

Aid organisations berate British government's record

Barry Mason
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On June 16, British development charities, including Oxfam, Cafod, Action Aid and DATA, took out a full-page advertisement in the *Guardian* newspaper. It was an attempt to persuade the British government to increase its contribution to international aid to 0.7 percent of national income.

The advert called for Prime Minister Tony Blair and Chancellor Gordon Brown “to put their money where their mouth is”. It pointed out that ten other countries have committed to increase aid to 0.7 percent of national income and that the British government’s aid budget currently stands at 0.34 percent—around £3.8 billion. This puts Britain in eleventh place in terms of government overseas aid spending commitment; despite Blair’s “crocodile tears” when speaking of Africa as a “scar on the world’s conscience”.

Richard Miller, UK director of Action Aid, said: “Unless the UK government at the very least sets a timetable to achieve 0.7 percent of income on aid Blair and Brown’s words will look very hollow indeed. If they fail to deliver the cash, the whole world will pay the price. The cost of Britain’s failure could be African lives.”

The Labour government was also indicted by Steve Tibbett of War on Want. In a letter to the *Guardian* he wrote, “While the UK has been leading the way on rhetoric about development and poverty, it has also been leading the charge for linking aid to the damaging privatisation of public services, as well as supporting anti-development policies on a range of issues, from promoting arms exports to linking trade and investment, as well as supporting war in the Middle East.”

Blair has recently set up an Africa Commission, which is due to report in spring next year, when Britain takes up the chair of the G8 group of the world’s

leading economies. In a letter to the *Observer* of June 20 Kevin Watkins, head of research at Oxfam, wrote: “Failure to deliver major increases in aid now will fatally damage both the commission’s credibility and the prime minister’s efforts to position himself as a global leader in war against poverty.... The challenge is at its starkest in Africa, where more than half the population survives on less than \$1 a day.... The region is losing out to poverty. Only eight countries, representing less than 15 percent of Africa’s population are on course to halve poverty by 2015.”

Pop star and campaigner Bob Geldolf, who organised the Live Aid concerts, has been appointed to Blair’s Africa Commission. In a press release from UK Oxfam dated June 22 he was quoted as saying, “I’m sick of sitting with Tony and Gordon and hearing of grandiose schemes and guff about African scars. If they really want to get rid of the scars and give the African Commission real credibility then they must increase aid to 0.7 percent.”

Prior to the G8 meeting at the beginning of June, which was attended by the leaders of six African countries, Gordon Brown published an article in the *Independent* newspaper extolling Blair’s Africa Commission. He wrote, “The challenge is massive but not unprecedented. In the 1940s, under the Marshall Plan, two percent of America’s national income was transferred to Europe, enabling Europe’s reconstruction, the resumption of world trade and prosperity of Europe and America in the post war years.... So, to put the needs of Africa first and push forward the debate for a 21st century Marshall Plan, Tony Blair has responded to Bob Geldolf’s far-sighted proposal for a new Commission for Africa.”

The Marshall Plan was not funded out of a wellspring of generosity by the US ruling elite. They understood

that in the aftermath of the Second World War, European capitalism was so weakened and faced growing political opposition from the working class, that unless America pump primed the capitalist world economy it would collapse and they faced the prospect of revolution throughout Europe.

The bourgeoisie does not feel such a spur to charitable impulses today.

Global Policy Forum, which monitors decisions made by bodies such as the United Nations and others, made an assessment of the G8 meeting's pronouncements affecting Africa. In a June 11 article they pointed out that prior to the summit it had been rumoured that Blair planned to propose a complete write-off of \$10 billion in debt owed by the world's poorest countries. Bush had been prepared to back this on the basis of a similar deal for Iraq's foreign debts—none of which were owed to the US.

No agreement was made to cancel the debts. Instead a minor concession was made to extend the World Bank-IMF debt relief programme—the Heavily Indebted Poor Countries (HIPC) Initiative—to 2006. It had been due to expire in 2005.

The G8 meeting also failed to fund any more money to the Global Fund to Fight AIDS, tuberculosis and malaria. This fund was set up by the United Nations to carry out a strategic fight against these diseases. To date the fund has attracted less than half the amount from donations that experts deem necessary. Instead the meeting proposed to create a “global HIV/AIDS vaccine initiative”.

The Global Forum article says; “Activists denounced the initiative as ‘cynical’ given the depleted resources of the Global Fund and the continuing spread of the disease, the most devastating in recorded history. The fact that no new resources were pledged—even to the Vaccine Initiative—was seen as particularly disappointing.”

In the same week that the British charities launched their *Guardian* appeal to the Blair government, Mark Malloch Brown, administrator of the United Nations Development Programme (UNDP), issued a press briefing in Geneva. He said 2005 would be a “make-or-break” year for the Millennium Goals of halving the number in poverty by 2015. He explained: “A 10-year run is the minimum you need to get the outcomes we are looking for by 2015.”

He went on to outline how remote the chance was of meeting the goals. He explained that UNDP had calculated that on present trends the millennium goals for Africa would not be met until 2147—that is in 143 years time. UNDP had also calculated that to achieve the development goals relating to water and sanitation would mean that every day “between now and 2015, 250,000 people must be linked to water, energy and sanitation systems.” He added that this was too much to expect from the public sector and that it would mean the private sector would have to be involved.

When challenged by a reporter as to whether it was realistic for private industry to become involved when there was no incentive, Malloch Brown replied that the UNDP was looking to small and medium sized local firms rather than large multinationals. This vain hope gives an indication of the extent to which the UNDP is whistling in the dark to keep up its spirits.

Jeffrey Sachs, Director of the Earth Institute at Columbia University and special adviser on Millennium Development Goals to the UN general secretary, wrote an article—“Doing the sums on Africa”—in the May edition of the *Economist*:

“In recent years, African countries have been told by the rich world simply to ‘live within their means’, however meagre those means might be.... Ever since the UN Millennium Assembly in September 2000, the low-income countries were told to ‘scale up’ their ambitions in order to meet the poverty-reduction targets summarised in the Millennium Development Goals.... Africa’s plans are on the table, but the financing is not.”



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