

Will African poverty become history?

NEW YORK, JUNE 13, 2005 – Before the telegraph and the phone and the satellite, Africans communicated through a people's technology, the drum. Today, the e-mail list and the Web have become the world's new drum, modern communications tools that operate outside or in the shadows of the glare of the Big Media circus. It's these new drummers that have made African debt the issue it is, not governments or media outlets.

That's partly because the western media still tend to ignore and marginalize Africa, even as NGO organizations and development crusaders – along with rock stars like Bono and his ONE campaign organizers – worked very hard for years to put African debt issues on the global agenda.

According to the New York Times, an impressive 160 million people got involved in one way or another to pressure western governments to cancel billion dollars of debt that poorer countries can't pay. And, lo and behold, this effort has now hit pay dirt as Britain's Tony Blair, in a bid to improve his image and legacy, has persuaded the G8 countries to lift a debt burden from 18 countries worth \$40 billion (22 billion pounds sterling, 33 billion euros).

George Bush, whose policies toward Africa have been criticized for "benign neglect," was pushed to back Blair, and so Washington has joined the debt-burning party overseas. (This is the same Administration that lobbied for the new bankruptcy bill to ensure that millions of Americans carrying \$800 billion in credit card debt can no longer declare bankruptcy and must pay through the nose. And never mind the escalating trillions in U.S. national debt.)

The initial reaction to what seems to be an act of western compassion and benevolence has been positive. The press coverage seems very upbeat as well, with Bono and singer Bob Geldof praising the new policy which international lending agencies have yet to ratify.

"Tomorrow, 280 million Africans will wake up for the first time in their lives without owing you or me a penny," said Geldof, who is organizing the Live 8 concerts, which are being criticized for a lack of black and African performers.

(Pink Floyd announced they are reuniting to perform.)

BBC reports: “Anti-poverty campaigners have also welcomed the deal – but say they want more nations to benefit.”

Explains South Africa’s Archbishop Desmond Tutu: “It is a splendid start and one hopes that they will, from here, go on to cancel all debt for most of the countries – I gather it is about 62 countries – who are heavily indebted.”

Adds BBC: “Ugandan Information Minister Nsaba Buturo – whose country will benefit immediately – told AFP the decision was ‘commendable’, but added: ‘It’s something that should have been done yesterday.’

“Ethiopia’s Finance Minister Sofian Ahmed said his country’s debt cancellation was ‘very encouraging’, assuming there were no strings attached.”

But, alas, there ARE strings attached, not to mention continuing chains of dependency in a world where the rich are getting richer and the poor are getting poorer every day. Few media accounts are putting this news in the larger context of what critics of neo-liberalism call “global apartheid.”

Unfortunately, this analysis is often hinted at but rarely spelled out. Geldof adds: “The end will not be achieved until we have the complete package... of debt cancellation, doubling of aid, and trade justice.”

The World Development Movement says: “Our fear is that the economic strings attached to this deal means it will be years before many of them benefit, and under the current deal some never will.”

Romilly Greenhill of Action Aid said, “It will do little to immediately help millions in at least 40 other countries that also need debt relief.”

MediaChannel.org advisor Anna Kaca, who has been monitoring the story, writes to me from Finland that:

- 1) Not all developing countries will get their debts cancelled.
- 2) Blair suggests that the interest rates for the debts, the loans, should be paid by the rich countries during a period of years. After that the developing countries should pay off the original sums of their loans themselves.
- 3) The countries that receive the Blair debt cancellation model are obliged to sign up on an economic and political program of reforms that are largely neo-liberal.

She also points out that Blair is under intense political pressure in Britain, with major protests slated for Scotland when the G8 assembles in July.

More skepticism is needed, argues the CatsDream blog:

“Is it possible to ask a couple of questions about Make Poverty History? Or is this another slogan, another PR campaign like Weapons of Mass Destruction, Support Our Troops, War on Terror, Export Democracy? Also, if this is another propaganda operation, what’s the trick?

“Africa and its tragedies. Wouldn’t it be interesting to know where all these tragedies come from? Wouldn’t it be helpful to understand at least some of the reasons why so many people suffer terribly and die of treatable diseases? What about colonialism? Water, food and medicines, of course. But what about the economy and the plans imposed by western powers, the World Bank and the IMF. The never ending wars, of course. And what about selling Africa billions of weapons?

“So, why Make Poverty History? What’s behind all this love and good feelings we are presented 24-7 on TV? For which reason are people like Blair, Brown, Bush, Wolfowitz so eager to help Africa? I don’t doubt the good intentions and the honest feelings of Bono and Geldof. (BUT) those who have the power to take decisions will use any mean to build consent around their power, hide their real agenda and using the popularity of rock stars and showbiz people at their own advantage. What do you think it’s the reason for all these Sirs and Lords and Ladies, after all?”

These are important questions even if the author’s English is a second language.

Can we ask our “friends” in the media to start asking tougher questions and report on the causes of this crisis, and who benefits from Africa’s distress? Are African programs such as NEPAD (the New Partnership for African Development) working? Can they? What is the neo-liberal agenda here and its impact?

Are we seeing a real victory for Africa? Should we be beating drums for the limited debt cancellations or for more pressure on the rich and powerful? Can’t the media do more to press for more fundamental change?