UK Policy and African Agency: Whose Agency? Whose Interests?

Tom Cargill (Chatham House)

BISA ISA 2012

The recent history of United Kingdom engagement with regards to Africa offers some useful insights as to the changing nature and extent of African Agency. This chapter examines some of these engagements, particularly as they relate to UK government policy and civil society activism, and question the extent to which they supported or denied African agency. In this context agency is defined simply as the capacity, as a matter of deliberate policy, to exert political influence externally. The UK itself retains considerable agency with regards to Africa, yet the degree to which UK governments have chosen to exercise that agency has, until recently, been minimal. In the past ten years this has appeared to change, largely with the expressed objective of using UK agency largely altruistically with regards to Africa in support of greater African agency. This UK objective is now changing also, on the basis that it has been, at least partially, met and that the rationale upon which it was based - that the UK could afford such an objective and that Africa could and should offer little in return - is no longer the case (if it ever was). Whether this change heralds a return to an old narrative of exploitation, or heralds a new era of greater African agency is a question that flows throughout this book, but will be at least partially addressed from the UK perspective in this chapter.

The UK & Africa: Why does it matter?

The UK’s continued disproportionate importance for African Agency emanates largely from the decaying and yet still potent afterglow of the UK’s imperial past. This continued importance is perhaps disguised by the scale of loss of influence through the second half of the 20th century. Yet the UK remains influential from a governmental and multilateral institutional point of view - through the UK’s continued permanent membership of the UN Security Council, and activist role it seeks to play across a large number of international issues. At least as important are the significant numbers of influential civil society campaign groups with global mandate based out of the UK, many with a particular focus on Africa. The international news media too has a disproportionate presence in the UK and London in particular, with most English language services producing a significant proportion, if not the majority, of their Africa related content out of the UK. In addition, the influence of UK based academic thought on Africa related issues remains disproportionate, with the UK the second largest source of journals and news sources with a specific Africa focus after the US, though if this is narrowed down to quality sources with a political focus and relatively wide international readership the UK has more than any other country. The relationships UK based academic institutions enjoy across Africa is also significant. The international role of the City of London, and the influence it continues to exert on international legal, business, financial and regulatory practice has considerable impact on Africa. Finally, the increasing prominence in the UK of people with immediate African background and/or strong family connections in Africa is, longer term, perhaps most important of all. Members of these communities, ever more deeply rooted and influential in British cultural, political and economic life, are also increasingly important and assertive actors in bilateral relations - including in funding political objectives, developmental programmes and commercial

1 For instance the Government of China has for some time been considering using UK law as the basis for all Chinese commercial engagements in Africa.
operations in various African countries - both individually and specifically as UK based groups. This has added to the importance of a growing number of British cities as fundraising destinations for ambitious politicians from across Africa. All of these sources - governmental, civil society, media, academic and the City, are supported by, and in turn support, the widespread employment of UK citizens in positions of influence throughout international and internationally focussed, organisations which tend, whether they are financial, campaigning, political journalistic or other, to collectively, have a higher degree of influential interaction with and on states in Africa than elsewhere. The impact this has, and the extent to which it is in support of, ‘UK’ influence per se is hard to quantify but is profound.2

In all of these ways the UK still has a considerable degree of agency with regards to Africa. Yet for a period from the 1970s until the beginning of the 21st Century, when many aspects of this agency were far stronger than they are today, this agency was not exercised to any significant degree on the part of the UK government. The reasons for this are varied, but cluster around a historically rooted moralism in UK engagement in Africa. Julia Gallagher writes persuasively of ‘doing good in Africa’ as being a particular feature of the post 1997 Labour Government under Tony Blair3. This tendency has its roots in the late 18th and 19th century anti-slavery and missionary movements initiated by Thomas Clarkson and William Wilberforce, feeding into the campaigns of ED Morel and Roger Casement against Belgian Royal exploitation in the Congo.4 Reflecting the growth of the Fabian Society and Labour movement this tendency split in the early 20th century into a liberal paternalistic and basically Imperialist moral movement, as personified in the Christian Missionary Society and the World Council of Churches under Joseph Oldham and the campaigning of Lionel Curtis, and an anti-colonial internationalist movement embracing the Communist Party, and parts of the Labour Party, British left wing intelligencia and trade union movement personified in such figures as Leonard Woolf and Fenner Brockway5. Both wings continued to evolve as the Second World War, Cold War and then decolonisation changed the context in which they operated. Yet they did not fade, and in fact as official UK and business engagement and imperialist ambitions with regards to Africa retreated through the 1970s, these campaigns came to dominate Africa in much of the UK public and elite imagination, eventually metamorphosising via the anti-Apartheid campaigns into Live Aid, the Jubilee Campaign and the related constellation of Africa focussed rights, aid, and

---

2 The insistence by the US and Europe on reserving leadership of the World Bank and IMF respectively for their own citizens is testament to this.
3 For a fascinating description of the roles which ideas of Africa played in Labour Party and, to some extent broader elite thinking in the UK from the 19th century to the present see Julia Gallagher, ‘Britain and Africa Under Blair: In pursuit of the good state’ ( Manchester University Press, 2011)
4 A key attribute of all of these moral campaigns is that while Africa was, technically, rarely their sole geographical focus, the exoticisation of Africa as the ‘other’, the ‘dark continent’ and of Africans as noble savages came to dominate the British public imagination to such an extent that any campaign organised around a certain set of aims - internationalist, developmental, justice, rights focussed - unless it were expressly stated otherwise, was assumed to have Africa as its primary focus. This tendency only increased as large parts of Asia and South America grew economically and became assertive politically in the 1970s and 1980s leaving Africa ever more adrift from the international political and economic mainstream.
development advocacy campaigns. The sentiment behind them also came to infuse much academic consideration on Africa, as part of the growth of development studies and its popularity amongst students interested in Africa. By the 1980s, for large parts of the British left, the campaigning space on Africa was one of the few remaining arenas in which they could argue their case in a relatively popular and uncontested manner free from the complications and reversals brought about by Thatcherism and Labour’s intellectual miasma.

The 1997 Labour Government

By the mid-1990s, the importance of more active altruistic state support for international development, divorced from self interested foreign policy objectives, was one of the few remaining near consensus issues for the Labour left, and all the more important for that as the party leadership made the transition to New Labour. When New Labour won the 1997 election there were rearguard attempts to retain some FCO influence over development policy, and Clare Short was initially reluctant when asked to take on the new Department for International Development. However her demand that it retain complete independence as a Cabinet level department of state ensured that the establishment of DFID was a landmark act of the new government - perhaps the last significant extension of UK welfarism in the spirit of the 1945-'51 Labour government.

By the time of Labour’s 1997 election victory, UK government involvement in Africa was so limited that there was little reaction from African leaders. Inevitably there was uncertainty over the implications of the establishment of DFID as a new department separate from the FCO, but much of the continent was too consumed with other challenges to pay much attention. Indeed, for the first year or so the lack of interest seemed justified, as UK policy in Africa remained broadly the same as it had been under the previous Conservative administration: that is; lukewarm support for UK trade and Business interests that requested it and minimal political interventions. On conflict in Sierra Leone and dictatorship in Nigeria the UK fell in with the general Commonwealth consensus; on the Eritrea Ethiopia border conflict the UK toed the UN line. On Zimbabwe too nothing seemed to change initially, with President Mugabe saying that he expected a continuation in policy from the previous Conservative administration.

The first indication of a more robust liberal interventionist approach to Africa came in British policy towards Sierra Leone and subsequent military intervention in May 2000. The intervention was successful, in that it brought the stability, security and coercion needed to end the endemic violence in that country. However it was perhaps indicative too of the Blair Government’s desire to cut through convention and precedent to reach an immediate policy aim, without sufficient sensitivity to the complexity of the underlying situation and its historical and legal context. As far back as May 1998 Blair had expressed irritation at criticisms of High Commissioner to Sierra Leone Peter Penfold over the “arms to Sierra Leone” affair, describing it as “hoo-ha” compared to the “superb job” Peter Penfold had done in dealing with the consequences of the May coup.

The intervention was also subsequently an example of spin and the rewriting of history, for despite being used repeatedly as an example of a successful and bold liberal intervention, it was never planned as such - developing as mission creep after a series of events commencing

7 Private Interviews
8 ‘Zimbabwe: Mugabe meets Blair over Land seizure issue in Zimbabwe’ Pan African News Agency 23rd October 1997
9 Fran Abrams & Andrew Buncombe, ‘Blair ‘We did nothing wrong’ Independent, 12th May 1998
when a small British force sent to evacuate UK nationals helped Nigerian UNAMSIL peacekeepers repel a rebel attack on the airport where they were based. However it started, and however successful the military intervention was, such bold and unilateral action deserved the kind of bureaucratic capacity and sustained high level political follow up that was so often lacking in policy subsequently. Sierra Leone significantly still exhibits many of the social divisions that contributed to the traumatic conflict, despite over ten years of high level interventionist UK engagement. It is understandable that the intervention was fully utilised for domestic and international UK purposes (including in support of intervention in Afghanistan and Iraq), but the extent to which this was not always matched by continued high level political engagement on Sierra Leone itself raises the question as to what extent the intervention supported greater Sierra Leoneon, as opposed to UK agency.

Such over-confidence, inexperience and lack of capacity was to get the first Labour government into trouble again in Africa. It was in Zimbabwe that these weaknesses were first identified and then ruthlessly exploited by President Mugabe, one of the more adept and experienced political tacticians on a continent with more than its fair share of gifted political operators. Mugabe, losing domestic support, and under pressure to support and justify increasing land invasions from veterans and their families angry at the slow pace of land reform, received a gift in the form of Peter Hain, who was appointed Minister in the FCO with responsibility for African affairs in 1999. Hain appeared seized with the conviction that, as a former high profile activist against apartheid, he could understand, and speak out for the interests of Africans, and what is more, was mandated to do so given his position.

From the very beginning, Hain took an uncompromising line with regards to corruption and reform in Africa. Speaking at Wilton Park in September 1999, Hain said: "We will not support corrupt governments. We will not subsidise economic mismanagement. We will not fund repression or bankroll dictatorship. And we will not back failure. We will speak out against it and do all we can to help ordinary African people establish the rights and the future to which they are entitled."  

The problem was not so much with the message, but with the inherent image problem from an African perspective of a former colonial power appearing to unilaterally demand the mantle of champion for Africans. Hain personalized this, with his first words in the same speech being; "At dawn in Soweto, South Africa, in 1994, the queue stretched far out of sight. Emotions welled up inside me as I watched people voting for the first time in their lives. Something of the same feeling is with me today, standing before you as Britain's Minister for Africa setting out my strategy for a new partnership with Africa. Why? Because I am a son of Africa, born under the African sky in Nairobi and brought up in Pretoria,"

This sentiment was symptomatic of a fundamental misunderstanding which extended beyond Hain to many parts of the Labour Party hierarchy. They saw themselves as campaigners against international injustice, and being from a political tradition that championed such issues as anti-racism and third world solidarity - as being on the side of the victims of oppression rather than its perpetrators. As such they could not, once in power, be identified internationally as inheritors of the colonial legacy, and, by extension, neither any more could the UK Government. This is summed up in a 1997 letter from Clare Short, newly installed as International Development Secretary, to the Zimbabwe Minister of Land. In it Short denies that the UK has a special responsibility to meet the cost of land purchases in Zimbabwe (this is before the land invasions). She makes an initial justification of this on the basis that "We are a new Government

---

10 Peter Hain, 'The Challenges for Governance in Africa' Wilton Park Conference, 13th September 1999
from diverse backgrounds without links to former colonial interests. My own origins are Irish and as you know we were colonised not colonisers.11

These attitudes understandably irritated many African leaders and others, not least because the claim of not being colonisers was used to justify a high handed approach to the complex politics of the continent that appeared much like the British neo-colonialism that Ministers claimed to reject.

Mugabe was able to use this to his advantage, both by claiming - with some popular success - that he was standing up to meddling Imperialists, and by taunting the Labour Government in order to provoke further out-spoken statements from British Ministers.12 This tactic was highly successful throughout the key period of the MDC’s major challenge to ZANU PF power in 2000, and continues to find resonance today. It was a major reason for other African leaders finding themselves unable to be as vocally critical of Mugabe as they might otherwise have been.13

‘The world must judge us on Africa’: The Commission for Africa and the G8

Tony Blair wrote “the World Must Judge Us on Africa” in an article for the British press marking a visit to South Africa in February 2006.14 This statement followed his making African development a key objective of Britain’s presidency of the G-8 and European Union in 2005.

Blair’s personal commitment to Africa should not be doubted. During the 2001 election campaign he promised to make Africa more of a priority in his second term. The perfect opportunity presented itself to him when approached by Mbeki and Obasanajo at the 2001 G8 summit in Genoa. It was these leaders who, along with Presidents Bouteflika of Algeria and a little later Wade of Senegal, set out to engage with G8 leaders during the 2000 Okinawa Summit and the 2001 Genoa Summit in support of new commitments to encourage growth across Africa in return for greater reform efforts amongst African leaders themselves.15 The New Partnership for Africa (NEPAD) was the result, with Blair quickly won over by the charisma and drive of Mbeki in particular. Shortly afterwards he gave a speech to the Labour Party Conference in which, despite it taking place in the immediate aftermath of the 9-11 terrorist attacks, he devoted a significant section to Africa calling it ‘a scar on the conscience of the world’.16 There has subsequently been much criticism of this speech and the passive victim-hood this phrase especially conferred on Africa. Yet overlooked is the earlier reference to ‘a partnership for Africa’, in language that closely followed that of NEPAD, and related Africa Action Plan that was emerging at the time and also driven by the leaders of NEPAD. In this sense, while the

11 Letter from Clare Short to Hon Kumbirai Kangai MP, Minister of Agriculture and Land, November 1997 reproduced in The Guardian http://politics.guardian.co.uk/foi/images/0,9069,1015120,00.html
12 For instance see David Dimbleby’s interview with President Mugabe in ‘Smith, Mugabe & the Union Jack’ Documentary by the BBC prior to the 2000 Zimbabwe elections
13 Private Interviews
15 For a fuller treatment of the development of NEPAD and the G8 focus on Africa see Tom Cargill ‘Our Common Strategic Interests: Africa’s Role in the Post-G8 World’ Chatham House Report, June 2010
16 For the full text see http://www.guardian.co.uk/politics/2001/oct/02/labourconference.labour6 . The ‘New African Initiative’ was a transitional title of what was to become NEPAD
language may have offered a passive view of Africa, the speech itself was very much a result of an active international diplomatic strategy by African leaders. It was their lobbying that convince Blair to make Africa a priorit for the UK’s 2005 G8 Presidency. During the Sea Island summit in the United States in 2004, Africa attracted higher profile than expected due to efficient lobbying by the United Kingdom which the US felt it owed as an ally because of the Iraq war. Since Kananaskis aid pledges to Africa had significantly increased and the UK wanted to build upon this record.17

The Rise and fall of the Commission for Africa

As well as these African leaders, Prime Minister Blair was also influenced by celebrity. Irish pop star campaigner Bob Geldof at the 2003 Evian summit convinced Blair that he should create a commission to re-assess the causes of African poverty. The Commission for Africa was subsequently established by Tony Blair in February 2004.

The aim of the Commission was to take a fresh look at Africa’s past and present and the international community’s role in its development path. The Commission’s creation was timed to seize on the political and symbolic opportunity that 2005 presented for that year saw the coincidence of the United Kingdom chairmanship of both the G-8 and in the second half of the year, the European Union. The Prime Minister made Africa, together with Climate Change, the focus of both. In September 2005 the United Nations convened the first major summit to review the implementation of the UN Millennium Development Goals. 2005 was also the 20th anniversary of Live Aid and the 25th anniversary of the publication of the seminal Brandt Commission report “North-South”.

The were seventeen members of the Commission, nine of them African, including South African Finance Minister Trevor Manuel, Tanzanian President Benjamin Mkapa and Ethiopian Prime Minister Meles Zenawi, although all the Commissioners officially worked in their personal capacity.18 Prime Minister Blair was the chair. The members of the Commission met formally three times prior to publication of its report. At the first meeting on 4 May 2004 the Commission’s objectives were agreed and the work was divided into six principal themes: the economy, natural resources, governance, peace and security, human development and culture and participation.

From the very beginning the commission was linked by Prime Minister Blair to the influential 1980 Brandt report, credited with placing North-South Relations onto the international agenda. Yet questions persisted regarding the nature and purpose of the Commission. Its stated aim was to create a report and set of proposals containing ‘new and radical thinking’ on how to develop Africa, but to what extent this would be differentiated from official UK foreign policy was left open to question.

The composition of the Commission was challenged from the outset for including individuals such as Ethiopia’s Meles Zenawi. South Africa’s Finance Minister Trevor Manuel, sat on the Commission more as a gesture mandated by President Thabo Mbeki for improving bilateral relations badly impacted over Zimbabwe and Iraq, than as a signal of real African buy-in.19

18 For a list of the commissioners see: www.commissionforafrica.org
19 Interview with senior ex-British diplomat, 10 February 2006.
An initial draft of the report was to be delivered to Commissioners in mid October for a meeting in Addis Ababa, but by the start of the month hardly any consultations in Africa had taken place and many UK groups were only just being invited to submit their own ideas. So before nearly any Africans had had their say on what the report should be composed of, the framework was set. It was this failure to bring on board groups from across the continent itself that again caused problems for the Commission, and this sense of disconnection from initiatives already taking place in Africa was re-enforced when the Prime Minister gave a key note address on Africa in Addis Ababa in November without once mentioning the New Partnership for African Development (NEPAD), the key initiative to which the AU and African Government’s have committed themselves. The Commission, and by extension the UK government, was by now developing a reputation for itself as being loftily out of touch, an image not helped when a major figure in the Commission reportedly claimed at a dinner for senior international diplomats that 2005 would be the year when “Africa was discovered on the international agenda”. Such thinking was reflected again in Blair’s February 2006 interview in South Africa where he claimed that “I think the G8 last year was the first time Africa has come centre stage for the G-8 Summit”. Meanwhile hurried consultation exercises were taking place across Africa, as well as in other G8 countries. Yet for many it felt like a cosmetic exercise to legitimise a report already basically drafted by the Secretariat. Indeed at a conference on leadership drawing African professionals from across the continent, hosted by Chatham House and the British Council in Abuja in November 2004, the Commission report was almost universally derided or ignored as being at best peripheral to efforts already underway. By March 2005 the little interest in the Commission there had been from the international media evaporated further, the launch was confirmed to take place at the British Museum, and was dominated by the Prime Minister, Chancellor and Bob Geldof. Media interest in the UK lasted roughly three days before it largely disappeared. Entitled ‘Our Common Interest’ the 461 page report was a cogent summary of existing ideas on what is required to boost growth and good governance across Africa. However, the lack of new and original thinking was in contradiction with the original proclaimed central purpose of the Commission which was to consider Africa from a fresh perspective. The Commission’s report’s main prescription was to emphasize the importance of governance and aid for African recovery, something the World Bank has already been saying for a decade. The Commission report also asserts that more aid will lead to better governance and that the G-8 and international multilateral organizations are key to recovery rather than what African countries do for themselves.

The launch event was carefully managed, but it was striking that although probably the most substantive efforts at consultation were by business there was no reference to the importance of the private sector in Africa at the launch. This emphasized the vision of Blair, Brown and Geldof that this was a charitable exercise. The emphasis was not on supporting African agency, but rather Western agency for Africa.

---

A separate event occurred in Addis Ababa and an event in New York turned out to be a simple handing over of the report to the UN.24 A few days later a UK general election was announced. International development issues played a very minor role during the campaign but there was some anecdotal evidence that voters disillusioned by the war in Iraq had been encouraged to vote Labour because of its initiatives on Africa25.

From Labour to Conservative led coalition

The general humanitarian thrust of UK policy on Africa did not change under Gordon Brown’s premiership, though that thrust had inevitably weakened since the high point of the UK G8 in 2005 and weakened further still as the mounting financial crisis and leadership issues sucked in ever more of the Brown government’s attention. The changed ministerial teams in DFID and the FCO appeared content to allow both departments to continue doing what they had been doing - the only serious clash occurring when DFID attempted to undertake more political analysis of the challenges facing developing countries; something that was strenuously resisted by Foreign Secretary David Miliband in a move that represented Whitehall village politics at its worst given widespread frustration at DFID’s inability to engage with politics26.

The establishment of DFID in 1997 had proven to be the start of a re-invigorated UK approach to Africa after decades of decline in government interest. Yet that approach had been, for the most part, fairly one dimensional - focusing on Africa as a place to do good27. The FCO on the other hand had steadily dwindled in size and importance with regards to UK policy on Africa. From 2005 in particular the need for cost cutting to compensate for the high costs of British engagement in Iraq and the review of security of British diplomatic and aid missions abroad contributed towards a 20 percent in personnel. Diplomatic missions in Mali, Lesotho, Swaziland and Madagascar were closed and a number of other embassies downsized, positions merged or downgraded including the closure of the Consulate General in Douala. The removal of foreign exchange protection and other measures in the face of the financial crisis from 2008 weakened FCO capacity further, whilst DFID’s budget, if not its head count, was protected and steadily increased in pursuit of the 0.7% of GDP target that had been committed to in 2005.

Labour’s period in office coincided with the ‘long decade’ of growth and reform in Africa. Even before the 2010 UK election the near consensus that had been achieved in the UK and beyond between development organisations, DFID, and some of the most influential parts of academia regarding what was desirable and achievable as far as development policy was concerned, was being questioned – not least by the perception, rightly or wrongly, that African states were now in a better position to define their own developmental needs, but also from the growing criticism that the role of the private sector as a driver of development had been neglected to say the least. Yet, under Labour there was still a strong sense from DFID, supported by Ministers, and a significant section, if not the majority of UK opinion formers amongst NGOs and the news media, that the private sector was something of a necessary evil as regards development in Africa. This sense was bolstered by widely reported corporate scandals involving Western

24 For a Russian perspective on the Commission see, Vladimir Shubin of the Russian Academy of Sciences, in *International Affairs*, vol.81, no.5, October 2005, p.1158.
25 Private Interviews
26 Private Interviews
27 Gallagher ‘Doing Good In Africa’ ibid
companies such as the corruption cases involving BAE in South Africa and Tanzania, the Trafigura waste dumping case in Cote d'Ivoire and the ongoing scandal of the oil mismanagement, corruption and pollution in the Niger Delta. These cases, appearing to conform to all the worst stereotypes of Western corporate behaviour, were well covered by the UK media, as was increasing Chinese investment, often in negative - and often racially tinged - terms of exploitation. This contrasted with the lack of coverage of the underlying story of economic growth across Africa. This pointed to the strength of the underlying UK cultural narrative on Africa as Gallagher’s essentially passive ‘sacred space’, which all the activities around the G8 and Commission for Africa had done little to change, and much to sustain. However the tone set by government at least was to change dramatically under the new Conservative led coalition that came to power in June 2011.

In the run up to the election, the Conservatives had surprised some, even within their own party, by committing to the 0.7% of GDP target for development assistance and the protection of DFID’s cabinet status. Yet the Conservative leadership considered this commitment an important way of attracting wavering centre ground voters, and their private polling continues to show that it is an important factor in support amongst women voters in particular. Whilst there was, and is, a clear electoral calculation in the continuation of much of the headline commitments inherited from Labour, there is evidence that Cameron and Foreign secretary William Hague have been increasingly persuaded of the case for the continuation of the bulk of Labour policy on international development, as championed by Development secretary Andrew Mitchell. The case is one of national interest, with perceptions that the UK’s soft power is enhanced by international respect for UK development policy, but it is also a case of promoting and protecting emerging and prospective UK trade interests. It is this last interest that has begun to cause increasing tensions, as it has coincided with an insistence that the private sector must be given a more central role in development efforts - the most prominent departure from Labour policy even if in fact policy was already heading in this direction - and yet beyond the rhetoric this only just beginning to be translated into a significant policy on the ground. Given perceptions that the Conservatives value the interests of business over considerations of social justice or equality, this policy has provoked understandable cynicism. There is however, a clear desire to ‘re-educate’ DFID away from its perceived Labour inclined ideological orientation – which has led to thorough internal reorganisation and a, hopefully temporary, by 2012, still ongoing loss of clear direction and sense of purpose within the department. The other fundamental change to impact UK policy to Africa since the election is the desire to put the FCO back to the forefront of UK policy making towards Africa. Because the FCO rarely took Africa seriously (with the exception of South Africa and Rhodesia/ Zimbabwe) when DFID was created in 1997 it quickly and effectively took over UK policy towards Africa, with DFID country heads across Africa often replacing Ambassadors as the principle bilateral link. This has caused problems, not least from African governments resenting being treated differently than sovereign governments elsewhere in the world. In some cases the FCO and DFID appeared to run separate and sometimes competing, diplomatic strategies. This caused increasing tension in London, but DFID’s role was protected under both the Blair and Brown administrations. This has changed dramatically under the new government, with Ambassadors and High Commissioners now expected to coordinate both diplomatic and development policy in a way they never had to previously. This combined with 20% cuts in the FCO budget and an increased expectation that Ambassadors will lobby more openly and effectively for UK business interests, has seriously stretched UK capacity across Africa. It has also re-invigorated concerns about the relationship between narrow UK interests, development objectives, and trade in a way not apparent since the creation of DFID back in 1997.
The ongoing global financial crisis that started in 2008 is fast becoming a useful if imperfect defacto ‘bookend’ to the long decade of growth, diplomatic assertiveness, and political and economic reform that characterised much of Africa from the late 1990’s. Yet even before the current financial crisis, there was a growing recognition that however positive recent years had been for Africa, such achievements were amplified because of the previously dire situation of much of the continent in the aftermath of multiple crises and ill informed policies of the 80’s and 90’s, and that the first decade of the 21st century had in many ways only partly reversed some of the worst aspects of the previous malaise. A combination of increasing stability through reduced conflict, and, often fairly limited and basic improvements in governance, had been responsible for much of the improvement - in the context of increasing commodity prices and the growing availability of cheap Chinese consumer goods. With the initial gains made possible by these changing circumstances now largely gone by 2008, it was becoming apparent that continued growth would in many cases depend upon much tougher choices and more deep seated reforms. Prior to the financial crisis it is likely that there was more consensus on the types of reforms required, and more influence amongst those international institutions and western countries likely to prescribe the reforms – whether they would have worked or not. But 2008 saw all the economic operating assumptions that would have fed into the inevitable World Bank, IMF, OECD donor advice to African governments seeking the next stage of reform, thrown into the air – and it is still unclear where, if anywhere, such consensus will re-emerge.

Several things flowed from the crises that have impacted the nature and the direction of economic and governance reforms. Firstly; Western countries, and associated institutions and perspectives, have suffered a major loss of prestige and confidence. The visceral exposure of the corruption, collusion and incompetence that led to the crash erased much of the moral authority and claim to competence that Western policy makers had previously traded on. Secondly, this has conversely boosted the confidence of African policy makers at a time when many new partners are emerging around the world – not just China, India and Brazil but Turkey, South Korea, Mexico, Indonesia –indeed anyone who wants access to new markets and resources for their companies, and the support of African states - over 25% of the UN – for any number of positions, agreements or votes. This confidence is heightened further because Africa in general did not go into recession in the crisis – though many economies struggled and continue to do so. The praise which African Finance Ministers received for their general handling of the crisis was a big boost. It gave many actors the reassurance that they need no longer be patronised by Europeans and North Americans about what was in African interests.

Thirdly, the crisis has reduced, temporarily at least, the amount of time Western policy actors wish to think about Africa – which, though growing in prominence, was anyway not high on their list of priorities. This has coincided with a significant drop in media and policy interest in Africa related issues. Campaigning NGOs such as Oxfam and Amnesty International have also struggled to raise issues of concern to them. When policy makers do think about Africa - issues of governance are increasingly challenged by trade promotion and strategic interest. The fallout from the Arab Spring has complicated this a little, but generally trade is now much more important a consideration than it was. The important but chronically undervalued and frustrating EU-Africa relationship is a victim to this greater marginalisation of Africa in the minds of senior Western policy actors. This tendency is amplified by the loss of credibility and confidence on governance issues described above.
Fourthly; and related to this point, the financial crisis was a serious blow to the advance of a common understanding of the role of development assistance. This agenda included the desirability of non-tied aid; the separation of development from foreign policy; the aspiration to reach 0.7% of GDP committed to development assistance; the selective use of conditionality; and other aspects. In fact these set of ideas have proved more resilient than may have been expected. Even in the UK, with its shift from Labour to a Conservative led coalition, the government is still committed to most of this agenda, though in the face of considerable opposition from its own MPs. Elsewhere in Europe this agenda is now subject to serious equivocation and reversals, with France, Italy and Germany retracting from commitments made at the 2005 Gleneagles G8 Summit. Funding shortfalls and more hostile public perceptions of aid have blunted much advocacy campaigning on this issue. The US for its part may in fact be continuing to advance aspects of this agenda under Obama – with a re-invigorated USAID department – but there are political limits to the progress possible given the US domestic attachment to tied aid and unilateralism. The rise of the G20 had already called into question the Western dominance of development policy, as had the re-emergence of China. For good or ill the financial crisis arrested Western aspirations to be leaders in development – whether permanently or not is still unclear.

Despite this dramatic shift in global influence, relationships between much of Africa and Europe, especially the UK, remain deep and complex. All of the above trends - the crisis, loss of Western confidence and interest in Africa, the emergence of new partners, the absence of consensus on a way forward – are challenging African states as to their identity and affinities – especially with regards to former colonial powers and the US. Beyond all the anger, grievance, rhetoric of resistance and schadenfreude at seeing Western loss of pride and prestige, the links between Africa and these Western countries remain strong and – with increasing migration, use of IT, and generational change – in many respects are growing stronger, not weaker.

What does this all mean for African agency? Most importantly, African states are increasingly aware of and interested in utilising the expanding choice of relationships confronting them. Often, it is true, this interest continues to appear to translate into a regime survival strategy of playing various foreign powers off against each other. Yet increasingly, as regimes are developing a more national - as opposed to purely venal – sense of purpose, these balance of power strategies are being used to pursue broader objectives. Angola and Mozambique are good examples of this, having consciously sought a diversity of bilateral relations to secure the best economic - as well as political – deals. Rwanda has also done so, within it’s very specific context. Yet although this growing awareness of choice has translated into greater agency on a national level, there is still doubt as to whether, despite recent progress, it has done so at a regional and continental level.

The 2011 Libya Intervention

The way that sub-Saharan Africa was referenced in UK policy and media commentary on the largely North African ‘Arab Spring’ demonstrated again, if it was required, the low level of awareness amongst such observers, of African political dynamics, and the minimal attention

---

such issues were thought to warrant. The repeated question raised of whether the Arab Spring would spread to sub-Saharan Africa lacked any reference to Africa’s democratic transitions of the 1990s which had in many ways prefigured the changes now underway in North Africa and the Middle East. The ambiguous nature of sub-Saharan-North African relations did not help either. Assertions that what was happening in Tunisia, Egypt, and then Libya were prerogatives of the African Union never sounded particularly heartfelt until the prospect of Western intervention into Libya loomed. Apart from a number of fairly anodyne resolutions the AU seemed conspicuous by its absence with regards to engagement in North Africa until shortly before the NATO intervention. This of course changed quickly in the run up to and aftermath of UNSC Resolution 1973 which authorised the use of force specifically to protect civilians in Libya - though it was then used as justification for NATO military support of the rebels. Many African governments and others across Africa, felt deeply aggrieved at the manner in which NATO intervened – with the UK and France – self declared leaders of the intervention - particular targets for approbrium. Europe Africa relations were already in crisis\textsuperscript{29}. The EU_Africa summit of 2010 in Tripoli was, by all accounts, disastrous with frustrations from the Europeans that the Africans had not prepared the agenda fully, and from the Africans that the Europeans were, once again wagging fingers and patronizing them\textsuperscript{30}. None of these issues were satisfactorily addressed with both sides left feeling resentful. This was the situation as it stood even before the Libya intervention. In its aftermath, there are fundamental questions hanging over the EU-Africa relationship that from the European side, including the UK, simply do not appear to be acknowledged let alone addressed. The Libya episode was the AU’s most prominent encounter with high stakes international diplomacy at it’s fastest and most cut-throat, played out under the blinding lights of the 24 hr news cycle. It was a bruising and humiliating encounter for an organisation that had begun to develop some confidence in handling such crises as Sudan and Somalia, yet found itself appearing lumbering and out of touch on Libya. Understandably many African observers (as well as non-African) blamed Western powers – and the UK & France in particular, for the way in which they appeared to seize the opportunity – post financial crisis - to demonstrate continued global influence and power, both for international and domestic audiences, via the Libya intervention. How this plays out over coming months and years will be a significant driver for future relations. UK policy makers in particular seem far more focussed on how the absence of Gaddafi’s funding and leadership – for good or for ill – will impact the AU. Little if any thought is being committed to repairing the breach in trust opened up by the Libya intervention.

Conclusion

The Libya intervention shows in some sense how little things have changed with regards to Africa’s agency. The AU had little alternative but appeal to international law to support their policy and, protested impotently when it did not do so. Western states, the UK prominent amongst them, utilised those same laws in pursuit of their own policies (which they would argue represent common interests) and were able to override objections to their actions. African agency remains limited. UK agency remains extensive. Yet the NATO intervention was an exceptional episode in recent UK-Africa engagements. Bilateral relations continue to dominate , and within them aid, and now increasingly trade, continue to be the major concerns in the


Agency in world affairs’ paper presented at BISA Seminar 4: Implications for IR Theory

\textsuperscript{30} Private interviews
relationship between the UK and Africa. Has this shift in UK focus translated into more agency for African states? In one important area, possibly, for while the UK government might deny it, issues of human rights and governance cannot be quite so forcefully raised as once they were – when purely developmental and humanitarian interests predominated. Moves by the UK to establish regular Human Rights reporting and a unit on combating sexual violence may prove this wrong but the February 2012 hosting by UK Foreign Minister Henry Bellingham of a UK-Eritrea trade forum with the Eritrean Foreign Minister and UK business representatives, at a time when Eritrea is both suspended from the AU and under UN Sanctions for serious violations of international law, suggests otherwise.

Whether such renewed agency on the part of African states is a good thing or a bad thing is beyond the scope of this chapter, but it is a challenge to the UK’s historical self-defined moral mission in Africa. The case of Eritrea exposes some of the tensions in such an approach, but in bilateral relations with more democratically accountable governments such as Ghana or Tanzania, a thicker relationship involving more than just development assistance and advice on human rights and governance from the UK may be more desirable. A key question that flows from this is; has the UK given up the agency it is sought to exert over human rights and governance issues willingly? For if so then arguably the agency gained by African states as a result is less significant – it can be removed at any time given a change of policy in the UK. However the increasing choice of relationships facing African states suggests that the decline in UK influence over such issues is not completely voluntary. While it may be too early to say, as many African elites would like to, that the UK and other Western relationships can now be easily replaced with alternative alliances, it is an increasingly real prospect that they will be. How then will the UK reconcile this growing tension between it’s self perceived moral mission and it’s declining capacity to pursue it? On one level this may simply signal the return to ‘business as usual’. Until 1997 official UK policy had a patchy record at best of attempting to enforce standards of good governance across Africa. Trade and political imperatives generally prevailed. Since 1997 there has been a growing focus on human rights and governance, but while, for a short period the fading glow of unipolarism and the resources DFID could wield meant African states had to pay lip service to its exhortations, the extent to which reforms made across the continent can be traced to UK agency via development assistance on a bilateral level is far from clear. Where the UK did, and could continue to, for better or worse, play a ‘moral’ role is in multi-lateral forums such as the G8 and G20. On balance the UK’s and Tony Blair’s activism on Africa within the G8 – however contradictory in its motives and consequences – probably did make a contribution to supporting the efforts of reformist African leaders such as Mbeki, Obasanjo and others, which in turn helped entrench the past ten years of economic and political reforms seen across Africa. The contradiction is that it is through another such multilateral institution – NATO – that the UK rebuffed the very agency it had contributed to fostering, in pursuit of a different self proclaimed ‘moral’ agenda.31 On this multilateral level then, greater African agency still appears to be contingent - dependent upon the voluntary ceding of influence by, amongst others, the UK – a lesser kind of agency. It is probably not coincidental either that the AU’s humiliation over Libya took place long after Mbeki and Obasanjo had moved on. There are no longer the powerful unifying voices in the continent that once there were. So on a bilateral level, African states are gaining greater agency in relation to their engagements with the UK where both sides are seeking more transactional relationships, whilst on a multilateral level - where the issues addressed are more strategic and moral, the ‘African voice’ is still weak, partly due to the lack of powerful individual advocates. The question of whose

---

31 An action, it should be noted, that would have been just as likely to have taken place under a Blair led government.
interests this serves depends upon the perspective of the observer, but it certainly seems unlikely to become an issue of concern for the UK in the foreseeable future.