



In December, **KY Amoako** (left), executive secretary of the United Nations Economic Commission for Africa, visited London to deliver the latest in a series of millennium lectures at Downing Street. His speech on 'Fulfilling Africa's promise' was heard by an audience that included British prime minister Tony Blair, Cherie Booth QC, and the secretary of state for international development, Clare Short. During his UK visit, he spoke to **Chris Alden**.

**CA:** The general view of Africa is that it is a continent in decline. This is despite the fact that eight of the world's 20 fastest growing economies are found in Africa. How do you account for this misperception?

**KA:** Africa is an extremely diverse continent consisting of 53 states. Within that diversity, we have some economies that have done well and others that haven't. The top ranking countries are Botswana, Mozambique and Tunisia and they share a few common features, amongst them a commitment to sound macro-economic policies, the practice of good governance and a stable environment. The reason for the lack of recognition by the international community as a whole of these economic achievements is the poor performance of the other African countries. The result is that the aggregate growth figure for the continent last year stood at only 3.5 per cent. That simply isn't good enough. African economies have to do better than that if the general perception is to change.

**CA:** Why isn't there more foreign direct investment coming into Africa?

**KA:** One reason, which we just alluded to, is the problem of Africa's image. Too often the only picture of the continent is that of continuous conflict, genocide, destruction of habitats and resources, and the HIV/AIDS pandemic. The 'neighbourhood effect' causes countries that are not directly affected by these issues to be tarred with the same brush as those which are experiencing these conditions. Where we do see potential for investment, it is the small size of African economies – Mali and Ghana, for example – that unfortunately keeps commitments low.

Another challenge is that of natural resources, the area of traditional interest for foreign investors. Africa needs to move away from its over-dependency on this sector, which still receives the bulk of foreign direct investment. But the question remains, how does Africa achieve this? The Lagos Plan of 1981 points the way – through developmental regionalism. We can see this happening already in the telecommunications sector, where

foreign investment has played a key role in the expansion of that area.

**CA:** What are the prospects for initiatives such as the New Economic Partnership for Africa's Development (NEPAD) and the African Union? (NEPAD is an initiative driven by African leaders to encourage a constructive partnership between the industrialised states and Africa with the aim of furthering investment-led development in the continent.)

**KA:** NEPAD and the African Union are exciting initiatives reflecting the insights and experiences of a new generation of African leaders. NEPAD is a visionary compact between this leadership and the African people that provides a framework for accelerated development that is 'home grown', that is to say, the product of African thinking. NEPAD is an attempt to redefine Africa's programme for development in such a way that African countries take ownership of the process. Creating a capable state with a set of sound economic policies and a stable political environment is at the core of the initiative. It has been very well-received to date by the G8 countries, the United Nations and the European Union. We have learned a lot from previous decades of what works and what doesn't work in development and have sought to incorporate these insights into this general framework.

**CA:** What about the obstacles to realising these ambitions, for example, Africa's substantial debt and the HIV/AIDS crisis?

**KA:** Taking the debt issue first, as you know the HIPC (Heavily Indebted Poor Countries) initiative and the enhanced HIPC initiative have been important steps towards resolving the continental debt burden. Non governmental organisations such as Jubilee 2000 played a key role in mobilising public support in the industrialised countries, to bring pressure to bear on their governments to change their approach to the question of Africa's debt burden. Individual African countries themselves didn't have the influence necessary to push the debt issue, so here is a case where it was important that civil society was able to do so.

More, however, still could be done in this area. Regarding HIV/AIDS, the pandemic is a huge problem not only for Africa but the world as a whole. The impact of the disease can be seen in the reduction of life expectancy of Africans in many parts of the continent, as well as in the creation of a whole generation of AIDS orphans. In economic terms, the cost to African development is considerable, slashing expectations for growth in some areas and sectors. Fortunately we are seeing a mobilisation of international support for addressing the HIV/AIDS crisis. For example, Kofi Annan has played a crucial role in raising awareness of the problem through the UN's Global AIDS Fund. Here, again, more still needs to be done.

**CA:** Finally, what do you think of the potential for new technologies such as the internet to serve as a tool for development?

**KA:** As you know, the Economic Commission for Africa has played an important part in launching the African Information Society, an initiative which has sought to leverage the benefits of the new technologies for African development. Through improved communication infrastructure and an enabling policy environment, ICTs (information communication technologies) can be used to improve deliveries in the areas of health, education and social services as well as provide significant commercial opportunities to African entrepreneurs. A complementary development has been the huge increase in the use of mobile telephones, which is transforming the lives of ordinary Africans. Taken together, these developments promise to change the landscape of the continent in the 21st century. ■

#### Dr Chris Alden

is a lecturer in the Department of International Relations. He is currently researching the impact of ICTs on Africa. The full text of Mr Amoako's speech at Downing Street is available on the United Nations Economic Commission for Africa website at [www.uneca.org](http://www.uneca.org)  
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# Africa's priorities – image and economy?