

Live Aid: a challenge to the 'experts'?

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The success of Live Aid in highlighting world justice issues is a challenge to governments and development agencies. Some have criticised it as a short-lived, simplistic response of benefit chiefly to the music business. Colm Regan of Trócaire argues that Live Aid challenges traditional approaches to development education and calls for better communication between NGOs and the public, especially young people.

Five years ago who would have believed that the plight of the Third World would become one of the most popular social and political causes of our time? Who would have believed that young people and more particularly their music and culture, usually on the receiving end of harsh and dismissive comment, would spearhead that involvement? Equally, who would have believed that the worlds of fashion, art, sport, rock music and humour, normally castigated for epitomising the selfish, profligate and uncaring character of modern western society, would become involved? And finally, who would have believed that those organisations – governments and international/voluntary agencies – normally concerned with world development issues would *not* be directly involved?

Band Aid, Live Aid, Sport Aid and the myriad of other "aids" they have generated have proved to be remarkably successful and, to date, enduring phenomena. Their inspiration comes not from a political figure or a known personality from the world of international development or charity but from an unlikely and, so far, not particularly successful rock star. They have involved hitherto uninvolved people and organisations; they have raised cash and consciousness in the battle against hunger and poverty and they have raised fundamental questions about political and economic priorities in today's world. And most of all, they have done so on a scale unheard of up to now. Despite popular perception, they have not however done this without criticism. Criticism has come from politicians, development workers, educationalists and the media.

There are those who objected to Geldof's style – blunt and to the point, devoid of the normal diplomatic "niceties"; some claim that Live Aid has reinforced negative stereotypical images of Africa; that Live Aid avoided the central political questions involved; that it has reinforced the view that charity is the answer; and finally that it merely was a "consumerist pop hype".

But, as ever, nothing succeeds like success and there is now a growing mythology emerging around these conflicting assessments of Live Aid. Whatever else it has done, Live Aid has certainly fuelled debate and discussion around the key development issue of hunger and its causes. It has not only

offered a challenge to our political and economic system but also to the development “experts” be they in the official or voluntary aid sectors.

The following comments are offered as an introductory review of some of the achievements as well as the criticisms of Live Aid. An exhaustive and realistic assessment of the events of the last two years can only be achieved in the future. However it can be argued that Live Aid has offered those of us in the development movement, particularly those concerned with education work, a number of serious challenges which need to be reviewed. Whatever our overall assessment may be we should not ignore the motivation, strategy and potential impact of Live Aid on the development debate.

Live Aid: some of the achievements

In financial, musical and communications terms Live Aid was a huge success. The single “Do they know it’s Christmas?” went to No. 1 in the charts and became one of the best selling singles of all time. Its success generated a flood of charity singles from all over the world (including the Third World and “Show Some Concern” in Ireland) as well as Mick Jagger and David Bowie’s hit “Dancing in the Streets”. Live Aid featured sixteen hours of music, some two hundred songs by fifty-two artists beamed via fourteen satellites to five hundred million TV sets in one hundred and sixty countries. All of this time and technology focussed on a single, soluble problem – hunger in Africa.

Live Aid raised over fifty million pounds – cash which has and will continue to be used for immediate relief and rehabilitation as well as longer-term development projects. The work of many a well known and experienced agency (including those of Ireland) has received a boost from the coffers of the Band Aid Trust. From the proceeds of the first single alone, Band Aid organised seven emergency flights and three ships to Africa. Included in the contents were six trucks, twenty-two land rovers, eight land cruisers, eighteen water tankers, twenty three hospital tents, one hundred and forty tons of high energy biscuits, one thousand two hundred and forty tons of dried skim milk powder, twenty five tons of full cream milk powder, two tons of gold top milk, fifty two tons of medical supplies, five hundred and ten tons of vegetable oil, four hundred and fifty tons of sugar, one thousand tons of grain, fifty two tons of reinforced plastic sheeting and ten tons of cooking and eating utensils. All of this amounted to real, practical, immediate and badly needed humanitarian aid.

Justice issues

Live Aid’s success owes much to both the cause it espoused as well as the medium through it made its appeal. Live Aid fused together two of the most powerful cultural forces in existence – popular music and television. It didn’t preach to people, or confuse them with detailed or complex political debate; it provided an obvious way to become involved and directly encouraged participation by everyone (this was especially the case with Sport Aid).

In this respect Live Aid was not something new – music’s concern with world justice issues did not begin in 1984. The history of the relationship between

music, popular culture and politics is a complex one and by no means as simple as some Live Aid “watchers” would suggest. This has recently been analysed in depth by John Street in the excellent *Rebel Rock: The Politics of Popular Music*. The 1960’s and 70’s witnessed events such as “Concert for Bangladesh”, “Rock for Kampuchea”, the punk era spawned “Rock against Racism” – a very potent and forthright answer to the rise of the National Front. More recently, some of the world’s foremost rock musicians released an album under the name “Artists against Apartheid”. Individual bands such as Simple Minds, U2, UB40, Madness, etc. have identified with causes and organisations such as Amnesty and UNICEF.

Apart from raising cash popular music has also raised consciousness through frequently and directly highlighting world justice issues. The Specials Aka record “Free Nelson Mandela” reached No. 1 and forged a bond between young people and a single symbol of the struggle against apartheid. Jeffrey Osborn’s “Soweto”, Latin Quarter’s “Radio Africa”, U2’s “Unforgettable Fire”, Jackson Browne’s “Lives in the Balance” etc. have made it not only acceptable but necessary to engage political issues like the arms race, repression and hunger. And they have done so in a way far more immediate, powerful and political than any agency or solidarity group could hope to. Live Aid remains one of the most successful of such enterprises to date.

What of the politics of Live Aid? There can be little doubt that in its reliance on mass communications and an instant obvious message, Live Aid in its immediate impact presented a very simple picture. At times it was both sentimental and mawkish but in that it captured a real moral starting point – the obvious immorality of simultaneous greed and need on a massive scale. Compassion remains a key reference point for all concerned with injustice. There can be few who were not deeply touched by the sight of tens of thousands of people standing in silence observing a horrific tragedy occurring thousands of miles away.

Herein lies both Live Aid’s essential strength and perhaps its weakness. This simple and touching message spurred a response in immediate terms but made it more difficult to link it to the longer-term, less emotional and more political issues which needed to be faced. This aspect Geldof has found much more difficult to sell but it is there all the same despite the comments of some.

What of the politics of the musicians themselves? Obviously the majority of songs and bands performing remained characteristic of popular music. Others however delved deeper e.g. Elvis Costello, UB40, and, most explicitly Ireland’s U2. They were asked why they participated – their answer was:

“U2 are involved in Live Aid because it’s more than money, it’s music . . . but it’s also a demonstration to the politicians and policy makers that men, women and children will not walk by other men, women and children as they die, bellies swollen, starving to death for the sake of a cup of grain and water . . . For the price of Star Wars, the MX Missile, offensive defence budgets, the deserts of Africa could be turned into fertile lands. The technology is with us. The technocrats are not. Are we part of a civilisation that protects itself by investing in life or investing in death?”¹

Geldof has not been slow to attack governments, international institutions

and the hypocrisy of today's leaders in terms with which the public can readily identify. While the causes of famine and inequality are not spelled out in minute detail they are painted in broad strokes. Direct democracy versus bureaucracy.

"We had wanted governments to react. They were forced to . . . In America talk of massive airlifts, food, emergency measures, congressional committees activated. In Russia a desperate attempt to defend a record of cynicism, deceit and arms sales. In Europe, a plea to act. Finally . . . It was so pathetically obvious that in a world of surplus, starvation is the most senseless death of all".²

The agitation has continued; there is now talk of "Africanising" Band Aid, of long term projects and of commitment beyond the day, the event, the glamour and the worldwide attention. The "buzz" which Live Aid has generated, the awards, medals and nominations have helped keep the issue alive – but for how much longer?

Live Aid was capable of transcending national frontiers. It was staged on both sides of the Atlantic, was watched in one hundred and sixty countries, involved musicians from all over the world and above all zeroed in on a key issue in the relationship between the First and Third Worlds. Sport Aid built on this with active participation from all throughout the world including Africa itself. This global picture is something development agencies have worked on for decades.

Many commentators have argued that Live Aid fundamentally challenged the growing selfishness which dominates popular politics today. It gave the lie to the frequent argument of politicians that the public is not interested in the world beyond our shores. It challenged the narrow nationalism currently in vogue in political circles in Europe and the United States. It has challenged the international priorities of our own government, the European Community and the superpowers.

Live Aid has made giving and caring fashionable. Admittedly this could be a double-edged sword – fashions change, trends come and go. But this need not be so. In an interesting essay on charity, psychologist Enver Carim has argued that:

"People have been giving, however, not only because they've begun to understand the gaps between rich and poor, but also because they are realising that giving is doing. Giving is a form of real action, giving achieves practical results. Instead of just watching the poor on television, or reading about them in newspapers and magazines, and perhaps feeling bad about not being able to help in some way, people have discovered that giving is the long arm of love. It reaches all continents. It transforms thoughts and feelings into action."³

It certainly cannot be argued that the majority of those who donated to or participated in Live/Sport Aid fully understand the dynamic and complex relationship between North and South. Neither can it be said that Live Aid set out to promote that understanding. However it can be argued that it makes the task of fostering that understanding all the easier.

Live Aid: Some of the criticisms

While there has been massive trumpeting of the successes of Live Aid there has been less public criticism voiced. It has been limited to the pages of some newspapers such as the Guardian, to development magazines such as Links, to small scale seminars and to the general discussions of development agencies. One of the most serious criticisms, it is argued, is that Live Aid presented a partial, simplistic and stereotypical view of Africa and its problem of famine. The pictures presented during the Wembley and Philadelphia events might seem to justify this claim. The focus was on those immediately suffering and the need for us to respond. No attention was given to the work of African governments, communities or agencies in tackling hunger and its causes. In this it reinforced the view of Africa as a helpless continent in need of our continued help and direction. This in turn could reinforce a Eurocentric or racist view of black people as less capable of organising their own affairs – a view which has currency in certain economic and political circles in the West at present.

However it should be recognised that this is a general problem of the way in which Africa is often presented by the media, various relief and development agencies, and government aid organisations and is not something peculiar to Live Aid. The fact that Africa continues to be presented in such terms is in itself an indictment of all these bodies and of the failure of our educational programmes. It should also be remembered that the images and reports presented by Live Aid were not false – they represented the real and horrific suffering of Ethiopians. They were a harrowing reminder of the failure of both national and international governments and voluntary agency policies in relation to agriculture and food provision.

The newness and inexperience of Band Aid has led to the claim that mistakes have frequently been made in the field. While it is yet far too early to objectively assess Live Aid's impact in relief or development terms, so far few serious or sustained mistakes have been reported – certainly no more than one would expect in the circumstances. Many of the projects funded by the Band Aid Trust were presented by agencies with considerable experience in the areas of both relief and rehabilitation. In fairness to Band Aid it should also be remembered that the history of government and voluntary agency involvement in Africa is littered with mistakes – Band Aid has not, by any means, had a monopoly on them.

Certainly the criticisms of Band Aid's School Aid Scheme seem valid. This scheme encouraged school children to collect food locally, assemble it via the schools in a number of designated points and have it transported by Band Aid to Ethiopia and Sudan. Problems arose when the food remained uncollected, was unsuitable for Ethiopians' needs or for transport. In this it certainly reinforced the view that food aid is the answer to famine. But again this is a commonly held view which has only been challenged by a handful of agencies.

Some people have argued that Live Aid's essential weakness arises from its integral links with the world of showbusiness and popular music. It is argued that this business has its own priorities and that these do not extend to the

promotion of justice in the world. This task is best left to the "experts" of the developed world. However it may well be that part of Live Aid's success stems precisely from the fact that it did not arise from the ranks of the traditional development lobby. Its almost naive belief in simple attainable goals in the face of supposed complexity and difficulty appealed to the majority of people. Live Aid's links with the music business ensured the active participation of young people. That population is no longer prepared to accept the traditional arguments and responses of either governments or international agencies who, in their view, have largely failed.

The criticism that commitment would not continue beyond the immediate glamour and publicity of Live Aid itself has, so far, not been sustained. Most recently we have witnessed the emergence of Comic Relief and Disco-Aid while the links between the Band Aid Trust and the agencies have been strengthened. Geldof's own commitment to development issues has not diminished, as suggested and, as noted, there are now plans to "Africanise" Band Aid.

All in all Band Aid represented both a challenge to and a reinforcement of traditional views of both hunger and Africa. The images and the initial messages presented reinforced a perception which many of us in development work have sought to modify. Yet Band Aid also challenged the dominant political and economic malaise which has inhibited positive and sustained action on tackling the crisis and its causes.

Live Aid: Some of the challenges

While Live Aid offered a number of real political challenges to governments around the world, it has also offered them to the voluntary development and relief sectors. Whether or not the generous compassion of Live/Sport Aid can be sustained in the future and translated into concerted political action depends, to some extent, on how we respond to such challenges. Development and justice work has become increasingly difficult in the economic and political climate of the late 1980s. The successes and achievements of NGOs in the 1960's and 70's can no longer be repeated. Just as our strategies for tackling Third World development issues need to change to accommodate the 80's and 90's so too do the methodologies of our campaigning and education work. In this sphere Live Aid offers some important challenges.

Perhaps one of the most important issues revolves around the starting point of education or campaign work. For years now our Third World experience has suggested that the starting point should be the issues and causes with which we identify e.g. Central America, South Africa, women in development, multinationals etc. Seldom have our starting points revolved around the needs of people here in Ireland. What are their concerns? What do they think needs to be tackled and how? Live Aid demonstrated the need to start at the beginning with people's perceptions of the issues and not with our well worked out, predetermined causes and solutions.

For years Irish agencies have encouraged the public to become involved, to give cash, to lobby, to picket or to educate. Yet the issues chosen for such action have been ours and consequently the problems as perceived by the public have

not been included. Thus organisations emerge during crises such as the famine which put forward views and solutions to hunger apparently at odds with those of the agencies. Move the Mountain is but one example. Agencies need to constantly remind themselves that there is a vital need to return to the basics, to engage the public in debate and discussion at a starting point which makes sense of their perceptions.

Secondly there is a need for more active participation between the agencies and the public. Sport Aid was so successful not simply because it raised over £30 million but because it urged active participation by all. The sight of tens of thousands of people running in Budapest, Barcelona and Ouagadougou gave people a sense of being part of a movement. This sense of a movement is missing in Ireland – development and justice issues are seen to be the preserve of a small elite or else a matter of charity alone. Just as development projects in the Third World have long recognised the need to actively involve the community in all stages of project planning, implementation and assessment, there is now a need to adopt a similar strategy in our education/campaigning work. While some agencies claim that this has been the case for the past decade the evidence of results on the grounds would seem to deny it.

A third challenge from Band Aid involves the question of the medium through which we choose to promote global awareness and understanding. By and large the development movement has ignored popular culture and has instead concentrated on lectures, seminars and papers presented by “experts”. At a time when such methods are being increasingly challenged in educational work, there is a need to more fully incorporate this change in campaigning. Popular culture remains a very powerful force for political and social change; it is an essential part of current campaigning on apartheid and on disarmament. Its involvement in the development movement to date has largely been in isolation from the non-governmental organisations. There is a need to build more effective bridges, and not only on our terms, in the wake of Live Aid.

Whether or not the potential released by Live Aid can be realised depends to some extent, on whether development agencies take the need for more education work seriously. In the past we have constantly argued for its importance and yet our practise has been far from satisfactory. The number of programmes and projects geared towards specific target groups and particularly young people remain few. There is a pressing need for such programmes where we provide people with an opportunity to raise their own consciousness on such issues. In this sense, Live Aid remains a challenge to us all.

On a more fundamental level, Live Aid has highlighted a larger, essentially political question. Once the glamour and energy of Live Aid began a host of individuals and institutions rushed to have their names and programmes associated with it. They recognised that the public at large supported Geldof's vision and so they wanted to be seen to be a part of it and, of course, to some extent they wanted control of it. Live Aid trespassed into the territory of the traditional “experts” and they didn't like it. Live Aid has highlighted the fact that many social and political institutions are out of touch with the public and have failed them. They are not representative of public attitudes and may, in

the case of the famine, be actually holding them back. The public clearly wants action on issues such as hunger and disarmament but the political system does not. This is particularly true of young people. The attempt by various political interests to be associated with Live Aid is an attempt to mediate public opinion and channel it into established forms of action. Live Aid represents a spontaneous response to a major political issue which arose outside the traditional arena and is therefore a challenge to it.

Live Aid was an important occasion in the fight against famine yet it was not unique. It raised a lot of money but when set against the scale of the problem it remains insignificant. It did a lot for the music business, for the image of the stars and for the various charities but it did not solve the problem. Its essential value lay in the publicity generated particularly amongst young people and in the medium it utilised. It placed a premium on active participation. It challenged us all about our beliefs, priorities and goals. It is up to us to respond. Commenting on his 1985 trip to Africa, Geldof noted:

"The journey was not some jaunt into a personal heart of darkness nor was it a dilettante's voyeuristic dip into the pitiless pain and degradation of others. It was a trip to refocus my outrage".⁴

For many people Live Aid was just such an opportunity for refocussing their outrage.

Note:

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Footnotes

¹As quoted in Hot Press magazine

²Bob Geldof, *op. cit.* p.7

³New Internationalist, June 1986, p.15

⁴Bob Geldof in *With Geldof in Africa*, Times Books, 1985, p.7