

BELINDA STRONACH

Our reputation at stake in Africa

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On a recent trip to Africa, I spent time with Liberian President Ellen Johnson Sirleaf. As we spoke, a curious ritual developed. I'd ask questions about her country, but she kept bringing the conversation back to Canada – to the high regard in which our nation has long been held by her people; to the influence Canada has had as a force in helping to make life better in Africa. "Canada is admired," she said, "because Canada has been a good citizen." But that progressive reputation, the shared legacy of every Canadian, is now at risk.

Last month, the ONE Campaign – a global organization fighting extreme poverty – revealed that the countries of the G8, including Canada, are not living up to their 2005 commitments to Africa.

According to The DATA Report 2008, we're halfway to the 2010 deadline – yet only \$3 billion of the \$22 billion pledged has been delivered. That's just 14 per cent. Canada's Official Development Assistance to Africa actually declined in 2007, the report found.

The reticence of Canada and much of the G8 – only the U.S. and Britain are on track to keep their word – threatens to scuttle the momentum that's being generated in parts of Africa. As the ONE Campaign points out, stories of development success on the continent are being realized every day.

For instance:

2.1 million Africans are now on life-saving AIDS medication, up from only 50,000 in 2002.

26 million children were immunized against a group of life-threatening diseases between 2001 and 2006.

29 million African children were able to enter school for the first time – a direct result of debt relief and increased assistance between 1999 and 2005.

59 million bed nets had been distributed by the Global Fund alone by the end of 2007, helping to dramatically reduce malaria rates in countries such as Tanzania, Rwanda and Ethiopia.

These positive trends may not be what we usually hear about Africa, but it is the reality. While the G8 is falling behind on the partnership, Africa is stepping up. By simply keeping their promises, the G8 nations could provide an immeasurable boost to development efforts and begin the task of lifting millions out of poverty.

Canada, which will host the G8 Summit in 2010, needs to regain its place as a major player in the unfolding story of Africa's development. For Canadians to welcome the other G8 members to the "finish line summit" yet still be slogging toward the finish line ourselves would be a national embarrassment and a distressing failure of political will.

Canada must meet its commitment this year – and form a new, long-term partnership with Africa that includes not only a more substantial commitment of financial assistance, but also an improved trade relationship.

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Africans would prefer to increase their economic development and prosperity by trading their way out of poverty. We can support that by making our trade policies friendlier to imports from Africa.

The story of the 20th century was the development of North America and Europe. That of the 21st century will be the growth of the developing world, likely highlighted by the rise of Africa. Personally, I am an optimist on Africa.

Canada has a storied history in leading the G8's African agenda and playing a positive role in development, and the goodwill from that history endures across the continent. But it will be forever diminished if we go back on our word now.

Many thousands of Canadians signed up to Make Poverty History in 2005 when these commitments to the people of Africa were made at the Gleneagles Summit.

As our nation takes the world stage in 2010, let us add to this storied history and strong relationship with Africa rather than blemish it. Let us continue to be "a good citizen."