

INTO AFRICA

Jo Chandler reports on why Australia is rediscovering Africa.

Drums draw a crowd from all corners of the Chimoio market, in central Mozambique, and into a square surrounded by thatch-covered stalls. A group of women, some of them sex workers, follow the beat into the centre of the crowd and begin to dance, the rhythm of their quick feet raising the dust. Having nailed their audience, their work begins.

The 10-minute play they perform is the equivalent of a TV soap opera. There's grief with the death of a husband, romance as the widow and her brother-in-law contemplate a marriage, and a few gags (crude ones, judging by the tenor of the laugh they draw, though the joke defies translation). There's tension as the groom insists his bride have an HIV test, drama when it turns out to be positive.

The doctor character explains what the infection is, how it spreads (debunking local myths of witchcraft along the way), how it might be treated and managed, and how a positive life is possible. It's no fairytale, but the happy couple exit stage left, arms entwined, to loud applause. The children are shooed away as the actors re-emerge to pass out long ribbons of condoms to the crowd, and there is no shortage of demand.

This is Australian aid money at work in Africa. The women are 'activistas' – volunteers with a non-government organisation supported by Melbourne's Burnet Institute and AusAID funds. Later that night, some of the women will conduct an unlikely cruise of a pick-up bar on the outskirts of town, where dozens of trucks have pulled over for the night. They sit down with the men as they drink their beers and talk to them about safe sex. They hand out condoms. They talk to women offering sex, especially the youngest ones, about



their health, about how to protect themselves from infection, and urge them to take HIV tests.

Board a one-hour flight to the coast and the capital of Maputo, and if you fly in as evening falls you will see Australian corporate money at work, processing alumina imported from Western Australia, and lighting up the sky as it sucks up the lion's share of the country's cheap, brown-coal power. This is BHP Billiton's \$2 billion Mozal aluminium smelter – a mega-project at the core of the impoverished country's improving economic profile, and one of the showpieces of an Australian investment and resource boom in sub-Saharan Africa since the turn of the decade.

Actual and prospective investment by Australian resource companies in the continent has climbed to \$US20 billion (\$A29 billion) over that period, according to a recent report published by the Lowy Institute. While the report anticipated that the boom was strongly grounded enough to survive a fractious financial market, and that its greatest

threat would come from instability in fragile nations, the scale of the market meltdown may now put paid to many big projects still on the drawing board. Certainly several major companies have signalled that some planned projects are likely to be delayed or shelved.

Whether the resources boom continues or stalls, supporting Australian corporate activity in the high-stakes, high-risk African environment is one of the factors giving impetus to the Federal Government's push for what the Minister for Foreign Affairs, Stephen Smith, calls a new partnership of 'deeper engagement' with Africa.

So far, that engagement translates to closer government-to-government ties with African nations, as well as pledges of increased aid. The Rudd Government's increase in the Australian aid budget from 0.32 per cent of gross domestic product to 0.5 per cent is expected to push funding to Africa up from \$91 million last year to \$250 million by 2015. Plus there is

an unspecified promise to up Africa's share of the kitty to help realise the objectives of the United Nations' Millennium Development Goals.

Australians have a deep empathy for Africa, says Tim Costello. Of the 400,000 children sponsored by Australians through World Vision, two-thirds are African. 'We often say it's not our region, true. But most of the aid program until very recently was forgiving Iraq's debt, and Africa is much closer than Iraq.'

As for the question of Asia versus Africa: 'I don't think we should set the poor against the poor. There is no question that our engagement in the Asia Pacific is our priority . . . we can do both. It is also true that while the greatest numbers of the world's poor are in our region, it is Africa that is the continent with the greatest misery.'

The man responsible for Australia's aid program, Bob McMullan, laid out the new African blueprint in a speech to the Australia Africa Business Council in August. Despite the vastly changed economic landscape that has

emerged in the intervening months, he says the government remains firmly committed to developing multi-layered new partnerships across the Indian Ocean.

'We will still be predominantly focused on the Asia Pacific, but [on Africa] we have been pathetically small in what we have done, almost embarrassing, and it's time we were back. Not trying to do everything, but doing the things we are good at.'

Programs enlisting Australian expertise on agriculture, water, and resource management are all areas where a significant contribution can be made.

'If you have a commitment to the Millennium Development Goals as we do, then Africa is the region that is most off track. If you do see yourself as a middle power in the world, you can't ignore a continent with 53 countries and great issues. And we are going to engage in an effective, efficient manner doing things we are good at.'

On the question of the motives underwriting this new journey – reaching out to Africans, or shoring up Australian interests – McMullan, like Tim Costello, prefers to view it as a happy conjunction of the interests of both worlds.

Clearly there are elements of both, he says. 'We are pursuing Australia's national interest, and Australia has a national interest in a more stable and more prosperous world.'

'A lot of Australians want to see their government more effectively engaged in the fight against global poverty,' he says, and that is a fight that can be fought on a range of fronts.

An abridged and slightly modified article by Jo Chandler, *The Age*, 20 October 2008. To see the full article 'Into Africa' go to <www.theage.com.au>

ABOVE LEFT: Women activists raising awareness about HIV infection through dance and theatre. Photo: Celeste MacArthur

The truth of what is happening

Late last year Collingwood defender Heritier 'Harry' O'Brien, as a youth ambassador for the Burnet Institute, visited rural Mozambique, one of the poorest nations on the planet.

The idea was that this articulate young footballer could provide a voice to engage other young people on issues far removed from their team's winning prospects – issues such as HIV/AIDS, malaria, maternal and infant mortality, the list goes on.

And so it was that Harry found himself in Mozambique. 'I was fortunate to spend a week in Manica Province to see the development work the Burnet Institute is doing with funding from the Australian Government. It's working with 46 local non-government organisations to build capacity among communities affected by HIV and AIDS,' says Harry who visited health clinics, talked to sex workers and priests, and took encouragement from some of the very good initiatives happening on the ground.

Everywhere the situation is tough. No question. There are so many orphans. 'Nearly all the people I spoke to were directly or indirectly affected by the HIV/AIDS epidemic.'

But there were also some bright spots.

A visit to a commune of substitute mothers and family, for example, brought smiles. There were more orphans but these were happy, well-fed, clean and loved, breaking into songs that raise the roof of the cement church that lies at the heart of their small community. Pastor Joseph Madeira and his wife have been caring for children here for 15 years, assisted by volunteers, local women who live in as 'mothers' and several of the now grown up members of their extended family.

Holding the hand of three-year-old John, Harry is taken on a tour of the busy enterprise that supports the 55 orphans, the diaspora of HIV. A few hectares of crops, three sewing machines, a donated phone that they rent to the neighbourhood by the minute all bring in income. There's also some international support, including from the Burnet Institute which provides training to help them secure and expand their operations.



But not every encounter with children is as happy. At the end of one of the day's program tours there is a visit to a crumbling mud hut where two small boys live alone after the deaths, from AIDS, of both their parents. They are fed by families living nearby. The brothers are just five and eight, their bodies filthy and frail, their skin broken and sore, their clothes in tatters.

Harry was warned that he might be overwhelmed by culture shock. 'But I have seen extreme poverty before. My eyes have always been open to these things. To me the biggest culture shock is home in Australia ... the lack of awareness of the truth of what is happening in the world,' he says.

The Australian Government, through AusAID, supports the work of the Burnet Institute, one of the leading medical research and public health institutes in Australia. Based in Melbourne the institute also has health professionals helping development in countries across Asia, the Pacific and Africa. <www.burnet.edu.au>

TOP: 'Severely malnourished children living in conditions unfit for any human being seemed to be the norm as we moved from location to location,' says Harry who was deeply affected by the plight of so many orphans, particularly these brothers who have been fending for themselves since their parents died from AIDS. Families living nearby give them food. Photo: Celeste MacArthur



ABOVE: Harry O'Brien spent his time in Mozambique visiting orphanages and teaching children the basics of football. For a long time he has wanted to do something to help tackle the kind of poverty he first saw in Brazil and again in Soweto on the Magpies tour to South Africa. Photo: Celeste MacArthur