Point of View

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Who really cares for Africa?

The destiny of all the peoples in the world is today, more than ever before in recorded history, linked closely together. This is why the traditional political, economic and social divisions that were created to promote self-interest at the expense of others can no longer be tolerated. The author gives some examples of the obstacles to progress in Africa and other developing countries, and calls for a truly new world order based on justice and equity.

We live in a world of dramatic change. Indeed, it has been said with justification that the only consistent thing about the world today is its constant change. In this very fluid state, health, which requires stability to thrive, is most at stake. And it is clear that, wherever in the world one looks, the health of our future generation, children and young adults, is challenged.

In my country malnutrition and actual starvation due to an unprecedented drought and the terrible scourge of AIDS, which now accounts for 22% of hospital deaths in 0-5-year-old children, have added to the burdens of tropical diseases and trauma. This has effectively wiped out the health gains of the past decade which reduced morbidity and mortality through primary health care, universal child immunization, and the promotion of breast-feeding and sound nutritional knowledge. In the developed countries, road and other accidents and substance abuse seem to be creating similarly adverse trends in the health profiles of the younger sector of the population.

Those with power to change conditions in favour of equity are insensitive to the issues, lack the political will or foresight to facilitate change, and are comfortable as proxy critics for the monetary establishments while promoting democratic liberalization and preserving financial myths as imagined by Adam Smith.

Let us recall the post-Adam Smith era, in nineteenth century Britain, as regards human rather than market values. Life expectancy, for males, was then 42 years.

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Only one of five children survived to the age of 5. Average length of a marriage was 12 years—terminated not by divorce but by the demise of one of the partners, usually the woman. Teenage pregnancy was the rule, rather than the exception, baby dumping was commonplace and the epidemiological pattern of syphilis (for which there was no cure or vaccine) indicates the profligate promiscuity of the era. Dickens epitomized the philosophy through the memorable words of Scrooge in *A Christmas Carol*—"If the poor are going to die of hunger or disease, they should better do it quickly and relieve the world of its excess population"; or, more cynically Jonathan Swift commenting on the potato famine in Ireland—"The Irish should eat their children: that would solve both the population and the hunger problems".

Of course, they did not. They emigrated to the Brave New World: this is just what, justifiably, the Northern hemisphere fears from African regions today. The European metropolitan countries, having colonized Africa, now fear that Africans will colonize Europe.

So a supplementary strategy has been devised, the logic of population control. These protagonists have hijacked the high principles of family planning; the bait for the individual is a higher standard of living, and for the country a lower morbidity and economic emancipation. Our intelligent population in Zimbabwe have grasped the promises of modern contraceptive techniques—from a low rate of contraception use (14%) at Independence in 1980, most recent figures show that over 50% of women of childbearing age use modern contraceptive procedures and there are another nearly 20% who wish to use, but cannot gain access to hormonal contraception. Human life has become part of the throw-away philosophy.

### The economic front

The philosophy of population control is based on a concept of numerical equality which we in Africa do not seem to enjoy in any other context. As a matter of fact the cost, environmentally, of one North American child is more than one hundred times that of a sub-Saharan African child. And the logic of persuading parents to limit families so as to improve their status does not bear examination, given the ecological pressures already destroying our global security.

Growth (in the economic sense) has in the Northern hemisphere been almost entirely saprophytic. More investment has been disbursed in taking over existing enterprises than has been directed towards new capital creation. New investments in the leisure and entertainment industries have been the most successful in terms of monetary return.

On the other hand, in Africa our entertainment is provided mostly at little or no cost to the audience, has a cultural purpose, and welds together people too poor to buy a television set. And in the health field we use the medium of entertainment as an effective form of communication of health information, as opposed to the commercial pop music market which is devoted to the promotion of promiscuity, drug dependency and other iconoclastic pursuits to benefit the proprietors of the modern media bordellos. The destructive effect on the susceptible vulnerable clientele
seems to be of no consequence in the Gadarene rush to infect every youngster with the virus of self-interest and community anomie.

In the process the media and the offshore world of finance are happy to appropriate the environmental, ecological and

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occumemical issues of the day. Abolition of opposition has always been a primary objective of every totalitarian tyrant. And in the pursuit of self-aggrandizement, the priests of property and the monks of money regard their rights as inviolable, while personal, human rights must be subordinate or even ignored. It is most interesting that this disregard is the very defect, of which our imperfect, but sensitive governments in southern Africa are most accused. Yet refusal of our right to require that those who use our land must respect overall national needs confirms for me the words of Omar Bradley—"We have become technological giants and moral midgets".

It is high time we recognized some of the distortions which threaten future relationships. Subjective opinions which are less than adequately informed cannot help. In the C.I.T.E.S. Forum (International Conference on Trade in Endangered Species) it seems that some authorities want the African continent to become a botanical garden for the developed world, not a self-reliant community in her own right.

What really we need is a truly new world order—not an engineered buy-out of socialist sycophancies by dubiously sustainable capitalist concepts: not a takeover but a trading revolution.

Do not undermine our small successes—in agricultural diversification, in mineral exploitation, and especially in the whole spectrum of health promotion. For some conditions—notably malaria and schistosomiasis—we are better than metropolitan countries at achieving a successful outcome. We have sustained our Expanded Programme on Immunization while making it more cost-effective and added new strategies, especially AIDS advocacy and community-based distribution of contraceptive materials. Nationwide, the annual consumption of condoms has grown from 500 000 in 1985 to 65 million last year. Yet the quality of life for our people has declined as a result of the tendency of those with economic power to move the goal posts with depressing regularity.

Whether this be on the management of elephants, or unfair trading practices such as agricultural subsidies and protectionist quotas, or the use of HIV serology screening to restrict intercountry travel, xenophobia is based on ignorance and a fear of new challenges.

We have to abolish the things which divide us and promote mutual support on the basis of a common destiny. Those countries that think they can be quarantined from contagion (whether AIDS or intravenous drug abuse) need to realize that modern mobility and the human desire for freedom will frustrate any "cordon sanitaire". Only uplifting the future prospects for all our children can promote a harmoniously progressive healthy world. We need to spread God's loving kindness to defeat the greed, selfishness and hatred in mankind. Then we can say to our children, "There is a bright future: tomorrow is another day".