

International Affairs Forum Interview: Mr. Matt Phillips

International Affairs Forum speaks with Mr. Matt Phillips, Head of Public Affairs for children's rights group, Save the Children.

International Affairs Forum: Last month the EU agreed to double its development aid budget, with the 15 richest members setting a target of contributing at least 0.51% of their national wealth. How would you like to see this extra money spent?



Mr. Matt Phillips: We would certainly like to see the money spent on poverty eradication, but we are not just calling for more money. It is absolutely crucial that we get greater debt cancellation so developing countries have more money freed up for future investments in health and education – exactly the sort of measures that eradicate poverty.

But we are just as concerned about policies as we are about the volume of money. For instance, the EU only spends half of its aid money on poverty eradication in the poorest countries, whereas we would like to see at least 70% of aid from the EU being spent on the poorest countries, particularly helping the poorest children.

We really have a strong sense that greater effectiveness is as important as greater volume. We don't actually want greater volume if it means enforcing unrealistic economic conditions. We need donors to harmonize better, to make their aid more predictable.

IA-Forum: In April of this year the World Bank and IMF warned that some of the Millennium Development Goals (MDGs) may be missed. Were the targets too optimistic or do you think they can still be met?

Mr. Phillips: We don't think the targets were optimistic enough. We're an organisation that is about eradicating poverty. The MDGs are only aimed at halving the most extreme poverty and improving rates of infant mortality - not actually reaching the levels of the rich world for instance.

So the MDG are a step on the way – they are crucial a step. But the problem is that when they devised their goals, they didn't bring with them the political will. That is why this year is so important. If we are going to get those 100 million children into school and get as many girls as boys into school, we actually need the money in place now. In four years time it will be too late, so

we need the money and the policies now to deliver on these goals – and that's about political will.

IA-Forum: Millennium Development Goal (MDG) 4 plans to reduce the under-five mortality rate by two thirds, between 1990 and 2015. Do you think this is achievable? What are the particular challenges in meeting this goal and what could the international community be doing better to meet it?

Mr. Phillips: Yes, the international community could be doing more. This goal – indeed all the goals - are entirely achievable but they require the political will and investment in place. In terms of all the goals, the fundamental foundation of all them will have to be the establishment of basic health care systems in developing countries, and the principle of free health care.

At the moment far too many of the poor, especially children, face costs for health care, so we need to make it free at the point of use. To give an example - a typical rural family in Ethiopia might have an annual cash budget of £75 a year. The average cost of a health care intervention is £1.50, for a family that may have six children. The reality is that these families are too poor to be sick and can't get healthcare. If they do survive and grow up, they are frequently disabled and therefore unable to break the cycle of poverty.

All the health goals have the same goal behind them – basic health care as a fundamental right. The reason it hasn't happened is the failure of investment by rich countries and an over emphasis on vertical health programs. There are 75 individual disease initiatives out there, but what these disease initiatives don't do is sufficiently build up the systems that are needed in the long term. In the long run it is important that aid is predictable and can meet recurring costs such as nurses' salaries and the costs of running health centres.

IA-Forum: The Global Campaign for Education gave the UK a 'B' grade for its efforts at meeting the 3rd MDG of ensuring that, by 2015, children everywhere, boys and girls alike, will be able to complete a full course of primary schooling. Do you think this is a fair reflection? What could the UK be doing better to help achieve this goal?

Mr. Phillips: The UK, like others, wasn't properly backing the education goals such as 'education fast track'. What they need to do is work on delivering the financial package and making aid work effectively.

What we have seen is the first deadline for the gender equity goal in primary and secondary education. But they have missed this target – it won't be achieved by the end of this year. There are only 8 girls for every 10 boys in school and in many parts of Africa it is much worse. The international community has failed to deliver on its first goal and has so far failed to get 100 million more children into school.

The consequence of this is illiteracy, and consequently a failure to empower large parts of the population to take their countries forward as they reach adulthood. More literate societies are more able to develop, and more literate populations are better able to break the cycle of poverty.

IA-Forum: Much recent attention has been focused on increasing aid, yet Theodore Moran of Georgetown University's School of Foreign Service is one of a number of people who believe that one of the weaknesses of the outgoing World Bank President, James Wolfensohn, was that he focussed too much on trying to relieve the problems of poor people directly. Mr Moran argues instead that more emphasis should be placed on economic growth in reducing poverty. Do you agree?

Mr. Phillips: We think the emphasis should be on growth that delivers rights, not just economic growth for its own sake. What we saw in Latin America for instance was growth that wasn't equitable so it still left large proportion of the population in poverty and an elite middle class where wealth doesn't just trickle down to the poor. The net result is that the children at the bottom of the heap are no better off. We're looking for equitable growth and the kind of growth that really works for children - the kind of growth that is economically and socially sustainable.

We hear a great deal from those supporting the neo-liberal agenda that the key is to apply economic rules such as liberalisation using a one-size-fits-all form across the whole world. But we know from experience that the developing world is suffering from having liberalisation forced upon them. One aspect of this is fiscal discipline, which means budgetary and spending control. But the impact of this has been cutbacks in spending on health care and education – exactly the things that hit the poorest.

The way those restrictions have been applied has reduced the ability of developing countries to implement the policies that really work. These kinds of restrictions coming from the World Bank and IMF or other donors have really held back action to reduce poverty. What developing countries require is more investment in health and education and so we would like to see them allowed the same flexibility that western countries have when they balance the books over an economic cycle - not every year. What we need to see in Africa is a period of investment to break the cycle of poverty as well as all those other things like improving governance and anti-corruption measures.

These liberalisation voices also ignore the fact that African companies cannot step up straightaway and compete with multi-nationals from the rich world. They are not markets that are mature and they don't have the critical mass of the population with the expertise to help enterprises compete. They need more time to take their economies forward in ways that work for them and they shouldn't be forced to open up markets or cut back on health and education. They shouldn't be forced down these routes of privatisation and liberalisation until they are ready.

IA-Forum: The 2nd July 2005 is the date set for the Live 8 event, with concerts to be held in London, Philadelphia, Paris, Rome and Berlin. Do you think such celebrity endorsed events are helpful and do you think there are any limitations?

Mr. Phillips: I'll start with the second part of the question first. Yes these events do have limitations because they are always vulnerable to the attack that these are grandstanding pop stars. But there is something different this time. First, Live 8 is about justice, not charity. It's entirely about the systemic issues and the political moment of the G8 summit and is not about fundraising. That is different from what has come before.

Secondly, it has a spine of a mobilised global society with millions of individuals campaigning for change. It will be a very powerful moment with campaigners demanding that political leaders take action, not demanding money from the people watching. It has also allowed the issue to be globalized, especially in many countries where development hasn't previously been a big issue. The arrival of Live 8 in the US will accelerate the agenda there for example.

That is very powerful and on a much bigger scale than we otherwise could expect.

IA-Forum: Thank you, Mr. Phillips.

Comments? Send them to: editor@ia-forum.org

