

**FROM THE CIVIL SOCIETY GROUP AT THE E U FORUM FOR
SUSTAINABLE RURAL DEVELOPMENT**

July 4, 2007

**To: Dr Simon Maxwell
Director,
Overseas Development Institute
London, UK**

Dear Dr Maxwell

We had the privilege of listening to your keynote presentation on June 18, 2007 to the Second EU Forum on Sustainable Rural Development at Berlin on the theme of *Rural Livelihoods in the face of globalization*.

Most of us found the content and style of your presentation very offensive, almost colonial. From the point you offered a chocolate bar as a prize to anyone who could better your presentation to the point where you called upon your audience that to succeed in influencing policy, it was necessary to deliver just *simple messages to people who have power*, made us feel that you were infantilising the issues and treating your audience like a bunch of school children. Most of the African delegates found it a direct insult to their sensibilities. They commented that you behaved more like a chocolate salesman than a development thinker which you were expected to be, to come on to the stage on that morning.

This was also the flavour of most of your presentation. The tricky matrix which you said you developed just because you wanted it to lend itself to alliteration, though appeared fascinating in the beginning, became irritating later when one realized that beyond the 'B's in their name the four countries you put together shared nothing else in terms of the complexities of their societies and ecologies, both natural and political. This bunching together of countries seemed like an illusion being created by a trickster, something very distasteful especially in an august gathering of some of the best African brains.

But you tried to cast this illusion longer when you made a powerful argument that political and economic inclusion was the tie that brought these countries together. This lent some credence for a while to your argument. But later as you went on, the illusion lifted and your arguments were found extremely wanting in terms of intellectual depth. Thereafter most of the messages from you such as Nebuchadnezzar as the first globaliser and God as the first food aid deliverer, were all in the class of stand up comedians.

Apart from this unsavoury style of your presentation, what we found galling was the kind of solutions that you offered. Or did you offer any solutions at all?

What were the two lasting messages that you left behind? Only two come to our mind. Whether they were lasting or not, we leave it to your consideration.

- 1 After creating a matrix that was meaningful to none, you portrayed the DEFRA of UK and FAO as the knights in shining armour who lived the principles of your glowing matrix.
- 2 After all the homilies to participatory and democratic governance for the African states, you made a prescription that left your audience gasping for breath. You said that we needed to send very simple messages to three most people in the world: the new chief of USAID, the new economic ministers of UK and France. You almost suggested that that would be a fitting finale for the EU Forum.

You could see the wave of exasperation that swept through the audience at that point of time. How come they were being treated to this farce? And were being presented this huge democratic deficit? And what is the moral right of a keynote speaker to suggest to the Forum that the key to Sustainable Rural Development in Africa was in the hands of just three persons in the world?

Nothing could have been a more disastrous start in terms of content and form for the EU Forum. Your keynote left such a foul taste in the mouth of all the people in the auditorium. Particularly the civil society groups which have struggled so hard to bring democracy to such global platforms and force policy makers walk their talk of participation, democracy and transparency. Your keynote destroyed it all.

And finally, with a characteristic arrogance, you accused the Civil Society Declaration, a declaration which was an outcome of a two day deliberation between over 50 civil society representatives from Africa, Asia, Latin America, Europe and North America of serving *a lot of nonsense*. Again something we do not see as the trait of development thinkers but as the character of cheap street side brawl. Though you addressed much of your fury at our stand on Green Revolution, we have this sneaking suspicion that what got your goat was our insistence on the African agenda to be a hallmark of democratic participation and led by the vision of African people. We think that this went against your prescription of an agenda led by consultants and the powerful. This got you so angry with us since this view of ours will not lead the Forum to follow what *Simon Says*

Whatever that may be, Dr Maxwell, we wish to challenge you to present your Keynote Address and the Civil Society Declaration to any set of development philosophers, scholars and academicians for evaluation. If they uphold your keynote as a superior piece of development discourse, we will be glad to offer you two bars of chocolate as a prize.

But in all seriousness we think that the EU Forum did the most inappropriate thing by subjecting all of us to your kind of insulting, arrogant discourse.

We started this letter to you by saying that we had the privilege of listening to your keynote. But as we approach the end of this letter, we are left thinking whether it was indeed a privilege at all!

One last request Dr Maxwell. Please do not reply to this letter. There is nothing you can explain to us and nothing of your explanation that we would wish to listen to.

With best wishes

Representatives of Civil Society organizations at the EU Forum

Signed by

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