

## **De Roy's Diary and the *Damned by Debt Relief Tour***

Joy and sadness conjoined in me as I was leaving Ghana for London; joy, because I was going to experience a different way of life in one of the richest countries in the world, and sadness because I was parting company with my lovely wife, my family and friends. Within six hours I had flown from Ghana in West Africa, crossed the Mediterranean Sea and landed at Gatwick Airport, London. This was human ingenuity. This was technology. I wished I could fly many times like that to any part of Ghana and across the world with my family for holidays. However, my wishes are under siege because I live on £3 a day.

We disembarked from the plane along a tube corridor and were wheeled around the magnificent airport by escalators and lifts. Old and physically-challenged people did not need to exert themselves since machines were aiding them. I was overjoyed by the ease of life that development has brought to people in the UK.

As we drove off from the airport, my amazement turned to anger as the gulf between Ghana and London in terms of development became apparent. I saw huge beautiful bridges, highways, underground tubes, railways, buses, modern housing units, to mention but a few. I was incensed because this was all on a large scale while the promotion of tiny, tiny projects are all that is on offer to Ghana from the World Bank, IMF and externally-funded NGOs. I was particularly stunned by two big supermarkets called Tesco and Asda. I was amazed to see so many varieties of food from different countries at affordable prices for everyone, all in one shop, kept under hygienic conditions. In fact, food is one of the least expensive things to worry about in London.

In Ghana, one has to wander around every nook and cranny of local markets to gather basic ingredients to prepare something to eat and they're expensive. There's none of the convenience of ready made food available to most. Setting the fire alone takes 30 minutes since we are still forced to use charcoal and firewood instead of electricity and gas. Where are the campaigns to bring more supermarkets to Ghana?

In people's homes in the UK there are washing and drying machines for dishes and clothes, freezers and widescreen televisions. Many Ghanaians trek daily for eight miles, scrambling for firewood, water, and foodstuff, carrying heavy loads on our heads and our backs. Our peers in a different part of the same world perform these activities effortlessly. Scientific, technological and industrial developments have given them enviable and unparalleled freedom, choices and opportunities in life. The labour-intensive work in Ghana is intolerable.

It was no surprise to me, therefore, that in London people hardly sleep. The bars, pubs, clubs and cinemas fill up with people in the evenings. They wine, dine and dance through the night, enjoying themselves with their friends and loved ones. During the day, the museums and parks are also always packed with people. In Ghana we rarely have time for such entertainment. What time do we have to spend on leisure when our activities are full of unproductive manual labour which leaves little time for anything else? I never saw my father taking a stroll with any of his four children let alone taking a holiday. It's not because he didn't love us or didn't desire that, but rather because there was no money and there was no spare time for such things. Development has endowed Londoners with the spare time for holidaying and partying. Meanwhile, lack of development in Ghana has denied us these vital life pleasures and comforts. Our activities are geared towards survival.

Yet, as I started my speaking tour in schools, colleges and universities, it became clear to me that all that glitters is not gold. The great ideas that spurred on pioneers to venture to make life easier, more bountiful and pleasurable for those in the West are now under attack. The culprits in the dock are affluence, ambition, science and technology. Strangely, the jury prosecuting are those that already have a lot of it! I was surprised to listen to the discussion on affluence at The Battle of Ideas annual public debate. This was the first time I had heard the suggestion that flying abroad must be rationed, or worse still, banned. The denunciation of material comfort is so widespread that even school children think affluence is a worthless evil for society to pursue. A broad spectrum of people I talked to were concerned that there is less happiness and laughter in British society due to economic development. Some said those of us in Africa are happier and laugh more often than those in the UK. This is incredible! Is this an anti-human syndrome? I thought that freedom from toil was the centrepiece of economic development, handing anybody the ability to unleash their potential and gain unlimited opportunities. Well, if the West is not happy with such great things perhaps they should swap with us Africans. We would love to have what these people hate. You see, we believe in the material progress of mankind; we hate being constantly subdued by nature; we are tired of dying early; we are tired of sleeping in mud huts; we are tired of walking long distances for water, food and fuel; we are tired of doing our washing by hand; we are tired of farming with hoes and cutlasses and waiting for nature to be merciful unto us.

At another session, one worried student told me that we were destroying our environment and the planet with it; we were greedy, consumed too much, produced too much, wasted too much, flew too much and drove big cars... and he then blamed this for Africa's poverty. I felt very sorry for this doom monger. Africans are not suffering because of climate change. We are suffering because of underdevelopment. The fact is we simply don't have the infrastructure and the safety nets that have enabled the West to subdue nature. As a stalwart believer in humanity, I think the modest human achievements of the West must be celebrated. It seems that in spite of the fact that the West is economically rich, in the way they perceive the future they are bankrupt. Not only do they look at the future with unnecessary fear, but they have lost their trust in humanity. They no longer believe in humankind as the architect of history, but rather as the destroyer – and nature the redeemer.

This was exemplified at November's mammoth protest on climate change at Trafalgar Square. Apparently the protest was against the backdrop of US refusal to kowtow to the Kyoto treaty and more fundamentally against the so-called destruction of the environment through the West's unrestrained economic growth. What struck me most were the frantic efforts made by the speakers to gag any critical dispassionate debate on the issue. "This is no time for any debate, this is operation Noah", the Archbishop of London said. One spoke of "thousands of people in Africa and Bangladesh" who were dying because of the West's recklessness and greedy consumption levels, imploring the crowd of the need to cut down their carbon emissions. The crowd didn't need much convincing. I read placards demanding "no to 4x4 cars", "take public transport" and "don't fly more than once a year". I was shocked at the rubbish that was thrown at a 4x4 vehicle by some of the protesters. I'm happy that those of us living in Ghana don't see climate change as a problem. We see, if anything, only a lack of economic development to tame the consequences of what nature may throw at us.

As my tour gathered momentum similar sentiments of pessimism and disenchantment became more apparent. I was bored by the long and fruitless comments made by an African

lecturer who said that Africans were suffering because of corruption and corrupt leaders. Why is every rich African seen as corrupt and why has corruption become such a huge development issue, especially in the West? Why does the West look at Africans and their leaders with distrust, mistrust and suspicion? Why has the West suddenly become so obsessed with corruption? Corruption is not our biggest problem in Ghana or Africa. That title should go to Western interference and lack of investment. Corruption has been used as an excuse by the West to extend and deepen its regulatory and interfering policies in Africa.

One of our next stops was a posh, modern university in central London (the kind of university I've always longed to study at) where the film engendered a very healthy debate. Students posed lots of intelligent questions such as "Ghana is resource rich and has a good business climate so why aren't investors interested in investing in it?"; "Is it only Ghana that is implementing the World Bank's poverty reduction programme?"; "What is wrong with the poverty reduction strategy?" After telling the students that the sum of FDI (Foreign Direct Investment) and debt relief combined is worth less to Ghana than the remittances from Ghanaians in the Diaspora, the students started to revise their notes. I could see that they couldn't believe their ears. It was at this point that they began to see the low horizons, the lies and the emptiness that has been sold as debt relief. I told the students that poverty reduction is a one-size-fits-all straightjacket programme that was imposed on Ghana and other debt relief recipient countries as HIPC conditionalities. I said that what the poverty reduction strategy offers is basic local schemes like micro-credit for women and boreholes, latrines and we Ghanaians will never be fooled to think this is development.

I had a memorable discussion at a sixth form college which Bob Geldof had visited merely a week earlier to also give a talk to the students. Perhaps because of this, the students and their staff attended our discussion in very large numbers. Most of them had already participated in Live8 and Make Poverty History, so were shocked at my unfettered swipe at these campaigns. When I said that the only thing that the "mission accomplished" claim by Bob Geldof did was to promote and entrench survivalism, interference and low horizons, the audience looked shocked. However, the students began to understand me better when they got to know the facts about the insidious strings attached to the debt relief initiative. I put them in a quandary when I said we Ghanaians and Africans don't want to be patronised by self-elected representatives such as Geldof. By this stage, the confusion in the air was palpable, and there were murmurings of desperation. "I have £10. I really want to help and you're saying you don't want pity," one student lamented. He continued, "The NGO-campaigners you mentioned are making emotional fanfares to get our money, but they are not delivering the real development that you want, so what should those of us who genuinely want to help do?"

I was not surprised by his question because I have become used to people assuming that all that we need is small-scale investment. At least this student's token was higher than the UN's miserable Millennium Development Goal target of US\$2/day, or the paltry \$3/day target of Jubilee2000 and the much vaunted debt-relief programme of the IMF and World Bank. These are the supposed ambitions that Ghana must aspire to. How insulting. Does the West really believe in economic development in Africa? No. The West and its funding agencies don't think "much" (economic development) is possible at all. Even when they do think there is potential they worry about the consequences, especially in the light of the apocalypse painted by their Stern Report on Climate Change. Given their low horizons, it's no wonder Foreign Direct Investment (FDI) is so low in Ghana and also why Official Development Assistance (ODA) is at its lowest ebb since the 1970s. If all that rich western donors promote in Ghana is micro-credit and "basic" schemes, what then can a student full

of good intentions do? Even Western-funded NGOs like Oxfam and ActionAid believe that giving micro-credit loans of between £10 and £30 to mostly women is “development”. Yet, what can £10 do for Ghanaians who want to have industries, factories, highways, jobs and a university education? Such is the belief here in the UK that all that people in Ghana need are projects aimed to keep us hovering just above survival levels. My advice to students who want to help is to at least find out what really goes on in Africa, tell the truth and challenge these awful campaigns.

Later in my speaking tour we were invited to Cambridge University. The magnificent lecture theatre I spoke at was full to capacity. It was a great privilege for me to debate in such a high class university, among some of the cream of the world’s intellect. Indeed, I was armed for one of my toughest debates ever. Many questions were asked; from the usual issues of corruption to impending environmental disaster. One man asked, “You accuse Blair and Bob Geldof of being self-elected speakers for the poor in Ghana but those of you in this film are not poor, so how could you claim to be speaking for the poor?” I told him that as a basic teacher I live on £3 a day, is that rich? Anyway, even if I (or the others interviewed in *Damned by Debt Relief*) were rich, neither Mr Blair nor Geldof could ever know our development priorities better than we Ghanaians ourselves. Don’t Ghanaians rich or poor have the right to speak against unbridled Western interference and low expectations? Blair has no constitutional mandate to speak for Ghanaians, we did not vote for him.

There followed many more depressing questions about whether I trusted my government more than the British government, or suggesting that my rejection of western “advice” was merely a show of arrogant national pride. It was disappointing to listen to such bogus questions and prejudice from students who will one day become leaders in the corporate, civil and political world. They failed to appreciate that Africans are equally as intelligent and capable as Westerners. Given the much-needed resources and the disappearance of Western interference, we may even be able to develop beyond the West’s level. We would do everything we could to improve the lives of our people: building factories, universities, hydro and nuclear power projects and creating millions of jobs for our people. It is revolting and shocking to hear people belittle the development aspirations and abilities of Ghanaians. In fact, it is the West which has lost any sense of development. We Ghanaians will always defend our right to rule ourselves and determine our own development priorities. Furthermore, whether we’re corrupt or not, people must appreciate the fact that when Western-backed policies fail in Ghana, Ghanaians cannot hold any Western organisations or their governments responsible. They are unaccountable and unelected agencies as far as the Ghanaian electoral mandate is concerned. Which members of the World Bank or IMF have been taken to task for their disastrous Structural Adjustment programmes (SAPs) in Ghana in the 1980s and 1990s? None.

Lest I forget, I made a few trips outside of London because I wanted to know what a village looked like. I was shown a couple of very nice places in the countryside. I was astonished to hear such places are all “villages”. They have highways, good roads, portable water, electricity, recreational facilities, local supermarkets, telecommunication facilities and more besides. Such facilities are striking in their non-existence in even towns and cities in Ghana. Where they do exist, they are in a deplorable state and hard to access. Apparently, it’s considered a privilege to live in some rural areas in the UK and people actually long to live there. The countryside here is far more habitable than a city in Ghana. Young people are fleeing in droves from rural Ghana to our towns and cities because rural life is full of misery and hopelessness. The social amenities and infrastructure, jobs, education and entertainment

are at least a possibility in our cities and towns; in the UK they are plentiful in town and country.

One fascinating feature I admire about the countryside in the UK is its farming. I saw vast tracts of land being manned by just one person. From the tilling of the land and the planting of crops to harvesting, storage and the transport of farm produce, it all involved the use of machinery, thereby making farming not only simpler but also an attractive business venture.

I escaped rural and farming life in Ghana because it is punitive, unproductive and hopeless. In school, errant students are made to weed with axe, hoe and cutlass as a form of punishment because the teachers consider our farming methods to be retributive. The mass exodus of rural youth to urban areas in search of a better life has its genesis in their rejection of a life of primitive farming. Unfortunately, such a life is being promoted through poverty reduction initiatives and is romanticised by the West as “sustainable development”.

At the last university I visited on my tour I was fortunate to be able to debate with a professor in global economic policy, and advisor to the British government. He claimed to understand the “genesis and revelation” of the HIPC, debt relief and poverty reduction programmes being spearheaded by DFID. In fact, his understanding went so far as to apparently enable him to participate in Ghanaian cabinet meetings. I was astounded by such freely admitted interference. That British officials can negotiate access to another nation’s cabinet meetings indicates just how far the West downplays the sovereignty of countries like Ghana.

At the final screening of the *Damned by Debt Relief* tour, I was surprised to see so many people – including Ghanaians – showing up at the improvised theatre that had been assembled at the WORLDwrite centre to watch it. Silence fell upon the crowd as the lights went down and the film began, again. And then to this hushed audience I gave my speech, one last time.

The following, I now believe is the most salient part of the speech I had constructed and delivered to so many academic institutions across the UK:

The West’s environmentalism which puts nature above human beings and despises true development, leaves Africans living off the land and remaining as poor as ever. The West’s association of corruption with Africans and their leaders is racial discrimination in disguise – it is an idea which sweeps global inequality and underdevelopment under the carpet. It is an idea which justifies ever more interference and control over our affairs. These ideas are holding back our prospects and they must be challenged. Our freedom is not for sale...

At this final screening many people came to discuss and share their opinions with me. I suddenly felt that as long as there was this space for an open debate of the facts – such as took place on this tour – then there would be hope in the fight against global inequality, although it wouldn’t be an easy one.

When I arrived back home in Ghana I was heartily welcomed by my wife and friends at the airport. But the euphoria was as short-lived as the electricity; Ghana’s ongoing energy crisis had caused yet another blackout, shrouding the journey back to the house in unrelenting darkness. Of course, this is contrary to Britain’s uninterrupted national grid (indeed, I read in the *Guardian* newspaper of a giant gas project from Norway to the UK, costing £5.2billion).

What I experienced during my short stay in the UK has brought untold frustrations into my life as I think about how long it will take us to overcome this huge global inequality. However, I know I must cling to the memories of those many debates I had in the UK, in the knowledge that people in the west do not wish upon Ghanaians the shackles of underdevelopment. Presented with the facts I believe many more people would demand an end to western interference and the beginning of some real development.

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