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Justice and the market *Some thoughts by our new executive director*

When told by economists that we should "let the market decide," the Senior Bishop of the African Methodist Episcopal Church, Bishop John Hurst Adams, asked incredulously, "Are you serious? You mean you're going to let the market decide on me? I'm not going to have anything to do with it? I declare," Bishop Adams continued, "somewhere in our economic philosophy [we need to] not only let the market decide, we also [need to] let the people decide. The common good of the common people is important."

I assumed the position of executive director of the Washington Office on Africa in the midst of the ongoing debate over the Africa Growth and Opportunity Act, and though Bishop Adams was talking about urban issues within the United States, I think he also captured the essence of our concerns about this Africa trade bill. For those of us seeking a just American policy toward Africa, a bill that requires African nations to demonstrate their commitment to a free market economy if they are to reap the benefits of the act may well challenge, indeed threaten, commitment to their own common good. It is not so much that the often long lists of parastatals providing non-essential services in many African nations are appropriate economic answers for Africa or anywhere else; it is rather that an American insistence that African nations apply an economic perspective that within the United States is characterized by a striking absence of discussion about the common good is a fundamental disservice to African aspirations for common services for education and health and the like. A just policy toward Africa needs to affirm *community*, both in the sense of American and African commonalities and in the sense of respect for community needs and hopes within Africa. The benefits of an open market need to be balanced with the realities of Africa's economic challenges and the needs of Africa's people as a people.

Recently I attended a briefing on what is essentially a re-write within the Senate Finance Committee of the Africa trade bill that has already passed the House (H.R. 1432). Nevermind that attachments to the Senate version, including "fast-track" and NAFTA extensions, likely mean that the bill is dead for this Congress. It was revealing to me to see that references to debt relief and to targeted U.S. aid funding for Africa were cut. They added requirements that African textiles contain U.S. thread and that the fabric be both spun and cut in the U.S. if textiles were to be eligible for the bill's benefits. Moreover, they kept demands that African nations remove restrictions upon foreign investment and reduce allegedly "high" corporate taxes.

I am spending this much time in this reflection discussing the Africa Growth and Opportunity Act because it symbolizes for me the critical role of those of us – you and me – engaged in advocacy for Africa. We could celebrate this trade bill as a sign that the United States is prepared to treat Africa seriously, which of course American political and economic leadership have often not done. But a just American economic policy toward Africa must do more than emphasize access to markets. It must embrace economic advantages for Africa as well as for American business. It must affirm the significance of a thoughtful aid program and the tragic impact of international debt upon African social well-being. It must effectively discourage the exploitation of African labor. It must be sensitive to African environmental concerns. When, last month, Mobil Oil took out quarter-page ads in the *Washington Post* urging passage of the Africa Growth and Opportunity Act and declaring that “the U.S. stands before an enormous market opportunity” that can create “thousands of new American jobs,” well... we have to pause and think.

There are those within the Africa advocacy community who have felt that, on balance, the Africa trade bill deserved our support, especially after the eligibility criteria were broadened. We respect those judgments, just as we recognize the dilemma that this bill poses. During the anti-apartheid struggle, there was widespread clarity about where justice lay, and there often was substantial agreement about the direction to take toward the goal of a free and just South Africa. As the Washington Office on Africa (WOA), together with a wide variety of organizations concerned about Africa advocacy, approaches African issues and American policy today, where justice lies is sometimes less clear, and the means toward shared understandings about direction and action are even more of a struggle. There is no doubt in my mind that the dilemma the Africa trade bill poses for Africa advocates will be repeated many times as we seek to articulate a vision of a just American relationship with Africa.

As WOA’s new executive director, I want us to be partners in a process of discernment *and* action expressive of such a vision. To do that, my hope is that we will invest some energy into listening. To whose voices do we listen? I believe there are two important answers to that query. First, I believe that, in order for the integrity of those whose concerns we have embraced to be honored, we need to work at hearing them. Otherwise we are lost in that old colonial mentality of claiming to act *for* Africa rather than *with* Africans. This is, frankly, often difficult to do in any pervasive way. One of the challenges of the Africa Growth and Opportunity Act, for example, is that so many African ambassadors in Washington have supported its passage. Their important voices should not be neglected. But neither should grassroots NGO’s within Africa, nor the African churches, and finding those voices takes more effort. Grappling with the structural adjustment programs imposed upon many African nations, Anglican Bishop Bernard Malango of Northern Zambia tells the story of an elderly Zambian woman asking, “Why are we suffering so much?” “Because of the IMF,” came the reply. “Well, who is this Mr. IMF who makes us suffer so much?” she retorted. For me it is not so much the sophistication of the analysis or the power of the speaker as it is that by listening we will have tried to balance our notorious Western impulse toward “efficient” decision-making with the often remarkably perceptive insights of our African colleagues.

We at WOA need to listen, too, to our sponsoring organizations. There is a wealth of African experience wrapped up both in the faith communities that are at the center of our support and among

our friends from a rich variety of backgrounds. All have helped to make WOA an effective advocate over the years. My hope is that WOA's role will be to do these things:

- ✓ to encourage reflection *and* action about the issues before us
- ✓ to provide timely information about the Congressional agenda and the administration's African initiatives
- ✓ to support Africa advocacy efforts of sponsoring organizations and their constituencies
- ✓ to offer possibilities for networking to enhance our effectiveness, *and*
- ✓ to facilitate discussion about our concerns that may not be addressed by political Washington at all.

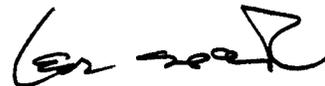
If the process is more time-consuming and if the issues offer less clarity, this is nevertheless a crucial time for Africa advocacy. As I consider the issues that confront us, I wonder:

- ✓ Is there a chance for a "good" Africa trade bill in the next Congress?
- ✓ Must the foreign aid appropriations for Africa remain at such a discouraging place?
- ✓ Will the U.S. Congress, which is ill-disposed to meet American treaty obligations for its own payments to the United Nations, have the decency to support meaningful debt relief for Africa?
- ✓ Is the rural and agricultural development legislation called Africa: Seeds of Hope, that Bread for the World has worked on so well, headed anywhere?
- ✓ Will Gen. Abubakar, whose recent words *and* actions include so many of the "right" things, renege on his promises, as his military predecessors in Nigeria have consistently done, and if so, will there be the will in Congress to move forward on a version of the Nigerian Democracy and Civil Society Empowerment Act?

We have quite a bit of work ahead of us, and it need not be discouraging work. I am convinced that Americans do care about Africa. What happens is that American voices about Africa tend to become lost in the nuances of the choices and in the "competition" of other issues for attention. If WOA and those who support us can be partners who provide timely challenges for reflection and action and who present meaningful avenues for effective advocacy, then we really can be voices together for a just American policy toward and with Africa.

One step is for you to hear from us, which you are doing now. Another is for us to hear from you. We would like to hear your assessment of what the priorities are and of what you need from WOA to strengthen your own efforts to address those priorities. I hope you will take the time to do that. I look forward to hearing from you, and to our working together. *La luta continua*. The struggle continues. It really does.

Yours faithfully,



Leon P. Spencer
Executive Director

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