

Africa: The Imperative for Engagement

Most Rev. Mitsuo Miyake
Chief Senior Minister,
Shinto Konko Church of Izuo

In the wider world at this moment, we are witnessing a preoccupation with action on climate change. This is indeed a very positive thing, but let us imagine for a moment that the earth's overheating was going to result in 10 million children losing their lives next year, 2010. A state of emergency would be declared, and you would hear no other news. Well, in fact next year extreme poverty will take more than 10 million children's lives, and you will hear very little about it. Nearly half of these lives will be on the continent of Africa, where HIV/Aids is killing teachers faster than they can be trained, and where there are entire villages in which the children are the parents. Countless children will die unnecessarily as a result of mosquito bites, dirty water, and diarrhea. This is not natural catastrophe — it's completely avoidable. Simple solutions are available: provision of mosquito nets, sinking boreholes for clean water.

In 1984, my grandfather, the Most Rev. Toshio Miyake, engaged with the plight of the poor in Africa by installing a clean water supply to people who escape from Uganda's civil war in the UNHCR's refugee camp in west Kenya. Even at that time, a quarter of a century ago, the total lack or low quality of freshwater was obviously the most limiting factor on development, constraining food production and industrial activity, and contributing significantly to the burden of disease. Since then, land degradation and water shortages in many parts of Africa have become a major threat to the ability of poor farmers to earn a living from the land. Like many other humanitarians of that time, my grandfather was moved by the fact that for many historical reasons, the African continent - home to one-sixth of humanity - remained the world's poorest region, contributing only one-fortieth of world GDP.

On the eve of decolonization in 1960, real GDP per head in sub-Saharan Africa was almost three times higher than in Southeast Asia, and Africans were expected to live two years longer on average. In the 50 years since then, Southeast Asia's real GDP per head grew by 1,000% and people lived 32 years longer, while African GDP per head grew by only 38% and people lived just 9 years longer.

The reasons for this are many & complex. Oxford economist Paul Collier argues that many African states have fallen into one or several development

traps that are extremely difficult to escape. Once a country is mired in one of them, a domino effect means it is easy to fall into the next. Being poor makes you prone to conflict, and being in conflict makes you poor.

Today Africa still faces enormous challenges to sustainable development. Over the past 30 years, her environment has continued to deteriorate. Thousands have already died from starvation brought about by environmental degradation, millions more face imminent disaster because their water sources have run dry, their land has become so denuded they cannot rear livestock, and the soil so poor they cannot cultivate it. According to the FAO, "poverty alleviation and environmental protection will remain the most important priorities over the next two decades".

However, there is good news: In the last 20 years Africa has been transformed from a continent dominated by one-party states and military dictatorships, to one in which the principle of competition for political power through multi-party elections is gradually becoming the norm. In 2008 Africa was the only continent to grow faster than it did in 2007, at 6.2%, significantly higher than the United States & Canada (2.2%), Japan (2.5%), European Union (2.3%). 33 African countries' GDP growth rate was over 4.5%, and 10 of them were over 7%.

Targeted debt cancellation and aid have meant that 20 million more African children are in school, and 1.3 million Africans are on lifesaving drugs. African countries' ever-increasing population demands creative efforts to find new ways of producing more food from the country's finite resources. Real, lasting poverty reduction is only possible if the environment is able to provide the services people depend on, and if natural resources are used in ways that do not undermine long-term development.

I believe the rich world needs to demonstrate its values by acting, as my grandfather did a quarter-century ago, through pharmacology, agro-ecology, and technological help for those in extreme circumstances, in their hour of need. There are already some inspiring examples: in 2004 the US economist Jeffrey Sachs, Director of the Earth Institute at Columbia University, began the "Millennium Villages," 79 villages in 10 African countries where exactly \$110 is allocated per person each year for five years to implement a prescribed set of basic "interventions": fertilizer and high-yield seeds, clean water, basic health care and education, mosquito bed nets, and a communication link to the outside world. The first Millennium Village, in Kenya, has already more than tripled its maize production, and malaria has fallen by two-thirds. Financier and

philanthropist George Soros recently donated \$50 million to the Millennium Villages Project.

So, we need to view and describe the continent of Africa *not* as a burden, a hopeless deathbed of war, disease, and corruption, but rather as an *opportunity*, as an *adventure*. We should not allow ourselves the lazy habit of distorting the reality of a dynamic, entrepreneurial continent of 53 diverse and resource-rich countries. What Africa needs is not pity, or handouts, but “a leg up” – opportunities for the marginalized to exercise their creative energies. There is proof that this can work: during the recent economic boom times, poverty has been reduced. But Africa has of course become the most conspicuous victim of the current recession, which has swept away many benefits of her recent economic reforms. Many Africans will fall back into desperate poverty. After a half-decade of 5% growth, the continent’s growth rate is expected to halve. Some countries have already contracted. The continental powerhouse, South Africa, has announced a forecast of minus 2% growth for 2010. This statistic hides personal tragedy for millions.

So, now is the time for concerted action by those with the means to make a difference. Last year in Kyoto & Osaka, my church was instrumental in organizing a convocation of religious leaders to deliver to the annual meeting of the G8 heads of state, through the Japanese government, a statement of concerns that included specific mention of the rich world’s particular moral duty to address African issues. Our precincts hosted an Africa seminar titled “Living with Africa: Reckoning with Poverty”, which debated how to give support in the areas of traditionally religious concern: health, education, emergency relief, as well as medium-term adaptation – in particular, self-sustained poverty alleviation.

It is critical that we help boost African civil society now, to carry it through this downturn. In the spirit of my grandfather’s outreach to Africa, I believe in direct poverty reduction at the grassroots – one possible model being, for example, my own church’s work in India, Nepal, Bangladesh, and Sri Lanka builds orphanages. The African HIV/Aids epidemic has left countless children homeless, all across the continent.

But already much good work is being done by dedicated people and communities, who deserve our commitment and support. Let us not be daunted by the scale of the challenge. Every contribution marks a point of hope for future growth and eventual flourishing.

Thank you.