

And still he stays silent

By hailing the failure of this summer's G8 summit as a success, Bob Geldof has betrayed the poor of Africa

Two months have not elapsed since the G8 summit, and already almost everything has turned to ashes. Even the crustiest sceptics have been shocked by the speed with which its promises have been broken.

It is true that they didn't amount to much. The World Development Movement described the agreement as "a disaster for the world's poor". ActionAid complained that "the G8 have completely failed to deliver trade justice". Christian Aid called July 8 "a sad day for poor people in Africa and all over the world". Oxfam lamented that "neither the necessary sense of urgency nor the historic potential of Gleneagles was grasped by the G8". But one man had a different view. Bob Geldof, who organised the Live 8 events, announced that "a great justice has been done ... On aid, 10 out of 10; on debt, eight out of 10 ... Mission accomplished frankly."

Had he not signed off like this, had he not gone on to describe a South African campaigner who had criticised the deal as "a disgrace", Geldof could have walked away from the summit unencumbered by further responsibility. He could have spent the rest of his life on holiday, and no one would have minded. But it was because he gave the G8 his seal of approval, because he told us, in effect, that we could all go home and stop worrying about Africa, that he now has a responsibility to speak out.

The uses to which a Geldof can be put are limited. Before the summit he was seen by campaigners as naive, ill-informed and unaccountable. But he can make public statements with the potential to embarrass politicians. While they don't usually rise

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above the “give us your fucking money” level, they do have the effect of capturing the attention of the press. But though almost everything he said he was fighting for has fallen apart, he has yet to tell the public.

Immediately after the summit, as the world’s attention shifted to the London bombs, Germany and Italy announced that they might not be able to meet the commitments they had just made, due to “budgetary constraints”. A week later, on July 15, the World Development Movement obtained leaked documents showing that four of the IMF’s European directors were trying to overturn the G8’s debt deal. Four days after that, Gordon Brown dropped a bombshell. He admitted that the aid package the G8 leaders had promised “includes the numbers for debt relief”. The extra money they had promised for aid and the extra money they had promised for debt relief were in fact one and the same.

Nine days after that, on July 28, the United States, which had appeared to give some ground at Gleneagles, announced a pact with Australia, China and India to undermine the Kyoto protocol on climate change. On August 2, leaked documents from the World Bank showed that the G8 had not in fact granted 100% debt relief to 18 countries, but had promised enough money only to write off their repayments for the next three years. On August 3, the United Nations revealed that only one-third of the money needed for famine relief in Niger and 14% of the money needed by Mali had been pledged by the rich nations. Some 5 million people in the western Sahel remained at risk of starvation.

Two weeks ago, we discovered that John Bolton, the new US ambassador to the United Nations, had proposed 750 amendments to the agreement that is meant to be concluded at next week’s UN summit. He was, in effect, striking out the millennium development goals on health, education and poverty relief, which the UN set in 2000. Yesterday, ActionAid released a report showing that the first of these goals – equal access to schooling for boys and girls by 2005 – has been missed in over 70 countries. “Africa,” it found, “is currently projected to miss every goal.” There is so little resolve at the UN to do anything about it that the summit could deliver “a worse outcome than the situation before the G8”. Yet Geldof remains silent.

“We are very critical of what Bob Geldof did during the G8 Summit,” Demba Moussa Dembele of the African Forum on Alternatives tells me. “He did it for his self-promotion. This is why he marginalised African singers, putting the limelight on himself and Bono, rather than on the issues. The objectives of the whole Live 8 campaign had little to do with poverty reduction in Africa. It was a scheme intended to project Geldof and Blair as humanitarian figures coming to the rescue of ‘poor and helpless’ Africans.”

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“Right from the beginning,” says Kofi Mawuli Klu of the Forum of African Human Rights Defenders, “he has acted in his own selfish interests. It was all about self-promotion, about usurping the place of Africans. His message was ‘shut up and watch me’. Without even understanding the root causes of the problems, he used his role to drown the voices of the African people and replace them with his own. There are many knowledgeable people – African and non-African – who could have advised him, but he has been on his own, ego-tripping.”

I have heard similar sentiments from every African campaigner I have spoken to. Bob Geldof is beginning to look like Mother Teresa or Joy Adamson. To the corporate press, and therefore to most of the public, he is a saint. Among those who know something about the issues, he is detested. Those other tabloid saints appeared to recognise that if they rattled the cages of the powerful, the newspapers upon which their public regard depended would turn against them. When there was a conflict between their public image and their cause, the image won. It seems to me that Geldof has played the same game.

He seized a campaign that commanded great public enthusiasm, that had the potential to gravely embarrass Tony Blair and George Bush. He asked us to focus not on the harm the G8 leaders were doing, but on the help they might give. When they failed to deliver, he praised them anyway. His endorsement and the public forgetfulness it prompted helped license them to start reversing their commitments. When they did so, he said nothing. This looks to me like more than just political naivety. It looks as if he is working for the other side.

I don't mean that this is what he intended – or intends – to do. I mean that he came to identify with the people he was supposed to be lobbying. By ensuring that the campaign was as much about him as about Africa, he ensured that if they failed, he failed. He needed a story with a happy ending.

There is just one thing Geldof can now do for Africa. This is to announce that his optimism was misplaced, that the mission was not accomplished, that the struggle for justice is as urgent as ever. But while he holds his tongue, he will remain the man who betrayed the poor.