

**david king**

# Beyond Gleneagles

*After pushing the issue on the international political scene in 2005, is the UK government taking a break on Africa's development? No, and supporting science is among its top priorities, explains Sir David King.*

**T**ony Blair's right-hand man on science leans towards the tape recorder and clears his throat. His office is tidy, as is the man, crisp in his suit despite the heat wave holding London to ransom outside.

It's late July, and a little over a week since the UK Department for International Development (DFID) published its new strategy for alleviating world poverty. Its talking points include a renewed focus on Sub-Saharan Africa and a boost for development science. Both are topics close to Sir David King's heart—he spent the first 30 years of his life in South Africa and the remainder in or around science labs.

The UK government's chief scientific advisor is not despondent about the state of science on the continent of his birth. But nor is he entirely optimistic.

"I don't despair," he says. "I see some very bright things happening. But—and it's a very big but—the stresses on the African continent simply outweigh the stresses anywhere else in the world. When one adds to the problems of clean water, sanitised conditions, agriculture, disease, malaria and HIV/Aids the problems that are on the horizon from climate change, which is going to become a big stress for Africa, then one realises there's an enormous task ahead of us."

The implementation of the plans fuelled by the G8 summit at Gleneagles and Blair's own Commission for Africa report last year is now firmly in the hands of Africans, through the agencies of the African Union and the New Partnership for Africa's Development (Nepad). This is as it should be, King believes.

"We see it as a partnership with African leadership. We're not simply passively handing it over to the AU and Nepad, but rather working closely with them. This has to be led by the AU, but we are prepared to assist in any way we can."

This assistance will, as the recent White Paper attests, also be financial. The UK government has committed to doubling its spend on international development from the current level of 0.32 percent of Gross National Income to 0.7 percent by 2013. The focus of its investment will be areas where progress on the UN's Millennium Development Goals has been slow or nonexistent. In particular, South-

Eastern Asia and Sub-Saharan Africa.

Science has rocketed up DFID's list of funding priorities in recent years. The White Paper says DFID's science budget will double, reaching £220m (\$416m) in a few years. The money will be channelled into three research areas—agricultural productivity, the fight against disease and tackling climate change.

But will the money end up with African researchers or with well-heeled scientists in non-African institutions? Gareth Thomas, the UK minister for international development, had his department criticised by the UK Royal Society after insinuating that a lot of the money would end up with development scientists in UK institutions. The Royal Society said that spending the money in Africa—and building local research capacity to tackle future problems—would render it doubly effective.

King's view is that, wherever possible, the research should be funded in Africa. "Where there is local expertise, we want to be building that expertise up. Whether this is in research or in direct funding for schools, high schools, or universities, it is to build up local skills. So the priority would always be to fund it in Africa."

At the same time, he says, maintaining the development science capability in the UK is also necessary.

**THE UK GOVERNMENT** supports the Nepad position to develop centres of excellence in research across Africa. "We strongly support that, because one of the problems in Africa is the isolation of expertise," King says.

But there is a balance to be struck, he explains. There needs to be a parallel effort to build up existing research infrastructure, in particular in the universities. "If we were to set up, for example, a centre of excellence in East Africa tomorrow, it would have the potential of denuding all the regional universities of their talent. There's a concern that the money will simply end up in a few countries. That's why I keep stressing that the AU and Nepad have to have a leadership. If they're not happy, then we would be foolish to proceed down that line."

What the UK government will not do is dictate in which disciplines science capacity should be built. "We certainly see the need for skills development in areas like civil engineering, medicine and agriculture. But I don't think we would want to get into the business of picking winners. Supporting excellence is what we'd rather do, because I believe that excellence pulls through on the

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whole system. If you have standards of excellence, people aim higher."

Allowing Africans to set the science agenda is all well and good, but what does the UK government make of tensions that exist within Africa? It is no secret that South Africa, in particular, has been accused by its neighbours of hijacking pan-African discussions.

**KING SAYS THAT** it is an issue that goes beyond science. Africa is losing an estimated 100,000 skilled people per annum—not only nurses, doctors and engineers but also scientists. Within Africa, he says, South Africa is a net beneficiary of this brain drain. However, he points out, this has less to do with Africa per se than being the result of modern globalisation.

"The right way to approach it is to create attractive facilities in the countries to retain their own people. 'Attractive facilities' often mean not only reasonable salaries, but also the ability to function as a skilled person. That's the way you're going to keep your skills base. Because running against the stream of people flowing from poorer to richer countries is the basic loyalty that many people feel towards their own country," he says.

As an afterthought, and perhaps coming a bit closer

to answering the original question, he adds that the UK government sees South Africa as a "good player" in Africa. "So, while we're aware of the criticisms emerging from other countries in Africa, we think that really has to do with globalisation rather than with South Africa."

The UK government will not stop pushing for Africa to be top of the agenda, says King. "If you look at the G8 communiqué from St Petersburg, you will again find a reference to African development. The British government was very keen to continue the momentum from our presidency into future presidencies."

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**SO MUCH FOR** Sir David's views as a politician. But what about his emotional response to what is happening on the continent of his birth? As Blair's chief scientist, he has travelled the globe lecturing on the need to take climate change seriously. He says science will be needed by the world in general,

and Africa in particular, to tackle the threat. At times, the struggle can seem hopeless.

King prescribes pragmatism as the best remedy for such despondency. "You have to avoid being overwhelmed by the size of the problem. It's a matter of getting on with it."

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