

MAKE POVERTY HISTORY – WHAT COULD AUSTRALIA DO?

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Thank you.

Recently Bono, the lead singer for U2 was doing a concert in Scotland. As part of his promotion of the anti-poverty campaign in which he's played such a prominent part, he started clicking his fingers, repeating the action every thirty seconds. "Every time I click my fingers a child dies unnecessarily from a preventable disease." After he'd been doing this for a few minutes to a largely silent and transfixed audience, someone helpfully shouted out: "Then bloody well stop clicking your fingers".

The perils of campaign stunts – and of quick and easy answers.

Bono is only one of the more public faces of the global campaign against poverty, a campaign which is calling upon the international community to take the necessary action to give all the world's population the things most of us take for granted in this country.

It's a campaign which has mobilised literally millions, in rich and poor countries alike. It's a campaign which has placed unprecedented pressure on politicians of whatever hue. It's a campaign which has inspired young people to a degree not seen for generations. It's a campaign which has put the need and possibility of ending poverty on the global political agenda. It's a campaign which unfortunately generally has still not been able to translate rhetoric into real political action.

In Australia the campaign is known as Make Poverty History – a coalition of development, church and youth groups which has wrung political commitment out of government. A commitment which to some degree is being delivered upon.

Young people are inspired by the campaign. More than a million white wristbands have been sold in this country- indeed campaigning against poverty has almost become a fashion statement. Church people – from across the denominations – have joined the campaign. And increasingly we're seeing new constituencies adding their voices, most recently some members of the business community.

So what is this campaign about? What is motivating so many people from such diverse backgrounds to lend their support?

The first of these questions is easier to answer. Make Poverty History in Australia, similar organisations around the world and their many supporters believe that mass

absolute poverty in times of plenty is an obscenity – and an unnecessary one at that - and that we have the resources and know-how to find pathways out of poverty for the billions – a third of world's population – living on less than \$US 2 a day. What is lacking is the political will to do so.

I could now regale you with statistics. And there are many such statistics detailing exactly how many millions of people lack access to clean water and sanitation, whose kids don't see the inside of a classroom, who are never able to see a doctor or a nurse, who die from preventable diseases and who die far too young. But mindful of Bono's experiences in Scotland I'll not run that risk.

Ultimately this campaign is about people. People who most of the campaigners will never meet but with whom they feel a deep bond.

I'd like to tell you about some of the people I've been fortunate enough to meet over my time with Oxfam. I frequently visit our development programs around the world, checking progress and holding my agency accountable to the people in whose name we speak.

They're people with amazing strength and resilience who are held back by factors beyond their control. They're people like the villagers in Tigray in Ethiopia who lacked access to clean water. As a result the women and girls embarked upon a daily four to five hour trip each way for water. It was a dangerous trip as they frequently came under attack from outlaw gangs.

Oxfam and our partner organisation worked with them to provide the capital and technical know-how so that they could build a hand dug well close to their village. No more long and dangerous trips to get water but rather improved living standards and higher incomes.

Or people like two seventeen year old boys named Anthony and Agin in Tamil Nadu in southern India whose lives were devastated by the 2004 Boxing Day tsunami. They'd lost most of the members of their families and their livelihoods as fishermen had been decimated.

Or communities like those in Limpopo province in South Africa who are trying to cope with the consequences of the HIV and AIDS pandemic. One in five of that country's population is HIV positive. While lacking resources, local communities are working together to try to prevent the further spread of the virus, provide community based care to those infected or affected by the disease and campaigning against stigma and discrimination which still afflicts the fight against HIV and AIDS.

The motivations of Make Poverty History campaigners are as many as there are campaigners. But there seems to be a number of common themes.

There's a deep humanitarian concern, a reaching out to fellow humans whatever their religion, whatever their race, nationality or ethnicity. It's a recognition, an acceptance – indeed a celebration – of global citizenship. That we've all got a stake in the future of planet earth.

But there's also an anger.

An anger that while we've got the capacity to ensure that people throughout the world can enjoy a decent life and we've got the know-how to make a difference the status quo remains. The stumbling blocks are a combination of lack of political will and an unwillingness to make change and to cede privileges.

But ultimately it's an optimistic campaign. Change is both desirable and necessary *but also possible*. Make Poverty History believes that we can win the battle of both political number crunching but also of ideas. And that with the right policies pathways out of poverty can be found.

Concern, anger and optimism.

A powerful combination.

Some are motivated by other, also legitimate concerns. There's those who highlight the inherent instability of a grossly unequal world where rich and poor live together cheek by jowl. Such a world is just not sustainable.

And then there's those who pinpoint the loss of business opportunities. A report by Allen Consulting Group for the recently launched Business for Poverty Relief Alliance – an alliance backed by companies like the ANZ Bank, IAG and Grey Global Group – argued that *“Global poverty represents a direct threat to the current and future prosperity of a range of Australian businesses through the loss of potential markets, damage to foreign affiliates and a greater risk of regional stability.”*

So what changes are required? What is Make Poverty History calling for?

First, we're arguing that beating poverty is the number one issue of our age. All political actions should be judged by what impact they have on this priority task.

Underpinning this belief is the view that it is people living in poverty, especially women and girls, who suffer most from any negative trend. The increasing number of humanitarian disasters – it's Oxfam's experience that it's the poor who suffer the most, the ones who have the fewest resources to respond. Climate change – it's people living in poverty who are in the front line, whose already vulnerable livelihoods are put at even greater risk. Armed conflict – be it intra-state or between countries – it's the poor who suffer the most.

We're saying that achieving the United Nations' Millennium Development Goals (the MDGs) is the priority task for humanity. These Goals were agreed to by virtually all of the world's leaders – including our own Prime Minister, John Howard. They're a set of simple, measurable goals to be achieved by 2015. They deal with access to health care, to universal primary education, to tackling the HIV and AIDS pandemic and other such essentials.

As former UN Secretary General Kofi Annan once said: *“They're a set of simple but powerful objectives that every man and woman in the street from New York to Nairobi to New Delhi can easily support and understand.”*

Then we're calling for more resources to go to the task of beating poverty. That means more development assistance and aid of the right sort. Aid which helps build the capacity of local people, developing their institutions, societies and economies. Aid which recognises that 70% of the poor are women. Aid which benefits intended recipients not rich country consultants or rich elites.

We want a sustainable solution to the debt crisis which still plagues development efforts throughout the world. It's a crisis which still sees far too much money being diverted to servicing unpayable debts rather than for social purposes.

And we want an end to the rigged rules and double standards of the international trading system which sees a European cow subsidised to the tune of \$US 2 day – more than what two billion people survive on. The \$350 billion annual subsidies for primarily European and American farmers are symptomatic of the inherent unfairness of the world's trading regime.

But then there's a need to change policies. And this is not just changing the policies of rich country governments – though that is desperately needed. Primarily it means poor country governments have to change their policies, prioritising the battle against poverty. It means ending corruption, which hurts the poor more than any other group. It means ensuring that governance is transparent and accountable.

We have also to recognise the linkages. The other great global challenge is how to respond to the climate change crisis. It's recognising that these two challenges are linked and that an equitable response to climate change is critical.

So after so many concerts, so many wristbands worn, so many petitions signed – what's the scorecard?

It's a mixed picture.

Almost every region has increased primary school enrolments, particularly Latin America, the Caribbean and North Africa. In our own region 72% of developing countries are on track to meet Millennium Development Goal 2 which aims to achieve universal primary education by 2015. And 80% are on track to achieve Goal 3 which relates to gender equality in education.

And with all the inequalities and environmental problems, real progress is being made in countries like China and India with literally hundreds of millions of people finding a pathway out of poverty.

But the reality is that on current trends the MDGs are not going to be met by the target date. As we approach the half way mark towards 2015, progress is not looking good.

Why not?

There's a number of reasons. Clearly some developing country government refuse to prioritise beating poverty. Unfortunately Zimbabwe is not the only country going backwards. But there are numerous examples of countries and governments doing the right thing but held back by factors beyond their control.

Too many rich countries have invested more in top quality rhetoric rather than decent policies.

Despite the grand promises at the G8 Summit two years ago, aid spending by the world's richest countries has gone backwards.

The World Trade Organisation's trade negotiations are on life support, barely surviving. Given that this current round was dubbed the Doha Development Round and that promises were made to developing countries that this round would unlock the development potential of international trade it's a particularly cruel joke that is being played on people living in poverty in developing countries.

And while there's been welcome movement on resolving the debt crisis, too few countries are benefiting.

And in Australia?

The aid program is improving – and is more tightly focused on poverty eradication. But its linkages with achieving the Millennium Development Goals are still not strong.

And while aid spending has increased in line with the Prime Minister's 2005 pledge, Australia still ranks as one of the poorest performing rich countries.

Does all this matter? It won't surprise if I say yes and that I believe it matters profoundly.

It matters because far too many people around the globe are leading lives where their potential is being unfulfilled. It matters because there is an inherent instability in a grossly unequal world. It matters because the confidence held by many in the capacities of our political systems to respond to the big challenges of our times will be dashed with uncertain consequences. It matters because the world's economic future could be so much brighter if poverty was eliminated.

And for Australia it matters because we are one of the richest countries of the world. And we're virtually unique amongst rich countries in that most of our neighbours are developing countries. We're affected by their fate.

And it matters because Australians expect our country to do better. Recently Oxfam has been conducting some focus groups of what could be called "mainstream Australians" – in metropolitan and regional Australia; tabloid and broadsheet readers.

These groups revealed a surprising sense of competitiveness when comparing Australia to other nations. And I'm not just talking about on the sporting field. In this instance we're talking about Australia's record in social justice. The groups were keen to know where Australia stood and were willing to spend more provided they were confident that the money was being spent well.

As with making poverty history "over there" so with tackling it effectively in this country. As well as our development and humanitarian programs around the world – and the Oxfams as a whole work in over 100 countries – Oxfam Australia works with Indigenous communities in this country.

We do so because we see that their situation is unfortunately akin to that of many communities that we work with in countries like Mozambique or Bangladesh. Indeed the life expectancy of an Indigenous Australian is less than that of someone born in Bangladesh or Nigeria.

We've helped launch the Close the Gap campaign- aiming to get bi-partisan commitment to closing the seventeen year gap in life expectancy between Indigenous and non-Indigenous Australians. Like with the Make Poverty History campaign, Close the Gap is motivated by concern, anger and optimism.

Concern that our fellow human beings are falling prey to preventable diseases and living such shortened lives.

Anger that in one of the richest countries of the world, three per cent of the population are being left so far behind. Anger that Australia ranks lowest amongst other rich countries with Indigenous populations – countries like New Zealand, Canada and the United States.

And optimism that by building upon good practice in Australia and through learning from experiences in countries like Canada or New Zealand and with proper resourcing that sustainable and significant change could be achieved.

Good practice like the Townsville Mums and Babies program which over the last seven years has led to increased birth weights of Indigenous children. Good practice like the Strong women, Strong Babies program in the Northern Territory which again has led to increased average birth weight.

Already we're seeing responses – albeit still too modest in the face of the challenges - from both sides of politics to the Close the Gap campaign. It's early days – and it is an election year – but they're really positive developments.

Both Make Poverty History and Close the Gap are ambitious campaigns. Some will accuse us of being unrealistic. For surely the poor will always be with us?

But while I accept that there are no simple answers – it's not just a case of more money, though generally that is needed- it is a case of learning what is working and building upon those experiences. Things like the Townville mums and babies program or the community based approaches to HIV and AIDS in southern Africa. It's recognising that sometimes it's most important to start small and build upon those experiences. It's recognising the inter-relationship between advancing people's right to have a say in their future and ensuring that they're got access to education and healthcare.

I reject the idea that they're unrealistic campaigns. Visionary? Yes. Ambitious? Yes. Timely? Yes. Necessary? Unfortunately so. But realistic? Yes.

But then I'm often reminded of a saying from a few years ago. Be Realistic. Demand the Impossible.

Thank you.