

TLS AIDS and Africa ^{1/11} 91

Sir, – I feel that Tony Barnett (Letters, October 18) has rather distorted the sense of my article on “The condition of Africa” (September 20) in order to make some points about the possible significance of the AIDS epidemic on which he is about to publish a book.

So far from attempting an “optimistic picture” of the continent, I wrote in terms which most commentators have found thoroughly disconcerting, about the political and economic implications of the demographic increase which is expected to double the population of Africa within twenty years. This still appears to me by far the most important issue facing Africa today.

Barnett’s strictures might be justified if that increase were likely to be negated by the AIDS epidemic, but is it?

As I read the evidence easily available to the layman, we have the World Health Organization forecast that 8–10 million cases of HIV infection worldwide today may rise to 25–30 million by the year 2000, and may then involve 5–6 million actual cases of AIDS worldwide. Even assuming that Africa will have the largest share in this disaster, such figures would hardly suggest that the expected increase in total population to around 700 million by that date will be very significantly dented.

I realize that some distinctly more pessimistic prognoses have been proposed for the impact of AIDS in some African countries, notably Uganda, but I do not know how far they are to be accepted or taken as representative of the whole continent. Perhaps Tony Barnett’s book will make this clearer.

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