
A “historic opportunity for Africa”?

The Commission for Africa was launched by the British Prime Minister 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.” It was tasked with producing a report “with clear recommendations for the G8, EU and other wealthy countries as well as African countries.” This last “as well” is already giving a clue to the Commission’s mandate.

The report is now ready, and one of its main recommendations is to build more roads. “To improve its capacity to trade”, the report says, “Africa needs to make changes internally. It must improve its transport infrastructure to make goods cheaper to move.” Although the report does take a look -not necessarily a “fresh” one- at Africa’s past, its recommendations don’t take the lessons learnt on board. On the contrary, it completely ignores the consequences of road building on people and the environment in the African continent. In fact, the exploitation of Africa and its peoples in colonial, post-colonial and present times was and is made possible through the opening of roads.

Walter Rodney -a leading theoretician of Pan-Africanism- illustrates the process of road building in Africa: “Means of communication were not constructed in the colonial period so that Africans could visit their friends. Nor were they laid down to facilitate internal trade in African commodities. There were no roads connecting different colonies or different parts of the same colony to meet Africa's needs and development. All roads and railways led down to the sea. They were built to extract gold or cotton and to make business possible for the trading companies and for white settlers.”

Not much has changed since, except for the fact that more and more commodities have left the continent to make rich countries richer and African countries poorer in economic, social and environmental terms. Part of the current external debt that would apparently be “condoned” by the G8 is the result of road building through loans to governments. While governments contracted the debt, foreign corporations used the roads freely to make their profits.

Most of those profits were made at the expense of forests and forest peoples, particularly in the tropics and subtropics, first through industrial logging and later from other activities such as mining and export-oriented agriculture, all resulting in widespread deforestation and violation of local peoples’ rights. This didn’t just happen: it was made possible through strategic road opening leading to the desired resources.

Roads are of course not a bad thing in themselves and in many cases local communities can benefit from them. But when the “G8, EU and other wealthy countries” are involved in their promotion, all alarm bells should ring at the same time. Again, as Walter Rodney says, these roads would not be built so that Africans can visit their friends, but, as the Commission for Africa report says, “to make goods cheaper to move”. Where to? Again to the ports, obviously.

The above allows for a much better understanding of the recent G8 meeting decision in Scotland, where the leaders of the rich countries made a number of commitments on Africa, with the stated aim of addressing poverty in that continent. We will mention only two issues mentioned in the G8

agreement, which shed light on the underlying interests in the agreement:

- “To provide resources and training to help African producers meet current and new health and safety standards for food exports and other products.” Food exports!
- To “Continue our work to build an international infrastructure consortium ... to facilitate infrastructure investment...” More roads!

A “historic opportunity for Africa”? For a handful of Africans, certainly. For the wealthy nations, absolutely. For African people and their environment, no way. The deal is really about how to make African countries generate the conditions for a more efficient appropriation of their resources by Northern-based corporations. Once again, roads for exporting Africa’s wealth.