

Compassionate Conditionality for Africa

By Larry Diamond

It is hard not to nod in sad agreement with *The Economist's* recent headline on Africa, “the hopeless continent.” No region of the world is poorer, more heavily in debt, or more besieged by civil wars, refugees, famine, preventable deadly diseases, and state repression. On no continent is life more Hobbesian, quite literally, short, nasty, and brutish.

In the grip of an AIDS epidemic, life expectancy in some African countries is plunging back to pre-colonial levels. Many older Africans think things were better under British or French colonial rule. With some notable exceptions (mainly in southern Africa, most of all Botswana), the promise of independence has been squandered.

More precisely, it has been stolen. Africa's core problem is that it has been wretchedly governed. Its now endemic political pathologies – corruption, nepotism, ethnic domination, abuse of power, decimation of the rule of law – have seeped deeply into the culture.

There are ways of reversing this bleeding tragedy, but the latest international policy fashion – unconditional debt forgiveness for the poorest of the poor countries – is not one of them. To be sure, Africa is flat broke. The nearly \$400 billion it owes internationally represent three-quarters of its GDP and nearly four times its annual exports. But in many countries, the external debt – Nigeria's more than \$30 billion, for example – is easily equaled or exceeded by what its political leaders have embezzled and swindled from the state.

Unless African countries lay the institutional foundations of limited and accountable government, under a true rule of law, they have no hope of lasting relief from their burdens. Those institutions will not be encouraged by an unconditional write-off of debt. Rather, “forgiveness” would reinforce the climate of indulgence and irresponsibility that has brought the continent to this pathetic juncture.

Africa needs the compassion of the West, but it also needs its conditionality. The debt can never be repaid, but it must only be forgiven in exchange for real and lasting reforms to control corruption and contain the abuse of power. A new American president should lead the West in offering to Africa (and other poor countries) a new international bargain: debt for democracy, and development for good governance.

The bargain would suspend repayments on the debt of any poor country that put in place credible laws and independent structures to monitor the assets and conduct of public officials; to prosecute and remove corrupt officials; to audit public accounts; to insulate the judiciary from political interference or ethnic favor; to ensure the public and civil society access to government information; and to protect freedom of the press, and of association, assembly, and other forms of thought and expression.

For every year an African country holds to this bargain, its external debt should be reduced by ten percent. After ten years, if the country continues to respect its own institutions, the pre-existing stock of debt should be retired altogether.

Along with debt retirement, assistance should flow at higher levels to train, equip, and empower the judges, lawyers, accountants, auditors, administrators, elected officials, journalists, and civil society leaders and activists necessary to make good governance a reality.

Such a bargain would help African countries lay the institutional foundations for sustainable economic growth, and for finally beginning to attract foreign investment outside of oil and other minerals. Only with freedom, transparency, and a rule of law can Africa escape its miseries. Only with conditionality can the West show compassion.