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*The 37th in our series of expert comment and analysis by **Lord Hannay of Chiswick**, formerly UK Permanent Representative to the EU and to the UN, member of the House of Lords International Relations and Defence Committee. The views expressed are those of the author and not of the Committee whose recent report on Sub-Saharan Africa he is introducing and commenting on.*

The UK And Sub-Saharan Africa - Prosperity, Peace And Development Cooperation

It may well be that readers of this note will not be familiar with the recent report of the House of Lords International and Defence Committee on the UK and Sub-Saharan Africa which issued in July. If that is so, it is at least in part due to the rather bizarre decision taken by the House authorities to cease the publication of Committee reports in hard copy; and in part perhaps also due to the way that the obsession with COVID-19 reporting is drowning out all other topics.

It would be a pity to overlook this report, the result of a six month enquiry, with which the Committee persisted despite the distractions of COVID and the need to take evidence virtually rather than in person; and which addresses what will necessarily be an

important building block of any post-Brexit British foreign policy.

The Committee set out to address two broad, inter-related questions. Does Africa matter to the international community and does Africa matter to a post-Brexit UK? The evidence we took led us to positive conclusions to both questions.

Africa's population is growing faster than any other region in the world, yet its weight in international organisations is not proportionate; it is adversely affected by all the main challenges facing developing countries - poverty, instability, the effects of climate change, corruption, human rights abuses and many others; and success in getting anywhere near meeting the UN's Sustainable Development Goals by 2030 will depend crucially on what happens in Africa. So far as Britain is concerned, Africa is a region with which we have had long



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and strong historical links - not all of them, of course, positive ones - and with which we share links of culture and language and fellow membership of the Commonwealth. And it is a region where, as a middle-ranking power with world-wide interests and a continuing commitment to devoting 0.7% of our Gross National Income to development programmes, we really could make a difference.

The COVID pandemic broke after we had set the enquiry in hand and begun to take evidence. Obviously we had to face the question whether that changed all the parameters within which we were working. The adverse effects on African countries, in terms of the medical effects of the pandemic itself and then, even more so, the economic consequences on their prospects for growth, were clearly pretty dire. But we concluded that those effects did not so much change the main challenges facing African countries as they accelerated the need to address them and increased the scale of what needed to be done anyway.

The Committee spent a good deal of its time searching for what various government speeches referred to as its Africa strategy, but we were unable to find it or to lay our hands on any document setting out such a strategy. At times it faded into what officials called a strategic approach. We concluded that, rather than playing about with grandiose and imprecise concepts implied by the phrase 'Africa strategy', the

government would do better to draw up a plan of action for the region and the large number of countries in it, with some precise, time-limited commitments; a plan of action of that kind could be updated from time to time. That recommendation now sits in the government's in-tray - their first response has been Delphic rather than dismissive. We shall see. We could not escape the suspicion that one of the factors contributing to the vagueness and inadequacy of successive governments' handling of relations with Africa was due to the remarkable frequency with which the ministerial responsibility for Africa in the FCO and DFID changed - 19 ministers for Africa in the period since 1997 and counting. Perhaps a little more stability there might be a help.

Where the Committee was more on the same page as the government was over the desirability of the UK doing what it could to back up the collective efforts of African states, both acting through the African Union and through sub-regional organisations such as ECOWAS, to find effective responses to the challenges they all face. Such efforts include the plan for achieving an African Free Trade Area in the years ahead to encourage intra-African trade, still at a lamentably low level; and the increasing involvement of the AU in peacekeeping and peace-building missions in a continent still faced by far too many disputes and too much insecurity which is holding back development. We encouraged the government to step up that support for Africa's multilateral institutions



and to press at the UN for the costs of joint UN/AU peacekeeping operations to receive resources under UN assessed contributions. Like all other multilateral work this will be hard going but an Africa which cannot concert collectively, in other areas too such as combatting climate change and health pandemics will be a poorer and less secure place.

What were our main specific criticisms of government policy? Well, we were both surprised and shocked to discover that, four years after the vote to leave the European Union and four years after a new Department for International Trade had been established to shape a new, post-Brexit trade policy, precisely nothing had yet been done to identify ways in which Britain could offer better access to African exports and could encourage African countries to move away from exporting commodities to processing them themselves. We are continually being told how much better placed a Britain outside the European Union will be to pursue an enlightened trade policy. And there must certainly be African products whose access to our market was inhibited so long as we were in the EU. But apparently the DIT has yet to find them. So reality is lagging well behind the rhetoric.

Less surprising, but no less shocking, was the tidal wave of evidence the Committee received about the damaging effects of the way the Home Office handles Britain's visa policy. We heard of rules whose application

was quite simply described as humiliating and inhumane. In the higher education sector, which is, without question, one of Britain's national assets and which has a major contribution to make to African countries' development, we were told about language tests imposed, which required students to undertake costly and risky journeys to neighbouring countries. More by luck than good judgement COVID-19 has necessitated the suspension of some of these onerous requirements. But lasting improvement is what is needed. It is good, however, to hear that the government is currently increasing the number of Chevening and Commonwealth scholars, as we recommended. But we do need to recognise the extent to which the left hand of our visa regime is undoing much of the good achieved through our programmes of aid and cooperation.

As to peacekeeping in Africa, Britain's contribution, while welcome, remains pretty modest. Small deployments to Somalia, South Sudan and now to Mali have provided some assistance to a continent whose needs are very pressing. The training provided to other contingents is particularly valuable, but we questioned whether it would not be even more valuable if we were able to provide mentoring back up to those contingents we had trained when they deployed. There has been no response from the government to that suggestion.

On human rights the Committee decided quite deliberately not to go in detail into individual



country performances, since this would have severely overloaded our report which was intended to be thematic rather than country-specific. But we did express our dismay at the deteriorating situation in Cameroon and urged the government to work actively with the AU and with others such as France to reverse the inter-community strife which risks getting out of control. In Cameroon, as elsewhere in Africa, the Committee felt it was high time to put behind us the tradition of Anglo-French rivalry. The Committee also gave its firm support to the work of the International Criminal Court which has been subjected to a good deal of criticism from African countries. intention of permitting former president Bashir to be brought to justice could perhaps mark a turning point in those tensions.

The government's decision to merge the FCO and DFID came like a bolt from the blue, just a few days before we completed our report. It was not a welcome development to the Committee for a whole range of reasons, including the inevitable bureaucratic disruption and confusion such upheavals bring in their wake. At a time when Africa's needs are greater than they have ever been, this was a distraction we could have wished to have been spared.

There is plenty more in the report, for example a section underlining the crucial importance to African economies of remittances from the diaspora which, like so much else, is suffering collateral damage from COVID-19

and urging the government to do all it can to facilitate such transfers and to reduce the often excessive charges levied on them as the price of transmission. But, rather than lengthening this commentary, I would only commend a reading of the report itself and express the hope that others, including the government, will use it as a mine for further policy prescriptions.

One final thought. If Britain's relationship with Africa, and with the countries of which it is composed, really is to get off on a new footing, it will need two things, a maintenance of resources under the 0.7% GNI commitment and a culture of genuine cooperation between equals. In the past there has been too great a tendency to think that we could simply tell African countries what they should be doing. That approach will not serve any more.

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House of Lords official portrait

The House of Lords Select Committee on International Relations and Defence Report is available to download: [The UK and Sub-Saharan Africa: prosperity, peace and development co-operation](#)



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