

G8 communiqué fails to cover over conflicts between great powers

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After the tremendous media hype, the G8 conference at Gleneagles near Edinburgh produced a final communiqué that failed to cover over the conflicts between the major powers that had been evident throughout.

The communiqué offered no solid progress on aid to either Africa or the environment. Both were the issues on which British Prime Minister Tony Blair had said he would make significant advances.

Time has done nothing to soften the still bitter conflicts over the United States' invasion of Iraq. The recent European summit succeeded only in deepening the rifts. So that, without ever being a subject for formal discussion, the US's aggressive foreign policy dominated the conference.

Despite the show of unity over the London bombings, it was conflict and rivalry that characterised the Gleneagles meeting. Such were the tensions hanging over the gathering that the assembled leaders could not reach agreement on matters that they all know threaten the continued stability of the capitalist system. On the eve of the conference, the Bank for International Settlements warned that the growing US trade deficit could lead to a "disorderly decline of the dollar." But the G8 did not address this question, the low level of the Chinese yuan or the continuing rise in the euro.

Blair, who chaired the conference, gave the questions of Africa and climate change centre place on the agenda in an attempt to turn the event into a self-aggrandising propaganda coup. The hopes and expectations of the charities that were swept up in the round of rock concerts and marches that made up the Live 8 "Make Poverty History" campaign were dashed.

Only Blair's loyal cheerleader, the Murdoch-owned *Sun* newspaper, saw the conference as one of a series of triumphs for Blair. The paper's political editor Trevor Kavanagh said that Blair was being written off as "a lame duck leader" two months ago. At that time, "Critics predicted a period of 18 months before Chancellor Gordon Brown took over." Now, Kavanagh claims, everything has changed, "The lame duck is now cock of the walk." He calls for Blair to seize the opportunity to push through "change on all fronts."

Under a banner headline, "10 Million Lives Saved," the *Sun* did its best to push the decisions on aid as an epochal event that would dramatically improve conditions in Africa. "That's ten million more like Birhan Woldu," Bob Geldof told the *Sun*. He was referring to the Ethiopian woman who appeared on the Live 8 stage in London alongside Madonna. She had been filmed as a starving child at the time of the original Live Aid concert in aid of Ethiopia 20 years ago. The *Sun* flew her to Britain for the Live 8 concert as a living testimonial to Geldof's efforts.

But Geldof and U2 frontman Bono, who organised the Live 8 concerts, found themselves the object of furious criticism as the limited nature of the deal emerged. The headline figure of a doubling of aid to \$50 billion turns out to be much less on closer inspection. The increased money is not to come on line until 2010. As Kumi Naidoo, head of Global Call for Action Against Poverty, said, waiting until 2010 to double aid "would be like waiting five years to respond to the tsunami."

It is not certain that all the G8 countries will meet the new target. Germany and Japan have not given absolute guarantees to do so. Even among those that have agreed, similar pledges have been made before without result.

The figure of \$50 billion is in any case considerably inflated. Much of the money involved has already been announced. President Bush had said that he would double US aid to Africa before he went to Gleneagles. A joint statement by African Civil Society Organisations noted, "The Summit has simply reaffirmed existing decisions on debt cancellation and doubling of aid. The debt package only provides ten percent of the relief required and affects only one third of the countries that need it."

Of the aid that is given to Africa, a large proportion will go to Western consultants, not to the poor. A recent report from the charity Action Aid suggested that 61 percent of aid flows were "phantom." Sometimes as much as 90 percent of aid goes on to "overpriced technical assistance from international consultants," according to the report. When "phantom" aid is taken out of the calculations, Britain, the

US, Germany, Italy, France, Canada and Japan spend only 0.07 percent of national income on aid. Action Aid suggests that 86 cents in the dollar of US aid is “phantom” aid because it is tied to the purchase of US goods and services.

On the question of HIV-AIDS, the G8 Summit appears to have made an explicit promise to ensure access to treatment for everyone that needs it by 2010. In reality, there is neither the political will nor the means to make good on this promise. Campaigners estimate that \$18 billion is needed in the next three years to combat AIDS. Even if that money were available, most African countries lack the medical facilities to implement a widespread treatment programme. Families affected by AIDS seldom have access to the clean water and power supply that are necessary to maintain hygiene or the nutritious diet that sufferers need. A serious anti-AIDS programme would require a concerted attempt to combat poverty and improve the entire social infrastructure in Africa.

Even those methods that have been proved to halt the spread of HIV and prolong the lives of those who are infected are under attack. Campaigns to promote the use of condoms have been shown to be effective, but right-wing Christian fundamentalists have insisted that US funds should be channeled into programmes that advocate sexual abstinence. Antiretroviral drugs have been shown to be effective in cutting the death rate from AIDS in the advanced industrialised countries. The main barrier to their use in Africa is cost, but the major drug companies are fighting to prevent the production of cheaper generic versions. US money earmarked for AIDS treatment goes exclusively to buy the more expensive branded drugs.

In South Africa, the ANC government has consistently obstructed attempts to make antiretroviral drugs available to everyone that needs them. President Thabo Mbeki of South Africa was present at the Gleneagles summit. The final statement places no obligation on his government to change its policy.

On debt relief, the Gleneagles meeting confirmed that there will be 100 percent debt relief for Heavily Indebted Poor Countries to the IMF and other international financial institutions. This does not cover countries like Nigeria, which is among the most indebted, but owes the money to private lenders. The debt relief on offer is dependent on the countries meeting certain conditions. They will be expected to privatise services such as water and will have to open their markets to foreign goods. Gleneagles offered Africa no concessions on trade. This means that while they have to open their markets to get debt relief, they will not have access to protected Western markets.

Climate change is already hitting Africa badly, with exceptional drought conditions in parts of the continent in

recent years. The G8 statement admits the possibility of “dangerous anthropogenic interference with the climate system,” but offers no concrete proposals for reducing the emission of greenhouse gases that most scientists agree are causing global warming. The Bush administration has consistently opposed any attempt to impose limits on emissions, and the Gleneagles statement was carefully drafted to avoid offending US interests.

If there was a guiding principle behind the summit’s conclusions on Africa and climate change—other than total prostration before the US—it was that private enterprise is king. Despite the mounting evidence that climate change is taking place and that it is caused by greenhouse gases, the assembled world leaders refused to challenge the major corporations that are the big polluters.

In Africa, the communiqué declares, “Private enterprise is a prime engine of growth.” Anyone who thinks that should look at West Africa, which is increasingly dominated by the oil corporations and where the mass of population live in poverty; at the mining districts of Zambia and South Africa, where workers are being laid off in droves; or at the countries where the water supply is being privatised and ordinary people can no longer afford this essential resource.

Some of the charities involved in the Make Poverty History campaign that pressed the G8 to take action on Africa are reported to have privately asked Geldof and Bono to criticise the summit. They wanted Geldof and Bono to say, “The people have spoken but the politicians have not listened.” The two rock musicians refused and were more bullish about the results of the Gleneagles conference than Blair himself, who had to admit that the results were something of a disappointment. There has been a certain cooling of relations between the celebrities and the charities in the wake of Gleneagles. But the charities signed up to a campaign that used them as willing extras in a publicity video for Blair and the major corporations that sponsored the concerts.

The people, in any recognisable democratic sense of that word, did not speak. The only people that Live 8 allowed a voice were government ministers, extremely wealthy celebrities, media moguls, transnational corporations, public relations firms and compliant journalists.



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