

Band Aid: Is That It?

Band Aid transformed the politics of aid. In this interview with Noll Scott, **Bob Geldof**, argues that things *could* be different, that the attitude of West and East can be changed.

It's roughly two years since you started Band Aid. What do you think its main achievements have been?

Its main achievement, I suppose, has been putting aid at the top of the political agenda - the discussion of famine as an unnecessary evil. Plus maybe changing the attitude of a lot of people under the age of 20 in the West towards the Third World. In Africa itself then undoubtedly the legacy is in x number of people who've been helped to stay alive. I think that maybe we've also helped to redefine the aid business, and the way in which it works. Finally, it's making the idea of helping other people an exciting and novel idea, especially in a Christian ethic when you've been brought up to do that sort of thing as a duty.

This has happened when we have a government that is promoting an ideology of selfishness.

That's too easy. This government has an ideology of individualism as opposed to collectivism. Band Aid has been a godsend for both those ideologies, in that the Tories say, 'look what the individual can achieve', the Labour Party says, 'look what collective action achieves', the SDP says, 'look at the compassion of everyone', the marxists in Ethiopia say, 'look it's the proletariat not the governments of the West', the democratic Sudanese say 'it's the West-

ern governments that care and not the Eastern ones'. So really whatever ideology you have you can fit Band Aid into it. I have the front cover of *Marxism Today* up on my wall alongside *The Spectator*, both of whom have managed to fit me into a slot.

So what comes next? You called your book *Is That It? Is it?*

I don't know, and that's why I posed the question in the last sentence. I often ask myself. There's certainly no more that I can achieve within this given sphere - the point was to mark the idea, to raise it to such a conscious level that it became a talking-point everywhere, whereby you had to think about it, if not at least contribute. And positing the argument that it was unnecessary and ridiculous.

So once you've done that, and once you've set up the organisation whereby you could put into effect the expenditure of the money, then I didn't see a point really in continuing with that exercise. Band Aid should never repeat what the other agencies do, it's not in the same game at all.

But you have acquired a lot of expertise, and on top of that of course you're very well known.

Yeah but expertise, it's like any profession. Once you understand the jargon you've cracked the code. What's the



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point of being a freemason when you understand the secret handshakes? And I think there's an awful lot of bollocks talked about the correct way of doing it. There's no correct way of keeping someone alive. You either do or you don't. And you're faced with x number of problems and you use your logic to circumvent those problems and if people get in the way of them, then you either circumvent them or you ride roughshod over them. That's basically it. And you help other people without hurting others and we've no vested interest in hanging around at all, which probably makes for more dynamic and radical behaviour.

But there are two sides to it, aren't there? There's physically helping people in Africa, and then there's changing people's minds here in the West. Now how transitory do you think the latter is? There was a fantastic wave of compassion that everyone was swept up in. Do you think that's changed something fairly fundamental...

I think that lots of people are less ashamed about the notion of helping others - I shy away from the word charity because I happen to believe that it's a moral imperative, which is a completely different kettle of fish. The biggest changes were with the school-children who took part in School Aid or whatever. I'm not sure it's fundamental. May it's ephemeral, maybe it's just a fashion. I would tend to think, however, that nine year olds, when they're 22, will remember Live Aid in the same way that people of my generation remember what they were doing when Kennedy was shot. Because it's an emotive spasm, and they tend to remember that, the day everything seemed possible. So that might have some ongoing warm feeling, and if you seek to reproduce it, then nobody can any longer sit in front of their TVs and say, 'That's awful, but what can I do about it?' Now you can actually say, 'That's awful, and I can do something.' If nothing else it proves that you can shift things on this planet without having to be a member of a government and stuff like that.

Which is not to take away from the geopolitical nature of man-made famine, and that can only be solved by what Michael Manley called a 'quantum leap in imagination by the world's statesmen'. That quantum leap is not in evidence so far. At the UN it was tired old cliches. I was there when the Cubans made their speech, which was pathetically predictable, as was the American and the British, and the others.

What is going on in the Third World countries that are starving? Yes colonialism, but to a point, world armament shipments. Aid that comes with conditions, both financial and ideological, imposed on the backs of 14th century societies for 21st century ideologies. It can't work. Those people cannot meet those conditions. And aid in general is a perversion of the simple

act of generosity, of putting your hand in your pocket because you see something on TV or read about it and say 'well, yes, I'd like to help that person'. Aid is a perversion of that. And aid benefits the donor countries more than it benefits the beneficiaries.

If you look at all those things, plus the rescheduling of debt, they are actually achievable. They could actually be stopped. Really, do the Soviets need to supply the Ethiopians with arms? No they don't. Who gives a damn who has the balance of power there. Who cares that the third poorest country in the world is marxist or democratic. Who cares? It's not even strategically important. They already have Aden. The United States has Sudan. So who's fooling who?

But isn't there a deeper problem with societies like ours, that base their wealth on the poverty of others?

No they don't. I disagree with you. In fact that's a cliché. The West doesn't base its wealth on the poverty of others. When the West needs a Third World country, there's a symbiotic relationship. Take Niger and France. France needs Niger for its independent nuclear programme, because Niger has got uranium. When you move from Chad into Niger, you move from a country absolutely devastated, with nil capital city, with Libyan bombers circling over and bombing it every Saturday night, to a country with clean cities, development and, moreover, less urbanisation which is a major factor in famine. Why? Because it's in France's interest to maintain a government in power so they can have the uranium. That's the reality of the situation.

So if the Third World has got something the West needs, that country will get rich. My argument to businessmen is: forget humanitarianism, forget the imperative to help. Who cares? Let's talk business. Imagine a wealthy continent to the south. Who is the first to benefit? Europe. There's no question. So instead of giving them \$3billion in aid, which makes them aid junkies, imposing ludicrous conditions and then making them pay £9billion out in interest on their loans, why not say 'all right, keep the interest, we don't need it'. Develop the countries. And if you have a thriving market between the two, then you have two societies based on a mutual wealth. They both trade off each other.

I really don't go along with the cliché that because we're x times wealthier, which of course we are, it's necessary to keep those countries in subjugation. It's preferable to do everything we can to make those countries develop. At the moment we're not, because we're not allowing them political stability. Our aid imposes conditions on them, which they can't meet, which aggravates the internal political situation, and then which is stirred up by the Soviets and the US, and once again the whole thing falls down again. But that isn't in *their*

interest either. That's the point. I've said it to the Soviets and I've said it to the Americans. It is not in their interests to interfere in that way, in the clichéd way that bumbling giants behave. If you had King Kong walking down Oxford Street, he'd trample on Selfridge's, trample on all the people, but that's not in his interests. It's the same principle.

So I think you need a redrawing, a restructuring of the ideological lines and it comes down to this: who actually gives a damn whether they're marxists or capitalists? Why not let them get on with it themselves and find an African solution to their own problems without us morally-imposing, politically-imposing, ideologically-imposing, financially-imposing conditions. Let them find a way themselves.

So you see it as a real possibility that those hands can simply be taken off?

They could be. I mean the question is why not, and this is where I get called naïve. But if sophistication got us this far, then I'll stand up for naivety.

But people who have power - especially over things like commodity prices - don't want to relinquish that power.

Well, the market is what controls commodity prices, and that's the realistic world. If you want to bog it down with the workings of the financial system then you're going to end up not keeping anyone going and Africa will not be allowed to develop unless you, sitting here in Oxford Street, impose your idea of what the financial conditions of the world should be. They are what they are. They are markets. The world is a giant market, and by supplying people who need it, if you can get that market, then you make money.

Now obviously there are cartels that do that, but you are not going to change the financial realities of the world short of a revolution. You may say, 'yeah, well that's exactly right', but the people here do not want that revolution if it upsets their lifestyle, and their lifestyle is fair enough. What Band Aid did was make them, for maybe a year and a half, consistently think of other people's lifestyles. Now that cannot be sustained, because otherwise you become a complete bore, you become the boy who cried wolf and they say 'is there no end to this?', and you say, 'well, yes there is, but it is dealing with it on a geopolitical basis, broadening the financial system'. The commodities market isn't going to increase the price of sugar just because the Cuban economy is dependent on it. It just isn't. It's going to be what the market will bear, and if the housewife here has to pay whatever then she's going to say, 'damn it' and look for substitutes.

But it's not because of the mechanism of the market. It's because the EEC consciously goes and subsidises sugar and sells it way under cost and depresses world prices.

But the EEC CAP is a nonsense anyway...

It is a nonsense, but it's because of that...
But it is having to change, because of the internal contradictions and because of the pressure - he says immodestly - which people like Band Aid have brought to bear, which allied to the famine made people think, 'This is ridiculous'. But I don't think that will change it radically - it'll benefit the West much more than it will benefit the Third World. They're not suddenly going to shift their agricultural policy to make sure that the Third World does better than Europe.

Don't you think one of the big problems with public attitudes is that Africa is still seen as victim?

I agree with you. I tried to get over that point with Sport Aid where we had them as participants. We had to fly in TV stations into Burkina and set up a national TV system to get it out of there. But then you had Nepal contributing £350,000. You had India contributing £1.5m. Talk about the boot being on the other foot. I thought that was wonderful. There you had supposed victims seeing other people as worse off and contributing.

That is a critical problem, seeing Africans as victims. You're quite right. It's not normal for Africans to go around in rags. That is not a normal state of being for them and we just

imagine it is because we see it on TV.

The charity business has changed a lot. I seem to remember when I was, say 10, it was really pure compassion, you saw a starving kid in India...

The guilt thing was a Judaeo-Christian ethic.

That slowly evolved, so 10 or 11 years ago it was 'Let's give them the seeds they need so they can set themselves up'. Now Band Aid seems to have pushed that a stage further, or at least been part of a wider movement within the charities, of taking some responsibility ourselves for the condition in which people find themselves.

That's true. But I think that it has to be taken a stage further. By and large the people who work in charities are really good people and you hear a lot of shit about them, that they're all middle class and university-educated. So what? That never bugged me. What does bother me is that I've been in a lot of places where that attitude is very patronising.

I would like to get over that by 'Africanising' Band Aid, and we've started in Mali and Burkina Faso. We don't have a presence in any African country. We don't actually implement the projects ourselves. The other agencies do. We monitor what we're spending the money on. But we'd like to set up African aid agencies - for the simple reason of dignity and pride, for one. Moreover I don't think you can decide

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on a project sitting here in Oxford Street. It's not decided by us, it's decided by other people who are all huge experts in the field. But that won't do either.

Imagine an African aid agency working in Toxteth and the people deciding they want a new community hall. They went to the African aid worker and he says: 'I don't know about that, I'll have to check in Quagadougou whether you can have one.' How can someone in Quagadougou be expected to understand the problems of Toxteth?

So you have this huge moral distance and it just seemed to me to be slightly skewed. Now most of the projects do come from Africa but they're sent here and it's decided here. So what we'd like to do is use the expertise that is already in Africa by using the Burkinés for Burkina and the Malians for Mali who can then go out to their own villages and sort out the things themselves.

Now of course the Band Aid Trust means that people gave money in trust for those that need it, so control of the actual money will still be here, but at least they will be able to decide for themselves which projects they want the money allocated to their country to be spent on.

So that is the next direction for Band Aid?
Yes, definitely. That's the main direction. We're checking it out in those countries, but if it works then we'll use it further.*

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