

**Statement issued by Stephen Lewis, UN Special Envoy for HIV/AIDS in Africa,  
on the occasion of the launch in Canada of the “Make Poverty History” campaign,  
at a press conference in Ottawa, February 11<sup>th</sup>, 2005, 10:00 a.m.**

The “Make Poverty History” campaign is rooted in the conviction that 2005 can be the turning point in the fight to eliminate poverty from the face of the earth. There are one billion, two hundred million people living in absolute poverty world-wide, and nearly half of them are in Africa. From my perspective, the mesh of poverty and HIV/AIDS is the deadliest combination on the planet, and there’s not the slightest possibility of confronting poverty so long as AIDS runs its savage course.

To make poverty history requires making AIDS history. To achieve both means that the western world, the G7 in particular, must deliver on the host of commitments they have made. Alas, it’s not happening. Just look at what transpired last weekend.

The G7 couldn’t get its act together. The G7 Finance Ministers met in the UK, and failed, yet again, to come to agreement on the cancellation of African debt. It was a devastating blow to the continent.

For several years now, ever since it became clear that the Heavily Indebted Poor Countries (HIPC) initiative was a grand design that couldn’t do the job, the G7 nations have been discussing alternative ways to significantly reduce or eliminate African debt. To that end, all G7 countries have reduced bilateral debt in part or in whole, but they remain stymied on the debt that is held by the International Financial Institutions, that is to say the World Bank, the International Monetary Fund and the African Development Bank. It is a debt that continues to exact a hugely destructive burden of payments from African countries.

Far more flows out of Africa than flows into Africa. Looked at historically, between 1970 and 2002, the poorest African countries received \$294 billion dollars in loans, paid back \$298 billion in principal and interest, and at the end of the process, still owed more than \$200 billion! This is mathematics conceived by Dr. Strangelove.

The pressure on the G7, magnificently applied by the Jubilee Coalition and its allies in the NGO community, has forced the financial aristocrats of the donor world to make promise after promise about dealing with African debt. In fact, the parade of promises is unrelenting. Virtually every gathering of G7 leaders or Finance Ministers since the turn of the century has held the prospect of change. On every occasion we get a twitch in the right direction, but all the twitches in the world do not a cancellation make.

Last weekend was perhaps the nadir in the process; a bitter disappointment. Governments and commentators alike are attempting to put a good face on what happened, but the truth is that the G7, ostensibly on the path of debt cancellation and increased foreign aid, failed abysmally on both counts.

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The US disagreed with the UK plan, and the UK disagreed with the American plan. Canada disagreed with both. France and Japan each advanced alternative ways to raise money for debt relief and foreign aid, but those designs were unacceptable to any of the other G7 countries. It was a potpourri of good intentions gone wrong.

It must be galling for African governments. It seems to take the G7 no effort to cancel huge chunks of Iraqi debt, or to instantly fashion an offer of moratorium on the servicing of debt for the countries devastated by the Tsunami. But when it comes to Africa, everything takes forever.

It has to end. If the burden of debt service were lifted, African countries would have a significant boost in resources ... a boost to address poverty, or put children into school, or purchase insecticide-treated bed nets for malaria, or fight the eviscerating contagion of HIV/AIDS. Every time the clock is turned back on progress towards debt relief, Africa's prospects of reaching the Millennium Development Goals (MDGs) are dealt another crippling setback.

What worries me greatly in all of this is the position of the Global Fund for AIDS, Tuberculosis and Malaria. It is clear that debt is but one aspect of a larger picture of increased official development assistance. The British Chancellor of the Exchequer, and the Secretary-General of the United Nations and Jeffrey Sachs, author of the plan to achieve the MDGs, have said time and time again that foreign aid must be doubled. There was no such instinct in evidence last weekend. And if both debt relief and increased foreign aid are contentious, or not yet in sight, then contributions to the Global Fund are similarly in jeopardy. And if the Global Fund, already in need of billions to meet its anticipated targets, falls short, then we will not put three million people living with AIDS into treatment this year, or millions more next year, and the great plan to confound the pandemic in Africa will come crashing to the ground.

Surely, the G7 can bring itself to turn the tide. For twenty years, dating back to the Special Session of the United Nations in 1986, when the first contemporary compact with the continent was fashioned, the G7 countries have repeatedly defaulted on their commitments to Africa. It really is a shameful record. This next G7 conference in July must be seen as the moment of redemption.

In some ways, everything rests with the leadership of the United Kingdom. They will chair the G7, they will chair the EU, they will chair the replenishment conference of the Global Fund and they will issue the report from the Commission on Africa appointed by the UK Government. All of this is auspicious because there's no denying the extraordinary commitment of Tony Blair and Gordon Brown to Africa.

What is not auspicious, however, is the divide between language and reality. The UK speaks of debt cancellation when what has been promised is part-payment of debt service for ten years, and then the intolerable financial burden will return, as before, to Africa. Canada has done exactly the same ... the Minister of Finance talks of “cancellation” when the word simply doesn't apply. The United States talks of cancellation, but with numerous --- and thus far, unacceptable --- conditions. The UK is promoting an International Financial Facility, supported by France,

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Germany and Italy, but disavowed by the United States, Japan and Canada. Some members of the G7 are promoting the sale of IMF gold to cover the costs of debt relief, but others, including Canada, are resisting. The French and Japanese are advocating a tax on international financial transactions and/or airline travel, but the reception is cool to the point of frigidity.

This is not a prognosis for success.

In the meantime, Africa’s future is ticking away. The continent has been betrayed on commitments of foreign aid, on cancellation of debt, on the promise of a new international trading regimen, and it has yet to recover from the damage done by structural adjustment programmes of the 1980s and 1990s, imposed by the International Financial Institutions.

The G7, meeting in Gleneagles, Scotland, in July, knows what they have to do. The world is truly hoping for a breakthrough. Millions of African lives hang in the balance.