

Listen To Africa

by Dorin Tudoran




There are very few issues that one can get more wrong than Africa. Listen to the Nigerian writer Chinua Achebe on media coverage of his continent: "People go to Africa and confirm what they already have in their heads and so they fail to see what is there in front of them. This is what people have come to expect. It's not viewed as a serious continent. It's a place of strange, bizarre and illogical things, where people don't do what common sense demands." While images like a woman's AIDS-ravaged body or a malnourished child represent a devastating part of Africa's reality, they are only one dimension of it.



Indeed, Africa's issues are complex and multi-faceted. As Hyppolyt Pul notes in this issue, some analysts consider the never-ending conflicts in Africa a result of arbitrary colonial boundaries that disrupted the feeling of belonging among different African groups. As in so many cases, everything started with the land and could, probably, end with it. Listen to Bishop Desmond Tutu: "There is a story...about when the missionaries came to Africa. They had the Bible and we, the natives, had the land. They said 'Let us pray,' and we dutifully shut our eyes. When we opened them, why, they now had the land and we had the Bible...Those who may have wanted to exploit us and to subject us to injustice and oppression should really not have given us the Bible, because that placed dynamite under their nefarious schemes."

Africa is a place of great resources that often go undistributed to its own inhabitants. As Ian Gary (inside) describes, Africa's wealth in new oil reserves could paradoxically widen the gap between the rich and poor due to moral illegitimacy, foggy transparency and growing corruption of the African state. No wonder that millions and millions of Africa's inhabitants do not trust the state, no matter the party in power.

But things could improve for Africa in the twenty-first century. As documentary filmmaker Carol Pineau finds, private enterprise is thriving both in Africa's democracies (Botswana, Ghana, Senegal, etc.) as well as in conflict-ridden states. Rwanda's president Paul Kagame might be right when he says that "in Africa today, we recognize that trade and investment, and not aid, are pillars of development." Helping this momentum is the international attention driven by the Commission for Africa, the group U.K. Prime Minister Tony Blair founded to identify coherent solutions to Africa's stagnation. We would do well to listen to his imperative: "There can be no excuse, no defense, no justification for the plight of millions of our fellow beings in Africa today. We cannot allow this to continue. It is, I believe, the biggest moral challenge of our generation. A challenge for all of us—for governments of Africa and the countries of the developed world."

To make it work this time, we should listen to Africa when assessing its needs and Africa should listen to Nelson Mandela, who said, "I dream of an Africa which is in peace with itself." 

From top to bottom: Adenike Ogunlesi, founder of Ruff 'n' Tumble in Nigeria; Mohammed Yassin Olad, CEO of Daallo Airlines in Somalia; Edusel Derkyl, Deputy Managing Director, and Stephanie Baeta Ansah, Managing Director, of HFC Bank Ghana Ltd. in Ghana; and Rod Evans, Director of Homegrown in Kenya. These entrepreneurs, among others, were featured in Carole Pineau's documentary "Africa: Open for Business." For more information, visit www.africaopenforbusiness.com.