

We meet for this ‘Stand up – Speak out’ event on the United Nations World Poverty Day, in response to the combined call from the UN Millennium Campaign and GCAP, the Global Call to Action against Poverty, the international successor to Make Poverty History. 23.5 million people, in 80 countries, ‘stood up’ last year – a world record. This year we hope to set a new one.

We meet to ‘Stand up’ against poverty, and to ‘Speak out’ in support of the Millennium Development Goals (the MDGs), the eight targets endorsed and adopted by all the world’s governments at the UN Millennium Assembly in 2000. They were drawn up to put flesh on the commitment to halve severe poverty by 2015, and summaries are displayed on the placards.

Now if the Union Society had given me a couple of hours, I could have presented a scholarly analysis of the goals. But they didn’t, so I can’t! So I will talk briefly about the reality of global poverty, before a few concluding remarks.

First come with me with Professor Jeffrey Sachs, economics advisor to Kofi Annan, as he was visiting the main hospital in Malawi in the late 90s. The doctor suggested he stepped into the medical ward:

*“There was no medicine in the medical ward. The ward had 150 beds - there were 450 people in the ward. These 450 people were fit into a room with 150 beds by putting three people in or around each bed. Two people were lying head to toe, toe to head, in each bed – strangers sharing a death bed.*

*“Alongside or underneath the bed there was somebody on the ground, sometimes literally on the ground or sometimes on a piece of cardboard, dying beneath the bed. The room was filled with moans. Family members were sitting by the beds, swabbing dried lips and watching their loved ones die.” Die of AIDS, of course. Truly, as Bono puts it, “There is a continent - Africa - being consumed by flames.”*

That is the reality of global poverty.

And this is from Zambia, another peaceful Commonwealth country with a democratic government, again in the 1990s:

*“The doctor looked up and saw a woman with her two boys. One was thirteen years old, the other three. Both were ill. The diagnosis was simple and the prescription straightforward. Another routine case. Some time later, he saw her again and asked after the children. Her face flushed. The older child was doing well, but the younger was dead. Unable to afford treatment for both, she made an impossibly painful choice. The oldest received the medicine, the youngest she had to watch die.”*

Finally we go to Ghana, where someone encountered families eking out a desperate existence on the concrete hub of a city roundabout. They had been making quite a reasonable living in the North, growing rice. Now, because of the conditions for debt relief and aid imposed by the IMF, protection against dumped rice from the West (produced by highly mechanised and highly subsidised producers of course) had to be removed, with the

consequence that these poor people couldn't even sell their produce in the local markets.

According to Mats Karlsson, the World Bank's man in Ghana, *"The biggest problem facing farmers in the developing world are the subsidies the West provides for its own farmers. These are deeply unfair."* "Unfair" is putting it mildly, given that they are driving millions of poor farmers into total destitution.

An update on these situations reveals the very mixed state of progress towards the MDGs.

Five years ago the number of people in less developed countries with access to treatment for AIDS was in the order of 200,000; now it's about two million, and rising. Rich countries have pledged treatment for five million by 2010 – a mammoth step forward. We simply must keep them to it and press them to go further. If, God forbid, they break the covenant they have made with the diseased and desperate, it should not be with our meek acquiescence!

Similarly, if the woman's two boys had needed simple treatment (*very* simple treatment) in Zambia in 2007, it would have been available, provided free in rural areas with the proceeds of debt relief agreed at the Gleneagles G8 Summit in 2005. Nevertheless, the poorest countries, the 'Low Income Countries' are still paying rich countries over 100 million dollars *each day*. Real progress, but not nearly enough.

Unhappily, as far as international trade rules are concerned, poor countries have been (and these are the words of Professor Joseph Stiglitz, former Chief Economist of the World Bank and winner of the Nobel Prize in Economics) - poor countries have been "*cheated, having had their arms twisted and got nothing in return*". Michael Howard, when Leader of the Conservative Party, called the trade rules "*appalling, hypocritical and immoral*".

Finally, we have not even begun to take seriously the climate crisis, which is already hitting the poorest hardest.

Bono refers to the type of poverty I have described as “*stupid poverty*”. “*Stupid poverty sees a child die of hunger in a world of plenty and of a disease preventable by a ten pence vaccination. We could be the first generation to outlaw it; the first generation to unknot the whole tangle of bad trade, bad debt and bad luck.*” “*But will we be that generation?*” he asks. “*Will we in the West realise our potential or will we sleep in the comfort of our affluence with apathy and indifference murmuring softly in our ears?*”

Finally, I bring to you the words of perhaps the greatest human being of our generation, Nelson Mandela, spoken early in 2005 in Trafalgar Square to launch the Make Poverty History campaign:

*“While poverty persists, there is no true freedom. In this new century, millions of people remain imprisoned, enslaved, and in chains. They are trapped in the prison of poverty. It is time to set them free.*

*“Sometimes it falls upon a generation to be great. You can be that great generation. Of course the task will not be easy. But not to do this would be a crime against humanity, against which I ask all humanity now to rise up.”*