



# The fearless factor

The economist Dambisa Moyo seems undaunted by the big, bleak questions facing us today, from the decline of the West to – in her latest book – the battle raging for the earth’s dwindling resources. So, asks ARIEL LEVE, are we really all doomed?

PHOTOGRAPH BY TINA TYRELL

It’s a sunny morning in June in New York and Dambisa Moyo is sitting on a folding chair, long legs crossed, tapping away at her BlackBerry. As I approach she stands up and walks towards me. At ease in strikingly feminine attire (a close-fitting navy dress and tailored black blazer), Moyo has the confidence of someone used to walking in 5in stilettos before noon; she doesn’t wobble.

‘Hello,’ she says, gently, shaking hands. She has a firm grip. ‘I’m Dambisa.’ Her manner is friendly, polite, and serious, too – there’s nothing frivolous about Moyo. Even a question about the year she was born (1969) is, from her perspective, irrelevant. In the past, she explains, her ideas got washed away if people fixated on how old she was. She’d rather be discussing the fate of America or the banking crisis, environmental issues or international trade.

Born in Lusaka, the capital of Zambia, Moyo is a formidable woman with a hefty surplus of degrees: a masters from Harvard and a doctorate in economics from Oxford, plus an undergraduate degree in chemistry and an MBA in finance from the American University in Washington DC. She has also worked at Goldman Sachs and the World

Bank. She is tuned in and instinctively paying attention to serious global economic matters at all times. If she’s reading the newspaper it’s not to relax. She’s taking things in, making assessments, drawing conclusions. She might not jump up and write them down – but then again she might.

Moyo’s books have become bestsellers and sparked debates with world leaders and policy-makers. Her first book, *Dead Aid*, argues that foreign aid has hurt Africa, fuelling its dependency on the West. Her second book, *How the West Was Lost*, examines America’s faulty policies and decisions and looks at how the scales have tipped away from Western industrialised economies and towards the emerging world.

She has a direct way of speaking that is non-nonsense without being bombastic, and, whether you agree with her ideas or not, she is armed with the knowledge to, at the very least, make a compelling case. Her new book, *Winner Take All: The Race for the World’s Resources*, examines the global battle for commodities set to play out in the 21st century, in which China will be the main power-broker. ‘China is attempting the death-defying feat, which no one has attempted in the



history of the world, which is to move a billion people out of poverty,' she says. 'When I speak to Chinese policy-makers the thing that annoys them the most about Western policy-makers is that they're not given any credit for anything. There's always bad news. I'm sympathetic to the Chinese; no one has stood up and said, "Gosh, what you guys have done - I'm impressed."

One might say that's because of their human-rights record. 'But you know what? I would say issues around human rights - either you're going to take a hard stance, or you're not. You can't borrow money from China the way the US has done and then turn around and say, "But you've got a human-rights problem." You can't be half pregnant. Of course there's work to be done. The world in general will get much more out of China if it treats them as an ally and says, "Look, these are things that are not going to fly," rather than try to humiliate them, which is what I think the penchant has been.'

**M**oyo's fundamental argument is that the Chinese are securing hard commodities (extracted through mining) and soft commodities (from crops) while the West struggles to keep up. 'Resources are not infinite,' she says. '[It's estimated there] will be nine billion people on the planet by 2050. The fact that there are going to be three billion new people in the middle class by 2025, and the fact that there are going to be many more people in urban areas [means] there will be significant demand pressure for things like arable land, for water, energy and minerals.'

'If you look at the data, which I've done in this book,' she continues, '[you'll see] the disconnect between the demand and the lack of supply - supply is scarce, it's depleted and it's finite - clear indications for higher prices and potentially a situation where there's going to be more conflict around the world. There are already 25 wars raging today that have their roots in commodity scarcity. And research from the US predicts more wars around water in the decade to come.'

It's rather an apocalyptic vision. 'We need to be doing something very aggressive to solve this problem,' she states. 'We, as in the global community.' With this ominous prediction, you'd think the West was doomed. But it's in Moyo's nature to be an optimist. 'To my detriment,' she says with a laugh. 'I do believe in the innate good of people. I believe if people have the right information they will do the right thing. I think whether it's aid to Africa, the global economy or commodities, these crises have had their origins in people not having information [about] the implications of their actions.'



## THE WORLD ACCORDING TO DM

- China is poised to become the world's largest economy by 2025
- **The earth does not have adequate resources to support its projected 2050 population of nine billion, particularly not at the living standard to which many hundreds of millions of people have grown accustomed**
- As of 2010 an estimated 5.3 billion mobile phones were in use worldwide, accounting for approximately 77 per cent of the world's population
- **Each day about one billion people go hungry; one billion are clinically obese**
- Forty per cent of all the food produced in America is thrown out and Britain wastes 30 per cent of its food - enough to feed the world's hungry many times over
- **Africa is the only region where famines have repeatedly occurred over the past 30 years, leaving the continent the only one in the world unable to feed itself. Yet one third of the remaining untillable land left on earth is in Africa**
- Forecasts suggest that in 40 years the global demand for water could exhaust the world's supply
- **At current levels of production the world's 847 billion tons of coal reserves is enough to last us just over a century**
- Recently discovered veins of iron, copper, cobalt, gold and critical industrial metals like lithium in Afghanistan have been estimated to be worth about \$1 trillion dollars

Moyo's day begins early. 'Waking up at 6am is late!' She will go to the gym or run around the park - less out of vanity, than to clear her mind. Her time is divided between homes in London, New York and Zambia, though mostly, she says, she's travelling and on a plane. 'I love it. Nobody can tell me what it's like in Columbia - I've been there. Russia - I've been there. I try to get this information first hand.' She's created makeshift homes in different places. 'If I go to Singapore I have friends there. If they came to Zambia they'd feel the same way. I've made connections and I have friends in many, many countries.'

She enjoys meeting people and exchanging ideas - having conversations all over the planet. It's safe to assume these conversations are not idle small-talk. But when it comes to her private life she pulls back. She is unwilling to reveal anything personal. She's not married? 'No.' She smiles. And children? Another no, another smile. The silence hangs in the air. 'This is the extent of my answer.'

Moyo talking with Arianna Huffington at the Blouin Creative Leadership Summit in New York, 2010

She exhales. 'I have a gorgeous nephew. My sister and her husband live in London. It's something that would be lovely to have.'

In the course of our discussion Moyo frequently refers to how lucky she feels and how, being born in a poor, land-locked country, she never expected



her life to turn out this way. Her parents shaped her fundamental principles and sensibility. Both highly educated, they met at the university of Zambia. 'Two of the first black graduates,' she says proudly. Her mother, a banker, is the chair of a prominent Zambian bank, and her father received his PhD in America.

## **'Politics in the West is a luxurious pastime. But if you're living in Africa it seems to me it's intertwined with your ability to exist'**

'I had the good fortune to spend hours with my parents around the dinner table having debates on politics and economics. Politics in the West is a luxurious pastime. People tend to have the conversation "What do you think of this candidate?" at a cocktail party. But if you're living in Africa or South America or Eastern Europe, it seems to me that it's so intertwined with your ability to exist.'

She attended primary and secondary school in Zambia before an attempted coup brought her to America. Did she ever feel any limitations growing up in Africa? 'Absolutely not. Perhaps if I'd been born 10 years earlier during the colonial era I'd have a different view. But by the time I came along we were independent countries. African countries have done amazing things. The US has never had a woman president; we've had two in Africa.'

She credits her parents with not only giving her confidence but also instilling in her a sense of being able to aim high. She shrugs off labels of any sort. 'People say to me, "What's it like being an African woman?" I am also an economist. Nobody should be bogged down by how other people define them. People have said I'm not really African. Yes, I am. Those people are wrong and it's not my business to correct them if they can't be bothered to go to Africa and look around and see that there really are African doctors and lawyers. People have a penchant for horror stories, but

that's not the way people live [in Africa]. Of course there are wars and disease but in a population of a billion you could argue it's relatively isolated cases. It's not the case that the whole continent is in civil war and people are dying of HIV/Aids.'

So why, then, does she think there is so much more pity for Africans than, say, the Chinese? 'I have no idea. There are more poor people in China than in Africa. More poor people in India than in Africa. My simplistic one line is that it boils down to money. The fact that the Chinese and Indians have delivered economic growth – I think that has shifted the view of them from being the horse to being the rider. Perhaps that's where Africa has some room to grow.'

Just then her phone rings and she's informed her car is waiting. She offers me a lift. Later in the day Moyo's best friend, with whom she grew up, now a lawyer, will be arriving in town and she is excited to see her. As we head downstairs in the lift she says, 'What I value most about her is that, whatever craziness my life takes on, she's so grounded. If I have doubt I'll usually go to her. There are times I have to make calls with confidential information that I can't share with her, and then I try to think about people whom I admire, and what decision they would have made.'

An example? Nelson Mandela. 'I imagine choices he's made. They're not easy choices. He spent 27 years in prison for an idea that the world didn't buy into.' And a less obvious example? She thinks for a minute. 'Well, I absolutely love Tina Turner. I've never met her but she's somebody who made a difficult choice at a particular time – with no idea how it would turn out.'

We continue the conversation in the car. Does she ever have a day with nothing on the agenda? No plans? She struggles with this one. She tells me she loves crime shows. 'I like the ones that require you to think – *Poirot*. I'm a *Law & Order* addict.' But then she admits she watches them on the go.

Suddenly she looks perplexed. 'What do you mean by not doing stuff?' I describe a day of waking up and having no plan. 'I would struggle to do nothing,' she concedes. 'I'm not good at that. I would question why I had nothing to do.'

We've stopped at a red light. While we wait for it to turn green Moyo reflects, then says, 'All I can do is live the best life I can right now. If that means that when I pass on I've done something that I think is useful to moving humanity forward, then I will have achieved more than I could ever have wished for. I don't need another handbag.' ●