

Trade and Aid Are Not Mutually Exclusive

Written by Chris McCarthy

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CHRIS MCCARTHY, JUN 17 2011

'If we wait for the moment when everything, absolutely everything, is ready, we shall never begin.'
Ivan Turgenev (Russian novelist and playwright)

Britain currently faces a host of challenges – housing shortages, unacceptable illiteracy rates, youth unemployment, sluggish growth, and so on. When the deficit is paid down, debts become less burdensome and economic growth more robust the country will still face challenges, some new, some familiar and some unforeseen. They will not all drown under the tide of endless money as New Labour's record on the NHS demonstrates. The party did much to improve the lot of patients but in the process created a bloated bureaucratic dinosaur.

It's not compelling enough an argument to propose that in these chastened times with unprecedented cuts in public expenditure that we should renege on our commitments to the world's poorest. As the Prime Minister and International Development Minister, Andrew Mitchell, yesterday pledged a further £814m to help vaccinate children around the world against preventable diseases, some commentators have denounced the plans as unaffordable in light of the economic context at home.

"People find it very hard to understand why we are doing this," opined Conservative MP Peter Bone, "when libraries are closing, lollipop ladies are being sacked, potholes need repairing and people are finding life tough."

The government hasn't abdicated in its responsibility to the British public by pledging more money to a global vaccine program – the International Development budget will rise to just 0.7% of Gross National Income from 2013. Circumstances are difficult for millions of Britons and the forecast remains troubling for years to come. These are incomparable, however, to the two million children who die from pneumonia alone each year, despite an available preventative vaccine, and the millions of mothers who suffer their torturously brief, painful lives.

The moral argument is very clear: we should continue to be at the vanguard of helping those most in need because we can; because the return on our capital is enormous; and because to retreat would leave an inexcusable scar on our conscience. How can we continue to turn our back to a situation of unparalleled suffering that, while not necessarily of our making, we can affect a lasting and unparalleled change?

To those whom the moral arguments are not compelling enough, who propose that removing restrictions on trade and increasing investment is the better path to poverty reduction, that to offer aid is to shower pity; trade and aid are not mutually exclusive concepts and to save a life is not to extend pity. Markets are imperfect. There is little immediate profit motive to provide affordable (relative to the local population) vaccines to those who most need it and who are typically the most destitute in society.

Part of the end-goal is for developing nations to have the resources, infrastructure and medical expertise to manage their own prevention programs. Many simply do not yet have those capabilities and it may be many years or decades until they do. There's nothing to prohibit us from continuing to trade and invest in regions such as Sub-Saharan Africa (now a trillion-dollar industry which grew faster than India and Brazil between 2000 and 2010) while simultaneously helping countries tackle epidemics of pneumonia, diarrhoea and malaria.

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Reducing preventable diseases will also help drive the economic prosperity of countries that detractors of our aid program suggest would be better served if we bought more of their footballs and jumpers. On a purely utilitarian level it's economically inefficient that so much of the potential labour force will never reach working age. When you consider also that family members will spend most of their time and limited means caring for their sick children, the untapped potential is vast. Potential that will grow into new markets for us to trade with as China has already recognised.

We must be careful not to overstate, however, the potential for successful aid initiatives to arrest immigration into the UK or protect our national security. Aid is not the panacea for terrorism and it's disingenuous to imply that the root cause of terrorist acts is destitution.

Osama Bin Laden was the son of a millionaire Saudi businessman. His extremist zeal was born not of poverty but an antagonism to what he saw as imperialist, murderous Western foreign policy against fellow Muslims. The four men who carried out the July 7 bombings in London were motivated for similar reasons. While none were notably wealthy, neither were they living in abject poverty. The Troubles, which persisted for decades killing thousands across Northern Ireland, the Republic of Ireland, Britain and parts of Europe, were the product of sectarian strife and not economic impoverishment.

In some circumstances economic disenfranchisement provides fertile ground for extremist recruiters to indoctrinate people into supporting deplorable creeds. Such adherence, however, is typically shallow – NATO troops often bribe Taliban followers to renounce their allegiance, albeit temporarily – and their destitute situation is not the primary driver of those who 'lead' them. They are typically exploited with promises of money or cajoled with threats to themselves and their families.

In these contexts aid programs are insufficient; security, education, and inclusive political governance must accompany economic opportunities. The absence of a meaningful presence of Al Qaeda in the Arab Spring has illustrated the tacit rejection by the Arab people of the limited vision the organisation offers for democratic, political and economic reform.

The history of Western aid delivery is not flush with glowing recommendations but to advocate the abolition of Britain's entire aid budget (as Melanie Phillips did on *Question Time* in May) is akin to suggesting we dismantle the NHS because of its bureaucratic impositions. We must always, of course, ensure money is being spent effectively with sufficient accountability and transparency. But we must not step back from our commitments to those who most need it, not because they need our pity but because as compassionate humans with the means to literally save millions of lives, we should find the alternative intolerable.

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About the author:

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