

The subject who is truly loyal to the Chief Magistrate will neither advise nor submit to arbitrary measures. - JUNIUS



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Tackling the sacred cow of Ottawa's African aid

With the best of intentions, Canada has poured billions of dollars in aid into sub-Saharan Africa over the decades. But the sad fate of that aid, and the great tragedy of the region, is captured in a simple graph on the cover of a new Senate foreign affairs committee report on the situation. A blue line that tracks Africa's share of global economic activity snakes across the grid, slipping steadily downward from 1965 to 2004. Sub-Saharan Africa's economic share has dwindled to almost half of what it once was.

"The committee has concluded that forty years of foreign aid has done little to propel Africa from economic stagnation or to improve the quality of life on the continent," the 189-page report says. "The Canadian International Development Agency has failed to make a foreign aid difference in Africa. . . . CIDA is ineffective, costly and overly bureaucratic." As a result, it adds, CIDA should be abolished or drastically overhauled.

In Ottawa, that teacup-rattling prescription is heresy. But after two years and the testimony of more than 400 witnesses on three continents, the committee has produced a thought-provoking analysis. The senators spare no one, from corrupt African governments to world trade rules that hinder market access for African agricultural products. But they reserve much of their tough talk for the aid agency that has directed \$12.4-billion in bilateral help into the troubled area since 1968.

The picture is not pretty. Fully 81 per

cent of CIDA's 1,500 employees work at its Ottawa headquarters. Staffers in the field have little authority to design projects or allocate funds. As a result, Canadian aid is "slow, inflexible and unresponsive to conditions on the ground," the report says. It is also scattershot, going to 46 of 53 African nations. Each new minister, and there have been 11 since 1989, changes priorities. The committee says that aid has been focused too heavily on social welfare at the expense of economic development, which would help countries help themselves.

Its prescription is drastic: Ottawa should create an Africa Office that would bundle staffers for aid, trade, security and foreign affairs under one roof with the principal mandate of economic development. At least four-fifths of this staff should be dispersed to the field with decision-making authority. If CIDA is preserved, it should focus on such areas as agricultural productivity, improved access to micro-finance and small business development.

CIDA insiders insist that the agency has evolved over the past five years. About 60 per cent of its bilateral African aid goes to six well-functioning countries. It is working on initiatives to improve governance in such nations as Mali and Tanzania. And it has put money into basic education and treatment for HIV/AIDS and malaria because those have a direct economic impact.

But real change comes slowly to all bureaucracies. The senators have taken on a sacred Ottawa cow. Such a hard look was long overdue.