“I have smelt, heard and touched poverty. I know what it's about”.

Honorary Professor in the Department of Economics, Luis de Sebastián has an MSc in Economics from the London School of Economics and a Ph.D in Political Science from UHE (Geneva). He probes the consequences of European presence on the African continent in his book *Africa, Sin of Europe* (*África, pecado de Europa* – Trotta Editorial SA).

**Luis de Sebastián**  
Honorary Professor in the Department of Economics
Africa, Sin of Europe is your latest book. It analyses the "damage" that European occupation did to the African continent. But are we the only ones to blame for their unfortunate situation?

No. It is clear that European occupation, particularly by countries such as Belgium, Great Britain and France, greatly harmed the continent. These countries exploited Africa's resources and people, especially through the slave trade. I am also aware and speak of 50 years of independence that some countries on the continent have enjoyed and have not used to improve the unfortunate situations created by the Europeans. In addition, slavery and occupation produced a dual situation in Africa from which some powerful Africans benefited. For example, they benefited from slavery by selling other Africans, in exchange for weapons, horses and other goods, to Europeans who in turn transported, sold and used them. Americans also did damage to the continent, but they came much later as they were concerned with dominating the West and did not take an interest in Africa until the Cold War began.

What role has Europe played so far in the economic and social development of Africa?

Firstly, it has played the role of receiving great numbers of Africans who, because they held passports from colonising countries, were able to migrate freely to these countries during the early years of independence. As a result countries like Great Britain, France and Belgium received thousands of immigrants. Colonising countries have also been markets for products from some African countries economically linked to them after independence, a situation which has not significantly benefited Africa. Europe must now begin to play the role of contributing to the economic development of the continent. But let us not delude ourselves - now more money than ever is being given to Africa because we do not want desperate Africans migrating to our countries to escape dire conditions in their home countries. In this respect, Spain is now giving much more to the development of Morocco than France, which until now had been the European country that gave the most. We all know why.

Do you believe that Spaniards are aware of the damage we have done to Africa?

Spain is not very aware because it does not believe it did much direct damage, as it only had two small colonies in Africa, Equatorial Guinea and Morocco. Indeed, when I started researching and wrote my first book on Africa, I wrote well of the Spaniards, but later I realised something: we bought African slaves from the British and French ships that transported them to Cuba. The Catholic Monarchs were the first to send African slaves to Spanish colonies in the Caribbean: the Spanish Crown made money from the slave trade. Hence we are also partly responsible and should be aware of it. This why I later wrote an article entitled, Africa, Sin of Spain, published by the Carolina Foundation.

In your book you mention the Millennium Development Goals to be met in Africa, but you are not very optimistic.

Many countries, especially those in sub-Saharan Africa, will not be able to meet even one of the Millennium Development Goals. Perhaps primary schooling for children is the one that is most being achieved throughout the continent, but it is not enough. This is partly due to the fact that development aid has steadily
decreased since 2005 in favour of aid given with particular interests in mind. A case in point is the United States, which provides the bulk of its aid to Israel, one of the countries which least needs it.

What could we do as a society to help Africa advance economically and socially?
It is very important for countries to help economically, but it is also necessary to increase awareness within society as a whole as there are countless areas where volunteer work can make a difference. One of the most critical emergencies that Africa faces is a shortage of doctors and nurses as the vast majority of those trained there leave for other countries. They leave not only because of money, but because the lack of adequate means to perform surgery and treat patients exasperates them. However, we must also look at the good things being done in Africa - people there are not standing idly by. For example, they have agreed to monitor each other and be accountable to the African Union in order to preserve democracy in all countries.

What role should companies play in contributing to Africa's progress?
It would be good if some companies set up there, hired African staff and taught them how to work so that little by little they could become fully involved in the business world. That is the way Spain developed. What we cannot do is just sell them goods, because that would be a repeat of what happened in the 19th century.

What methodology did you follow when writing the book?
It is a very academic book, very different to what someone like the journalist Bru Rovira, an expert on Africa, would write. To write it I researched a lot, but I have not travelled much to Africa. The only trip I made there was to the African Development Bank in Tunisia, to consult library materials and other archives. This book is based on extensive reading from a basic bibliography of English and French authors who have mostly analysed their own situations. I know the fact that I have not had a first-hand view of what is happening in Africa might be a bit disorienting, but it was not necessary because I have lived in some of the world's poorest places such as Haiti and El Salvador. I can say that I have smelt, seen and touched poverty. I know what it's about.