



Comment

The end of the world as we know it

The fight against extreme poverty can be won, but only if Bush recognises that military might alone won't secure the world

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Tuesday April 5, 2005

Guardian

The end of poverty is a choice, not a forecast. There are a billion people on earth fighting daily for their survival. The world has committed, in the Millennium Development Goals, to cut extreme poverty by half by 2015. By 2025, extreme poverty can be banished. By dint of interest and calendar, the next step rests with Downing Street.

Tony Blair has dramatically raised the stakes. Now, he must deliver. The Blair Africa Commission is a masterful display of diagnosis and politics. Africa's leading development thinkers and Britain's political leaders are aligned on a sound diagnosis and course of action. Blair has promised that Africa and development aid will be at the core of this year's G8 summit, which he will host in Scotland in July. Africans are daring to hope that this time offered help is not just empty words.

The ways out of the poverty trap can be found. The financial costs of the needed development aid are utterly manageable, just 70p per £100 (0.7%) of the national incomes of the donor nations.

Yet will the rich countries follow through? While the UK has raised the banner of fighting poverty in Africa, the US has armed only for its war against terror. Bush never even mentions the Millennium Development Goals. The US spends just 0.15% of its national income on aid, while devoting nearly 5% to the military. Is a superpower that devotes 30 times more in spending to the military than to development aid a reliable partner in the fight against extreme poverty?

The money, including the US contribution, needs to be Blair's focus in the lead up to the July summit, since the fight against extreme poverty cannot be won on rhetoric alone. The barriers to development in Africa are not in the mind, but in the soils, the mosquitoes, the vast distances over difficult terrain, the unsteady rainfall.

Africa faces three pressing and distinctive problems that were overcome in Asia 40 years ago. The first is growing enough food. Asia had its green revolution, Africa has not. The biggest difference is biophysical. Asia's breadbaskets are in the great river systems flowing from the Himalayas and Tibetan Plateau. The Indus, Ganges, Mekong and their vast floodplains have enabled monsoon Asia to develop the world's finest systems of irrigated, high-input farming. Asia's green revolution was built on the combination of irrigation, fertiliser, and high-yield variety seeds.

African agriculture, by contrast, is overwhelmingly rain-fed, without the floodplains and monsoons to underpin large-scale irrigation. The African savannah, with its long dry seasons and irregular rainy seasons, is home to hundreds of millions of poor subsistence farmers and their families. Nor can these impoverished farm households afford fertilisers or improved seed varieties, especially in view of the vagaries of water availability.

Yet modern science now points the way to a 21st-century African green revolution. Improved water management combined with proven methods of replenishing Africa's soil nutrients, and improved seeds adapted to African conditions, now make it possible for Africa to achieve the same agricultural breakthrough that Asia achieved two generations ago.

Powerful and practical solutions similarly exist for Africa's great second challenge, the control of killer diseases. Africa's children are dying of malaria, diarrhoea, respiratory infection, chronic under-nutrition, and the lack of neonatal care. In many places, 200 of every 1,000 children die before their fifth birthday. With modern public health and medical practices, these children can be saved. And when they are saved, parents will choose to have fewer children, secure in the knowledge that they will survive. Reduced child mortality and slower population growth, surprisingly enough, go hand in hand.

The most immediate campaign should be against malaria, a disease that will claim perhaps 5,000 African children today. As the London School of Hygiene and Tropical Medicine has long shown, insecticide-treated bed nets to keep mosquitoes away, combined with effective medicines, can cut child mortality decisively. By 2008, it would be possible to halve the malaria deaths. But we would have to help Africa to finance the effort.

Africa's third distinctive challenge is the lack of basic transport, power, and communications infrastructure. Africa's farm families need all-weather roads to get fertiliser into the villages and crops out to the market. Africa's villages need trucks to rush a dying child or mother in complicated labour to a district hospital. Africa's small businesses need mobile phones to get the latest market quote. The necessary investments are clear, and not particularly complex.

Ending poverty is a grand moral task, and a geopolitical imperative, but at the core, it is a relatively straightforward investment proposition. And the investment plans are actually on the table, or more accurately, on the shelves gathering dust, since Africa's leaders have been told at least until now that their ambitious investment plans cannot be funded. Of course, ambitious investment plans require responsible government: the kind we see in Ghana, Senegal, Ethiopia, Tanzania, and many other places. Zimbabwe, alas, would not be a credible partner.

The fight against extreme poverty can be won in Gleneagles this summer. Most importantly, Tony Blair needs to bring his friend George Bush back to reality, to an understanding that the US military alone will never secure a world beset by hunger, disease, and deprivation. If the United States and a united Europe will honour their long-standing - and long-neglected - pledge of 0.7% of GNP, then Africans and other impoverished people on the planet will roll up their sleeves and get to work saving themselves and their families, and ultimately helping to save all of the rest of us as well.

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