



Teaming Up with Africa

In the post-COVID-19 world Canada will need to re-think its foreign policy; which must focus on upholding our values, maintaining our priorities, and building a network of allies. As part of this re-think, Canada will need to reassess its partnership with the continent of Africa. Faced with major challenges on trade, health care, climate change, and food security, we need to broaden our horizons to view the 54 countries as, individually and collectively, potential and genuine partners for the realization of our foreign policy goals.

For Canadians, a rules-based international order, centred around multilateral cooperation, is critical for our well-being. The last years have shown in dramatic fashion that we cannot depend on our links with “great powers” not even the one with whom we share the world’s longest undefended border. Canada needs more trading partners--a core imperative behind the trade diversification agenda. China’s recent actions against Canadian citizens and against Canadian trade interests remind us that heavy dependence on the world’s second great power is risky. We now also have a new perspective on international supply chains and the associated risks and costs, which should push Canada to look for new partners as well as domestic possibilities.

Although Canada did not win a two-year term on the Security Council, this should not and will not stop our continued efforts to tackle the major challenges the world faces. For many of these we will need to build teams with others to bring about the needed changes. The Canadian government’s re-engagement with African countries and institutions in late 2019 and early 2020 was an excellent start to opening doors for some new partnerships. It showed a recognition of Africa’s growing economic importance, as well as its demographic and diplomatic weight.

However, our engagement with Africa needs to be one of genuine exchange, where both parties learn from each other. Many African leaders feel that Canada ignores them and their countries except when we need them. A new tone, a new approach, based on mutual respect and shared practical goals, is needed. While it is true that Africa would benefit from good relations with Canada, it is also true that Canada would benefit from good relations with African states. The range of areas for engagement goes beyond the traditional development areas of aid and debt relief – although it does need to include them too. Crucially, Africa has growing potential as a trading partner, and it plays an important role in the global governance we want to see strengthened.

Africa and Canada also share concerns about global public goods, where externalities affect us whatever our own actions – notably in areas like pandemics and climate change. Also, despite some cultural differences, African states will also be key partners in Canada's push for gender equality.

A fair question is why would African countries want to engage with Canada, a far-away country with a limited presence on the continent. Although we had a noteworthy record of development assistance, debt relief (during the HIPC period), and political engagement (for example in the fight against apartheid), in recent years we have been better known for mining investment, with limited involvement on other issues of importance to Africa beyond rhetorical engagement.

New Partnerships

What type of new partners does Africa want? Debt relief is again on the agenda post COVID-19, and Canada has shown leadership in organizing discussions on the subject. Although we are not a major creditor, we will be expected to contribute.

Climate change is a particularly high risk for sub-Saharan Africa. Temperature increases in the region will be even bigger than the global average; regions in Africa within 15 degrees of the equator are projected to be particularly affected. Canada has been active in the climate change area since the Paris Accord, but our efforts have been heavily focused on multilateral mitigation initiatives. In terms of our African engagement strategy as well as in the interests of a more balanced climate change agenda, we should look to provide significant support to Sub-Saharan African efforts to adapt to the inevitable warming they already face.

The food security issue is closely related to climate change. Projections of world-wide hunger post COVID-19 are particularly serious for Africa, where ruptures in

global supply chains threaten supplies of fertilizer and other inputs. Even before the pandemic, the UNEP was predicting that between 75 and 250 million Africans would face increased water stress by this year, due to climate change. Some countries' yields from rain-fed agriculture could fall by up to 50 percent. Even if international efforts keep global warming below 2°C, the continent could still face climate change adaptation costs of US\$ 50 billion per year by 2050.

Challenges notwithstanding, engagement with Africa must take the form of genuine exchange. As COVID-19 spread around the world, there was widespread concern that the virus would simply overwhelm Africa, given the level of poverty and the well-known deficiencies of its health systems. While it is too soon to deliver a final verdict, the direct health impact in Africa so far has been less than expected.

Many African countries have been more adept than expected at managing lockdowns and quarantines drawing from lessons learned managing other pandemics such as Ebola. This would be an interesting symbol of the need for Canada to look at its African partners with less condescension. There may be aspects of pandemic management that we can learn from Africans, including cost-effective solutions for health checks and tracing.

Nevertheless, Africa will face great pressures on its health care systems – even if, in the immediate, the pressures on their economies from reduced demand and lower commodity prices are their main problems. Many economies may need debt relief as well as more ventilators.

Africa will need specific help in the health area as the world learns how to manage the new disease (tests, treatment, vaccines), including ensuring that they can access equipment now and treatments or vaccines in the future. Such access issues are ones also faced by mid-sized developed countries – Canada should be fighting for a fair and global approach.

This brings us to a key part of our vision of an enhanced relationship with Africa, trade! Many African countries are prioritizing efforts to diversify their economies as well, seeking partners in key areas such as the technology for alternative energy development. The relative youthfulness of the African population could give the continent a comparative advantage as an alternative to Asia in the supply of labour-intensive goods or inputs. African countries have endorsed the rhetoric of free trade, as shown by the ratification of the African Continental Free Trade Area. Yet fundamental challenges remain, with very limited amounts of intra-African trade at the moment, despite fairly long-standing FTAs at the regional level.

What Canada needs to do

Canada needs to show Africa that the renewal of interest shown this past winter was not (only) about winning a Security Council seat. Canada needs to develop, and publicly articulate, a broad Africa strategy for future engagement. It should recognize that the key thing Africa needs has not changed – more growth to offset weak demand elsewhere, to finance education of the “demographic dividend generation” so that Africa can maximize the benefits it can win from the demographic transition.

A Canadian Africa strategy should include greater diplomatic, trade and aid links with Africa, embodying plans for more diplomatic and trade commissioner posts on the continent and enhanced and reimagined development assistance. In the short-run it won't be clear exactly how much damage the pandemic has done to Canada or to Africa. However, even with all the budgetary pressures on the Government, there should be room for additional as well as redirected resources to help African countries repair their economies. (Only redirecting assistance will NOT be a signal of enhanced engagement.)

Canada will not have the resources to engage bilaterally with all African countries, but it should use multilateral channels to strengthen relations (notably at African or heavily African institutions such as the African Union, the African Development Bank, UN Economic Commission for Africa, the Commonwealth and La Francophonie) particularly but not only with those countries where we don't have missions. This approach would have the added benefit of consistency with our broader engagement with multilateralism. This may require some flexibility – like many countries we have a tendency to view bilateral and multilateral relations as being in separate boxes.

African leaders are not interested in receiving aid in the traditional sense but instead eager to build constructive new relationships that will give the continent a more sustainable future, free from the dependencies of old. This way of understanding Africa will require a change in Canadian attitudes about how to engage with Africa, requiring humility and an open mind. The dividends from this change of approach would be worth it.