

Thoughts about concerts as a way to raise awareness of African poverty

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Summary & Comment: In this commentary on Live8, Richard Mshomba, points out that "while the benefits of using concerts to raise awareness of poverty are clear," they also, unintentionally, trivialize solutions to the problems; reinforce some stereotypes about Africa; and give wrong impressions that no positive things have taken place in Africa.

Thoughts about concerts as a way to raise awareness of African poverty

About 1.2 billion people in the world--one out of six--live on less than one dollar (about 1,100 shillings) a day. Sub-Saharan Africa is the most poverty-stricken region in the world. The region also suffers from the HIV/AIDS pandemic. In some southern African countries, 30 out of every 100 adults are infected with HIV/AIDS. At the same time, an endless cycle of repayments of external debt continues to diminish the potential for these countries to break out of the vicious cycle of poverty.

In 1985, a number of major cities in the world hosted concerts aimed at raising awareness of these and other challenges in developing countries. Now, twenty years later, five concerts with the same objective were held on July 2, this year in Berlin (Germany), London (UK), Paris (France), Philadelphia (USA), and Rome (Italy). Africa, the poorest continent in the world, will receive the most attention. These concerts were attended by millions of people and watched on TV and websites by many more millions.

To make them most effective, organizers scheduled these concerts to take place a few days before leaders of the eight industrialized countries (G8) - Canada, France, Germany, Italy, Japan, Russia, the U.K., and the U.S. - met in Scotland. The annual G8 summit was held from July 6-8. The concerts were meant to increase public pressure on G8 governments and other developed countries, so they do more for the poor, such as forgiving debts and providing more aid for antiretroviral drugs.

Awareness of an economic or social problem is a prerequisite to political pressure and effective engagement in solving the problem. Organizers of the concerts must, therefore, be commended for their mission and vision. There is no doubt that when leaders of the G8 met, the live aid concerts were in their minds and, to some extent, influenced their decisions. Moreover, this worldwide campaign added momentum to Prime Minister Tony Blair's push for more aid to Africa.

In effect, the concerts also reminded people that we live in an interconnected and interdependent world. What happens in the heartland of the U.S. may have an impact on a subsistence farmer in Africa. For example, agricultural subsidies in developed countries reduce world prices of the subsidized crops and, thus, the incomes of African farmers. World Bank studies suggest that subsidies to cotton producers in the U.S. and the European Union reduce West Africa's annual revenue from cotton exports by 250 million dollars a year. Therefore, while the role of aid cannot be diminished, what are also important are policies in industrialized countries that would promote economic independence of African countries.

More awareness about the interdependence of countries will help people see that helping African countries to reduce poverty has an indirect benefit to developed countries. For example, economic development in Africa enables Africans to buy more U.S. products, thus, increasing jobs in the U.S. Likewise, economic prosperity in Africa reduces the potential for political instability and the propensity for individuals to be lured into terrorist activities.

While the benefits of using concerts to raise awareness of poverty are clear, some words of caution are also in order. Because of their sensational nature, the concerts may, unintentionally, trivialize solutions to the problems. African problems could be solved almost instantaneously if all that was required was aid. But, of course, financial aid, whether direct or in the form of debt relief, can only go so far in dealing with very complex situations involving external and internal factors.

Some countries, such as Zimbabwe, Equatorial Guinea, and Sudan, need substantial improvement in their governance, economic freedom, and the rule of law before any financial aid can be effective. In other words, leaders in African countries must also be held accountable.

Honorable intentions notwithstanding, the sensational nature of live aid concerts can also reinforce some stereotypes about Africa. Most people in the West, particularly in the U.S., have only the National Geographic and a war- or famine-ravaged concept of Africa. To them, Africa is a jungle with wonderful wildlife and/or a continent in perpetual turmoil, a basket case. News or events about Africa often fail to relay the progress that a number of African countries have made in their relatively short history of independence and the potential they hold for investment and development.

Finally, concerts may leave some people believing that industrialized countries have been doing nothing to help African countries. While industrialized countries could certainly do more to help, it would not be fair to ignore the support they have been providing. Countries like Tanzania, Uganda, and Mozambique have benefited from debt relief, wisely investing the savings in education and health. African countries have received aid to help them with the HIV/AIDS pandemic. In addition, African countries receive preferential access to the U.S. and the European markets.

Hopefully, these concerts inspired some people to learn more about Africa and other developing countries while at the same time increasing the pressure on G8 leaders to do even more to help, through domestic policies and foreign aid.

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