

Clue: A major city



a b c d e f g h i j k l m n o p q r s t u v w x y z

guardian.co.uk

Comment

Will this be the year we make a difference?

British charities have tried to say bollocks to poverty - but the need for international aid is greater than ever, writes Ken Burnett

Ken Burnett

Society Guardian, Thursday January 4 2007



Protesters march along Princes street in Edinburgh's Make Poverty History march. Photograph: Christopher Furlong/Getty

Each morning 11-year-old Winfred Akera, an orphan, gets up at 6am, sweeps and cleans her compound, then prepares whatever breakfast she can find for her younger brother and sister and their sick grandmother. She then goes to school, where - against overwhelming odds - she tries to learn, hoping that somehow she might break from poverty and get a better life.

To feed her family, Winfred works weekends and evenings for other people. She says, "I dig gardens and sometimes people give me raw beans and cassava. Due to being an orphan it is now left to me to do all this work. If I don't do it, it means we should not eat that day."

Despite being a star pupil, the odds are stacked against little Winfred. Though hopes are high for ending the senseless war that has ravaged her community in the north of Uganda, there's still too little support for children like her. So many teachers have been killed, abducted, or have died from Aids that class sizes in her school rarely fall below 150 and are often much higher. Teachers' leader Musa Eweru ironically points out that in such conditions teaching is more crowd management than education.

Seeing a typical classroom in northern Uganda is an experience not to be forgotten. Small bodies squeeze cross-legged against each other in the dirt, packing every inch of floor so that the struggling teacher can barely step amongst them. Ten children share one book and the failure rate, even among primary pupils, is as high as 90 per cent. The sea of eager, upturned faces is enough to melt any teacher's heart, yet what can even the most dedicated of teachers do in the face of such need?

Just when things should be getting better, they get worse. HIV infection rates in Uganda, once the star of Africa's fight against Aids, are rising again, thanks to cynical western interference. The strings attached to US government aid have effectively removed condoms from Uganda's highly successful ABC policy, which advocated abstaining, being faithful, or using a condom. President Bush has told Winfred's government that it must not offer free condoms, so infections increase. Thus rightwing American moralising and religious bigotry are condemning thousands, maybe millions of Ugandans, to the slow death of Aids.

Nor is this 11-year-old surrogate mother and carer likely to be helped much by the Commonwealth heads of government conference, which will be held in Uganda in November 2007 at a cost of £22million. This seems an obscenity when, like thousands of others, Winfred has to survive on the equivalent of 12 pence per day. Left outside the five-star hotels where Commonwealth leaders will gather, poor Ugandans will take a dim view of these events. As Amanda Serumaga, ActionAid's

director in Uganda, ruefully points out, the cost could cover annual salaries for more than 46,000 teachers, buy 4,213,483 mosquito nets, or supply 8,426 bore holes for access to clean water. Even in Uganda, Ms Serumaga says, the reference to common wealth is an insult.

The world has certainly failed Winfred and her family. If 2005 was to be the start of a global movement to end poverty, Winfred didn't see it. She's one of those millions of children let down early in 2006, when the steam went out of the hugely popular Make Poverty History campaign. Despite all the wishful thinking, chances of an acceptable life for the likes of Winfred have scarcely advanced. If anything, they're in retreat.

Western donors shouldn't tolerate this backward slide, but somehow we do. The charity ActionAid uses the slogan 'Bollocks to Poverty' very successfully to engage young people in the struggle, but until now it has considered the phrase too challenging for the sensitivities of grown-ups. Perhaps it's time to rethink that.

Such progress as Uganda has made in reducing poverty comes mainly from remittances home from Ugandans living abroad. Uganda's chances of achieving the fabled millennium development goals will depend on determined leadership and political commitment in Uganda. And relentless pressure and sustained practical solidarity from friends outside.

Ms Serumaga puts it strongly: "British citizens are now part of a global movement working at the grassroots to make poverty history. What's needed now is unwavering support and solidarity from all corners of the world around the belief that it's not only achievable but is a human right. If our collective argument is that poverty, inequality, injustice and exclusion are neither fate nor destiny but a denial of rights - dealing wealth to some and not to others - then we must question and challenge decisions and policies that only yield further poverty."

For Winfred's sake, the struggle to make poverty history should be seen not as nearly over, but as just beginning. Will it make progress in 2007? That will be up to us.

· Ken Burnett is a trustee of ActionAid International and BookAid International. He writes for SocietyGuardian.co.uk in a private capacity and the views expressed here are his own. He can be reached at www.kenburnett.com.

Related information follows Ads by Google

Ads by Google

125 Hotels in Edinburgh
Book your hotel in Edinburgh online Good availability and great rates!
www.booking.com/Edinburgh

Volunteer Uganda
Volunteer adventures in Uganda Help build schools, teach orphans.
www.benefactors.com

Zambia on Zambian Website
New & growing info portal on Zambia News, people, charities, maps, etc
www.Zambian.com

guardian.co.uk © Guardian News and Media Limited 2008