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NEWS STORY
By Sarah McGregor

Breaking Africa's Dependency Syndrome

Economist Connie Freeman sings a different tune on aid and development

The anthem at worldwide rock concerts last weekend urging steep increases in foreign aid for Africa is slightly off-key with the needs of the continent that inspired Live 8, according to economist Connie Freeman.

The star-studded musical extravaganza, watched by billions of people live and on television, may have succeeded in attracting public awareness and political attention to the impoverished region, said Ms. Freeman, the regional director of the east and southern Africa office at the International Development Research Centre.

But the single-minded refrain heard in 10 cities, including Barrie, Ontario, calling for more cash may perpetuate the ongoing cycle of dependency on the West a relationship that Africans are rejecting more than ever, said Ms. Freeman.

"The media has picked up primarily on Bob Geldof's pitch, which is a single message," said Ms. Freeman, referring to the Irish rocker who before this year was most famous for organizing African famine relief concerts two decades ago. "[He says] 0.7 per cent [of gross domestic product to foreign aid] is necessary because poverty is terrible and the only way to solve it is for the rich world to make massive contributions to the poor world."

Ms. Freeman continued: "One of the things that has eroded over the past 40 years is the dependency syndrome, where Africans look to the rest of the world to solve their problems. And people in the North make the assumption that Africans are incapable of solving their own problems. That particular mindset is beginning to erode."

That trend, however, is still mostly in the minds of Africans and only slowly being accepted internationally, said Ms. Freeman.

Action Aid recently said that real aid flows from wealthy nations stood at \$27 billion U.S. in 2003, with hefty amounts going to Africa. Still, about 36 per cent of Africa's population are surviving on less than \$1 per day. British Prime Minister Tony Blair, through his Commission for Africa, has called for a doubling of assistance to \$50 billion by 2010.

Mr. Geldof, a Commission panelist and African crusader, is among the international players demanding that rich countries commit to a timetable to reach 0.7 of GDP to foreign aid over the next decade.

"Bob Geldof's appeal fits very nicely into the dependency syndrome," said Ms.

Freeman, explaining it's easy to mobilize civil society around a straightforward concept. What the 0.7 per cent debate fails to address is that the "first and most important thing that needs to happen is an improvement in African governance to improve the environment for additional assistance," she said.

Mr. Blair's report was delivered in March as the precursor to his yearlong leadership of the G-8, which he assumed July 1.

The UK leader has met privately with powerful leaders, including U.S. President George W. Bush in Washington and Prime Minister Paul Martin by videoconference, in the past month to shore up support for his plan to improve the livelihoods of Africans.

The G-8 Summit that runs today through July 8 will see industrialized nations and invited African leaders spend an entire day on the issues of Africa.

Overall, Ms. Freeman said the Blair report, the basis of these discussions, struck the right tone: "It talks, first and foremost, about governance and Africans working to improve the climate in their own countries so they can [effectively use] the aid coming in."

In contrast, another prominent study released this year, economist Jeffrey Sachs' Millennium Development Project, is flawed because of its "dependency tone," according to Ms. Freeman. He advocates for practical investments in items that can improve the daily conditions in Africa, such as malaria bed nets.

"[The Sachs report] is full of should, should, should, should, should. People don't react terribly well to 'shoulds'. It mentions African responsibility but it doesn't emphasize it to the extent necessary if it's going to work," she said. "My concern is that the continuance of the dependence mentality through his report threatens to sabotage it."

Ms. Freeman suggested that African leaders should be buttressed by solid governance institutions, forgiven of debt acquired years ago during the Cold War, freed of tied aid, and given a level playing field in global trade. Currently, Africa's portion of global trade is just 1 per cent, but it is home to 10 per cent of the world's population.

Ms. Freeman said the New Partnership for African Development, known as NEPAD, was one of the first building blocks of the new attitude of African leaders developing homegrown solutions. Through NEPAD, international leaders lent support to their African counterparts to bolster their own economic and political future.

In Scotland this week, Live 8 organizers, including Mr. Geldof and the Make Poverty History activists, are calling for 100 per cent debt relief, doubled aid budgets and trade justice.

Last week, at an end-of-year news conference with reporters, Prime Minister Paul Martin reiterated that 10 years was too expansive a timeframe to firmly commit to the foreign aid benchmark. Japan, Canada and the United States are the only G-8 countries that haven't committed to the 0.7 per cent (Neither has Russia, which due to

its modest economy isn't qualified as a donor nation). And EU member states are pledging to draw up timelines.

Mr. Martin questioned other nations' motives to meet the target, and some Canadian government officials have said the European promise is still tied to their economic ability to do so. "What in fact they're doing is that they're giving into short-term political pressure, to get their pictures in the paper, make an announcement, go home, go home to favourable headlines and then they forget about it. Well, I'm not going to do that. And I'm not going to do that because there's an election coming. I'm not going to do it under any circumstances," said Mr. Martin, according to a transcript.

Ms. Freeman said that good intentions will continue to drive development into the very distant future, and there is still a time and place for that approach. "The missionary approach is alive, and it will be for a long time. Everybody doesn't have the change in attitude. It's not a smooth process. You just see more and more [African] people standing up and saying we're doing this for ourselves," she said.

Ms. Freeman has just returned from a cross-Canada speaking tour, and will return to her office in Nairobi, Kenya after a brief holiday in North America.

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