

DINNER/DISCUSSION SUMMARY

Stark choices for development policy – what should the balance be between building institutions, direct support and capacity building?

Held at The Royal Society on 21st March 2007

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Chair: **The Earl of Selborne KBE FRS**
Chairman, The Foundation for Science and Technology

Speakers: **Sir Gordon Conway FRS**
Chief Scientific Adviser, Department for International Development and
Professor International Development, Imperial College

Dr Vikram Patel
Reader in International Mental Health, London School of Hygiene and Tropical Medicine

The Hon Aleke K Banda MP
President of the Peoples' Progressive Movement, Malawi

SIR GORDON CONWAY opened the debate by summarising the vision for the Department of International Development (DfID) aid delivery and the role of science and technology in supporting national innovation systems. The focus of DfID's programmes was on fragile states and low income countries with more limited support for middle income countries and Brazil, Russia, India and China. Science and technology must be incorporated into poverty reduction plans to persuade donors that that capacity building was worthwhile. For most of Sub-Saharan Africa economic growth could only be achieved through growth in agriculture, fisheries and forestry. Options for promoting small scale rural and urban entrepreneurship should not be missed. High value cash crops for export were important for growth.

Good translational research processes needed to be in place to turn basic science results into products that could assist development. A good example was the development of the insecticide-treated mosquito bed nets – this required research funding to an advanced research institute, fundamental science to develop the insecticide, new manufacturing facilities and co-ordination of support from national and international organisations.

DR VIKRAM PATEL reminded the audience of the United Nation's Millennium Development Goals – eradicate extreme poverty and hunger, achieve universal primary education, promote gender equality

and empower women, reduce child mortality, improve maternal health, combat HIV AIDS, malaria and other diseases, ensure environmental sustainability and develop a global partnership for development. Improved health is at the centre of many of these goals and yet today over 300 million children in developing countries are malnourished. Malnutrition increases mortality, and has long-term adverse impacts on cognitive and psychological performance. Food aid is not the answer – India which has a wide range of programmes has seen a negligible change in seven years in underweight children under three (46.7% of children in 1998-99 down to 45.9% in 2005-06); married women of child-bearing age are more anaemic today than they were seven years ago (56.1% compared to 51.8%). The poor health passes from generation to generation – a malnourished child becomes an adult with poorer health and reduced economic circumstances and a mother to a malnourished child. The answer is empowerment of women – building capacity in mothers and families is more likely to reduce malnutrition in children than direct food aid. This approach aligns with the DfID rights based approach for alleviating poverty.

HON ALEKE BANDA MP spoke about his experience in Malawi. He too cited the importance of the Millennium Development Goals in focussing attention on support for Malawi and other developing nations. Malawi has a democracy, has not been at war since independence and yet 65% of the population exists

on less than \$1/day, 53% of children are stunted due to chronic malnutrition and only 34% complete primary school. One in five children fail to reach their fifth birthday. HIV Aids is growing and there is a sharp upward trend in cancer cases. Debt cancellation has released new funds but Malawi is still almost totally dependent on donor support for development. The Paris Declaration endorsed in March 2005 by over 100 countries and international organisations agreed that aid should be targeted on the poorest countries and aligned with their priorities – this is of great benefit to Malawi. Malawi has adopted a sector wide approach in the health area where national and donor resources to support an agreed, integrated programme. This reduces the management burden and should deliver more. Previously officials were receiving a continuous stream of visitors from donor bodies to agree priorities and monitor progress. The Sector Wide Approach will be introduced to other areas. Donors should be more willing to engage with faith based organisations – 40% of health care is provided by faith based organisations in Malawi.

In summary Malawi needs opportunities for its young people, the economy must grow beyond food and cash crops, tobacco substitutes must be developed and new technology introduced. The changes to the cultivation of maize using drought resistant strains have enabled Malawi to achieve a record harvest in the last year of 3.1 million tonnes. Improved skills and research capacity can be delivered by strengthening the university and tertiary education systems.

The discussion began with suggestions for how Malawi might break out of growth stagnation – rural electrification through solar power was a possibility – China now supplied electricity to 90% of its population. Trade barriers particularly those set up by the European Union should be brought down so that Malawi could export goods at a fair price. Research on plant and animal disease and new crops could help improve farm productivity. The availability of hybrid maize seed, a network of agro dealers to distribute the seed and fertilizer and the availability of credit had all helped to increase the maize yield.

Doctors and nurses were returning to Malawi following an increase of salaries – but the salaries were still well below what a doctor or nurse could earn in the UK. It was much less expensive to train an engineer or a doctor in Malawi than send them overseas.

Donor agencies were willing to join in a sector wide approach but still wanted a robust auditing system and confidence in the governance and anti-corruption systems in place. The response to the December 2006 tsunami had shown how uncoordinated aid could go badly wrong; millions of dollars of aid had been committed but thousands of people are still in temporary accommodation.

The introduction into Malawi of a reliable, low-cost treadle pump to lift irrigation water has shown how simple technology can make a real difference to productivity. However, prospects for growth may only improve if small holders are empowered through microfinance and new cash crops introduced (possibly the jatropha nut for biofuel production).

DfID is investing in fewer, bigger projects. Africa and India need trained people – health improvements, irrigation system development, crop research and infrastructure improvements building cannot happen without skilled people. Education, particularly of women, and capacity building are the keys to success.

Dr Dougal Goodman FEng

The presentations are on the Foundation website at www.foundation.org.uk.

Useful web links:

The British Council

www.britishcouncil.org

CIA Factbook Entry for Malawi

www.cia.gov/cia/publications/factbook/geos/mi.html

Department for International Development

www.dfid.gov.uk

Department for Trade & Industry, Office of Science and Innovation

www.dti.gov.uk/science.uk-intl-engagement/page8386.html

FAO Report on Treadle Pumps

[ftp.fao.org/docrep/fao/005/x8293e/x8293e00.pdf](ftp://ftp.fao.org/docrep/fao/005/x8293e/x8293e00.pdf)

The Foreign and Commonwealth Office

www.fco.gov.uk

The Foundation for Science and Technology

www.foundation.org.uk

London School of Hygiene and Tropical Medicine

www.lshtm.ac.uk/nphiru/staff/vpatel.html

The Royal Academy of Engineering

www.raeng.org.uk

The Royal Society

www.royalsoc.ac.uk

UN Millennium Development Goals

www.un.org/millenniumgoals

The Wellcome Trust

www.wellcome.ac.uk

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