



Submission No 41

**Review of Australia's Relationship with the
Countries of Africa**

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Australia's Relations with the Countries of Africa.

A Submission to the Joint Standing Committee on Foreign Affairs, Defence and Trade,

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1. Introduction.

I welcome the Australian Federal Government's intention to 're-engage' with Africa and the opportunity to make this late Submission to the present parliamentary enquiry into Relations between Australia and Africa.

My own engagement with Africa as an historian and social scientist began at the end of the 1950s at Makerere University in Kampala, Uganda and has continued ever since. My most recent visit was in 2006-2007. I have included a brief biographical summary as a postscript.

I have taken into account the Terms of Reference set out in the Committee's invitation to contribute to this enquiry. With this in mind this Submission is primarily with the form that Australian re-engagement may or should take; at what level; and the benefit/s for Africa. With this in mind I wish briefly to comment on three quite different but inter-related questions with which the Joint Committee I have no doubt will be concerned. These relate to:

first the eradication of poverty in Africa

second the role of mining in African development. .

third the present state of African Studies in Australia.

1. Historical Poverty in Africa

Africa is earth's second oldest and today, after Asia, second most populous and poorest continent. It is also, after Australia, the second driest. The Sahara desert reminds us that Africa is no stranger to environmental change and as Kenyan historian Bethwell Ogot warned us nearly fifty years ago 'Any historical reconstruction of Africa must take cognisance of the vast changes in the physical environment ...over the past one million years.' (1) The continent has an estimated and rapidly expanding population of 965 million unevenly distributed between its fifty four states and one non-independent territory. Natural resources are unevenly distributed between regions and states and good agricultural land is in short supply. Agriculture nevertheless has a long history, including with food crops such as Asian yams, taro, bananas reaching the continent from across the Indian ocean. The continent is rich in minerals so that it is not surprising that historian John Illiffe has described Africa as 'rich in minerals and poor in soils.' While some of the world's greatest and longest river systems wend their way across the continent, water, or rather the absence of water, is almost synonymous with poverty; sometimes it is simply 'in the wrong

place.' Long periods of drought, rivers in decline and lakes drying up have been recurring elements in African history. One of the most dramatic indications of climate change in eastern Africa over the last fifty years nevertheless must surely be the receding snow caps of Mt. Kilimanjaro and the Rwenzuru mountains. A further recent but invisible natural disaster for Africa has been the increased loss of precious top soil in the dust blown from the continent across the Atlantic. Lester Brown, Director of the Earth Policy Institute, concludes that for Africa 'Those big storms take millions of tonnes of soil which takes centuries to replace': a natural phenomenon that some farmers in Australia also experienced during the huge dust storms late September last year.(2)

At the same time the Director of ILRI Carlos Seré pointed out last year that African farmers and pastoralists across most of the continent, 'have a long history of dealing with the vagaries of the weather'. He concluded that at the beginning of the twenty-first century 'climate change will stretch their adaptive capacity beyond its limits, as recent severe drought in the region has made abundantly clear.' The current water crises affecting much of Africa and especially the Nile River Basin where nine riparian states seek to share its waters, including those of Lake Victoria, will resonate across Australia with its own severe water problems.. By the 1990s moreover access to land had become increasingly difficult in a continent where the land frontier in most regions had long since closed;and where, for example in Ethiopia, a new wave of external investment in large-scale commercial farming for food exports which has come to be known as 'land grabbing' had emerged.

2. Australian relations with Africa: One Clear Objective: poverty reduction through sustainable development)

Helge Kjeshus argued, now many years ago, that the ecological control that East Africans had achieved over their environment through the nineteenth century was largely destroyed at the end of the century by "a series of natural and man-made disasters that altered the ecological balance of the environment at a time of significant political change.' (1) It is tempting to see history 'repeating itself' a century later. Contemporary poverty in Africa is best understood in a similar context of economic and political changes that occurred through the brief colonial era of the twentieth century and created the export -oriented agriculture and mining industries across much of Africa which continue to the present day. Neither it seems has proved to be an adequate basis for economic independence and the eradication of poverty in today's independent African states.

Historically mining for example has created significant African working and middle classes; for example in South Africa, Zambia, and the Congo; and has also in the latter country produced significant political and military elites. It has not necessarily (to use an old-fashioned jargon) 'trickled down' to the poorest levels of those societies, or in fact all regions: not South Africa's gold, Zambia's

copper, or the Democratic Republic of Congo's diamonds; nor Nigerian oil. In South Africa we necessarily have to take into account the impact of the then apartheid basis of society. Nevertheless as a perceptive Zambian bureaucrat pointed out to me many years ago 'at the end of the day you are left with a hole in the ground'.; we should perhaps add, slag hills. On the contrary it has created not only wastelands but also deadlands as shown by the Nigerian Delta tragedy which was not too long ago in the news and as a result greater poverty.

This does not necessarily mean that Australia's 108 Resources Companies presently active across Africa must or should withdraw. It does suggest the need to be clear as to what constitutes sustainable development; and to accept that at least some natural resources are not necessarily inexhaustible. In addition the experience of the DRC in the 1970s when the armies of seven African states competed for DRC's diamonds is a clear demonstration of the potential relationship between competition and conflict. (3)

The 1997 *Review of Australian Overseas Aid* entitled One Clear Objective poverty eradication through sustainable development made clear, in relation to the eradication of global poverty, the dangers for Australia and her commitment to that objective of what were termed 'short term Australian commercial interests' determining the priorities of the aid programme.(4) The definition of 'Australia's national interests' remains therefore a critical element in Australia's relations with Africa; not least in her (Australia's) definition of her regional associations, and her identification of her role in Africa as a 'minor player'. And perhaps that is what the present enquiry is about. Australia has to be reminded that it is a three-ocean continent in an Indian Ocean that is a major highway between Asia and Africa not only in relation to trade and commerce and national security, with important obligations as well as associations with the lands around the Indian Ocean rim, including mainland Africa.

3. African Studies across Australia.

Historically Australian scholarly engagement with Africa was concerned essentially with the expansion of British imperial power into the Indian Ocean region and with the Commonwealth. The late Professor Fred Alexander, who was Professor of History into the late 1950s had strong academic links with the South African academy. Until the late 1960s however Australian scholarly interest as well I suspect as public and political interest in Africa was limited, and concerned primarily with South Africa. For many years I was regularly asked the question when I came on leave from one or other of the African universities where I taught 'Why did you go to Africa?'

The formation of the Australasian Association of African Studies(AFSAAP) in 1978 at a time when South African apartheid and Rhodesia's unilateral declaration of independence undoubtedly increased academic as well as public interest and it was indeed in 1978 that AFSAAP was formed. Disappointingly

however while African studies attracted undergraduates the universities did not follow with staff appointments except in rare cases. This situation is one that Monash University has recently set out to revive and nurture and we all wish it well. Nevertheless Africanists in Australia (and there are quite a number of us engaged in teaching and research) I suspect are conscious of their vulnerability especially from the narrow identification of Australia with the Pacific region; hence the importance of the current enquiry. (5) This at a time when there is an enormous need for Australians to understand for example the amazing revival of piracy across the Gulf of Aden and the Indian Ocean.

4. Conclusions.

Very briefly:

1. I wholeheartedly agree with Mr Bob McMullan, M.P., Federal Parliamentary Secretary for International development Assistance, when he pointed out in an interview on his return from a visit to Africa, that 'If you are really concerned about global poverty you've got to be engaged in Sub Saharen Africa.' (AusAid 13-11,2009.) However, global poverty reaches deep into Asia as well as Africa. I do not at this stage understand how to confront this difficulty, except to ensure that African poverty is recognised as a major responsibility. What is required is to ensure that Australia's role in the global battle against poverty is specifically related to Australia's role as a three-ocean state.

2. To restore the earlier form of scholarship program which I understand has already taken place is to be welcomed. Far more critical however, so far as tertiary education is concerned, so far as my experience in east Africa demonstrates, is to assist in the restoration of African universities as fully functioning and equipped teaching and research bodies. This is especially critical in the case of libraries--even if it means to changing to e-books although the idea appalls me!

Also to ensure that African students pursueing further education and training overseas want to return home, but even more critical that they are able to.

Cherry Gertzel.

1-2-2010

Notes.

1. *Hadith*, pp 1-6.

2. *The Guardian Weekly* 02.10.2009 p3.

3. See *Final Report of the Panel of Experts on the Illegal Exploitation of natural resources and other forms of wealth of the Democratic Republic of Congo; The Curse of Gold*.

4. See *One Clear Objective* poverty reduction through sustanable development, The Australian Overseas Aid Program, 1997. pp 1-9.

5. See my essay on African Studies in *Knowing Ourselves and Others. The Humanities in Australia into the 21st Century*. Australian Research Council, 1998.

Dr Tanya Lyons and Dr Liz Dymock and Dr Jolyon Ford and other members of AFSAAP have also written on this issue.

Cherry Gertzel: Brief Biographical Note.

I taught and researched from 1958 to 1975-76 as a staff member at, in turn, Makerere University Kampala in Uganda, Nairobi University, Nairobi in Kenya, and at The University of Zambia, in Lusaka, Zambia. On my return to Australia in 1975-76 I became a staff member at Flinders University in Adelaide, South Australia 1975-1993 and subsequently in Curtin University, 1993-1997; since when I have been Adjunct Professor in the Humanities and Social Sciences. At Flinders and Curtin universities I continued to engage in research most of it relating to the politics and administration on the three east African states, but also on more widely ranging issues of social change.; and still do so. I am an Hon. Research Fellow in the History Department at the University of Western Australia. I am a former President of the African Studies of Australasia and the Pacific (AFSAAP) and former Editor of *The Australasian Review of African Studies* (ARAS)(the Association's journal) (1984-2004).