars he had in mind. But African conflicts are not playground battles to be stopped by the intervention of adults with superior wisdom and skills, and they are neither different from nor more stupid than those fought elsewhere. Like all conflicts, they are means to an end and are thus unlikely to be resolved by peaceful means while the participants still believe they can win. Peaceful resolution is also difficult when the leaders involved—for example, Jonas Savimbi in Angola or John Garang in Sudan—have no past except war and no future except a victory or continuing war. Poverty is a complicating factor, providing an ample supply of soldiers who put low value on their own and others' lives. As a result, mediation is not stopping African conflicts, and in some cases it is making them worse. It provides the combatants with time to rearm, reorganize, and go back to war, and with a guarantee that, if the going gets too rough again, a new agreement will provide another breathing space. Jonas Savimbi in Angola is a master at this game and there are other quick learners in Sierra Leone and the Democratic Republic of the Congo.

Policy advice is also in abundant supply in Africa. It is not always sound; the World Bank and bilateral donors have changed their prescriptions repeatedly over the years. Even more important, policy advice often creates unfunded mandates that leave African countries saddled with new problems. The debt problem of most African countries is at least in part the result of such unfunded mandates. A new one is being created right now around the AIDS crisis. The international community is presenting Africa with an expensive blueprint for action, including not only prevention efforts but also treatment with drugs that even in their cheapest versions are unaffordable. Reducing the cost of treatment to a few thousand dollars a year does not do much for a country where per capita income is measured in the low hundreds. To help defray the expenses, the international community is offering loans that Africa will not be able to repay.

Africa Micromanaged

The international community seeks to increase the impact of the limited resources it provides to Africa by imposing an avalanche of demands and conditionalities that supposedly ensure that the resources will not be squandered. But this avalanche makes it impossible for any African government to develop a coherent policy of its own. A memorandum of understanding signed between the IMF and Sierra Leone in November 1999 committed a government that did not even control the country to implement literally dozens of reforms (the agreement was rendered moot a few months later by the resumption of war). The World Bank peppers recipient countries with official delegations, all on important missions, all demanding the time and efforts of government officials. Bilateral donors add their delegations and demands. Taken individually, most demands are justified and many delegations are doing useful work. Taken together, they amount to a bewildering attempt at micromanaging African countries.

Although this problem has been recognized for years by donor countries and international financial institutions, the situation is getting worse rather than better. The economic

Africa's Impossible Debt

Progress on economic restructuring does not help African countries escape the debt trap. Even international financial institutions' best African pupils are struggling with unmanageable debt:

	Debt as % of GNP	Debt service as % of export earnings
Ghana	**54**	**28**
Mozambique	**74**	**18**
Uganda	**35**	**24**

In other cases, the debt is not only unmanageable, it is grotesque, as in the Republic of the Congo, where debt is almost three times GNP, or in Guinea-Bissau, where it is almost four times GNP. *(World Bank figures)*

Meanwhile, debt drains resources from desperately needed services . . .

"Among all African countries only South Africa is spending more on health care than on debt service." . . . and international assistance does not make up for the lost revenue. "In 1996, Sub-Saharan African countries were paying out $1.30 on debt service for every $1 received in grant aid from donors." *(African Policy Information Center, "Africa's Debt," December 1998)* conditionalities imposed by the World Bank and the IMF, and supported by the United States, aim at transforming the state-controlled, inward-looking African economies into market- and export-oriented ones. Over the years, as the understanding of the process of reform has become more sophisticated, the conditionalities have become more complex, and the demands on governments have escalated.

African countries also face political conditionalities—more than one shaky African government has seen aid suspended or has been threatened with suspension unless it held elections or took other steps toward democracy. In fact, political conditionalities tend to be imposed with particular vigor in Africa because donors do not have conflicting economic and security interests there. In and of themselves, the conditionalities are unexceptionable—respect human rights, for example. But they can quickly become unrealistic. There is a difference between condoning torture and extrajudicial executions and accepting the fact that a country like Rwanda, emerging from genocide with a shattered judicial system, is not in a position to bring the tens of thousands of suspects to trial speedily and with all due process.

There is also a demand for ever more stringent environmental and labor regulations and increasingly insistent pressure for governments to take on the problem of corruption. African countries need to address all these issues, but they are being asked to do so too fast and following rules that were designed for rich countries and strong governments.

As a result, Africa is beginning to balk. The same educated Africans who criticized their governments for lack of democracy, human rights violations, corruption, and failure to tackle problems are beginning to turn against the impossible international demands, the constant criticism, and the unfunded mandates. The questioning by South African President Thabo Mbeki of the scientific evidence that HIV leads to AIDS, and implicitly of Western advice on how to deal with Africa's AIDS crisis, should be seen in this context. It is not an act of personal madness or deep ignorance—Mbeki is a highly intelligent man, educated in top British schools. Rather, it is an act of frustration, a response to an international community that demands too much, offers too little, and does not spare the criticism. It is the same frustration that is leading African intellectuals to turn against neoliberal economic reform and talk darkly about delinking their countries from the international economy, whatever that might mean, even while condemning the United States and the international community for not doing more for their countries.

> Before asking what it can do to help Africa, the United States needs to ask what it can do to hurt it less.

From Vision to Policy

To be more effective in safeguarding U.S. interests while doing right for Africa, the next administration needs to redefine its policy concerning conflict, economic reform, and what has become known in recent years as "good governance." The policy should be narrow enough to be implementable, pursuing not what is best in theory but what is good enough and achievable in practice.

This new policy should be directed first at creating a more favorable international environment for Africa and only second at reforming the countries themselves—certainly not at micromanaging them. Before asking what it can do to help Africa, the United States needs to ask what it can do to hurt it less. It should also lead international organizations, other donor governments and, yes, NGOs to re-examine what they are doing.

Conflict

The "grand solution" approach heretofore pursued by the United States—that is, conflict resolution through negotiations that restore peace, maintain the unity of the country in its colonial borders, and transform it into a modern democracy—cannot be pursued on a large scale with the resources that are available. Such policy might be effective in a small country if international resources were concentrated there. Even in the best case scenario, however, there will not be sufficient resources to support such solutions for all African conflicts. Instead:

- Cessation of conflict, not a definitive solution, should be the first priority. Lasting solutions are usually the result of a protracted process, not a grand pact. As negotiations often prolong conflict, each situation needs to be individually examined. In some cases, more fighting is inevitable before negotiations become fruitful.

- Except in rare cases, peace agreements must not depend on the deployment of peacekeepers, who are in short supply.

- The war-to-democracy scenario is undoubtedly the most desirable, but is usually impossible to implement. In particular when a conflict has lasted for decades, with years of unsuccessful negotiations, the United States should be prepared to consider and even encourage other solutions that can restore peace, including partition of a country, population movements, and nondemocratic but reasonably competent governments.

- The United States must be willing to tolerate ambiguous situations if they help maintain peace, such as the existence of autonomous entities and informal political arrangements more typical of the 19th than the 20th century, such as the city-states that are developing in Somalia.

Economic Reform

A chasm now divides African countries from the world economy. The international community must recognize its dimension more honestly. African countries are seeing their small garment industries destroyed not by superior or more efficiently manufactured foreign products, but by the importation of the discarded, used clothing of the industrialized countries. Under such conditions, it is not helpful to preach the virtues of free trade. Instead, the next administration should:

- Act decisively to cancel bilateral debt and push international financial institutions to do the same. Most African countries will never be able to repay their debt in any case. There may be a moral hazard to debt relief, in that it rewards past malpractice. It is time to recognize, however, that there is also a moral hazard in not providing quick debt relief: it allows lenders to avoid the consequences of their own mistakes in providing loans for failed projects or for reform policies that do not pay off.

- Compile information, country by country, about all the conditionalities and demands imposed by all the donors. What is the complete package of requirements each country faces? Are they internally contradictory? How much reform can any weak government undertake all at once? Are some requests premature?

- Re-evaluate trade issues. African countries have been told for almost two decades that an export-led policy is the way out of their economic crisis, but most feel that they cannot compete in foreign markets, while foreign competition is destroying the little industry

A Continent in Decline

Socioeconomic conditions in Sub-Saharan African countries remain dismal, and the bright spots are few. For the continent as a whole, per capita income has declined for more than 20 years, and in many countries it is lower now than at the time of independence. The average illiteracy rate in Sub-Saharan Africa in 1998 was 41.65 percent. Average infant mortality is 91.8 per thousand, compared to 7 per thousand in the United States. Life expectancy is decreasing rapidly because of the toll taken by the AIDS scourge—in some countries it has already been cut by as much as 15–20 years. International aid is no longer a tool for development but a means of survival, representing 81 percent of government expenditure in Sierra Leone, 56 percent in Guinea, 24 percent in Burundi, and over 15 percent even in a relatively economically successful country like the Ivory Coast.

(World Bank and World Health Organization figures)

they have. Can access to markets be facilitated? Does the Africa Growth and Opportunity Act, which provides a modest opening of the U.S. market to African products, impose too many conditions in return? How do WTO rules affect Africa? African countries account for such an insignificant percentage of world trade—only about 1.6 percent—that any exceptions made would hardly upset the international system.

Politics and Governance

In the last decade, African countries have been subjected to unprecedented pressure to democratize and improve governance. The ultimate goal is admirable, but the near-term steps are wildly unrealistic. Instead, the next administration should:

- Reconsider the assumption that collapsed states must be reconstituted through democratic processes, particularly elections. Severely disrupted countries will probably need a considerable effort at restoring security and basic administrative structures before meaningful elections can be held.

- Work with NGOs as much as possible to examine how their combined efforts impact African countries. Transnational NGOs are becoming important players and are both numerous and independent of each other. They can help African countries or have a negative impact on them. Single-interest NGOs must be encouraged to look beyond their particular area and examine how the combined efforts of all NGOs affect a country. This will not be easy, because many NGOs are focused narrowly on specific issues and because most groups are suspicious of governments and international organizations.

- As in the case of economic reform, compile information about all political demands and conditionalities to determine how they can be streamlined to become more of a help and less of a burden on recipient countries.

Aid

Present levels of foreign assistance must be maintained and even increased in targeted countries once a policy is in place because Africa needs aid. Investment would be more desirable, but it is not in the offing in the foreseeable future. Instead, the next administration should:

- Concentrate development assistance and assistance to support political reform in countries with more competent governments and some stability, both because it is more likely to have a positive effect and because Africans desperately need some success stories to counteract spreading pessimism.

- Do not expect too much of countries to which support is provided. Ideally, it would be good for the assisted countries to have growing economies, decreasing income inequality, good human rights records, and democratizing governments. Unfortunately, such countries do not exist. Some of the fastest-growing African countries, such as Uganda, have competent governments, but not democratic ones. Corruption is a problem everywhere, income inequality is worsening, and democracy is mostly a façade. The challenge is to identify countries where meaningful progress can be detected despite the problems. This will always be a difficult call that can only be made case by case.

- Keep programs simple and avoid the temptation of social engineering, which is bound to fail.

Some Pain, Some Gain

The steps advocated here could be implemented without a significant increase in financial resources—the cost of debt cancellation is less than it appears because so much of it is bad debt that will never be repaid. For the next administration, such steps would entail some political costs, above all in its relations with NGOs that reject compromise in the name of absolute principles. On the other hand, the policy could gain support within international organizations and with other donor governments, which know perfectly well that many countries are being crushed by excessive requirements. Somebody needs to have the courage to stand up and say so.

From the African point of view, the changes advocated here would have a positive impact on countries with more competent governments because they would be most likely to take advantage of debt reduction, the opening of markets, and the lightening of conditionalities. How evenly distributed among the population the benefits would be depends on the level of corruption in each and the degree of accountability of its government. These are not problems the international community can solve, certainly not immediately. Countries singled out for special attention because they are seen as relatively successful might also find it easier to attract more foreign investment, something that few African countries have been able to do.

The change in policy might well lead to the de facto and even the de jure disappearance of some failed states. This would be a traumatic moment for Africa, which has adhered since independence to the idea that colonial borders are sacred. But the trauma might have a positive impact, making it clear to governments and opposition movements alike that greed for power may cause the country to disappear altogether, leaving them with nothing. Some countries may only find peace if they reconfigure or work out ad hoc arrangements rather than grand solutions, as has happened in Somalia.

The real problem with the policy advocated here is its impact on the populations of the collapsing states and the countries at war—the civilians caught in the conflicts and the millions of refugees and internally displaced people. The policy would do nothing for them in the short run. In the long run, it might force warlords to settle their differences, but it is important not to be overly optimistic on this point. However, present policies are not helping these populations either. Endless mediation efforts and the token presence of UN peacekeepers have not kept tens of thousands from being killed and millions from being turned into refugees or internally displaced persons. In the foreseeable future as at present, it is only humanitarian assistance that can alleviate, at least a little, the plight of the populations affected by war.

Replacing the unattainable vision of a democratic, resurgent Africa with a policy that acknowledges the hard realities that confront the continent and the impossibility of immediate transformation should not be interpreted as a counsel of despair or a callous call for further marginalizing Africa. Rather, it is a call for the next administration to lead an international effort to create a more favorable environment for Africa, one that decreases the micromanagment that has made it increasingly difficult for Africans to solve their own problems. The next agenda for Africa must replace a glowing vision with a sober assessment, and unfunded mandates with debt relief and aid that assists more than it burdens. ■

The next agenda for Africa must replace a glowing vision with a sober assessment, and unfunded mandates with debt relief and aid that assists more than it burdens.

The Carnegie Endowment normally does not take institutional positions on public policy issues; the views presented do not necessarily reflect the views of the Endowment, its officers, staff, or trustees.

CARNEGIE ENDOWMENT
for International Peace

www.ceip.org

Visit the new Carnegie Endowment web site: "A must for the web surfer interested in global affairs."

—Dow Jones Business Directory

The Carnegie Endowment for International Peace is a private, nonprofit organization dedicated to advancing cooperation between nations and promoting active international engagement by the United States. Founded in 1910, its work is nonpartisan and dedicated to achieving practical results. Its research is primarily grouped in two areas: the Global Policy Program and the Russian and Eurasian Program.

Related Resources *from* Carnegie Endowment

Visit www.ceip.org/pubs for these and other publications.

Funding Virtue: Civil Society Aid and Democracy Promotion, Marina Ottaway and Thomas Carothers, editors (2000)

The Third Force: The Rise of Transnational Civil Society, Ann M. Florini, editor (copublished with the Japan Center for International Exchange, 2000)

Africa's New Leaders: Democracy or State Reconstruction? Marina Ottaway (1999)

Intervention in Internal Conflicts: Legal and Political Conundrums, Carnegie Working Paper #15, Chantal de Jonge Oudraat (2000)

The Challenge of Semi-Authoritarianism, Carnegie Working Paper #7, Marina Ottaway and Martha Brill Olcott (1999)

CARNEGIE ENDOWMENT
for International Peace
1779 Massachusetts Avenue, NW
Washington, DC 20036

www.ceip.org