Africans are increasingly assuming responsibility for their own destiny. (CIDA Photo: Roger Lemoyne)

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Africa today stands at a crossroads. Behind it lies a sorry record of poverty, poor governance, and exclusion from the global economy. Ahead is the promise of a better future offered it by the New Partnership for Africa’s Development (NEPAD), a radical plan that offers African solutions to African problems.

Earlier this year Prime Minister Jean Chrétien committed Canada to a comprehensive collaboration in African development. As the host of the G8 Summit in Kananaskis, Prime Minister Chrétien successfully negotiated the G8 "Africa Action Plan," an extraordinary pledge of development support from the world’s richest aid donor governments. At the Summit, Prime Minister Chrétien announced Canadian initiatives under the Africa Action Plan to ease access to Canadian markets for African exporters and to strengthen investment links between Canada and African countries. Toward this end, International Trade Minister Pierre Pettigrew has just returned from a trip to South Africa, Nigeria, and Senegal where he worked to promote business relationships between Canadian companies and African partners.

The politics of blame

NEPAD is truly an immense undertaking. It touches not only on aid and trade, but even more fundamentally it relates to the ways in which Africans plan to govern themselves — and decide their futures.

In fact, it constitutes an unprecedented declaration of African responsibility for Africa’s future. This affirmation of African leadership marks a dramatic and important departure from the old rhetoric of justifications, and the old platitudes of blame. Africans are increasingly assuming responsibility for their own destiny, acknowledging at last that no one else will construct their future for them.
I want to be clear: Africans have suffered a real history of imperialism, slavery, colonialism, and Cold War exploitation. They have even suffered the effects of liberal condescension — that assumption among rich foreigners of superior knowledge and self-righteous intention. In earlier years this was referred to as the "White Man’s Burden." But Africans have also suffered the harms of irresponsibility in their own governance and among their own leaders. To some significant degree, misgovernment in Africa has rested on the politics of blaming others.

NEPAD alters that dynamic. It asserts the obligation of Africans to determine the course of their own development. It explicitly acknowledges the record of "poor leadership, corruption, and bad governance in many countries." It specifies practical and necessary measures of reform. This declaration of African leadership and responsibility represents radical progress.

**Peer review**

NEPAD deserves attention, especially in countries like Canada. One provision in NEPAD promotes the idea of peer review of African governments and leaders by other leaders. This is an acceptance that the domestic governance performance of one African government can properly be evaluated, and criticized, by other African governments. Peer review signals a major change on a continent where non-intervention and the rights of sovereignty have been zealously defended values. It means that African governments will now hold themselves responsible to observe and enforce rigorous standards of democratic governance.

Unlike previous development plans, NEPAD places an emphasis not on aid but on mobilizing Africa's own resources. This emphasis reinforces NEPAD’s rhetoric of autonomy. Although it is true that NEPAD advocates bigger flows of aid, it also emphasizes debt reduction, the promotion of private investment (both African and foreign), and the promise of liberalized trade in African exports. Most important, it looks to African resources as a major source of development capital.

This last element is critical because it goes to a fact of African economic life too often neglected — the reality that Africa is a huge and diverse continent of immense wealth as well as serious poverty. To put it squarely, more than half of the African economy is unrecorded and therefore, literally, immeasurable. That is to say, practically all the economic statistics we have about sub-Saharan Africa are partial at best and generally unreliable. The truth is that the largest and most vibrant components of African economic activity operate in the informal economy of barter and unrecorded transactions. Moreover, the World Bank estimates that nearly 40% of African capital is held by Africans offshore — contributing to the development of the North, not the South. Repatriating just a fraction of that African-owned capital would far surpass all the current aid flows into Africa.

**Risks and rewards**

One hardly needs to spell out the risks implicit in such a grandiose plan. First of all there is the risk of a failure in political will. A small group of prominent African leaders presumed to speak for a continent of 53 countries. Can they now bring their colleagues along? It may also come to pass that African leaders are not able to deliver on their promises — that they find themselves incapable of carrying out their own NEPAD commitments.

By and large I am an optimist on this point. For African autocrats, the comfortable days are over. African populations are demanding real elections, freer public debate, and government that is more accountable and more lawful. But the durability of political will is still an open question — partly because NEPAD itself was adopted with almost no prior popular or parliamentary participation in African countries.
My own sense is that one of the principal risks threatening NEPAD relates to inadequate capacity to quickly and efficiently implement an effective development program. Here is an opportunity for lasting contributions from Canadians and others, helping to expand indigenous capacity within African governments and supporting private-sector operations. The weaknesses of many governments and their regional institutions are numerous, but not insurmountable if adequate skill and political will are applied to strengthen them.

No matter how elegant the plan, unless programs are firmly rooted in African reality, they are likely to be subverted and will produce little in the way of lasting results. The challenge is to support Africans in their work to find solutions that will fit their own reality.

Dr Constance Freeman is the Regional Director of the International Development Research Centre’s (IDRC) office in Nairobi, Kenya. She will be chairing the panel on NEPAD at the 10th General Assembly of the Council for the Development of Social Science Research in Africa (CODESRIA) being held in Uganda from December 8th to 12th.

For more information:

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