

When Wearing White is Not Chic, and Collaboration Not Cool

By Patrick Bond, Dennis Brutus, and Virginia Setshedi | June 16, 2005

Notwithstanding the global hype associated with reversing aid, debt, and trade injustices during the past few days, it hasn't been an easy time for the huge Non-Governmental Organizations at the center of the action.

A front-page *New Statesman* article on May 30 revealed that Oxfam's revolving-door relationship with chancellor Gordon Brown has neutered the demands, strategies, and tactics of the 450-member NGO campaign, "Make Poverty History." The website of the British magazine *Red Pepper* followed up with a devastating political critique of the campaign, including a refusal to countenance any anti-war message that will embarrass Brown and Tony Blair.

Embarrassment of this sort seems endemic amongst the charity-minded. The Bob Geldof superstar concert series "Live 8" correctly stood accused of being "hideously white" (as Black Information Link put it), since only one band from Africa was scheduled amongst dozens at the five major performances. (A hastily arranged additional concert in Johannesburg may lead to a kind of outsourcing for black bands.) In any case, Sir Bob's mid-1980s Live Aid famine relief strategy is widely understood to have flopped because it ignored the countervailing roles of imperial power relations, capital accumulation, unreformable global institutions, and venal local elites—problems repeated and indeed amplified in Live 8.

There was another PR disaster in early June, just a month before the Group of 8 (G8) leaders meet in Gleneagles, Scotland: white wristbands favored by Blair as a mark of his commitment to Africa were revealed as products of Chinese forced labor at a Shenzhen firm, Tat Shing. According to the *Telegraph* newspaper, "Christian Aid, which bought more than 500,000 wristbands from Tat Shing, claims that Oxfam failed to tell other charities that it had decided to stop ordering from the Shenzhen Company. Oxfam said it told its coalition partners

of its decision, but 'perhaps could have put it in writing'."

Do these gaffes signify something deeper? Merely careless paternalism? Or perhaps a sense that the main outcomes of this campaign are to be celebrated in media buzz, fashion statements, celebrity chasing, and the NGOs' proximity to power?

NGOs or Organic Social Movements

The heart of the problem is that the large mainstream NGOs—and here we do not mean War on Want, the World Development Movement, and Christian Aid—are not putting serious pressure on the G-8. For example, when anti-poverty campaigners call for "cancellation of poor countries' unpayable debts," this leaves undefined what, exactly, is "unpayable" and concedes that the vast populations of lower-middle income countries will suffer under indefinite debt peonage. NGO and rock star endorsements of the partial debt relief gimmick announced by Gordon Brown and the G-8 finance ministers on June 11 illustrate the confusion.

Semantic wiggling is just one of the problems associated with the best of these initiatives, the Global Call to Action Against Poverty (GCAP), whose International Facilitation Group was established in Johannesburg late last year. Many excellent African organizations have joined the campaign, but have they fully recognized the potential costs of such campaigns, perhaps suppressing their better social-change instincts?

For GCAP, "A single global title for the mobilization is needed to provide focus, cohesion, and to maximize impact of activity ... The aim of "White



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Band Day” will be to get everyone around the world that wants to end poverty to wear a white band on those days.”

There *is* a genuine need for focus and cohesion. But if it is addressed in the manner conceived by GCAP’s strategists, it could have the reverse effect: organizational demobilization accompanied by lowest-common-denominator analyses and demands.

To illustrate, GCAP’s first newsletter, issued on June 14, is a 3600-word report-back on campaigning across the world. Yet it contains no reference to organic anti-poverty activism in the Global South, such as—in no particular order—labor strikes, popular mobilizations for AIDS-treatment and other health services, reconnections of water/electricity, land and housing occupations, anti-GMO and pro-food security campaigns, women’s organizing, municipal budget campaigns, student and youth movements, community resistance to displacements caused by dam construction and the like, anti-debt and reparations movements, environmental justice struggles, immigrants’ rights campaigns, political movements to take state power, etc. No mention of Bolivia, Venezuela, Palestine, or Iraq.

GCAP has superb member organizations across the Third World, to be sure, but as a network it just seems to float in the air, disconnected from the reality of anti-poverty protest. It’s as if the formidable recent upsurge of unrest—1980s-90s IMF Riots, high-profile indigenous people’s protests since Zapatismo in 1994, global justice activism since Seattle in 1999, the Social Forum movement since 2001, anti-war demos since 2001, autonomist protests and the Latin American left’s revival—never happened, don’t exist,

and aren’t worthy of acknowledgment much less integration and amplification.

Worse, GCAP’s promotion of the already watered-down UN Millennium Development Goals (MDGs) could draw activist energy and resources away from organic struggles and organizational imperatives in many Third World countries. If GCAP is successful, we foresee a tsunami of distraction, flooding out the diverse local struggles that could instead—if nurtured carefully—support a genuinely bottom-up, internationally-linked, networked fight against injustice.

In contrast to the GCAP rhetoric, albeit sometimes off the beaten path, serious activists are crossing borders, races, classes, and political traditions in sector after sector: land (Via Campesina), healthcare (International Peoples Health Council), free schooling (Global Campaign for Education), water (the People’s World Water Forum), energy/ climate change (the Durban Declaration), debt (Jubilee South), democratic development finance (IFIs-Out! and World Bank Bonds Boycott), trade (Our World is Not for Sale), and so on.

Of course, it is not at all easy to interlock the already overlapping grassroots and shop-floor justice campaigns. South Africans now campaigning for an overall program of “decommodification” and socio-economic rights know this, thanks to the various movements’ political splits (mainly over the merits of alignment to the corruption-ridden, neoliberal ruling party of Thabo Mbeki).

To be sure, there is broad unity in the South Africans’ objectives—free anti-retroviral medicines to fight AIDS; at least 50 liters of free water and 1 kilowatt hour of free electricity for each individual every day; extensive land reform; prohibitions on service

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disconnections and evictions; free education; the right to employment; and even a monthly “Basic Income Grant”—but very hard work lies ahead to connect the concrete struggles.

Globophiles, Globophobes

Still, without coherence emerging from organic struggles fought by mass democratic movements across the Global South (including in Northern ghettos), the construction of a top-down campaign against poverty is both unrealistic and subject to early cooption. According to Catherine Quarmby in the *New Statesman* last month, “Some of the most intriguing criticism of the softly-softly approach has come from within the government itself. One senior government source suggests that Oxfam has failed to learn one of the essential techniques of negotiation—if you agree on the basics too early you forfeit real influence.”

Unfortunately this is no aberration, but part of a pattern dating at least to 1995, when Oxfam International broke from the 50 Years is Enough protests against the World Bank, endorsing a large inflow of taxpayer funding at the very peak of the Washington Consensus mentality.

By 2002, Oxfam’s leading policy analyst, quoted in the *Washington Post*, happily revealed an agenda of divide-and-conquer, between “globophobes” (the global justice movement protesting the WTO/IMF/World Bank) and “globophiles” (Oxfam): “Breaking with some of its anti-globalization allies, the aid agency Oxfam International issued a report yesterday that praised international trade as a potentially enormous boon to the world’s poor ...” “The

extreme element of the anti-globalization movement is wrong,” said Kevin Watkins, a senior policy adviser for Oxfam who wrote most of the report. “Trade can deliver much more [for poor countries] than aid or debt relief.”

As then-director of Food First, Anuradha Mittal, complained, “We are disappointed that Oxfam, one of the NGO leaders on food security, has chosen to undermine the demands of social movements and think tanks in the South such as Via Campesina, Movement of Landless Workers (Brazil), Third World Network, Focus on the Global South, and Africa Trade Network which have demanded that governments must uphold the rights of all people to food sovereignty and the right to food rather than industry-led export-oriented production ... Oxfam undermines the demands of social movements and think tanks in the South.”

Proximity to Downing Street and Pennsylvania Avenue has unfortunately become a good proxy for political common sense, or lack thereof. For instance,

Mohammad Akhter, chief executive officer of Interaction, the 160-member NGO coalition many of whose members are considered *de facto* subsidiaries of the U.S. Agency for International Development, met new World Bank President Paul Wolfowitz late last month and publicly pronounced: “The World Bank is in good hands.”

A few days earlier, Interaction and Oxfam had thrown a grateful going-away bash for James Wolfensohn, even though on three high-profile occasions—the World Commission on Dams, Structural Adjustment Participatory Review Initiative, and Extractive Industries Review—he seduced NGOs

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into multi-stakeholder reviews, and then broke their hearts by allying instead with corporate and state suitors.

As a result of these sorts of influences, there appears little benefit—and great risk—for African NGOs to adopt as a high priority top-down Make Poverty History and even GCAP campaigns which endorse MDG end-goals dreamt up in the backrooms of the UN, where Bush administration ideologues breathe down bureaucrats' necks to reduce funding obligations, impose patriarchal and Christian-fundamentalist values, remove the word "rights" from (already fatuous) official rhetoric, and denude the few progressive UN agencies of any clout. Even

Johannesburg-based Civicus International staff have informally relabeled their objective the "Minimalist Development Goals."

Why, then, do those white bands grace some African NGO wrists and heads, from Civicus' chief executive officer at the last World Economic Forum in Davos, to a few brave pro-MDG NGOers at the Africa Social Forum? When Civicus staff brought two huge bags of the headbands to Lusaka and made a pitch for the campaign, it was so controversial—alongside a futile appeal to endorse a "Joint Facilitation Committee" with the hated World Bank—that the bags were left closed.

South Africa's Whiteband ("Witdoeke") Problem

If we flash back 19 years, to mid-1986, we get a better perspective on why wearing white headbands is so distasteful for the South African left. At the time, Cape Town's African township Crossroads had a population of 100 000+ and a high profile in anti-apartheid protest in part because of its location near the airport. Over a fortnight's time, violence erupted, leaving 60 people dead and approximately 60,000

people homeless as a reactionary paramilitary gang swept through, known as the "witdoeke," whose leader was specifically mandated by the apartheid regime to terrorize anti-apartheid activists.

According to a reliable history of the area, "The person selected for this in Crossroads was Johnson Ngxobongwana. Ngxobongwana had evolved from being a local warlord to a strong political voice in Crossroads. As chairman of the ward committee he had built up a popular following, and acquired a retinue of local thugs, known as witdoeke (white-cloths) for the white headbands they wore for identification. Unbeknownst to most people he also had 'unofficial'

sponsorship from South Africa's apartheid government and its security forces. Ngxobongwana was able to use these resources to eliminate rivals in the area, as well as marginalize women's groups and youth groups."

The Truth and Reconciliation Commission found Crossroads' fate to be comparable with techniques used in Johannesburg, Durban, and other sites where violence emanating

from the witdoeke-style Inkatha movement killed tens of thousands of people: "In the South African context, contra-mobilization was used to organize and support 'moderate blacks' to oppose the revolutionary movements. Of necessity, it was a covert strategy—concealing the hand of the state as provider of logistical, political, and financial support—and making use of "surrogate" forces. Hence, the state would not be seen to be involved in the conflict and violence between groupings and the resistance organizations."

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Nevertheless, from the standpoint of the resistance organizations, it is overdue that we collectively consider our fundamental visions, and in particular whether the much welcomed globalization of people—and of culture, ideas, hospitality, travel, and political solidarity—can be accompanied by what we'd argue is just as desperately needed: the deglobalization of capital.

For or Against Market Tyranny?

After all, the danger of NGO-lubricated ideological alignment with the neoliberal project is serious. At a time when men like Jeffrey Sachs are celebrated as saviors of the world's poor—for example, in a Bono song dedication at last month's big New York City concert—a deeper critique of markets and the NGOs which legitimate them is desperately needed.

Bono in particular has been obsequious. At the last New Labor party convention, Bono labeled Blair/Brown the “Lennon and McCartney of poverty reduction.” According to Quarmby, “some groups involved in Make Poverty History were horrified. John Hilary, director of campaigns and policy at War on Want, was in the audience. ‘When Bono said that, many NGO leaders who were there put their heads in their hands and groaned ... It's a killer blow for us. To see the smiles on the faces of Gordon Brown and Tony Blair! This is exactly what they want—they want people to believe that this is their crusade, without actually changing their policy.’”

Are the Make Poverty History campaign objectives for Gleneagles—greater Third World exposure to market mechanisms, a few crumbs of debt relief, and a doubling of (neoliberally-conditioned) aid—

actually worth endorsing as a reformist step forward, or should they be condemned as more of the same? In his book *Deglobalization*, Walden Bello has convincingly set out the justice movement's case for disempowering and defunding the global-scale institutions that push capitalism down Third World throats.

So when Sachs, Oxfam, Mbeki, and others continue to insist that the way to cure poverty is to expand the world market and reverse Africa's alleged “marginalization,” they elide the reality that Africa's trade/GDP ratio has for many years topped the world charts, and the reality that ever-greater reliance upon exporting

cash-crops and minerals—most of which have suffered huge declines in price due to gluts—is a recipe for underdevelopment.

When debt relief comes with more Western neoliberal conditionality, as HIPC shows, the reality is that people often end up in worse shape after relief than before.

And when G-8 “phantom aid” continues to foster Northern interests above

those of the Third World's people, it should be rethought entirely. In late May, Christian Aid's brilliant Ghanaian researcher/campaigner Charles Abugre declared—personally, not organizationally—to a Globalize Resistance conference in London: “Stop the aid! It's done too much damage!”

What to Wear, for Fun in the Sun?

What, then, should be done in coming weeks, especially on July 2 in Edinburgh? As Naomi Klein suggested at a University of KwaZulu-Natal anti-corporate conference on June 10, “A million people are going to Edinburgh and joining hands, wearing white, in a circle around the entire city, and it's going to be one big, giant bracelet. Everyone will wear bracelets, and then they'll *be* a bracelet. Are you

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excited about this? I always had concerns that some of these big corporate NGOs were less interested in contesting power than acting as accessories to power. But being a giant bracelet for the G-8 takes this a little too far.”

Instead, suggested Klein, “Encircle the G8! But instead of declaring themselves a piece of jewelry, they should say, we are a noose, we are putting pressure and we are squeezing these neoliberal policies that are taking lives around the world. Just like the noose that killed Ken Saro-Wiwa ten years ago this November.”

That is indeed the choice: to be a bauble for—or a noose against—neoliberalism. By joining those active across the Third World in concrete struggles (who in our experience are not wasting time with GCAPs and MDGs), Northern readers can offer real, lasting solidarity.

In making the choice, especially in Britain, consider whether the symbolism of the color white is appropriate. Are NGOs and their friends painting themselves as virgins at an altar, on the verge of marrying G-8 leaders like Bush, Berlusconi, Chirac, and Blair? Alternatively, will the NGO-led masses be waving white flags of surrender on July 2 in Edinburgh, with these headbands and wristbands?

It’s rather hard to tell. According to Make Poverty History’s Bruce Whitehead, “It’s not a march in the sense of a demonstration, but more of a walk. It is going to be very much a family affair. The emphasis is on fun in the sun. The intention is to welcome the G-8 leaders to Scotland and to ask them to deliver trade justice, debt cancellation, and increased aid to developing countries.”

Perhaps Whitehead and Make Poverty History need a change of both attitude and attire. After all, “white”

armies have traditionally fought “red” armies. Fortunately, unlike Russia in the late 1910s or Crossroads in the mid-1980s, today’s armies of NGOs and social movements are not carrying weapons of physical destruction, only ideas, energy, and a few material resources.

Still, we can’t help but conclude that, in contrast to the red social movement struggles for dignity and justice, those wearing white and adopting the NGOs’ weak program may appear as ... well, if not explicit agents of the G-8, then at minimum their decorations.

Hence when protesting against Wolfowitz on his mid-June Africa trip, against the Gleneagles meeting of the world’s rulers in early July, and against the World Bank and IMF annual meetings during the late

September days of anti-war action in Washington, DC, we’ll encourage our comrades to wear something more colorful, with politics to match.

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Patrick Bond is based at the Centre for Civil Society at the University of KwaZulu-Natal, Durban (<http://www.ukzn.ac.za/ccs/>) and a frequent contributor to Foreign Policy In Focus (www.fpiif.org); Dennis Brutus is a poet and professor emeritus at University of Pittsburgh, and works with Jubilee South Africa and the Centre for Economic Justice; and Virginia Setshedi is a Soweto-based anti-privatization activist employed at the Freedom of Expression Institute (<http://www.fxj.org.za/>).

FOR MORE INFORMATION:

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Christian Aid
<http://www.christianaid.org.uk/>

Global Call to Action to End Poverty
<http://www.whiteband.org/>

Global Campaign for Education
<http://www.campaignforeducation.org/>

International Peoples Health Council
<http://www.iphcglobal.org>

Jubilee South
<http://www.jubileesouth.org/>

Live 8
<http://www.live8live.com/>

Make Poverty History
<http://www.makepovertyhistory.org/>

Our World Is Not for Sale
<http://www.ourworldisnotforsale.org/>

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<http://www.viacampesina.org/>

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www.waronwant.org

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World Development Movement
www.wdm.org.uk

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