

Somerville - Smith

Continent in Crisis

THE recent decision by the G8 nationals to cancel the debt repayments of the worlds poorest 18 countries come at a crucial time for Africa.

Of those 18 nations, 16 are in Africa, a continent on the edge. Plagued by endemic ethnic wars, disease, famine and dictatorial government and now the AIDS epidemic, the whole continent is on the verge of a total melt-down. Some countries are currently spending up to 25% of their GNP on paying off debt to the rich nations of the world.

Past Dictators

This debt was often accrued by past dictators who siphoned off the cash to finance their own lavish lifestyles. These dictators have mostly been driven out by their people as democracy takes a foothold, however the debt remains.

It becomes a pointless exercise pouring hundreds of millions into Africa in aid, when they pay the same or more back to the same donor nations in debt interest.

The problems in Africa are vast and will not be solved overnight but this is a huge positive step towards making these nations self sufficient.

Trade Manipulation

In reality many of the problems in Africa are a result of the policies and trade restrictions of the wealthy nations anyway.

If the wealthy nations stopped paying their farmers to produce goods that they then dump on the worlds market to depress prices, the poor nations might be able to sell their produce at a fair price.

The wealthy nations can exist very well without this manipulation of their world trade, but for Africa it's a matter of survival.

Ethiopia — an example

A few figures to show you the real scale of this disparity of wealth, let us take Ethiopia as an example of one of the poorest countries in Africa.

The per capita income is less than A\$200 per year and their whole GNP for 2003 was less than 6 Billion dollars. This for a nation of 60 million was less than Kerry Packer's companies made in the same period.

Ethiopia is a good example of how aid must be targeted to the real situation on the ground.

With a life expectancy in the 40's and infant mortality at 50% or more, Ethiopians always had six to eight children in the expectation that two or three may survive into adulthood to farm the land and look after the extended family.

After Live Aid in 1985 set up feeding centres and regional health clinics the health of the population, especially the children improved dramatically.

Well Intentioned but Disasterous

However, nobody thought to set up birth control clinics or education programmes for the population.

This generation for the first time in the history of Ethiopia have nearly all survived into adulthood, doubling the population from 28 million in 1985 to 60 million now.

Even when wealthy nations mean well, our belief that we know best and what's good for the Third World can cause even more problems than they solve. People want to help - witness the great outpouring of cash and compassion over the recent Tsunami Appeal.

The problem is everyone is now becoming cynical and believe that the money they give is wasted and poorly spent by these huge and expensive aid agencies.

Aussies making a Real Difference

So often when discussing Africa people say to me "What's the point - can anyone

make a real difference?" Well the answer is "yes" and I'll tell you how ...

All over Africa are small, local agencies usually run by expatriates in conjunction with the local people servicing local needs.

One such agency is the AFAR Pastoralists Fund. Run by Valerie Browning, an Australian nurse married to a local man who has lived and worked with the AFAR people for over 30 years.

She has been setting up health clinics, teaching basic nursing and midwifery to local women and many other low tech programs targeted at local needs.

All this has been run on a shoestring budget of donations from Australians for many years. In the AFAR district, among the poorest of the poor a dollar can feed a large family for a day.

They are so careful with how the money is spent on the ground in Ethiopia that they send receipts back to the donors here to show how the money is being spent.

We will be promoting this as our main charity through this column and will feature in future articles more about this remarkable Australian with regular updates on what is happening to the AFAR people. We hope to organise various fundraisers and chook raffles in the future.

So keep posted!

For The Unannointed, Sid is the son of the infamous John Somerville-Smith, journalist and commentator of the 1970s.

Letters to the Editor

We want you to consider this newspaper to be your paper and we would like you to contribute anything you may think could be of interest to other readers. So keep them rolling in. But please note we will only publish those letters that comply with the editorial policy printed on page 2.

Hold your Water

SIFTING here watching the rain come falling down I am reminded how precious fresh water is in Melbourne.

A recent Government report stated that over the next 40 years Melbourne's water supply will be reduced by 35% due to lower rainfall, higher temperatures and other side effects of global warming.

We recently installed a water tank at home and hope to put in another one soon as many people have been encouraged to do in recent years.

At best, this is only going to store a few per cent of the available water from a decent down-pour. We have the technology available to us right now in Melbourne to build massive underground acquifiers to hold this runoff. The Mole machine that was used to drill out the underground rail loop and the Western trunk sewer is capable of doing the job.

Underground storage would eliminate the problems of evaporation and algae build up. When you consider the-billions spent on various marginally useful infrastructure projects, ie: the high speed regional rail Victoria should be at least considering projects such as this.

Water after all is the life blood of a city and without an adequate and assured supply, marvellous Melbourne will be in serious trouble.

by Sidney Somerville-Smith

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