

UK International Development Policy: Addressing the Key Issues Progressively

Written by Jayne Forbes

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JAYNE FORBES, JAN 14 2008

Much of development has historically been directed by colonial powers and more recently by the neo-liberal consensus. This has led to a situation whereby developing countries have had little control over their own resources, policies, economies and futures.

Green Party policy is predicated on subsidiarity, sustainability and the concept of localisation. We strongly believe that countries should not be forced to undertake development paths contrary to their own interest. That they should not be forced into competing globally, selling their limited resources at a cut price. That they should be encouraged to develop policies which do not force them to depend on the so called 'free market' approach. That they should not be forced to sign up to unfavourable, Economic Partnership Agreements, through the WTO.

Climate Change

The developed world needs to recognise the importance of immediately reducing carbon emissions and the concomitant climate change. Climate change has a far greater negative impact on developing countries and yet they had no part in the creation of the problem. Therefore it is vital that the developed countries support developing countries in adapting to climate change.

Globalisation

The current consensus among rich countries' governments is in favour of ever freer international trade and the process called globalisation, which includes the free movement of capital (though not generally of labour) as well as goods and services. This form of globalisation raises profound issues of global equity and environmental sustainability.

Globalisation has led to the marginalisation of poor countries and of poorer people in the industrialised countries as the material gains from globalisation are mainly secured by the rich, especially in the northern countries, while the poorest people in the global south are getting still poorer. There is now a huge gulf between the majority of the world's people and an extremely rich and pampered global elite.

Poor countries struggle to gain access to markets in rich countries, while burdened with debt and forced to open up their own economies. The flood of their exports has reduced prices for the commodities on which they depend, accelerated environmental destruction and destroyed the livelihoods of many poor people. For hundreds of millions of people this has meant chronic hunger, and for many of them malnutrition and starvation.

For the environment, globalisation has meant increasing resource depletion and destruction, with a disproportionate share of the environmental damage, industrial pollution and vulnerability to climate change in the global south – especially as large parts of the global south, in particular India and China, are undergoing a rapid industrial revolution. There is a conflict between global economic equity – the legitimate aspiration to improve material standards of living – and environmental sustainability: the planet simply cannot provide for everyone to live at the

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standards of resource and energy consumption of the rich countries.

The primary economic aim of international policy must be to resolve this conflict between the legitimate need for material growth in the south and global environmental sustainability, and lead to greater fairness and equality between people in various parts of the world. The record of globalisation has been quite the opposite of this. The rich countries need to contract their material economies to the point where they use no more than their fair share of the planet's resources, while poor countries could expand their economies to the same point.

Green Party policies on international trade and finance are founded on the achievement of such an equitable and sustainable world: they amount to the achievement of our original economic objectives on a world scale.

Development must meet the needs of those alive at present without threatening poverty and vulnerability to those unborn. This means ensuring that everyone on the planet enjoys a livelihood that can be supported by the planet's resources, ecology and atmosphere. Poverty should be defined in terms of people's rights and not their monetary incomes.

Every country must be permitted the political space to make its own decisions about economic policy and strategy, while living within global environmental limits. For most countries, this has not been the case since the 1980s. Successful development cannot be imposed by powerful institutions outside a country but must be a learning process, in which participatory local, regional and national institutions are free to exercise political and economic self-determination. The task of global institutions should be to enable countries to make their own progress, and not prescribe the methods by which they may do so.

Debt

All foreign debts owed by countries officially defined as "Least Developed" should immediately be written off by concerted international action, as well as those of all other countries which need such support in order to meet their MDG targets. The British Government should take a strong international lead in pressing for this objective.

Trade

Each country and region should be more self-sufficient on both equity and sustainability grounds. Local supply of goods would be preferred. Poor countries have little prospect of improved material standards without international trade since they need to import goods they cannot make themselves and to do so must export other goods. Nevertheless, international trade is operated by the richest countries and the trans-national corporations (TNCs) for their own benefit. Trade is not fair or benign, nor mutually advantageous in all cases, and does not automatically benefit the poor. Freer trade has meant greater freedom for the TNCs to operate to their own advantage.

Policies will be supported which increase small-scale, local community import substitution, rather than export promotion, support local food growing in place of cash crops for the international market, and encourage forms of economic development which are consistent with the culture and aspirations of the people concerned – involving their effective participation in all areas of development and at all stages of decision-making.

Trade policies should fully encourage food and energy self-sufficiency in all countries. Every country should be sovereign over its policies for food and other essentials, as well as for energy supplies, including policies for bio-fuels.

The commodity markets should be radically reformed with a view to reversing the catastrophic decline in prices that has occurred under globalisation. The resulting loss of income for poor countries has seriously damaged their chances of successful economic development; this problem needs to be resolved if there is to be any progress towards economic justice and an end to poverty. Wherever feasible, international commodity supplies should be managed in order to avoid the accumulation of surpluses. Concentrations of corporate power on global supply chains also need to be systematically reduced. More widely, development strategies should move away from export orientation.

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Global institutions should support the development of regional and South-South trade in preference to global markets. They should support countries' integration processes that assure people's welfare and environmental sustainability. There should be an end to bilateral trade and investment agreements between rich countries (or groupings like the EU) that disadvantage poor countries.

International agreements on the environment, labour conditions and health must take precedence over any international rules on trade. Corporations should be required to abide by the environmental, labour and social laws of their own country and of the country in which they are operating – whichever are the more stringent.

Aid

Aid has often been conceived in a paternalistic and economically colonialist fashion. Instead of serving the needs of the poor in poor countries, it continues to be used by donors as a means of furthering political, economic or military objectives, including the promotion of business interests. The recent history of economic conditionality applied to aid flows, particularly under the so-called Washington Consensus and post-Washington Consensus, has been disastrous, in some cases decimating infant industries and public services, extending environmental degradation and entrenching poverty for millions of people.

Aid should be aimed at the poorest; should mobilise the poor; should be locally designed and managed; should be subject to local oversight and scrutiny; and should be specific to local communities and environments. Tied aid should remain illegal.

British aid should become 0.7 percent of Gross National Product (GNP) within five years and 1.0 percent of GNP within ten years. Emergency aid, aid to dependent territories and debt relief should be an addition to this.

***Jayne Forbes** is the UK Green Party's Spokesperson for Globalisation and International Development. She has been Chair of the World Development Movement, an organisation which campaigns to relieve poverty in developing countries, and Chair of Tourism Concern, which works to ensure sustainable development through tourism. In this comment piece for e-IR, she addresses some of the key issues in British International Development policy.*