# On the richness of Africa

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*ABSTRACT: This paper argues that there needs to be a shift in the balance of understandings of Africa from being a continent dominated by poverty to one that is instead conceptualised as being 'rich'. It begins with an overview of arguments that seek to portray Africa as being poor, and then examines the interests that donors, African governments, the private sector, civil society and consultants all have in propagating such an image. In contrast, it then illustrates how Africa can instead be seen as being rich in terms of its mineral wealth, agricultural potential, culture, social and political institutions, and physical environment. It concludes by arguing that development initiatives that continue to seek to eliminate poverty in Africa will remain doomed to failure unless they refocus their attention on building upon the continent's existing riches.*

## 1. Introduction: African poverty and richness

Africa is all too frequently described as being 'poor', be it in academic discourses, global development conferences, the popular media, or the minds of most people as they go about their daily lives. In his important book, *The End of Poverty*, Jeffrey Sachs (2005, p.208), for example, comments that 'The combination of Africa's adverse geography and its extreme poverty creates the worst poverty trap in the world'. Likewise, Tunde Obadina (2004, unpaginated), the Director of Africa Business Information Services, comments that 'Africa is clearly a land of extreme poverty. The continent epitomises destitution, its images commonly used by media and charity organisations to depict human want and suffering'. The BBC's news website for children, cbbc newsround, similarly has a page entitled 'Why is Africa poor?' that includes the following summary: 'By the year 2000, half the world's poor were in Africa. It is the only continent to have become poorer in the past 25 years. This is because of several reasons: borrowing money, growing cash crops, dictatorship, fighting, population growth, land ownership, climate change, dirty water' (http://news.bbc.co.uk/cbbcnews/hi/newsid_4070000/newsid_4077100/4077104.stm accessed 15th September 2008).

In contrast to such arguments, this paper seeks to explore the implications of the suggestion that Africa might actually be a 'rich' continent. Such a notion immediately forces us to consider three issues: first, the ways in which we define poverty and richness; second, the interests that continue to shape our understandings of Africa as being poor; and third, the evidence that might exist that Africa is indeed rich. By exploring these agendas, I seek to encourage a shift away from an emphasis on how to 'eliminate poverty' in Africa towards a focus on ways in which those interested in doing so might be able to help Africans to 'build on their richness'. There is undoubted human suffering and poverty to be encountered across Africa, but it is important to challenge all too often taken for granted assumptions about the ways in which particular places are characterised. Posing the question of whether Africa is 'rich' or 'poor' not only encourages us to examine how we conceive of these notions, but more importantly it forces us to explore the reasons why such terms are used to describe certain places and people, and what their implications are for 'development' practices. In essence, we need to understand the interests underlying the use of words such as 'rich' and 'poor'.

Descriptions of African poverty are common across all areas of practice, be it in academic research, the rhetoric of donors, images in the mass media, or the advertising campaigns of international and local civil society organisations. Some of the clearest and most influential statements about poverty have been derived from the plethora of initiatives originating around the Millennium Declaration and the associated Millennium Development Goals (MDGs), the first of which is explicitly committed to eradicating extreme poverty and hunger (http://www.un.org/millenniumgoals, accessed 2nd July 2008). The UN's 2007 update on Africa and the MDGs thus comments that 'Although there have been major gains in several areas and the Goals remain achievable in most African nations, even the best governed countries on the continent have not been able to make sufficient progress in reducing extreme poverty in its many forms' (UN, 2007a, p.1). Indeed, as the report goes on to say, 'it is well known that the continent is the only region in the world where the number of extreme poor has risen over the past fifteen years' (UN, 2007a, p.3). Such global agendas have been translated into specific bilateral donor policies, typified by the emphasis that the UK's Department for International Development (DFID) places on poverty elimination. When the Labour party returned to power in 1997, its first White Paper on International Development was thus entitled *Eliminating world poverty: A challenge for the 21st century* (DFID, 1997), and the 2002 International Development Act in the UK likewise begins with the explicit statement that 'The Secretary of State may provide any person or body with development assistance if he is satisfied that the provision of the assistance is likely to contribute to a reduction of poverty' (Office of Public Sector Information, 2002). Henceforth, DFID's resources must be used explicitly for the purpose of reducing 'poverty'.

One of the most eloquent campaigners against poverty in Africa has been Jeffrey Sachs (2005), whose book *The End of Poverty* seeks to provide both a diagnosis of African poverty and also a prescription for how it can be ended, largely through the use of increased amounts of development assistance to enable sustained economic growth to take place (although for recent critiques see Easterley, 2006; Unwin, 2007). As he argues, 'At the most basic level, the key to ending extreme poverty is to enable the poorest of the poor to get their foot on the ladder of development' (Sachs, 2005, p. 244). At a more populist level, one has only to turn to the pages of most newspapers or visit the websites of international news channels to be bombarded with text and imagery propagating the notion that Africa is 'poor'. Some 140,000 results are currently thrown up by a search on Google for "African poverty" (accessed 2nd July 2008) - in contrast to a mere 58 for "African richness" - with the striking image shown in Figure 1, taken from the Borgen Project site (http://borgenproject.org, accessed 2nd July 2008) being featured at the top of the search page. Amongst civil society organisations, Traidcraft's strapline is 'Fighting poverty through trade', Oxfam's home page is dominated by the launch of its new book *From Poverty to Power* (Green, 2008) under the headline 'Poverty – the great struggle of our times', and Muslim Hands emphasises in its work that 'we believe that poverty can and must be eradicated, as it exists primarily die to the unjust distribution of resources' (http://www.muslimhands.org/en/gb/about_mh/, accessed 2nd July 2008)

**Figure 1**

*Image of poverty donated by Corbis – Bettmann*

Source: http://borgenproject.org/2.html, accessed 2nd July 2008

The evidence is apparently overwhelming that Africa and Africans are therefore poor. However, such a view is by no means universal, and there is increasing recognition that Africa may not actually be as poor as is often envisaged, even based on traditional definitions of poverty. A recent headline in the *Times* (9th April 2008, p. 5), for example, states that 'India takes on China over Africa's riches'. As the article goes on to say, 'India has granted Africa radically improved terms of trade in the clearest signal yet that it intends to compete head-to-head with China for access to the continent's natural resources'. Setri Nyommi, General Secretary of the Southern Africa Alliance participating in the Inter-Faith Peace Summit held in Johannesburg in 2003, which brought together African religious leaders from 21 countries and many different faiths, has likewise summarised the situation clearly by noting that 'In spite of Africa's richness in human and material resources, in life-giving cultural traditions, and in our embracing of faith commitments … the general image that people have of our continent is one of conflict, war, poverty, suffering, disease, violence, and injustice of every kind' (http://www.warc.ch/update/up131/10.html, accessed 2nd July 2008).

The central purpose of this paper is to pursue some of the reasons why this might be, and to examine what the implications are for the ways in which the life opportunities of people born in Africa today may be enhanced. The paper begins with a brief review of some of the main arguments concerning African poverty, before delving more deeply into the reasons why different types of organisation persist in emphasising its poverty over its richness. The remainder of the paper then examines the evidence for Africa's richness in more detail, and it concludes by suggesting that a shift to recognising Africa's richness would be much more beneficial to the continent's poor people than continuing to focus on the continent's poverty.

## 2. Defining African Poverty

This section highlights the diversity of meanings attributed to poverty, and emphasises that African poverty has been attributed to many causes. Above all, it argues that poverty is a construct; it is a word that has been used to serve particular purposes, and it can therefore only be understood in the context of those purposes. As Yapa (2001, p. 1) has commented, 'The materiality of the poverty problem does not exist independent of discourses we have constructed to understand it' (see also Crush, 1995).

## 2.1 Poverty as a construct

The word ‘poverty’ has been used in a wide variety of different ways throughout history, but at the heart of its meaning is the notion of a lack something, usually material needs (Beaudoin, 2006; Spicker, Alvarez Leguizamon and Gordon, 2007). It derives ultimately from the Latin *paupertas* (*pauper* + *tas*), through the Old French *poverte*, from which the modern French word *pauvreté* is also derived. Interestingly, the Latin *pauper*, from which the English word ‘pauper’ is derived, is a combination of *pau*, meaning small, and *pario*, meaning to give birth to, and in origin it therefore seems to have had an agricultural meaning referring either to livestock that produced small young, or land that was unproductive. At the heart of the notion of poverty is therefore that it is grounded in the land and agricultural production.

In much of Christian medieval Europe, poverty was seen as an inevitable part of human existence, a belief derived in large part from Jesus’ statement in the Bible that ‘You will always have the poor among you’ (NIV, John 12: 8; see also mark 14:7, and Matthew 26:11). Four other much older understandings of poverty, derived from Jewish traditions represented in the Old Testament, were nevertheless also prevalent in medieval Europe: that God will provide for the poor (Psalm 140:12); that we have a duty to help the poor by ensuring that they have justice and that their material needs are met (Proverbs 29:7; Leviticus 19:10); that the poor are in many ways better off than some other groups of people, notably the foolish or perverse rich (Proverbs 28:6; Ecclesiastes 4:13); and yet also that laziness and indulgence will make someone poor (Proverbs 10:4 and 21:17). Such views, particularly the notion that weak morals were largely to blame for poverty, lasted well into the 19$^{th}$ century, and it was only during the 20$^{th}$ century that there came to be widespread acceptance that social, economic and environmental factors had a significant impact on poverty. The old distinction between the ‘deserving poor’, those who because of their dependency as widows, orphans, prisoners or those with disabilities actually deserve to receive material aid, and the ‘undeserving poor’, who are able to work but who out of laziness or for some other reason are unwilling to do so, nevertheless still remains a powerful influence in many current discussions of poverty. This is particularly so in sub-Saharan Africa, where Christianity remains the dominant religion, and where Biblical teaching about poverty remains highly relevant for the lives of many millions of people (for a wider discussion of development ethics, see O'Neill, 1986; Corbridge, 1998).

In seeking to provide an overall framework for considering definitions of poverty, Stewart, Saith and Harriss-White (2007) have usefully suggested that there have been four main ways in which poverty is defined: the monetary approach, the capabilities approach, the social exclusion approach, and the participatory approach (see also http://www.poverty.org.uk, accessed 3rd July 2008). As they note, 'Poverty, of course, represents deprivation, but the definition of what is being deprived and by how much – are not agreed' (Stewart, Saith and Harriss-White, 2007, cover). The most significant point to which their work draws attention, though, is that the way in which poverty is defined and measured has considerable ramifications for the conclusions that are drawn and thus the policies that are subsequently constructed upon them.

**2.2 Economic approaches to poverty definition**

Economic definitions of poverty continue to dominate 'development' both in theory and practice, despite the numerous criticisms to which they have been subjected. In part, this results from the practical importance of the economy in people's everyday lives, but it also reflects the dominance of economic thinking in the international development arena, among both multilateral institutions, such as the World Bank and the UN, and also within bilateral donor agencies. Whilst the 1980s and 1990s to some extent saw a shift away from crude economic indicators of 'development' (Drakakis-Smith, 1994), the return of economic growth agendas with a vengeance in the later 1990s and 2000s has meant that poverty is still seen mainly in economic terms. Above all else, poverty remains defined primarily in terms of GDP per capita, and more specifically extreme poverty, as enshrined in the Millennium Development Goals, is considered to be the proportion of people in a given area living on one dollar a day (World Bank, 2006, 2007). Accordingly, some 41.1% of African people remained extremely poor in 2007 (UN, 2007a).

Moreover, 18 of the 20 poorest countries of the world in terms of GDP per capita are in Africa. By such definitions, Africa is indeed poor.

Such arguments have also led to a general acceptance that poverty can most usefully be defined in absolute terms. Moreover, this in turn has reinforced the view that the most appropriate solution to poverty lies in the fostering of the conditions for economic growth (Unwin, 2007). However, such absolute definitions of poverty have been widely criticised by those who see poverty as being a relative phenomenon, albeit still in economic terms (see for example Sen, 1976; Desai and Shah, 1988; O'Boyle, 1999; Madden, 2000). O'Boyle (1999) in particular has emphasised that those advocating absolute and relative definitions of poverty do so based on profoundly different understandings of the ways in which economic affairs are, and should be, managed. Indeed, those who have argued that a key feature of contemporary development practice is that its emphasis on economic growth is in practice being undermined by increasing inequalities would appear to be vindicated by an increasing amount of empirical evidence. Even the Millennium Development Goal Report for 2007 (UN, 2007b, p.8), usually an ardent advocate of the benefits of economic growth, highlighted that 'the benefits of economic growth in the developing world have been unequally shared, both within and among countries' (see also Milanovic, 2005). The implications of this are highly significant.

### 2.3 Alternative poverty constructs

Although economic definitions of poverty dominate global agendas, there has long been recognition that alternative conceptualisations of poverty also have validity. In the UN's (2008, p. 5) *Millennium Development Goals Report* for 2008, Sha Zukang thus comments that

> 'the results achieved to date highlight, once again, the multifaceted nature of poverty, the interactions of its various causes and manifestations and the wide-ranging and mutually reinforcing nature of the actions that have to be taken. The poor are not only those with the lowest

> incomes but also those who are the most deprived of health, education and other aspects of human well-being'.

This diversity has been acknowledged particularly in the Human Development Index (HDI) published by the UN since 1990 in its *Human Development Reports*. While the HDI has also been widely criticised (McGillivray, 1991; Noorbakhsh, 1998; Sagar and Najam, 1998; Cahill, 2005), its inclusion of life expectancy and educational dimensions alongside GDP has provided an alternative interpretation of poverty. Nevertheless, even by this measure, Sub-Saharan Africa remains by far the least developed continent in the world, with an average HDI in 2005 of only 0.493, compared with a figure of 0.611 for South Asia and a world average of 0.743 (UNDP, 2007). Moreover, almost 75% of African countries listed are ranked lower according to HDI than they are for GDP.

Another alternative to purely economic measures of poverty has been a focus on capabilities, as reflected in Sen's work and the Capability Poverty Measure (CPM). The CPM, introduced in the *Human Development Report* of 1996, built on Sen's (1976, 1999) arguments that a society's level of development should be measured by people's capabilities to live the lives they value rather than merely being based on economic standards of living, and it included measures of absence of three basic capabilities: the lack of being well nourished and healthy (% children under 5 who are underweight); a lack of capability for healthy reproduction (% births unattended by trained personnel); and a lack of capability to be educated and knowledgeable (female illiteracy). One of its key findings was that while 21% of people were then below the income poverty line, some 37% faced capability poverty.

Sen (1999) has subsequently refined and developed the notion of poverty as capability, and has explicitly linked this to ideas of freedom (see also Levine, 2004; McKinley, 2006). In essence, he argues that 'poverty' should be seen primarily as a lack of freedom, most recently summarising his views as follows:

> '…ultimately we have to see poverty as unfreedoms of various sorts: the lack of freedom to achieve even

> minimally satisfactory living conditions. Low income can certainly contribute to that, but so can a number of other influences, such as the lack of schools, absence of health facilities, unavailability of medicines, the subjugation of women, hazardous environmental features, and a lack of jobs (something that affects more than the earning of incomes)' (Sen, 2008, xiii).

Significantly, this list closely follows the MDGs, focusing as it does on education, gender, health, the environment and employment. More broadly, five freedoms have generally been seen as being essential for the elimination of poverty: 'political freedom, economic facilities, social opportunities, transparency guarantees and protective security' (http://www.removingunfreedoms.org/, accessed 16th September 2008). However, the critical point to note is that Africa is still defined as being poor, even adopting a freedom and capability approach to poverty. As Sen (1999, p.99) has commented, 'Extreme poverty is now heavily concentrated in two particular regions of the world: South Asia and Africa'. Indeed, it is interesting to note in this context that even Sen (1999, p.206) has argued that it is economic factors that underlie Africa's poverty: '…the problems of Africa are mainly a reflection of a general economic crisis (indeed a crisis with strong social and political as well as economic components)'.

Closely linked to these notions of freedom and capability are definitions of poverty in terms of social exclusion and lack of participation. Saith (2001) thus emphasises that the notion of 'social exclusion' was initially applied during the mid-1990s in the context of unemployment and the welfare state in Western Europe, but she emphasises that its emphasis on investigating the processes leading to poverty can provide added insights for understanding poverty in developing countries. Other benefits of a social exclusion approach include its emphasis on the multidimensional, relational, relative and dynamic character of poverty. Likewise, participatory approaches to poverty have drawn attention to the need to listen to how poor people actually define the concept of poverty themselves (see, for example, Brocklesby and Hinshelwood, 2001). Accordingly, Narayan *et al*. (2000, p.217) thus note that

'In rural Africa … the poor are defined as those who have to sell their produce at low prices to the rich and later buy it back at high prices because they need immediate cash and lack storage facilities; or those who work long hours for low wages because they have no bargaining power'. Interestingly, again, this is primarily an economic definition. What matters most for my argument here, though, is that even adopting social exclusion and participatory approaches to poverty, Africa is still fundamentally defined as being a poor continent.

**2.4 Causes of African poverty**

Just as there are many definitions of poverty in Africa, so too have there been numerous contrasting interpretations of its causes and ways in which it can be eliminated. An understanding of how these have been constructed is essential if we are to grapple with the complex reasons why people persist in describing Africa as poor. Three examples are particularly worthy of note, highlighting as they do, different approaches to the issue: the recommendations of the MDG Africa Steering Group in 2008; the Commission for Africa report of 2005; and Jeffrey Sach's (2005) account in *The End of Poverty*.

The MDG Africa Steering Group (2008) recommendations provide one point of entry into this debate. These were 'jointly produced and endorsed by the leaders of the United Nations, the African Union Commission, the African Development Bank Group, the European Commission, the International Monetary Fund, the Islamic Development Bank Group, the Organisation for Economic Co-operation and Development, and the World Bank Group' (http://www.mdgafrica.org/achieving_mdg.html, accessed 16th September 2008), and can therefore be considered as an indication of current thinking among multilateral donor agencies and African leaders. Having commented that progress towards delivery of the MDGs is not on track in many African countries, the Steering Group noted that there have been some successes, and argued that 'rapid progress is possible across Africa when sound national programmes are matched with adequate development assistance and full support from the international system' (MDG Africa Steering Group, 208, p.1). It went on to report that 'Existing international commitments – if fully implemented – can expand these success stories and are sufficient to achieve the MDGs' (MDG Africa Steering Group, 208, p.1). Given the composition of the Steering Group, it could hardly have argued otherwise, but such optimism is indeed surprising given the widespread evidence of continuing poverty across the continent. What is of most interest for the present paper, though, is the actual recommendations that the Steering Group made. These were grouped under sector headings related to agriculture and food security, education, health, infrastructure and trade facilities, national statistical systems (including census and civil registration), and climate proofing. Additionally, it called for donors to deliver on their existing commitments (totalling US$ 72 billion a year) which are seen as being sufficient to reach the MDGs in Africa, for increased aid predictability, for the scaling up of aid, and for follow-through on the financing needed. In essence, the Steering Group is calling for more of the same, and is fundamentally focusing on instruments for enhancing economic growth in its recommendations. The causes of poverty are seen primarily as being economic, and capable of 'elimination' through an injection of financial development assistance. Given the widespread emphasis among bilateral donors on the need for changes to governance structures in Africa, it is striking that the summary of the Steering Group's recommendations makes no mention of governance or indeed of the significant social or cultural dimensions to poverty.

In contrast, the Commission for Africa (2005), also reflecting a diversity of donor and African perspectives, chose to adopt a much broader and more nuanced understanding of African poverty. Their report begins with a clear statement that 'African poverty and stagnation is the greatest tragedy of our time' (Commission for Africa, 205, p.11), and then argues that a partnership between Africa and the developed world is therefore needed to enhance economic growth and good governance so that poverty can be tackled. The report's title, *Our Common Interest*, and this notion of partnership are highly significant for the analysis below, since they highlight the varying interests that different groups have in reducing African poverty. Instead of placing primacy on economic factors, the Commission for Africa (2005, p.12) emphasised that 'Without progress in governance, all other reforms will have limited impact'.

As the Commission (2005, p.98) goes on to say, ‘The major obstacles to African development in the past several decades have been difficult geography and poor governance’. These, though, are identified primarily because they limit the potential for economic growth. In summary, the report identifies four main groups of factors that have caused African poverty: *political*, including governance and conflict; *structural*, including fragmentation, transport costs, and the roles of agriculture, manufacturing, and services; *environmental and technological*, including climate, water, desertification, deforestation, and technological development; and *human*, health, education, and the growth and age structure of population’ (Commission for Africa, 2005, p.98). Key governance issues that require attention are seen as conflict, capacity to design and deliver policies, accountability, transparency and corruption.

A third perspective on the reasons for Africa’s poverty is provided by Jeffrey Sachs (2005) in *The End of Poverty*. In direct contrast to the Commission for Africa’s emphasis on governance, Sachs (2005, p.190) argues that ‘Both the critics of African governance and the critics of Western violence and meddling have got it wrong. Politics, at the end of the day, simply cannot explain Africa’s prolonged economic crisis. The claim that Africa’s corruption is the basic source of the problem does not withstand practical experience or serious scrutiny’. Instead, Sachs (2005, p.208) suggests that ‘The combination of Africa’s adverse geography and its extreme poverty creates the worst poverty trap in the world’. In particular, he draws attention to the following factors in explaining Africa’s low levels of economic growth: the lack of navigable rivers; the high percentages of its population living in the interior; the lack of irrigation and dominance of rainfed agriculture; heavily depleted soils; poor communication infrastructure; and the high incidence of disease, particularly malaria and HIV/AIDS. For Sachs, the crucial thing is that these factors have limited the potential for Africa to break out of poverty into sustained economic growth, and closely paralleling the Commission for Africa’s arguments, he too suggests that part of the solution is to develop a new kind of relationship, a global compact, between the rich and poor countries to help achieve this.

A particularly interesting feature of all of these arguments is the emphasis that they place on the ‘geography’ of Africa. This is explicitly so in the arguments of Sachs (2005) and the Commission for Africa (2005), but it is also present in the MDG Africa Steering Group’s (2008) emphasis on climate change and the environment. This raises very important questions about the attribution of notions of poverty to specific places, and it also begs the question as to whether it is actually places or people that are poor. We therefore need to ask whether there is something absolute about Africa as a place that makes it poor? For Sachs, the answer would appear to be yes: its lack of rivers providing navigation for exports to the coast; the environmental conditions that are so favourable to malaria; and the poor quality of its soils. Such notions, though, come perilously close to the arguments of the environmental determinists of the early part of the 20th century, such as Semple (1911, p.1) who wrote that

> ‘Man is a product of the earth’s surface. This means not merely that he is a child of the earth, dust of her dust, but that the earth has mothered him, fed him, set him tasks, directed his thoughts, confronted him with difficulties that have strengthened his body and sharpened his wits, given him his problems of navigation or irrigation, and at the same time whispered hints for their solution’.

The fundamental problem with such arguments is that they suggest that there are specific physical characteristics that make places as they are, and that these are absolute and lasting. As Semple 1911, p.620) went on to write with respect to the effects of climate on human behaviour, ‘The southerners of the subtropical Mediterranean basin are easy-going, improvident except under pressing necessity, gay, emotional, imaginative, all qualities which among the negroes of the equatorial belt degenerate into grave racial faults’. Accordingly, places with poor ‘natural resources’ or climates would inevitably be poor. If this were indeed the case, then no matter how much development assistance was proffered, such places would always remain at a disadvantage. However, human ingenuity and adaptability have instead meant that some of the most inhospitable parts of the world, such as the deserts of Saudi Arabia or the seas around Norway, now produce vast wealth - from hydrocarbon resources. As the French historian Febvre wrote in 1925 (p.236), 'There are no necessities, but everywhere possibilities; and man as master of possibilities, is judge of their use'. Those who argue that Africa is poor, frequently do so based on the idea that it has poor 'natural' physical endowments that necessarily make it poor. The observation that in the past or at the present somewhere is poor does not necessarily mean that it will always remain so. There is thus an important distinction between the actual and potential effects of the physical environment on poverty. When Wilfred Thesiger originally wrote his *Arabian Sands* in 1959 (Thesiger, 2008), for example, he had little idea of the transformation to the lives of the Bedu of the Arabian Peninsula that would soon result from the exploitation of its oil resources.

A further difficulty with much of the debate on African poverty is a conflation between people and places. Much of the international development community focuses primarily on the provision of assistance to specific places, with bilateral donors choosing to provide support to particular countries that they deem to be poor, largely based on figures for GDP per capita. DFID's Public Service Agreement targets for 2005-2008, thus explicitly state that it will achieve 'progress towards the MDGs in 16 key countries in Africa, demonstrated by' five main indicators (http://www.dfid.gov.uk/pubs/files/PSA/DFID-PSA-2005-08.pdf, accessed 16th September 2008). These countries include around 55% of Africa's population, but the assumption is still that poor people live in poor countries. This ignores the reality that many poor people live in middle-income countries, and these people are frequently therefore ignored in the implementation of country-based bilateral assistance programmes.

A final problem with descriptions of Africa as a 'poor' continent in physical terms is that they ignore the very wide diversity in the 'natural' environment not only across the continent, but also within its various countries. There are fundamental differences between the southern edges of the Sahara and the coast of the Gulf of Guinea, between the Ethiopian

Highlands and the Nile Valley, and between the Great Rift Valley and the banks of the Congo river. It is a dangerous over-simplification to label these all simply as being 'poor'.

If arguments based on the identification of Africa as a continent with poor 'natural' physical endowments are problematic, then those that seek to lay the blame for African poverty on its people are all the more complex and sensitive. As Sachs (2005, p.207) once again has commented, 'Africa gets a bad rap as the "corrupt continent". Even when such sentiments are not racist in intent, they survive in our societies as conventional wisdom because of existing widespread racism'. Despite such warnings, corruption, warfare, violence, human right abuses, and a host of other actions by African leaders are often blamed for continuing poverty across the continent (Commission for Africa, 2005). Even here, though, there are debates as to whether such actions result primarily from the behaviour of ruling African elites, or whether they reflect underlying structural issues affecting the global economy more widely.

## 3. The interests in African poverty

There are many existing critiques of the 'development project' (see for example Crush, 1995; Rahnema and Bawtree, 1997; Kothari, 2006), but few have explicitly addressed the notion that it is the way in which we define places and people as being 'poor', rather than rich, that lies at the heart of problem. In part, this is because they have focused primarily on a critique of 'development' rather than of 'poverty' itself. In his ground-breaking critique, Escobar (1995, p.21), for example, highlighted how, 'In the rapid globalization of U.S. domination as a world power, "the war on poverty" in the Third World began to occupy a prominent place' in the post-World War II era, but his primary focus was on the ways in which discourses on 'development' created the so-called Third World rather than specifically with poverty and richness themselves (see also Amin, 1972). It was the explicit bringing together of the notions of 'poverty' and 'development' in the Millennium Development Goals of 2000, based on the belief that it is really possible to eliminate extreme poverty, that brought the concept of poverty firmly again to the fore of global attention. Nevertheless, as Easterly (2008) has pointed out, the ways in which the Millennium Development Goals (MDGs) were defined have had important ramifications for our understanding of African poverty. Having reviewed the bias against Africa in the MDGs, he concludes that

> 'The obvious question to ask is why did the MDG set up portray universal failure in Africa when actually there were important successes? There are two possibilities – that it was accidental or that it was intentional. ... If it was accidental, then it points at the least to carelessness about the MDG campaign, which did not think through setting up the MDGs in a way that gave a fair portrait of progress in all regions. … The other possibility is that the bias against Africa was intentionally condoned (including the possibility that the bias-inducing shift from the global to the regional and country level was intentionally condoned). I am not suggesting any sinister conspiracy, just a possibility that the greater ''ambition'' of the goals for Africa was understood and accepted. If so, perhaps it was motivated by the desire to draw more attention to Africa, raise more foreign aid resources, and spur other actions to solve Africa's problems (Easterly, 2008, p.12).

This raises important questions about the intentionality of those involved in shaping development discourses, and indeed about why it may be in their interests for Africa and Africans to be seen as being poor. To explore this further, this section examines the contrasting but coalescing interests of governments, the private sector, civil society, the media, and academics and consultants, in maintaining the idea that Africa is poor. MDG 8 drew attention to the ways in which partnerships have increasingly been seen as essential for effective 'development' interventions (although for a critique see Martens, 2007), and it is therefore important to examine why each of these different types of potential partner continue to define Africa as being poor.

### 3.1 Governments

The Commission for Africa (2005, p.15) report highlighted the importance of building a new kind of relationship between donor governments in rich countries and the governments of poor countries in sub-Saharan Africa, and that this ‘can only be done through a new kind of partnership’. Whilst there is therefore a coalition of interests between both types of government, it is important to tease out each of these interests separately.

*3.1.1 The interests of donor governments*

It has become increasingly accepted globally that the governments of rich countries should provide support for the elimination of poverty in poor countries. Indeed, most of these governments have signed up to a commitment to reach the UN target of 0.7% of Gross National Income, first pledged in the 1970s General Assembly Resolution – although in 2007 the only countries to exceed this target were Denmark, Luxembourg, the Netherlands, Norway and Sweden (OECD DAC statistics http://www.oecd.org/document/8/0,3343,en_2649_34447_40381960_1_1_1_1,00.html, accessed 17th September 2008). Moreover, in 2005, 22 donor countries signed the Paris Declaration on Aid Effectiveness with the specific intention of enhancing their impact on poverty reduction (http://www.oecd.org/document/18/0,2340,en_2649_3236398_35401554_1_1_1_1,00.html, accessed 17th September 2008).

However, this is by no means an uncontested agenda (Osborne, 2002), and taxpayers in the economically advanced countries of the world often challenge the rationale whereby a share of their income should be spent on countries ‘overseas’ rather than for domestic purposes. This is particularly so at times of economic uncertainty and rising unemployment in rich countries, as during the current global financial crisis of the late 2000s. Donor governments therefore need to pay particular attention to the maintenance of support from their electorates for such policies, and work closely in coalition with civil society and the media to promote the benefits of development assistance. To highlight the importance of popular participation in poverty reduction, in 2004 DFID sponsored the production of *The Rough Guide to a*

*Better World* (Wroe and Doney, 2004), copies of which were made freely available to the public through post offices and consumer outlets. A survey of public attitudes towards development in the UK (Dawe, 2003) has highlighted that two-thirds of respondents were concerned about levels of poverty in developing countries, and that a similar number agreed that poverty in developing countries could have effects that would damage the interests of the UK. Whilst slightly less than a third of respondents considered that 'the UK's commitment to poverty reduction was too low', just under one fifth thought it was too high (Dawe, 2003, p.13).

The UK government's justification for why it should be involved in development is typical of the arguments of donor governments:

> 'More than a billion people, one in five of the world's population, live in extreme poverty. This means they live on less than 65p a day. Ten million children die before their fifth birthday, most of them from preventable diseases. More than 113 million children do not go to school.
>
> In a world of growing wealth, such levels of human suffering and wasted potential are not only morally wrong, they are also against our own interests. We are becoming much closer to people in faraway countries. We trade more and more with people around the world.
>
> Many of the problems which affect us, such as war and conflict, international crime, refugees, the trade in illegal drugs and the spread of diseases like HIV and AIDS, are caused or made worse by poverty in developing countries. Getting rid of poverty will make for a better world for everybody' (http://www.dfid.gov.uk/aboutdfid/default.asp, accessed 17th September 2008).

Broadly speaking this identifies three main grounds for intervention: a moral argument against poverty; the trade argument, implying that poverty reduction will increase the UK's benefits from trade; and a behavioural argument suggesting that war, crime and disease are caused by poverty. Each of these is problematic with respect to the definition of African poverty.

As the above example illustrates, the moral argument for development intervention is, and must be, premised on the notion that Africa is poor. If Africa was defined as being rich, then it would be difficult to convince an electorate that there was any value in 'development' intervention. Having justified intervention on moral grounds, though, a case can then be made that trade will be of direct benefit to the UK economy. It is with this economic concern that the main underlying interests of donor governments lie. Their fundamental agenda would thus appear to be to create an effective global economy in their own interests. If the moral agenda was really predominant it would be this, rather than the economic arguments that would dominate international development discourses. A reduction in warfare, violence and corruption is thus rarely advocated purely on moral grounds, but rather because they are seen as critical factors that reduce economic growth. While DFID's (2006) White Paper on *Making Governance Work for the Poor*, does indeed emphasise the negative impact that poor governance can have on the lives of poor people, its prime focus remains on creating a stable international environment that will stimulate economic growth. Moreover, as the above quotation emphasises, DFID justifies attention on these issues because they are some 'of the problems which affect *us'* (my emphasis). Again, it is the UK's interests, rather than those of poor countries and people themselves, that are placed at the fore. Furthermore, there is little evidence that war, crime and corruption are *necessarily* actually caused by poverty; the world's richest economy, the USA, alone accounts for some 46% of total world military expenditure, and was responsible for 30% of the world's arms exports between 2003 and 2007 (SIPRI, 2007). To be sure, forced migration, crime, and violence are often associated with poverty, but it can equally be argued that underlying structural causes create both poverty and these other expressions of dysfunctional societies (see for example, Bourguignon, 1999;

Soares, 2005). Donor governments therefore do not simply provide aid or assistance because a country is poor, but they use poverty as an excuse for intervention.

Traditionally, much donor assistance has taken the form of tied aid, whereby donors require that a percentage of the money given be spent on goods or services produced in the donor country. Whilst there has long been considerable criticism of such overt protectionism and self-interest (Kemp and Kojima, 1985; Schweinberger, 1990; Kemp, 2005), the OECD (2006) still estimated that in 2005 just under 60% of all bilateral aid remained tied. Unlike many other bilateral donors, USAID (the largest donor by volume) is quite explicit in its agenda, stating that 'U.S. foreign assistance has always had the twofold purpose of furthering America's foreign policy interests in expanding democracy and free markers while improving the lives of the citizens of the developing world' (http://www.usaid.gov/about_usaid/, accessed 17th September 2008). The US government therefore seeks to use African poverty, as legitimation for its interventions in the continent that will also be of benefit to the US economy.

Even within bilateral donor organisations that have untied aid, it is still possible to encounter extraordinary arrogance, with young and inexperienced advisors informing African ministers what they must do to receive aid/assistance. If these so-called 'partner countries' were truly seen as equals, it is unlikely that such arrogance would persist. Defining Africa as poor legitimates the belief of some donor staff that, coming from a rich country, they know all of the answer to eliminating poverty. Such a criticism is by no means universal, and there are many outstanding and committed staff working in donor organisations, but it is important to add this richness/poverty dimension to the arguments of Sachs (2005) who sees racism as still being widespread in donor countries. By seeing Africa as poor, many staff working for donor organisations tend to see processes and institutions in their own 'rich' countries as being 'better', especially when many of them have rather limited practical experience and understanding of Africa, its peoples, cultures and heritages. Even the Commission for Africa (2005, p.18) report comments that '… aid policies have often seemed designed to support the political and industrial interests of the rich countries as much as to reduce poverty in Africa' (for a strident critique of SIDA, see Mosander, 2008).

*3.1.2 Governments of 'poor countries'*

It is not only donor governments that have an interest in defining Africa as being poor. Recipient governments have equally powerful reasons for doing so. Based on their poverty, African countries have thus received an estimated increase in aid from all donors at current prices from US$ 15,489.4 million in 2000 to US$ 43, 401.97 million in 2006 (http://stats.oecd.org/wbos/Index.aspx?DatasetCode=ODA_RECIPIENT_REGION, accessed 17th September 2008). For those in power in poor countries, development assistance funds can provide both legitimation of their power, and also a means to retain it. It therefore makes huge sense for them to continue to argue that their countries are indeed poor. Although donor governments seek to place ever-tighter controls on the conditions under which governments can receive assistance, with the current favourite process being agreement on Poverty Reduction Strategy Papers (PRSP) (Mercer, 2003a; Booth, 2003; Unwin, 2004), there is good evidence that many governments are able to circumvent these controls. In his review of the PRSP process in seven African countries, Booth (2003, p.131) thus emphasises that 'Whether or not vicious circles of patrimonial politics, state weakness and ineffectual aid can be replaced with virtuous ones, based on greater national ownership of anti-poverty effort, is still uncertain'. Mercer (2003a) likewise reports that the poor, the people who are meant to be the beneficiaries of the PRSP process, are rarely directly involved in the shaping of these policies, and based on her research in Tanzania she suggests that even the civil society organisations that claim to represent them are frequently marginalised. Furthermore, although budget support mechanisms are claimed to be made available by donors only under conditions of minimal fiduciary risk, many African governments in receipt of such support are perceived as being among the most corrupt in the world. Moreover, one-off or project-based aid does not even have to satisfy this requirement. The UK government's assistance programme for Somalia, the lowest ranked country in Transparency

International's (2007) Corruption Perception Index, has thus given rise to considerable controversy in the press:

> 'Millions of pounds of British taxpayers' money is being used to support a government in Somalia accused of human rights abuses and war crimes.
>
> The money is supposed to be used to strengthen security and democracy, but The Times has learnt that it is financing a police force filled with militiamen and led by one of the country's most notorious warlords, Abdi Hasan Awale Qaybdib.
>
> At various times he has fought US forces or been given American money to fight Islamic extremists. Now he is being funded to keep the peace' (Times Online, 2 June 2008).

Across Africa, many civil society organisations report considerable concern at the ways in which governments sign up to the PRSP process with little real intention of actually delivering on their claimed objectives (Unwin, 2004). Christian Aid (2004), for example, notes that in 2002 the Ugandan government diverted 23% of its social services budget to fund its Operation Iron Fist against the Lord's Resistance Army. Responding to donor concerns, the government subsequently introduced a defence review, but Christian Aid (2004, p.30) notes that in Kampala this 'is regarded with derision; members of parliament are furious they were not involved. They call it a sham and say it is yet another government ploy to hoodwink donors'.

The ready availability of donor assistance, based on notions that Africa is poor, have meant that African governments have not always put in place measures that might actually benefit poor people in their countries. The drought in the Horn of Africa in 2008 is a typical example of how well intentioned plans, agreed by both donors and recipients of development assistance, may not always have the anticipated outcomes. Following the drought in 2002/3, donor support for Ethiopia's rural development strategy had appeared to lead to an increase in productivity and food security, but insufficient attention was paid to the development of new irrigation systems and means of storing grain to help poor people survive the inevitable periods of drought in the future. While the donor-funded Productive Safety Net Programme launched in 2005 has enabled some people to benefit from being able to get food and money in return for work, the inevitable drought in the first half of 2008, made worse by high food prices, placed many people at the risk of famine. While, uncertainty over the precise numbers of people suffering led to heated arguments between the UN and the Ethiopian government during the middle of the year, disaster was averted by the provision of substantial amounts of aid from the international community. More prior investment in agricultural production could have alleviated some of the hardship faced by Ethiopia's poor. Ironically, Al Jazeera reported in June 2008 that 'The Ethiopian government has announced plans to increase its military budget by $50m to $400m, just one week after it appealed for international help to tackle its worst famine in 25 years. The announcement came after the US and Britain on Tuesday pledged a combined $90m in famine relief to the African country. Sufian Ahmed, Ethiopia's finance minister, said "we can only sustain economic development when there is stability in our region". "We believe that this amount is proportional" (http://english.aljazeera.net/news/africa/2008/06/20086150858597530.html, accessed 17th September 2008).

Such observations are by no means meant to castigate all African leaders and governments; far from it. One of the most positive things to have happened in the last five years is that many such people are now indeed recognising that they need to take much greater control over their futures by rejecting unwanted interference in their countries by external governments, however well meaning their development assistance might be. Indeed, this paper is a direct result of some of these powerful and positive comments by African leaders. The fundamental point being made here, though, is that that these leaders nevertheless still retain an interesting in defining their continent, Africa, as being poor.

**3.2 The private sector: corporate social responsibility, but also real economic interest**

The private sector, here defined primarily as for profit companies and corporations both international and local, has a long history of intervention in development practice, from the earliest days of colonialism, through the imperialism of the metropolitan European powers of the 19$^{th}$ and early 20$^{th}$ centuries, to the new global divisions of labour shaped in the latter part of the 20$^{th}$ century. Following the collapse of the Soviet Union, the twin rhetorics of a free market and liberal democracy promulgated by the dominant multilateral and bilateral donor agencies have provided the context for an ever-increasing engagement of the private sector in development practice. This is based in part on a real interest of some in the private sector that their companies are indeed 'good global citizens', but underlying it there are also very definite commercial interests.

One of the key agencies through which this more direct involvement of the private sector in development practice was initiated was the drafting of the 4$^{th}$ and 5$^{th}$ targets of the 8$^{th}$ MDG to develop a global partnership for development: 'In cooperation with pharmaceutical companies, provide access to affordable essential drugs in developing countries', and 'In cooperation with the private sector, make available benefits of new technologies, especially information and communication' (http://www.un.org/millenniumgoals/global.shtml, accessed 17$^{th}$ September 2008). During the 1990s there had been increasing realisation amongst governments and international organisations that the private sector was fundamentally important in delivering the new development agenda: if economic growth would eliminate poverty, it was essential to involve those organisations that were seen to know best how to create economic growth, namely the large global corporations. Additionally, as evidenced through the emergence of institutions such as the UN's Financing for Development initiative (http://www.un.org/esa/ffd/, accessed 17$^{th}$ September 2008), the Monterrey Consensus (UN, 2003), and the work of the World Economic Forum (http://www.weforum.org, accessed 17$^{th}$ September 2008) in advocating the role of entrepreneurship in the global pubic interest, other international donors began to recognise the private sector as possibly being able to provide some of the financial burden that would be required to deliver the MDGs.

The private sector, likewise, had real interests in becoming much more closely involved in global governance agendas, and in working ‘in partnership’ with UN organisations as well as mulitalteral and bilateral donors so as to help shape these agendas in their own interests (see Unwin, 2005; Martens, 2007). It is, nevertheless, not immediately apparent what interests the private sector may have in describing Africa as poor. After all, surely the private sector is interested most in investing in areas with the greatest potential for economic growth? Building on this question, though, there are at least three main reasons why it is actually in the private sector’s interest to portray Africa as poor. First, many of the poorest areas of the world actually have the highest potential for growth. This is typified by the explosion of mobile ‘phone usage in Africa. Vodacom, for example, started business in South Africa in 1994, with forecasts of only 250,000 customers within ten years. In reality, it passed the 6 million users mark in 2000. It first offered a 3G network in 2004, and by 2007 had more than 23 million customers in South Africa, Tanzania, the Democratic republic of Congo, Lesotho and Mozambique. If appropriate business models are identified specifically for poor people, it is still possible for the private sector to reap substantial profits.

A second reason why the international private sector is interested in maintaining the notion that Africa is poor, is that this helps drive down the prices of raw materials and agricultural production across the continent, thereby reducing the costs to them of imports from Africa. Although there are conflicting arguments about the relationship between resource wealth, economic growth and political stability in the continent (see for example, Auty, 2001; Jensen and Wantchekon, 2004; Maconochie and Binns, 2007; Brunnschweiler, 2008), the combined power of the private sector is often such as to be able to ensure very tough deals with governments and state run enterprises. By emphasising the poverty of a country, a large international corporation can often be seen as having a significant development impact by investing in a country at relatively little cost, compared with the much higher investments that they would have to incur in wealthier countries. Moreover, the amount of fixed capital necessary to invest in production in poor countries with limited regulatory enforcement is often much less than it would be in richer countries with tighter regulation. This applies as much to Chinese investment in the mining and smelting of copper in Zambia as it does to the cost of greenhouses for production of roses for export in Kenya. Although there are very mixed views within Africa about the costs and benefits of Chinese investment (Broadman, 2007), it does at least offer an alternative to the experiences endured under the past 50 years of European and north American bilateral and multilateral donor policy. The US$ 1.2 billion in 2006 investment in Africa by Chinese companies is an indication of the value that the Chinese currently see in exploiting Africa's resource wealth.

Third, within the current global division of labour, it is very much in the private sector's interest to emphasise Africa's poverty with respect to wage rates. The presence of low labour rates in Africa serves as a kind of global reserve army of labour, not only enabling low cost production in itself, but also providing a means of limiting the potential impact of wage claims made by workers in the richer countries of the world (Kaplinsky, 2005, 2008); with capital being increasingly mobile, high wage claims in the major economies of the world can be countered by threats to move production overseas, with Africa being even an even cheaper location than the more usual Asian destinations. It is here that good governance agendas come so forcefully into play, because the threat of political instability and corruption still make Africa a risky investment location. This is yet another reason why the private sector is so keen to work with the international donor community to help stabilise the political context, thereby enabling them to maximise their profits from investment in Africa.

### 3.3 Civil Society and African poverty

The notion of civil society, and its role in contemporary development practice are both highly contested (Harbeson *et al.*, 1994; Hulme and Edwards, 1997;

McIlwaine, 1998a). For the present purpose, I follow the Centre for Civil Society at LSE's (2004) definition of civil society as 'the arena of uncoerced collective action around shared interests, purposes and values' (http://www.lse.ac.uk/collections/CCS/introduction.htm, accessed 19th September 2008). This diverse and heterogeneous group therefore includes Non-Governmental Organisations (NGOs), trade unions, faith groups, advocacy groups and associations, alongside many other forms of collective interest. What sets if apart from the private sector is that civil society is usually non-profit focussed, and it is distinct from government in that it has no legislative or ruling power over a particular territory (Rosenblum and Post, 2002).

For long, many saw such institutions as being innately 'good', but as Mercer (2002, p.13) has highlighted 'the late 1990s saw a proliferation of studies from across the developing world that collectively argued that civil societies are often fragmented, unorganized, uncooperative and weak'. Much of this criticism has focused on the ways in which NGOs have frequently been co-opted into the development agendas of states, and have thus not necessarily delivered their expected objectives in supporting marginalised communities (see also McIlwaine, 1998b; Mercer, 2003a). In his case study of northern Ghana, Mohen (2002, p.148) has thus argued that 'The aid paradigm means that civil society organisations have become more dependent on external funders as well as the market. The NGOs largely become service delivery mechanisms for pre-determined development agendas. In competing for these scarce aid resources, the NGOs position themselves strategically which creates tensions between organisations'. Moreover, he goes on to argue that 'the real beneficiaries of strengthening civil society have been the local elites' (Mohan, 2002, p.148). Significantly, such critiques were also expressed forcefully in the Commission for Africa's (2005) report which noted that 'It is, for example, widely perceived that some international institutions, such as the IMF, World Bank, UN Security Council and even many NGOs in developed countries (some of which are perceived in Africa as arms of the donor governments that fund them), do not adequately give space for African participation and perspectives in their thinking. At the same time, such institutions often betray an arrogance born of their own fixed procedures and structures, which in turn limit their ability to take account of different cultural standpoints'.

The key point to be made in this context, is that civil society organisations in general, and development focused NGOs in particular, face a challenging task with respect to the way in which they position themselves towards African poverty. In order to receive funding from governments to deliver their 'development' based advocacy and to implement their projects, they need to be seen to be supporting the hegemonic global agenda that development is about poverty elimination. There are clear advantages to them, therefore, in defining Africa as poor. Moreover, much of their revenue comes from fundraising campaigns that in the past have used graphic images of poverty to persuade the 'rich' to give to the 'poor' of Africa (see Figure 1). This applies as much to international NGOs as it does to local ones; both need to generate revenue, and they frequently do so by emphasising the poverty of Africa so as to manipulate and exploit the guilty consciences of the rich. A highly critical report by VSO (2002) thus took issue with the ways in which civil society organisations and the media in the UK have traditionally depicted development. As the report commented, 'When UK consumers think of the developing world, Africa is their starting point. TV images of famine and Western relief instantly spring to mind. Sixteen years on, Live Aid, Band Aid and the Ethiopian famine still have a powerful hold on our views of the developing world' (VSO, 2002, p.5). This has many ramifications, not least, as VSO (2002, p.3) go on to comment,

- 'Stereotypes of deprivation and poverty, together with images of Western aid, can lead to an impression that people in the developing world are helpless victims. 74% of the British public believe that these countries "depend on the money and knowledge of the West to progress." '
- 'The danger of stereotypes of this depth and magnitude is the psychological relationship they create between the developed and the developing world, which revolves around an implicit sense of superiority and inferiority.'

- 'The Live Aid Legacy defines the roles in our relationship with the developing world. We are powerful, benevolent givers; they are grateful receivers.'

Many, although by no means all, NGOs have responded positively to such criticisms, and are now adopting a more sophisticated approach to campaigning, and revenue generation, focusing especially on the ways in which money given by supporters does make a difference to people's lives. Traidcraft's web-site, for example, states on its front page that it 'fights poverty through trade, helping people in developing countries to transform their lives' (http://www.traidcraft.co.uk/, accessed 19th September 2008). Instead of pictures of starving children, there is an image of a smiling well-nourished family above the caption 'Roneck Kalele and his wife Zione weave baskets for DTL in Malawi. He received money for raw materials and does not need to travel to sell his baskets' (http://www.traidcraft.co.uk/, accessed 19th September 2008). Likewise, Save the Children's site promoting its *Rewrite the Future* campaign has a short video clip about educating children in West Darfur, Sudan (http://www.savethechildren.org/campaigns/rewrite-the-future, accessed 19th September 2008) that emphasises how 'A school once in shambles emerges as a source of pride for an entire community'. Even such positive imagery, though, is designed to draw attention to ways of reducing African poverty; immediately under the picture of the school is a large red button saying **Donate Now**.

Despite such increasingly positive imagery, NGOs benefit widely from the financial donations of people who still consider Africa to be poor; it would be a much greater challenge to them to persuade people to support their work if they described Africa and Africans as 'rich'.

### 3.4 Media and the consultancy industry

As the above section has highlighted, mass media plays a crucial role in shaping people's understanding of poverty. A report on 31st July 2008 on the Nigerian Masses Organization website (http://nigerianmasses.com/statenewsdetails.asp?id=23354&stateid=Lagos,

19th September 2008) thus reported:

> The Editor-in-Chief of *Newswatch* magazine, Mr. Ray Ekpu, has challenged Lagos Governor Mr. Babatunde Fashola's statement about too many "bad news" in the media.
>
> He said the trend would continue because nothing sells media products like bad news…
>
> He had said such bad news had negative effects on development….
>
> "The bad news is not as much as the good news but one asks first; will the public buy the good news? Will they buy it when you publish it?"
>
> He, however, said there was a challenge to media professionals to be able to find a balance between what the public wanted and what it needed…
>
> He said there was positive news about the society but it was not given the level of prominence it merited to counter-balance the negative news'.

This is but one example of the well-known axiom that 'bad news sells better than good news' (see for example Fenton, 2005), but it does highlight another significant feature about African poverty which is that the news media has historically tended to focus much more on accounts of African poverty than it has on its richness. A recent headline in the *Times* (18th September 2008, p.41) thus draws attention to the plight of people living in Darfur, under the words '**Ethiopia accused on hiding famine as millions starve'**. Imagery and text about Africa in the mass media is overwhelmingly about its poverty, with there being remarkably few positive stories about its richness. As the VSO (2002) report on perceptions of people in the UK noted, there is

- 'Anger at being conned: When consumers are presented with an alternative view of the developing world they often express anger and a feeling of being conned or misled. The target for this anger is mainly the media, and occasionally development charities, who are seen as the main source of information.

- More than half the people want the full story: the strongest call is to the media, particularly television. 55% of British people say they want to see more of the everyday life, history and culture of the developing world on television. They want to see the positives as well as the negatives, and they want context and background to a news story'.

There is some evidence that the mass media is now beginning to be much more even-handed in its portrayal of Africa, but across the world poverty tends to continue to be reported in a way that reinforces the interests of dominant social groups. As Bullock *et al.* (2001, p.243) comment, albeit with respect to the reporting of poverty in the USA, 'The media have the potential to challenge dominant beliefs about the poor and to generate support for progressive antipoverty movements…, but for the most part, economic inequality, social class, and poverty are presented superficially or are rendered invisible by the mainstream media'.

A further group that has particular interests in continuing to define Africa as poor are development consultants. Indeed, it can be argued that it is these, many of whom are also academics, who have most to gain from the continued definition of Africa as poor. It is extremely difficult to estimate the total amount of money intended for 'poverty elimination' that is actually spent on consultancy, but a powerful report by ActionAid International (2005) suggests that some 29% of UK aid in 2004 and as much as 90% of US and French aid is 'phantom aid' not really benefiting the poor. As the report comments, 'As often as not, aid has failed to reduce poverty because it has never reached the recipient country, but has instead been paid to donor country companies and consultants, often for overpriced and inappropriate goods and services that have few substantial benefits' (ActionAid International, 2005, p.9; see also ActionAid International, 2006); some 12% of the budget administered by DFID goes on consultant's costs, more than 80% of the contracts awarded by DFID in 2005-6 went to UK firms, and between 2000 and 2005 a total of £101 million was awarded to the big five accountancy firms.  DFID produced a robust response to this report, with the then International Development Secretary, Hilary Benn, commenting that '"It's simply nonsense to suggest that a third of UK aid is 'phantom'. "ActionAid's figures just don't stack up." "It's absurd to argue that debt relief, or practical advice from technical experts, isn't real aid."… ""But we do recognise that there is a need for more and better aid. We've been saying this for some time and that's why we've doubled our aid since 1997."' (http://www.dfid.gov.uk/news/files/2005/aid-effectiveness.asp, accessed 19th September 2008).  More generally, many others point to the large expenditure by donor agencies on consultants across Europe.  A recent report by CONCORD Aid Watch (2008, unpaginated) on the role of EU 'leadership in the fight against global poverty', representing 1600 NGOs in Europe, thus notes that

> 'Tying' aid to the procurement of donor goods and services inflates costs by up to 30%, slows down delivery and undermines ownership by preventing southern countries from directing aid where it is most needed, or supporting the development of local expertise and services. … the European Council recognised in 2005 that this issue needs to be addressed.  Since then, however, little has been done.'

and

> 'Much technical assistance continues to be tied and overpriced, and is often ineffective at building local capacity. It is frequently characterised by the over-use of costly international consultants, the creation of parallel structures, lack of effective or sustainable transfer of knowledge and capacity, the promotion of practices inappropriate to the national or local context, and an emphasis on meeting donor requirements'.

## 4. Evidence for the richness of Africa

The above account has emphasised the considerable interest that donors, African governments, the private sector, civil society, the media and consultants all have in continuing to describe Africa as poor. This is most definitely not to say that there is an explicit conspiracy among all of these 'development partners' to maintain existing levels of poverty in Africa. It is, though, to argue strongly that these interests do have a role in shaping the way many people 'see' Africa, and that a conceptualisation of Africa as poor has played an important part in shaping global development rhetoric and practice. In particular most international development policies relating to Africa are implicitly highly critical of existing structures and institutions across the continent, and seek to replace them by those that have been seen to work in their own richer countries of the world. There is thus pressure to impose so-called liberal democracy and macro-economic policy instruments designed to promote growth, with there being very little real understanding of whether such policies will actually 'work' in Africa. Indeed, as Sachs (2005) has argued, there is sound empirical evidence that democracy and economic growth need not be causally linked (for a more theoretical approach, see Habermas, 1994).

If Africa is indeed so poor, it should be hard to find evidence for its richness. However, this is by no means the case, and the following sections seek to highlight evidence for Africa's economic, cultural, environmental, political and social richness.

### 4.1 Economic richness: minerals, agriculture and labour

Many African countries are often described as having limited resources to support sustained economic growth, either in terms of industrial or agricultural potential. There is undoubtedly great spatial variation in the resource base for economic activity across the continent, but as increasing amounts of foreign direct investment, especially from India and China (Broadman, 2007), are indicating, Africa does indeed have considerable economic resources.

Africa already produces very large amounts of some of the world's most important minerals: 52.7% of diamonds, 48.9% of cobalt, 32.4% of manganese, and 28.5% of phosphate (British Geological Survey, 2008). Given the relatively low levels of exploration across much of the continent, it is highly likely that reserves are underestimated, and that there is potential for considerable increases in production (USGS, 2007). As Yager *et al.* (2007) have commented, 'Africa is *richly* endowed with mineral reserves and ranks first or second in quantity of world reserves of bauxite, cobalt, industrial diamond, phosphate rock, platinum-group metals (PGM), vermiculite, and zirconium' my emphasis). The challenge is to turn this potential into reality, and in this respect it is crucial that Africa's leaders not only ensure that the benefits of this richness are developed appropriately for their peoples, but also that they are able to resist the downward pressures on price exerted by the world's major trading states.

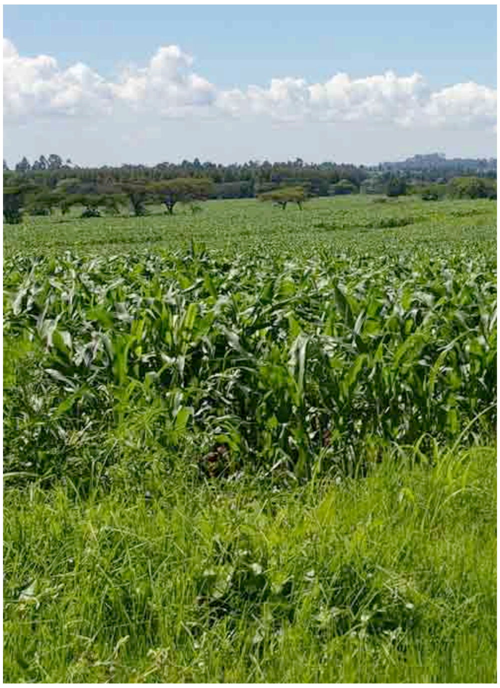
Africa is indeed rich in mineral wealth. On his journey through the Democratic Republic of Congo, this was well emphasised by the journalist Tim Butcher (2008, p.325), who summarised one of his conversations as follows:

> '"People who say there is no money in Africa are talking complete bollocks," Johnny said. "I have seen with my own eyes that there has always been plenty of money, whether it's for diamonds, cobalt, safari hunting, whatever. And with China needing resources to keep up their current economic boom, there is more money around today for African raw materials than ever before"'

There is a considerable debate, though, over whether or not such mineral wealth is a blessing or a curse. Jensen and Wantchekon (2004, p.816), for example, show that there is a 'robust and negative correlation between the presence of a sizable natural resource sector and the level of democracy in Africa', and that 'democratic reforms have been successful only in resource-poor countries such as Benin, Mali, and Madagascar'. In contrast, Maconachie and Binns (2007, p.104) argue that, 'In recent years, the so-called "resource curse" syndrome has gained increasing currency. Growing evidence suggests that many African countries with significant natural wealth have actually reaped limited rewards, instead experiencing underdevelopment, corruption, political instability, and in some cases, violent conflict'. They argue convincingly that diamond mining in Sierra Leone, admittedly a small country, if incorporated into a well-integrated rural development plan, does have the potential to serve as an engine for effective development. By building on some of the country's 'richness' it might therefore be possible to transform a country that has all too often been condemned to a self-fulfilling label of poverty by the outside world. Brunnschweiler (2008, p.412) has likewise emphasised that 'Results from both OLS and 2SLS estimations contradict most of the resource curse literature so far, showing that natural resources, and in particular mineral resources, have a positive direct association with real GDP growth over the period 1970-2000, even when controlling for the quality of institutions'. He goes on to conclude that 'In sum, an abundance of natural resources may in fact generally be much less of a curse and more of a boon for economic performance than often believed' (Brunnschweiler, 2008, p.413).

Turning to agriculture, many descriptions of the African continent's potential once again emphasise its poverty. Sachs' (2005) assertions that Africa's poverty is at least in part due to its lack of irrigation, the dominance of rainfed agriculture, and its heavily depleted soils, all point to the notion that the physical basis for successful agriculture is generally absent in the continent. To be sure, parts of Africa do indeed have depleted soils and difficult water supplies, but there are many senses in which Africa's agricultural potential is indeed rich. Most strikingly, Africa's soils are by no means as unsupportive of agriculture as is often assumed. This richness of African agriculture is, for example, readily visible in the images of maize cultivation, rose growing and tea plantations in Kenya shown in Figures 2-4. More formally, traditional arguments about Africa being a continent of poor soils are not necessarily borne out by the empirical evidence. According to the authoritative *World Soil Resources Report* (FAO, 2000), approximately 24% of the world's total area of soils is without major constraint (defined as including hydromorphy, low CEC, aluminium toxicity, high P-fixation, vertic properties, salinity, sodicity, shallowness and erosion risk). Europe does better than average, with some 31% of its soils without major constraints, as does north America with 27% of its soils without major constraints. What is striking, though, is that sub-Saharan Africa as a whole has 18% of its soils without major constraints, not far below the global average, and little different from China (20%) or New Zealand (19%). The average for Africa is, for example, far higher than the figures for the UK (5%), Sweden (4%), Spain (3%), or Germany (9%), all of which are deemed to be among the richer countries of the world. Indeed, it is estimated that across sub-Saharan Africa in the mid-1990s, only some 14.2% of potential arable land was actually in use, compared with a figure of 48.6% in north America and 55.6% in Europe. According to such estimates, it could be argued that Africa's agricultural potential is thus rich indeed.

**Figure 2**: *Maize cultivation near Mount Elgon, Kenya, 2007*



Source: Tim Unwin

**Figure 3**: *Rose cultivation near Kitali, Kenya, 2007*

Source: Tim Unwin

Labour provides a third key dimension of any economy. The ILO (2007) thus reports that the USA has by far the highest labour productivity in the world, that the productivity gap between the USA and other developed countries is growing, and that people in the USA work longer hours than in most other developed countries. However, data such as these, say more about the character of the economy and infrastructure supporting it than they do about the actual potential of the labour force. As the *Key Indicators of the Labour Market* report (ILO, 2007) reveals, such measures of productivity reflect a combination of capital, technology and labour itself. A lack of investment in training and skills development leads to an underutilisation of labour potential. The observation that in sub-Saharan Africa, labour productivity per person is one-twelfth that of workers in the industrialised countries should not therefore be taken to mean that African people are 'poor', but rather that they do not have access to, and are not trained in the use of, the technologies that could generate higher productivity rates. The World Economic Forum's (2007, p.3) *Global Competitiveness Report*, thus defines 'competitiveness as the set of institutions, policies, and factors that determine the level of productivity of a country'. Only one of the 12 pillars that comprise this index, that on health and primary education, focuses specifically on the characteristics of the people who actually make up the labour force.

Significantly, this comments that 'A healthy workforce is vial to a country's competitiveness and productivity' (World Economic Forum, 2007, p.3); the scourge of illness and disease across Africa (Sachs, 2005) is thus a critical factor affecting the perceived poverty, and very real suffering, of the continent's population. While the 5th pillar, on higher education, and the 7th on labour market efficiency, also address aspects of labour, they are more to do with the institutions that shape the skills that such a workforce possesses and the mechanisms for providing performance related incentives than they are with the actual innate characteristics of the people themselves. The observation that African labour is often poorly trained, does not mean that the people in question are necessarily poor.

**Figure 4**: *Tea cultivation near Rukuriri, Kenya, 2002*

Source: Tim Unwin

Similar logic can be applied to debates over capacity building and capacity development (see for example BMZ, 2007). Increasingly the term 'capacity development' is being preferred to the phrase 'capacity building' (World Bank, 1991), since the latter can be seen to imply that there is no foundation of capacity already existing in a country. However, even the term capacity development in essence focuses much more on enabling African governments and people to engage effectively in the increasingly globalised world of donor policy than they do necessarily in enhancing the indigenous capacities of African people (see for example, Bangura and Larbi, 2006). Capacity development programmes are thus fundamentally concerned with helping African governments more effectively to 'manage' donor disbursements, to develop economies suited to entrepreneurship and economic growth, and to encourage a particular kind of 'democracy' associated with 'good governance'. This is typified, for example, by the work of the World Bank's Capacity Development Resource Centre (http://www.worldbank.org/capacity, accessed 30 September 2008), where capacity development is explicitly defined as 'the key to development effectiveness'. This is not to deny that if African governments wish to engage effectively in the international economy, as undoubtedly most of them do, it is important for them to have the capacity to do so (World Bank Task Force on Capacity Development in Africa, 2005), but it is to emphasise that such agendas are primarily driven by a belief that Africans do not already have such capacities, and that they are therefore somehow impoverished. I want at least to permit the possibility that Africans are as rich as any other peoples in terms of their human capacity; it is just a different kind of richness. The argument that Africa is poor because its people do not have the capacity to 'develop' seems not only to be incredibly arrogant, but it also ignores the inherent richness in African human capacity. Rather than seeking to impose external 'capacities' on African peoples, a process that seems largely to have failed over the last 25 years, might it not at least make some sense specifically to support policies that seek to build on Africa's richness in human capacity. In this context, it is salient to note that two African countries, Kenya and Ethiopia, dominated the long distance events at the Beijing Olympics in 2008, winning nine gold medals and a total of 21 athletics medals in all. Africa indeed has rich human capacity.

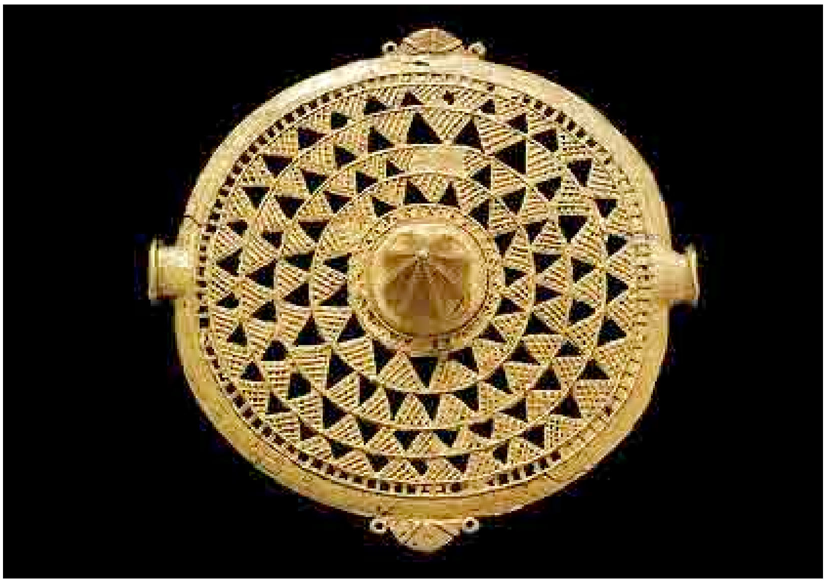
**4.2 Africa's cultural richness**

All too often Africa has been seen as being a continent with a poor cultural heritage. In part this results from its non-material traditions of oral history (see Alagoa, 1966), and the relative lack of extensive archaeological exploration across most of its central and southern regions. Such a view, though, also owes much to the environmental determinists of the early 20th century, such as Semple (1911), who argued that Africa was culturally backward because of its climate and physical environment. However, as more recent writers such as Reid (2008) so clearly emphasise, Africa actually has a rich diversity of people, societies, cultures and religious beliefs.

One measure of this is to be found in UNESCO's list of World Heritage Sites (http://whc.unesco.org, accessed 30 September 2008), which notes that 79 of the 878 listed sites, representing 9% of the total are to be found in Africa. Whilst this is somewhat less than Africa's 14% share of the world's population, and the list itself has been influenced by political manoeuvring (Bianchi and Boniface, 2002), it does nevertheless indicate that Africa has a rich cultural and natural heritage deemed to be of significance to all of the peoples of the world. Modern humans are widely held to have had their origins in Africa and spread out from thence to other parts of the world (Johanson and Edgar, 1996; Gamble 2007); Africa can thus be seen as the cultural hearth of humanity. Egypt, is renowned for its important cultural and economic role for two and a half thousand years before its conquest by the Persians, Greeks and Romans. The gold working of the Akan in west central Africa likewise reflects richness both in terms of the wealth produced by mining (Hilson, 2002), but also through the artistic expression found in its jewellery. Similarly, the ancient city of Axum/Aksum and the rock carved churches at Lalibela, attest to the cultural richness to be encountered in Ethiopia.

A further indicator of African cultural richness is the linguistic diversity to be found within the continent. Rosebud Kurwijila, the African Union Commissioner of Rural Economy and Agriculture, thus addressed the 5th World Congress of African Linguistics in 2006, as follows: 'As you all know, Africa is home to more than 2000 languages and dialects. This constitutes more than a third of the languages spoken in the world and is a sheer witness of African *richness* in linguistic and cultural diversity. However, many of Africa's indigenous languages are disappearing or on the verge of disappearance' (http://www.mail-archive.com/africanlanguages@yahoogroups.com/msg00431.html, accessed 16th September 2008, my emphasis).

**Figure 5**: *Akan gold – a Baule breastplate with open worked decoration*



Source: http://www.museumliaunig.at/en/akangold/breastplate-with-open-worked-decoration, accessed 30 September 2008

Another dimension is represented in the emphasis placed on cultural richness within the Commission for Africa's (2005, p.26) report, which recognised that an understanding of African cultural diversity is central to any proposals for effective development, and in particular that 'Africa's strength lies in social networks which are invisible to many outsiders. What can appear to donors as a form of anarchy is in fact structured; it is just that these are structures which Westerners are not trained to perceive'. In stressing Africa's rich cultural heritage, the report goes on to note that the 'developed world' is largely ignorant of three key dimensions thereof: the inheritance of history, the rich diversity of African cultures, and the invisible networks that it organises. In a fitting summary of Africa's cultural richness, the report emphasises that

> the term culture is more routinely used to describe cultural products such as literature, music, dance, art, sculpture,

> theatre, film and sport. All of these can be a source of economic reward as well as a source of identity and pride. Africa's traditions of oral history, ritual and other manifestations of what is known as 'intangible cultural heritage' deserve special mention here. There can be no doubt of the great *richness* (my emphasis) of contemporary African cultures. The continent's artists, musicians, novelists and film-makers continue to win both international audiences and international awards, with their influence further multiplied through the activities of diaspora communities.

This fittingly highlights the rich vibrancy of contemporary African design, music, dance, literature and theatre. As an article by Duff (2004) in The Independent was entitled 'The rich art of Africa goes on show to dispel "caricature" of a dark continent'. Some sense of this richness of contemporary African culture can be gauged from the diversity of artists he mentions: the film directors Fanta Régina Nacro from Burkina Faso and Branwen Okpako from Nigeria; the painters Chéri Samba and John Goba, from the democratic Republic of Congo and Sierra Leone respectively; musicians such as Youssou N'Dour from Senegal and South Africa's Ladysmith Black Mambazo; and writers such as the Nobel prize winners Wole Soyinka from Nigeria and Naguib Mahfouz from Egypt.

### 4.3 The richness of African social and political institutions

All too often, European and north American critiques of Africa emphasise its poor record of governance, and seek to impose their own particular brand of democracy on the countries of the continent (Commission for Africa, 2005). However, Africa has its own richness of social and political institutions that might usefully be able to provide an alternative basis for more effective development practices. Legesse (2006) has thus traced four key institutions amongst the Oromo of Ethiopia and Kenya: the generational system (*Gada* or rulers), the moiety organisation (*Qallu*, or electors and ritual leaders), the national assembly (*Gumi*), and the age-organistion (*hariyya*, or warriors). As he argues, ‘The study of an indigenous Africa democracy is a very worth while enterprise, because it is a rich source of ideas that can inspire and inform constitutional thinkers in Africa. On that foundation of historic and ethnographic knowledge, we can build genuinely *African democratic constitutions* that differ from the borrowed constitutions of today – *alien constitutions people do not care about and will not defend when they are violated*’ (Legesse, 2006, p. xiii, emphasis in original). As Held (1996) has argued in a different context, there are many different kinds of democracy. There may therefore be much to be gained from exploring further the ways in which indigenous African democratic principles might be incorporated into new forms of institution that would be of more relevance to the needs of African people than the imposition of one particular type of democracy that has emerged in one specific part of the world, namely the USA.

Many other institutions provide evidence of the richness of indigenous African political and social life. One of the best known of these is the *Gacaca* court system in Rwanda that builds on traditional mechanisms for community justice. In origin, the Gacaca settled disputes within families or villages, and were convened by village elders (*Inyangamugayo*, meaning those who hate evil, or ‘uncorrupted’) (Gabrisirege and Babalola, 2001; Corey and Joireman, 2004; Betts, 2005; see also Purdeková, 2008 for a discussion of Rwanda’s *Ingando*). Similarly, the *Indaba*, a Nguni word meaning a gathering or meeting of the principal men of a community (usually specifically among the Zulu and Xhosa), was a means whereby communities sought to resolve problems that affected them, and has come into quite widespread usage in South Africa to refer to gatherings where members of a group contribute to the solution of a problem (see for example Byerly, 1998).

Community self-help and co-operative groups of many different forms are common across Africa, and in some instances traditional systems continue to be used as an integral part of the modern state. Thus, in Kenya, the concept of *Harambee* (a Kiswahili word meaning ‘working together for a common purpose’) was used by Jomo Kenyatta, the country’s first independent Prime Minister and then President, as a means of bringing the country together to form a new nation. Traditionally, *Harambee* gatherings served various functions from working together on a particular project such as building houses or clearing bush, but have more recently come to be associated with fund raising initiatives and larger community development projects. At their heart was the central idea of a communal activity. Chieni (1997) emphasises that four principles are supposed to underlie *Harambee* activities: a bottom up strategy; participation guided by collective good rather than individual gain; choice guided by the felt needs of the majority; and project implementation based on maximising the use of local resources. As Hill (1991) has argued, this modern Harambee system has developed out of earlier institutions, such as the Kamba *mwethya*, in which a caller summoned people together to work on a selected activity.

However it is important to stress that Africa's richness is as much in its diversity of indigenous institutions as it is in the perceived quality thereof. As Spalding (1996) has emphasised in her critique of Nyerere's advocacy of *Ujamaa* in Tanzania (see also Hyden, 1980), it is all too easy to take one or two aspects of indigenous institutions and generalise from them to create an erroneous view of pan-African society. In her words, 'There are certain commonalities, explained by culture and reinforced by technology, but no universal or monolithic culture' (Spalding, 1996, p.103). The danger is that over-simplified generalisations can lead to the construction of communal 'solutions' to development practice that are not only unrealistic, but that also fail to take cognisance of past realities (see also Lele, 1981). Nevertheless, based on a review of indigenous Tanzanian cultural groups (see also Gulliver, 1971), Spalding (1996, p.103) does identify three commonalities that she sees as being particularly significant: 'the "loosely linked small communities", the propensity for migration, and the cross-cutting loyalties and obligations'. Elsewhere, she further highlights that family and individualism are significantly equally as important as wider communal dimensions in Tanzanian society.

Such examples of the richness of African social and political institutions can be found across the continent (for Nigeria, see for example Alagoa, 1966), with some of these surviving the period of European rule in the 19th and 20th centuries relatively intact. US and European-led capitalism requires certain kinds of social and political institutions in which to flourish. Hence the international agencies responsible for the spread of notions of economic growth as the solution to world poverty have been eager to promote these under the banner of liberal democracy. However, the lack of success of such initiatives in Africa suggests that, as the Commission for Africa (2005) has argued so convincingly, we need to build much more on local cultures and institutions rather than imposing external ones, if lasting ‘development’ is to be achieved across the continent.

### 4.4 The richness of African ‘nature’

The richness of Africa’s mineral wealth and soils has been highlighted in Section 4.1 above. However, Africa’s richness can also be seen more broadly in terms of its biodiversity, the beauty of its landscapes, its wildlife, and the potential for tourism that these other dimensions of the continent’s ‘natural’ environment enable.

The *World Atlas of Biodiversity* (UNEP 2002) thus shows that in terms of country level terrestrial biodiversity, most of sub-Saharan Africa, although less diverse than Latin America and South Asia, is actually much richer than Europe. Likewise, in their major recent study of vascular plant diversity in 1,032 geographical regions across the world, Kreft and Jetz (2007) have shown that much of central and southern Africa is indeed quite rich in terms of plant diversity. They find that ‘potential evapostranspiration, the number of wet days per year, and measurements of topographical and habitat heterogeneity emerge as core predictors of species richness’ (Kreft and Jetz, 2007, p.5925). Significantly for the purposes of my argument here is that they go on to note that ‘the residual differences across the major floristic kingdoms are minor, with the exception of the uniquely diverse Cape Region’ of South Africa, which ‘contains more than twice as many species as expected’ (Kreft and Jetz, 2007, p.5925). Whilst the Sahara desert, and the north of the African content are indeed low in biodiversity, the same is not true of the continent as a whole; Africa has rich biodiversity, especially in the Cape.

**Figure 6**: *Lions in the Masai Mara, 2007*

Source: Tim Unwin

Moreover, in contrast to Europe and north America, where most of the large mammals that once roamed the landscape have been eliminated in the process of creating a 'rich' urbanised world, Africa still manages to retain substantial areas of relatively 'natural' landscape where animals such as lions, elephants and gorillas can continue to thrive – albeit under constant pressure from other land uses (Figure 6). Likewise, Africa has many stunning and diverse landscapes, from Mount Kilimanjaro and the Great Rift Valley in the interior to the magnificent beaches of the continent's coasts. Not only do these provide valuable environmental resources in their own right, as with the Muni-Pomadze Ramsar site in Ghana (Figure 7; see also Gordon *et al*., 2000) but they also offer rich potential for tourism.

**Figure 7**: *The Muni-Pomadze Ramsar site, Ghana, 2008*

Source: Tim Unwin

Christie and Crompton (2001, p.1) have thus commented that ‘The quality of Africa’s resource endowment for tourism is exceptional, but most countries have only barely developed their tourism potential’. They suggest that tourism and travel contributed about 10% of GDP in sub-Saharan Africa at the end of the 1990s, and was then growing at 5% annually in real terms. More recently, RNCOS (2007) estimate that tourist arrivals in sub-Saharan Africa grew 11.1% in 2006 compared with the previous year, further reinforcing the view that tourism is already contributing substantially to the continent’s economic growth. Tourism development is not without very considerable tensions (see for example Dieke, 2000), but if Africa’s rich ‘natural’ environment can be managed sustainably and effectively, it offers very considerable potential for the continent’s future economic prosperity.

## 5. Conclusions: towards a development practice crafted out of African richness

From a definition of poverty, grounded in the absence of ‘things’ and an unproductive agricultural economy, this paper has sought to make a case that Africa should instead be conceived of as being rich. Africa’s poverty is literally ‘caused’ by the ways that people elsewhere in the world choose to define the continent in terms of ‘things’ that African people do not have, but that rich people themselves do possess (see also Easterly, 2008). Africa is poor in terms of GDP per capita, in contrast to the wealth of many people living in most other parts of the world. Africa is deemed to be ‘poor’ in terms of governance structures, compared with the richness of liberal democracy in those states that place value on this particular type of governance. What is deeply worrying about this, is that the process of causation, tied up as it is with a process of definition, may actually be working to make Africa even poorer. If people are constantly told that they are poor, they will eventually really believe that they are so, and will abandon the past richness of their culture and identity.

In contrast to such a downward spiral of causation, I argue that there are many ways in which Africa can be thought of as being rich. If Africa's richness can be built on, then perhaps a truly African path to development can be achieved that will begin to lead to real benefits for Africa's many peoples. Richness is generally considered to have four main types of meaning: as abundance of something, usually wealth; as being productive in the sense of sustaining vigorous growth; as having high intrinsic value, in terms for example of the richness of a landscape or a piece of cloth; and as diversity, in the sense of the number of different species in a community. In origin, it is derived from Old English *rice*, meaning strong or powerful. As the above examples have illustrated, Africa is indeed rich in all of these four senses. Africa has abundance of mineral resources that can provide the basis for economic wealth. Africa is rich in fertile soils, capable of sustaining vigorous growth if carefully managed. Africa is indeed rich in the intrinsic value of its cultures, landscapes and wildlife. Africa is not the vast barren continent that it is so often depicted as being, but instead maintains a rich biodiversity that is of immense global significance.

Sub-Saharan Africa is now widely considered to be poorer than it was in the middle of the 20$^{th}$ century when most of its countries achieved independence from their former colonial rulers. Fifty years of donor involvement have done virtually nothing to make Africa richer. Based on such evidence, there should be little confidence left that external agencies can indeed have a beneficial impact on African development, however that is to be defined. The time has come for a radical rethink of development practice across the continent. Six key inter-related steps would seem to be necessary for the creation of a development practice that seeks to build on the continent's richness rather than imposing an external solution that is intended to eliminate poverty.

First, those who now see Africa and Africans as poor need to begin to balance such ideas with notions that accept the inherent richness of the continent. Staff working in donor agencies need to learn to stop telling African ministers what they have to do to receive donor funding that will definitely eliminate poverty, and instead begin to learn how they might help to build on Africa's riches (see Commission for Africa, 2005). Likewise, the private sector, be it from China or the USA, needs to begin to respect Africa's richness, and pay appropriately for the mineral wealth extracted from its rocks.

Second, African leaders and peoples need to take much greater control over their own development agendas, and be willing to say no to well-intentioned but misguided offers of development assistance that are built on the premise that Africa is poor. The numerous failures in the implementation of top-down supply-led initiatives that have sought to promote the use of ICTs to eliminate African poverty (Unwin, 2008), for example, are ample testimony to the futility of this approach. There are many signs that African leaders are indeed beginning to adopt a more robust approach to foreign governments and international corporations, but it is extremely hard to overturn decades of existing practice that have led to widespread dependency on the development assistance community.

Third, it is important for pan-African and sub-continental institutions to be given greater support both by external agencies and by African governments themselves, so that shared understandings of Africa-wide issues can be developed and regional solutions proposed. Experience to date has shown that institutions such as the African Union, the New Partnership for Africa's Development, and the African Development Bank, have not been able to play as effective a role as they might have done, not least because of the wide diversity of interests that they seek to represent (Mercer, 2003b; Tikly, 2003; Murithi, 2005). Nevertheless, at least three of the NEPAD principles accord closely with the arguments proposed in this paper:

- African ownership and leadership, as well as broad and deep participation by all sectors of society
- Anchoring the development of Africa on its resources and the resourcefulness of its people
- Forging a new intentional partnership that changes the unequal relationship between Africa and the developed world

(http://www.dfa.gov.za/au.nepad/nepadbrief.htm, accessed 6th October 2008)

Fourth, there needs to be a shift in balance from externally determined development interventions that are meant to eliminate poverty, to ones that instead seek to build on Africa's richness. This can be typified by the need for there to be more high quality research on enhancing Africa's indigenous food production capacity (see IFPRI, 2004). Whilst the so-called Green Revolution was able to transform South Asian agricultural production in the late 1960s and 1970s, this has not been the case in Africa, in large part because of a lack of investment in research specifically on the ways in which African agriculture can be made more productive. Likewise, there are strong arguments for African governments to focus much more on their niche strengths rather than seeking to compete at a competitive disadvantage in international markets. In this context, the opportunity for tourism provided by the richness of Africa's physical environment and the potential for economic growth based on mineral processing are both significant areas for future African economic development. It is salient here that these are two sectors where Asian companies have recently been particular keen to invest.

Fifth, though, it is important to recognise that much of Africa's richness lies in its diversity. All too often, solutions to African poverty have been seen as being monolithic and universal (Sachs, 2005), and it is of critical importance that nuanced local and regional solutions are identified and developed. What can be achieved in Ghana is fundamentally different from what can be done in Mozambique. Both are African countries, but they have very different cultural, environmental and political contexts.

Finally, much more work needs to be done on identifying ways in which aspects of indigenous Africa social and political institutions might indeed be used to provide effective governance structures for the continent's peoples. Whilst these have undoubtedly been transformed by the experiences of colonialism and imperialism, as well as by the 'good' intentions of the international donor community in the latter part of the 20th century, many aspects of Africa's traditional institutions lie not far beneath the surface. It may well be that efforts to impose a European and US view of liberal democracy in the continent have foundered explicitly because they have failed to understand the strength and richness of these lasting traditions. The search for effective African solutions will not be easy, in part because of existing critiques of indigenous African societies as being patriarchal and hierarchical (Gordon, 1996; Kalabu, 2006). However, if the aspirations of at least some of those Africans who have contributed to the AU, NEPAD and Commission for Africa (2005) debates on these issues are to be fulfilled, it is essential that the richness of indigenous African institutions be built upon to help shape the continent's future.

Such suggestions are only a beginning, and given the case outlined above for much greater emphasis to be placed on African solutions to African challenges, it is somewhat presumptions for a white European male to be making these arguments at all. Indeed, given the strength of the interests that are continuing to describe Africa as poor, it seems rather unlikely that such a call will receive widespread acceptance. However, the time has surely come to bury once and for all the arrant nonsense that suggests that poverty in Africa can somehow be eliminated by a war against it. Rather than continuing to talk and write about 'the fight against poverty', as do campaigns such as Make Poverty History, we need instead to concentrate on supporting Africans in building upon their riches. The notion of a 'War against poverty' first featured in US President Johnson's State of the Union address in 1964, and the rhetoric is this deeply embedded in US culture. To continue to refer to it today, merely reinforces a US way of thinking that is at odds with rich African realities. War is violent and destructive; building is constructive. Let us together find ways in which we can indeed build on Africa's communal richness to help the continent's poor shape a brighter future for themselves.

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