

Oxfam GB's Director, Barbara Stocking, answers questions on how the international community should tackle world poverty

Is the world taking poverty seriously enough?

In the aftermath of the tsunami disaster there has been an outpouring of generosity from rich and poor countries alike. The response has shown just what the international community is capable of when moved. But the world has a notoriously short attention span when it comes to helping people in poverty. Thirty thousand people die from preventable diseases every day - the equivalent of a man-made tsunami a week. Despite this, and despite a lot of rhetoric about the need to end unnecessary suffering, rich countries have not done enough to meet the UN's Millennium Development Goals, which include fewer infant deaths, universal primary education and lower HIV infection rates. The public have shown that they care about these issues and that they want their governments to act. But if the world fails to act to meet even these minimal goals, and current trends are allowed to continue, 45 million more children will die between now and 2015.

What are the most urgent issues that need to be addressed if trade is to be made a power for good?

If the developing countries gained a 1% greater share of world trade, 128 million people would be lifted out of poverty. With seven out of every ten people in the world's poorest countries employed on the land, agricultural reform is a key area. We especially need to stop the harmful dumping of rich country agricultural surpluses. The EU and US must live up to their promise to end export subsidies and reform trade distorting domestic support, so that farmers in rich countries stop overproducing and farmers in poor countries have a chance to trade their way out of poverty. The EU and US must also give better access to their markets for developing countries. For example, some of the world's poorest countries could make a lot of money from trading in sugar but they are currently denied the opportunity to sell their sugar to rich countries because of tariffs of over 300%. The next WTO Ministerial in Hong Kong at the end of this year will be key moment for rich countries to demonstrate their willingness to agree the necessary reforms to make trade to work for the poor.

Are the UN's Millennium Development Goals achievable?

The Millennium Development Goals were chosen precisely because they were realistic and achievable. Funding the Millennium Development Goals would incur relatively little financial cost to donors. But many rich countries continue to deliver little more than empty promises. Meeting the UN target of allocating just 0.7 per cent of national income to aid – a target set in 1970 – would generate \$120 billion, enough to meet the MDGs and other vital poverty-reduction goals. But only five of the 22 major donors – none of them from the seven most powerful nations (the G7) – are currently meeting that target. In relative terms, donor countries devote a pittance of their wealth to aid budgets. Current aid levels are far lower than those that have been repeatedly promised, and lower as a proportion of national income than ever before. Yet financing the MDG targets would cost less each year than the money that rich-country governments routinely spend on defence. It's not just about money. Aid can only be effective in reducing poverty if it is invested in the delivery of basic social services and economic growth with equity. Both of these need long term support for infrastructure and institutions like schools, hospitals and local government. Fairer trade and deeper debt relief are also necessary.

Does Gordon Brown's idea for a "new Marshall Plan" for Africa - encompassing debt, aid and trade - constitute a good basis of tackling poverty in developing nations?

More aid for developing countries is important, but Gordon Brown is right: we won't make poverty history in 2005 unless we also address the issues of unfair trade and debt. Poor countries need more and better aid, fairer trade rules and deeper debt relief. Oxfam wants rich countries to cancel 100 per cent of the debt of the poorest countries - both bilateral debt, and the debts owed to the World Bank and African Development Bank. We also want donors to provide at least \$50 billion in aid immediately, in addition to existing aid budgets, and set binding timetables in 2005 to ensure that the 0.7 per cent target is met in all donor countries by 2010. Finally, we want rich countries to end agricultural export dumping, reform domestic subsidies and provide better market access for poor countries, so that trade can fulfil its potential as a vehicle for poverty reduction.

The Doha round of trade talks was supposed to benefit developing nations but has made insufficient progress. Is the WTO a sound vehicle for future trade agreements that will work to eradicate poverty or an ineffectual talking shop?

The Doha round was launched in 2001 with the laudable ambition of reforming trade rules so that poor countries could benefit. It was meant to restore confidence in the WTO process after significant protests in Seattle, and it was meant to show that globalisation could work for poor countries. But progress has been dismal and trust is at an all time low. The blame for the failure lies squarely with rich countries who have used their disproportionate money and power, along with legal loopholes to dodge reforms that jeopardise their short-term self interest. The WTO has been so far unable to stop that from happening. But this does not mean that the WTO should be abandoned. Its multilateral, democratic structure is preferable to bilateral or regional trade deals where poor countries can have their arms twisted and end up agreeing to deals that won't benefit them. The WTO and its members must redouble their efforts to realise a pro-poor outcome of the Doha round. A new world trade agreement would lift millions out of poverty and it would also open the door for a sensible debate on WTO reform.

What role does business play in shaping world trade? What role, in your view, should it play?

Big business can do a lot to make trade fairer and help reduce poverty. The catchall phrase is corporate social responsibility (CSR) but I'm afraid that too many businesses sign up to this concept without looking very far under the surface to see what it's all really about. CSR must not be just another public relations tool. It must be about acknowledging the power that business has to harm or to help. Strong corporate lobbies can influence governments' trade policies and prevent reform that could help poor people – the coffee industry and big pharmaceutical firms are two examples where corporate power is keeping people poor and depriving them of treatment. Elsewhere, the pressure from big business to get goods into shops cheaply and quickly can lead to appalling conditions for workers in factories overseas. Business can and must do more to promote a global trading system where human rights and fairness are paramount and where corporate power is a force for good.