

PRAXIS Interviews Practitioners: Alex de Waal

Alex de Waal is director of the newly-created United Nations Commission on HIV/AIDS and Governance in Africa (CHGA) and is also co-director of Justice Africa, an organization that initiates and supports civil society activities in Africa. He has served as associate director of Africa Watch, founder and director of African Rights, chairman of the Mines Advisory Group, and director of programmes for the International African Institute. He is author of Famine Crimes: Politics and the Disaster Relief Industry in Africa, among other titles. Mr. de Waal was interviewed on March 10, 2003 while at The Fletcher School to give a talk on the theme of “new variant famines” in Africa.

WHAT IS THE COMMISSION ON HIV/AIDS AND GOVERNANCE IN AFRICA? WHAT WAS ITS GENESIS AND WHAT DO YOU HOPE IT WILL ACCOMPLISH?

The Commission stemmed from a recognition I had about 18 months ago that HIV/AIDS threatened to have impacts on development and governance that were at that time not being fully recognized. I was concerned that the responses that were being mounted did not recognize the massive capacity constraints that existed within Africa for the delivery of AIDS prevention and treatment programs. As I looked at the problem more and more it became bigger and more complex. It was obvious that it was being neglected and also that it was raising all sorts

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of profound methodological and analytical issues about how we approach even understanding what development and governance are.

The idea of a commission arose in early 2002. It was initially to be a fairly modest project between a couple of universities. I then approached the Economic Commission for Africa [ECA] with the rationale that this new commission needed a high-profile African base, and also because ministries of

finance are one of the strategic entry points for changing the policies and programs of governments. The ECA is the peer of Africa’s ministries of finance and economic planning. Through the ECA it is possible to gain access to this key axis of government decision-making. The executive secretary of the ECA, K.Y. Amoako, has taken very bold leadership on the issue of HIV/AIDS and its economic and governance impacts, and he redoubled the energy of this idea among the senior management of the UN and with Secretary General Kofi Annan. What is happening now is that Kofi Annan is himself convening the Commission. The chair will be K.Y. Amoako. He will have about a dozen eminent commissioners and six task teams: macro-economics, public services, food security and sustainable livelihoods, peace and security, the private sector, and the family.

The philosophy is that it should be an activist commission. This is not an academic exercise because we do not have the luxury of time. The effects of this pandemic are upon us and we do not really understand what they are. We understand the magnitude and the urgency of responding but we do not know how to put policy tools together. So the Commission is simultaneously a research exercise, a policy engagement exercise, and an activist exercise.

THIS IS A VERY NEW COMMISSION, BUT HAVE THERE BEEN ANY VOCAL CRITICS SO FAR? ANYONE WHO HAS SAID YOU ARE GOING ABOUT IT IN THE WRONG WAY OR THAT PERHAPS THE UN IS NOT THE PROPER VEHICLE FOR SOMETHING LIKE THIS?

There are of course skeptics about the capacity of the

UN to address this. One of the core values of this initiative is that it should be an African-owned initiative, which is why it is located in the ECA, a part of the UN but also an African organization. The Commission's key partners in Africa are universities and research institutes. The majority of the commissioners will also be African. So it has an essentially African-led research, policy, and advocacy agenda. There are also some skeptics who say the problem is not that bad, that the measures taken have been effective, and all that needs to be done is to carry on

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down the same path. I think that attitude is too sanguine. I think this is a much more systemic and complex and considerably larger problem than many have realized. I hope I am wrong on that, but I do not think we can afford to be complacent.

HOW CAN YOU PUBLICIZE THE COMMISSION TO GET MAJOR DONORS ON BOARD? WHAT HAVE YOU BEEN DOING IN THAT REGARD THUS FAR?

What we are doing and what we plan to do at a larger scale with more urgency and more profile is a mixture of things. There is a need to address the academic community to get those who are doing research and analytical thinking on this issue to look at the parameter change that has occurred because of the catastrophic loss of adult life expectancy in Africa and what this means for social, economic, and political life on the continent. There is also a need, related to that, to train a whole new generation of development and governance professionals in this area. There are no experts, and we desperately need people who are at least professionally competent in addressing these problems. There are thus far only people who learned on the job. Many of them are doing excellent work, but we need to systematize that knowledge and scale it up in terms of advocacy. We want to develop policy

briefs and we want our commissioners to take the message to the highest levels—to heads of state, the international community, the court of world opinion—and say that this is probably the most pressing issues of our time in Africa and threatens to be in other parts of the world as well.

YOU WERE JUST TALKING ABOUT HOW PEOPLE DO NOT REALLY HAVE THE SKILL SETS THEY NEED TO DEAL WITH THIS ISSUE. WHAT ARE SOME OF THE SPECIFIC SKILLS THAT HUMANITARIAN AND DEVELOPMENT WORKERS NEED TO DEVELOP TO BE MORE EFFECTIVE IN CONFRONTING HIV/AIDS IN AFRICA? WHAT CAN ACADEMIC INSTITUTIONS DO TO TRAIN PEOPLE?

The impact of HIV/AIDS on humanitarian work and food security is massively cross-disciplinary. It challenges the fundamentals of the way we think about how societies work and it also challenges many of the methodologies we use for monitoring, early warning, and gathering basic information about food production, poverty, and national income. There are a number of key methodological issues we need to address. One is the issue of how to monitor households that are dissolving. How do you do surveys when your key data points, which include households impacted by HIV/AIDS, are just dropping out? Another is how to evaluate the work done by women in rearing and socializing children. This has traditionally been excluded from national accounting, from measures of national income. There is a great fear that we may not actually know the value of this work until women are no longer able to do it, when we have crops of orphans and under-socialized children and all the problems that accompany this. So

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humanitarians need to tend to ways of thinking and ways of acting that they have not before. In terms of actual policies and programs, we are really only at the beginning of thinking through the sort of needs that

are arising. Let me just focus on one: The need to take up some of the burden of care, care for sick people but also for children, which historically we have never needed to worry about because societies were so effective at doing that. We could just put resources into societies and they could take care of it themselves. Now humanitarian agencies need to begin to consider how to support schools that not only educate children but also keep them nourished and socialize them. We may need to consider paying wages to women to simply bring up children as valuable members of society.

YOU DISCUSSED EARLIER THE ROLE THAT AFRICAN GOVERNMENTS CAN PLAY, PARTICULARLY MINISTRIES OF FINANCE. IMAGINING THAT YOU ARE AN HIV-NEGATIVE WOMAN IN A SUB-SAHARAN COUNTRY, WHAT WOULD YOU WANT YOUR GOVERNMENT TO DO TO HELP YOU STAY NEGATIVE?

The key things that most people in HIV/AIDS-affected societies ask for are food and money. They really just need to be that much better off so that women in particular are less vulnerable to being economically required to engage in sexual relationships

for basic income and for survival, so that they are less vulnerable to being coerced into sex. Food and money, and protection is the other key issue. These are abiding issues but they need to be sharpened, refocused, and reformulated in the era of HIV/AIDS.

WHAT MOTIVATES YOU TO DO THE WORK YOU DO ON HIV/AIDS IN AFRICA? DOES YOUR PASSION COME FROM ANY PERSONAL EXPERIENCES?

I have been working in Africa and on Africa for more than 20 years. It is really the sense that all the visions and dreams and optimism that were driving my involvement with health, food security, conflict resolution, and human rights were imperiled by the HIV/AIDS epidemic. The people I was working with were also beginning to see their dreams of how Africa could develop, how people could achieve their aspirations for a decent life, being so cruelly trodden down by this pandemic. In Swaziland they call it the beast: “This beast is consuming everything we’ve been trying to do.” It is tragic and very difficult—very personally difficult—to confront the way in which so much hope and so many aspirations are being threatened. But it is also very necessary. ■