

Did Band and Live Aid do more harm than good? Did the money that they raised really lead to the death of as many people as it saved?

According to a few, the answers are "Yes, it would have been better to do nothing", but does that mean that by implication it is better to do nothing now - not to participate in the Make Poverty History events that are due to reach their peak this weekend?

I would argue that we should support Make Poverty History. The G8 meeting of the world's richest countries is being scrutinised like never before and now is not the time to be distracted by criticisms of events 20 years ago.

The Make Poverty History agenda is far wider than what Bob Geldof was trying to achieve in 1985 and is the result of years of planning by campaigning organisations. Band Aid was what it says on the tin: a quick fix. Geldof was trying to pump money into famine relief in Ethiopia. The criticism is that he was manipulated into supporting a resettlement programme that was masquerading as an aid effort, but was actually part of a military campaign by the government of the day, a government whose actions had already exacerbated a famine caused by drought. Geldof wasn't the only one who was supposedly manipulated. All the aid organisations bar one chose to continue working in Ethiopia. Where they right to do so? I have no idea. Parachuting aid into problem areas is fraught with difficulty. The history of charity work is full of situations where it has gone wrong: from the villagers who thought condoms should be stuck on sticks around their hamlet to ward off unwanted pregnancies to the farmers killed when they were hit by an air drop of food. People on the ground literally know where aid is best directed and the most successful international charities employ locals as much as they can - with good results. It must be recognised that in the world's hellholes, there often aren't right answers, just less wrong ones.

Crucially though the Make Poverty History campaign is about more than increased giving by governments. I think the other two strands of the campaign are probably more important: the forgiveness of debt and reform of the world trade rules. These offer the chance of greater self-reliance. Writing off debts, if it is linked with greater democracy, enables citizens to use more of their own money as they see fit. The same applies to reform of world trade rules, rules that seem designed to undermine indigenous businesses that spend profits in their communities in preference for the trans-nationals that ship them to their shiny headquarters overseas.

Band Aid was emergency first aid for a desperate situation. Make Poverty History is a long-term health plan for the planet.