

Bristol Dissent! Briefing

INFORMATION FOR ACTION

Africa Debt & Poverty

Blair & New Labour are promoting African debt & poverty as a main issue for this years G8 Summit in Scotland. In preparation, Blairs Commission for Africa produced its recommendations. Additionally, we have had the re-recording of Band Aid, another annual Comic Relief, and a stream of reports, media articles and programmes on the subject. So will poverty become history in 2005?

A plundered continent

African history makes uneasy reading for anyone with the slightest conscience or sense of human solidarity. Plundered by West European empires and traders for centuries through colonialism, theft of natural resources, and enslavement & deportation of its people the wealth accumulated by Bristols merchants & traders was replicated across Europe and the Americas, as early capitalists got very rich indeed.

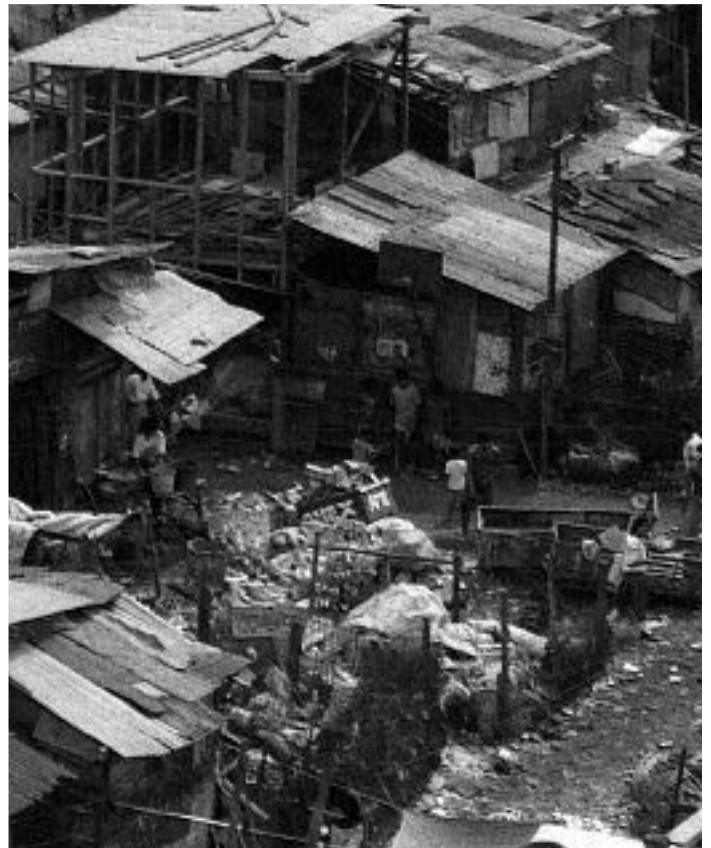
The slow eradication of slavery did not end Africas misery, colonial regimes and puppet governments & dictators continued the thieving. Post WW2, Africa was another Cold War playground for the West & the USSR, ensuring ongoing civil wars, chaos, death and plunder. Tragically, national liberation movements, despite their sometimes socialist rhetoric and their heroic struggles against all odds, led often to the replacement of one set of foreign rulers with equally barbaric and dictatorial home-grown ones (such as Mugabe in Zimbabwe) usually reliant on an external power for their domination. As capitalism has progressed, the theft and exploitation of Africas resources has continued, now less obviously by foreign nations and more blatantly by multinational corporations.

As imperialist powers withdrew, they took the expertise & governing structures theyd imposed on Africa, leaving behind the false nation states they had created across the continent. They also took, and continue to take those Africans, who we may term middle-class (educated, with specialist skills), down the brain drain out of Africa. The old ways of pre-colonial societies had been largely repressed or destroyed, now they found themselves expected to follow the ways of the Wests industrialised, democratic states, but without the skills to do so. They have continued to be ripped-off by western financial institutions & corporations, who have greased the palms of any dictators or ruling elites. Wealth has flowed out of Africa into the pockets of western business & banks and

the overseas accounts of the ruling elite. The result more chaos, debt, poverty, disease and civil war.

Gaping wounds & band-aids

Do-gooders have been travelling to Africa for centuries. Despite the best intentions of some, they have been part of the colonisation and creation of dependency. The Church sent missionaries to help civilise the savages, and teach them about our gods especially that very wealthy one that forms part of the system that rules us. Many NGOs (non-governmental organisations, charities) arose from such beginnings i.e. Christian Aid. The TV era brought heart-wrenching pictures of starving & sick kids and their mums, and the natural humanity & solidarity of many westerners ensured vast donations for these tragic people. The aid industry acknowledges that in the west those with the least to give, give proportionally the most. It is no irony that in the west, those with the least income pay proportionally more in taxes; whilst Africa pays proportionally the highest amounts of GDP back to the western banks/institutions in debt repayments. Think on that a moment.



The Ethiopian famine on our TV sets in 1984 led to BandAid, LiveAid, Comic Relief, and an upsurge in donations to old and new charities. Yet Geldof has admitted recently that Africa is worse off now than in 1984. In fact, Africans are proportionately poorer now than 40 years ago! In Ethiopia alone, 6 to 8 million people are reliant on food aid to survive each year. Some 25 million Africans have died from HIV/Aids largely because US Corporations would not relax their patents on drugs for many years, so preventing the provision of cheaper copies of the drug. At the same time 3000 children die a

day from malaria because they lack basic treatments costing £10 each. In the UK last year, the 4 biggest banks, plus the 2 biggest oil corporations, made combined profits of over £60 billion. The U.K.s richest person, Lakshmi Mittal, sits on a personal fortune of at least £14 billion.

The Commission for Africa

Aid and charity has not worked, in the majority of cases at least. It is a multi-million pound business, offering very well paid careers, especially at the top-end of its bureaucratic structures. Some would say it has re-launched a thousand showbiz careers! But continued poverty in Africa has become an embarrassment. There is a growing awareness, fuelled by the aggressive campaigning of some (such as the Drop the Debt campaign), that our political & big business elites are taking the piss over Africa. We keep giving, they keep getting poorer, and the corporations keep getting richer.

The terms & conditions of loans to Africa require them to privatise everything in the name of structural adjustment programmes; it puts restrictions on their trade out whilst taking our goods (and weapons) in; and it encourages the ongoing corruption of corporations and ruling elites. They do not give Africa a chance. This has led Blair and New Labour to act out of a confused and hypocritical Christian Socialist form of morality. Along with Blairs selfish desire to be remembered in history for doing something good, this has led to the cancellation of bi-lateral debts (where one country owes one other country) to the UK.

His Commission correctly identifies some problems corruption and exploitation; lack of internal infrastructures & resources for education, health, training & administration; massive failure to alleviate disease. It calls for: 100% cancellation of both bi-lateral and multi-lateral (owed to more than one country, usually an institution such as the IMF or World Bank) debt for at least the 42 HIPC (poorest African nations); for massive increases in aid (not loans!) to fund education, health, housing, water provision, training & other basic programmes; and for the removal of restrictive trade barriers and tariffs to stimulate the economy.

But these proposals are underpinned by the expectation that all western nations, institutions & banks will comply (of which there is zero guarantee the US has already ruled out 100% debt cancellation due to corporate pressure); and by an idea named the International Finance Facility (IFF), a brainchild of Gordon Brown. The IFF intends to raise money on private finance markets, guaranteed by government bonds (essentially our, taxpayers, money). Which is a bit like saying you give

them 50 quid, and if they dont pay it back with interest our taxpayers will bale you out. Which sounds to us like another con-trick (see PFI briefing paper) to help corporations make money, that may not help Africa. Lets not forget that the G8 and other institutions have failed before to cancel the debt and sort Africas problems out, why should that change now?

What the west really wants

Never mind such illusions as fair-trade, or trade justice, such concepts are alien to capitalism, and will only be embraced in any way if profit can be made out of them hence Starbucks & Tesco getting fair-trade certification! What the G8 & corporations really want is this: a market to expand into. They want a moderately healthy, educated, skilled, non-unionised workforce to produce goods cheaply; and they want a relatively peaceful, stable, healthy continent to consume those products. A continent they control. They look at Africa and they think of China, with its fast growing economy & consumption, where 60% of all exports come from businesses wholly or partly western controlled, and no human rights! When they talk of freedom & democracy, the only human rights they have in mind are those that allow you to exist on their terms enslaved under capitalism, the consumer society, and personal debt, with only the false illusion of choice. Just like in the West.

What can we do?

We know aid & charity doesnt work, particularly when tied up with imposing western values & structures. Some NGOs work to encourage self-help & self-management in Africa, to facilitate the desires of African people, not impose on them. Look into it and help where you can. Although we very rarely hear of them, there are massive social movements in some African nations, continuing their tradition of struggle, but directed towards land rights, workers rights, resisting privatisation & oppression & corruption, demanding access to resources. Look into it.

The most useful things we can do are to oppose the corporations & ruling elites in our countries. Yes, buy ethically if we can, but more importantly confront & harass the institutions, corporations and politicians at home - give them no peace until we have changed our own society.

More Info

www.jubilee2000uk.org/
www.african-initiatives.org.uk/
www.wdm.org.uk/
www.ifwatchnet.org/
www.commissionforafrica.org/
www.makepovertyhistory.org/