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Development and governance

Africa acknowledges it must help itself

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In return for a lot more aid, Africa has promised to monitor itself a lot more rigorously. That new resolve is already being tested

WHILE the leaders of eight of the world's richest countries gathered this week at Gleneagles in Scotland, their African counterparts, who run most of the world's poorest countries, gathered at the coastal town of Sirte, in Libya, for their own jamboree under the aegis of the African Union (AU). Despite a vast gulf in media coverage of the two meetings, they were, in fact, tightly linked. For in the new mood of scaling up aid to the poorest countries, Africa's own institutions, with the AU to the fore, are now being expected by rich countries to shoulder more of the burden for curing the continent's ills.

In the next few weeks the revamped AU, together with its much-vaunted offshoot, the New Partnership for Africa's Development, better known as Nepad, will face their first big tests of credibility. If these two bodies prove as feeble as their predecessors, the current wave of Afro-optimism in western capitals may fast turn to cynicism, as it has done before. Indeed, some fear that the AU, in particular, has already fallen down on its job.

The AU, which was a relaunch in 2002 of the decrepit old Organisation of African Unity (OAU), and Nepad were both created out of a fresh resolve by African leaders to "own" more of Africa's problems themselves rather than rely on the usual alphabet soup of international agencies and NGOs to feed their starving and stop the continent's civil wars. Nepad was set up in 2001 as the economic development arm of the OAU (and then of the AU), made up of all 53 of Africa's countries. This new spirit of African ownership matches the latest trend in the development world, whereby donor countries and multilateral organisations devolve as much responsibility as possible for anti-poverty and health programmes to the recipient countries themselves, rather than micro-manage them as in the past.

So documents like the recent report of the Commission for Africa, set up last year by Britain's Tony Blair to

"take a fresh look at Africa" and how to develop it, burst with enthusiasm for the AU and Nepad. In turn, these two bodies have explicitly promised to uphold human rights and democracy, to fight corruption and promote good governance. And both outfits promise to hold their members to account, to prod them to meet these stringent criteria.

The most explicit mechanism for doing so is Nepad's African Peer Review Mechanism (APRM). The 23 countries who have so far joined this voluntary scheme all offer themselves up for scrutiny by a panel of outside experts. Confidential reports are then handed to the subject governments, and a programme of action for improvements in such things as transparency and democratic accountability is agreed on and made public. At least, that is the plan. Last week, the experts handed their verdicts to the first two guinea pigs, Ghana and Rwanda; final reports and action plans are due out next month.

The implicit deal with rich countries is that if the AU and Nepad can start to enforce western standards of financial transparency and democracy in African countries, then more aid will flow their way to foster the good work. An early example of this hoped-for new trust between the West and Africa was last year's decision by NATO countries to lend the AU logistical help to move African soldiers around the vast area of Darfur, Sudan's troubled western province, as part of a drive to encourage Africa to run its own peacemaking and peacekeeping show.

Cheerleaders for the AU point to other, arguably more successful, interventions. The AU's robust refusal this year to endorse a coup in Togo, after President Gnassingbé Eyadéma died (and his son tried to take over), led to an election, though its fairness was disputed—and it resulted in the same son becoming president. The AU has also been trying hard to broker a peace between northerners and southerners in embattled Côte d'Ivoire.

But the AU and Nepad have a pack of sceptics on their heels. The AU, they say, has already clattered into its first serious hurdle: Zimbabwe. AU observers were mealy-mouthed about the flawed election there in March, and the organisation has refused to condemn, let alone try to stop, President Robert Mugabe's recent urban clearances which have left about 300,000 homeless. Mr Mugabe remains a hero for many Africans; but the AU, by its refusal to say or do anything about his flagrant abuse of human rights, has let itself down.

Equally, it has had nothing to say about the post-electoral clampdown in Ethiopia, where it is based. This has perplexed some of the AU'S staunchest supporters. Demonstrators have been shot dead, opposition leaders detained and the election result postponed. Wiseman Nkuhlu, who heads Nepad's secretariat, says "there is no justification for that kind of thing and the AU must deal with the Ethiopian situation." An impression is gathering that the AU is happy to take on smaller or more clear-cut cases, like Darfur or Togo, but baulks at more complex and demanding ones, such as Zimbabwe and Ethiopia.

Likewise with peer review. Moeletsi Mbeki, a businessman and brother of South Africa's president, Thabo Mbeki, argues that it is nothing more than a "sop to donors". Sceptics doubt whether the upcoming reports on Ghana and Rwanda, the two first countries to face scrutiny, will be rigorous enough.

If the AU and the APRM are to disprove the doubters, now is the moment. Kenya, a byword for corruption again, is the next country to face its peers; a report is due out in a few months. If rigorous and detailed, it would go a long way to showing that African governments can be trusted to police themselves. In the same spirit, critics are waiting for the AU to uphold its own professed principles on democracy and human rights in countries like Zimbabwe and Ethiopia. Otherwise it and Nepad will be rightly condemned as the same useless talking-shops of the bad old days. And that would once again erode the willingness of the latest generation of western donors to pay more for an Africa that shrinks from taking the tough measures needed to put its house in order.

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