



HeadsUp Forum # 25

www.HeadsUp.org.uk

Human Rights or Poverty? Should the UK only trade, send aid or money to countries with a good human rights record?

(April 14th – May 2nd 2008)

An online platform providing young people with a secure and structured space to discuss

Young people have strongly identified with the issue of human rights and poverty through their involvement in campaigns like Drop the Debt and Live 8. With this in mind and nearly three years on from the G8 summit in Gleneagles, HeadsUp wanted to explore what young people thought of the success of these campaigns and what still needed to be done.

Participants were appreciative of the dialogue with legislators who visited the debate. For most of the young people, this was the first time they had been in such discussions and the human rights debate gained expertise from the range of legislators taking part, including:

- **Shahid Malik MP** - Parliamentary Under-Secretary of State at DFID.
- **Meg Munn MP** - Parliamentary Under-Secretary of State at the FCO.
- **Lord Howell of Guildford** - Opposition Spokesperson for FCO.
- **David Lidington MP** - Shadow Minister for Foreign and Commonwealth Affairs.
- **David Howarth MP** – Shadow Justice Minister and Member of the Justice Select Committee

Senior Ministers, MPs, Peers, AMs and MSPs from all political parties continue to value HeadsUp as a useful forum to interact with young people on key issues. The HeadsUp team provide short, one-to-one online training sessions to all participating decision-makers.

Young people remain very keen and committed to HeadsUp as a unique opportunity to get their opinions heard by decision-makers. During this forum they posted comments both in and out of school hours - underlining how keen they are to use this resource, even giving up some of their spare time to keep on top of the debate as it developed.

In keeping with the youth participation agenda, a summary report outlining key findings and quotes is disseminated to interested parties, particularly legislators and government, enabling young people's voices to be heard by key decision-makers. The main objective of the site is not only to enable peer-to-peer deliberation on hot political issues, policies or events, but also to provide students with a means of informing themselves about the topic.

All HeadsUp Debates are supported by structured, student-centred background notes that include an overview of the key issues being debated, a comprehensive glossary and statistics package, plus summaries of arguments for and against specific issues.

11 to 18 year olds from across the UK took part in this Human Rights Debate. HeadsUp continues to attract new schools, teachers, and young people to register to take part in the debates.

The HeadsUp team would like to convey our thanks and appreciation to the legislators who gave up their time to participate in this debate. We would also like to extend an invitation to interested parties, particularly legislators and government, and interested NGOs, academics and journalists to respond to the findings.

Responses and requests for further information should be directed to:

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Human Rights or Poverty?

Forum Summary

**Does Britain interfere too much?
Does Britain spend too much in overseas aid?**

The UK spent £4.9 billion on overseas aid in 2007 and HeadsUp participants discussed whether this was too much or too little and whether the money was used in the right way. Meg Munn MP set the stage for the debate by setting out the Government's position:

The UK Government is committed to promoting human rights worldwide, and to ending poverty. We can't just do one or other: we must do both...

We have to do two things. We should encourage poor countries to live up to their human rights promises, ensuring that the law protects everyone, not just the rich. They have to make sure kids go to school and not into sweatshops. Importantly, they have to guarantee that people get access to food, water and basic health care.

But we also need to help these countries keep their promises. We do this through aid as well as through trade. We don't work alone; we achieve more by working with a range of international organisations with experience and expertise in human rights and development.

This sentiment was echoed by many users who felt that it was a moral obligation to play a part in helping other countries. One young participant put it succinctly:

I believe helping others in our world is the right thing to do. It is good to care for people not only in our families and community, but others that are in different countries also.

David Howarth MP was in full agreement:

The world is facing difficult times and we cannot be blind about it. Human rights are threatened in many places and we need to wonder why this is and what we can do about it. Young people can have tremendous power in influencing their own future and the future of children around the world. I wholeheartedly encourage them to speak out against poverty, abuse and violence.

This view was tempered by a belief that certain forms of overseas involvement could cause more harm than good, as summed up by this HeadsUp user:

I think that we shouldn't leave the countries that need us to suffer by themselves, however war and violence is not the answer. More people are getting hurt and killed than are being saved, Iraq has become a mess, and it seems as though we are to blame, even if we're not.

Conversely, a significant number of users felt that attention needed to be paid to domestic issues rather than assisting foreign countries, as indicated by these two comments:

I think the country should just concentrate on the things that are happening here, because until this country is sorted out, it is just being hypocritical to other countries telling them they have to do this, when there is enough bad things already going on here.

In Britain there's poverty and i think we need to sort this out before jumping to save the world. Adults and children are sleeping on the streets at night, and young girls are forced into prostitution. We do have charties and such working on these issues but we can do so much more to help.

The recent economic downturn was also mentioned by one user as a reason to be cautious about committing too much money overseas:

Although we are a powerful country we are going through a credit crunch and our economy is not stable. We need to address these problems before looking to help others.

Shahid Malik MP addressed these points directly:

One of the questions that (has been) raised a number of times in this forum (is), why when we have so many problems at home is the government investing so much time and effort abroad. This is a very reasonable question. There are two very important reasons why we give aid. Firstly as one of the richest countries in the world where every child has access to schooling and healthcare we have a moral responsibility to help people far less fortunate. For example in Uganda, aid made it possible for the Ugandan Government to provide free health care which doubled the number of children immunised, saving many lives.

Helping poorer counties is also in our own interests. Many of the problems which affect us, such as war and conflict, international crime, refugees, the trade in illegal drugs and the spread of diseases like HIV and AIDS, are caused or made worse by poverty in developing countries. Getting rid of poverty will make for a better world for everybody.

Lord Howell signalled a note of caution in warning that more aid doesn't necessarily help – it has to be spent in the correct way:

While we must do all we can to defeat poverty there is evidence that too much of the wrong sort aid, going to governments and officials, may actually discourage and paralyse development and enterprise in a society, and entrench the privileged few rather than helping the many.

So it has to be VERY selective to work. Just calling for more may do harm rather than good.

A concern was expressed that the countries helped by the UK could become too reliant on the UK and other donors:

I don't think Britain interferes. I believe that Britain only helps other countries by looking out for them. If we don't agree with a war our Country only helps the countries that are in need, like Afganistan. Although, it could be stated that our help only makes these countries rely on us, when one day, we may not be able to

help. Also, these problems are others, not ours, and we may only help because the problem concerns us too.

Shahid Malik MP again addressed this point directly:

This (aid dependence) is something that we worry about as well, but generally people and governments in poor countries don't want to rely on aid. They want help to solve the basic problems which will allow them to help themselves.

The way the UK and other Governments approaches "aid" has changed a lot over the years. Today it is about creating a partnership with another government. We do not tell them what to do.

Human Rights or Poverty?

Forum Summary

**Does aid work?
What's changed since Drop the Debt or Live 8?**

This forum thread dealt with young people's perspectives of the success of the large scale campaigns of recent years. Young people were heavily involved in these campaigns and HeadsUp attempted to get their views on what they thought the consequences of these campaigns had been.

This section of the forum saw some of the highest levels of activity as participants debated the merits of Live 8 at great length.

There was large scale agreement that the stated aims of Live 8 were positive, as shown by this young participant:

I think Live8 is a great way for people in the world to see how important issues are in the world but while having fun at the same time!

There was however a significant amount of scepticism about the result of the concert and some concern that money that was spent putting the concert on could have been better spent on aid. These HeadsUp users expressed their worries:

It just seems as though the publicity goes towards the acts at the events, it's all well and good saying that you're going to raise a load of money for the people that need it, but the British public (and the World) need to see where their money is going.

I do think that Live8 helped to bring the important issues into the media spotlight but it is concerning how much money was spent doing this. Surely the concerts could have still gone ahead without such a huge cost.

I think Live8 was quite a good idea but think about the amount of money spent on organising it and really that money could have done something too.

These views were countered by a number of participants who claimed the benefits by far outweighed the cost:

Yea but the money they spent organising it is no where near the amount they made from donations (millions).

i think that live8 is great and its helped the 'human rights' campaign dramatically. i still think, that as a country, we need to do more to help underprivileged people to gain the same access to simple aspects of everyday life that we also enjoy.

Nonetheless, there was also some scepticism about the motives for the acts who took part in Live 8:

The people who take part in Live8 are extremely hypocritical. Can you imagine the amount of money that could be made if all the rich stars just gave a small portion of their earnings? It would be enough to save a country. Also, the amount of money needed to end extreme world poverty is LESS than the USA's annual defence budget. However, giving this amount of aid would seriously mess up the world economy.

A number of participants also commented that Live 8 simplified the debate around overseas aid and not enough was made of the need to drop the debt:

The rich countries who are owed money by these poor countries should cancel the debts, and if this happens, money that is raised by events such as Live8 can actually be put towards the development of these countries. I do accept that the money owed to these "rich" countries is absolutely huge... I'm sure you would agree with me that the money owed is of a vast amount, so obviously these rich countries wouldn't agree to cancel the debts. They would be thinking, 'well, we are owed so much money it is only fair that the poor countries to give it back'. But they have got to ask themselves, 'millions and millions of people are living in poverty because we are reluctant to cancel their debts. Is this fair? Is this just? Is it O.K. to have many nations living in poverty, stuck in a crisis so that we can get our money back?' Of course it isn't fair! And anyway, these poor nations won't be able to pay back their debts so there is no economic gain for these rich countries. If these debts are cancelled, then these poor countries can start developing their country with the help of other countries to make them a better place.

My decision would be to lower the interest rate on this debt and let these countries slowly develop and sort themselves out. These countries have too many problems right now, like corruption, for us to give them more money so they should not be allowed to borrow money from us for a while

Others felt that some of their fellow HeadsUp participants were being too negative:

Come on, we all love sitting down in front of the telly, to watch a bit of the old magic that went when Top of the Pops went off air!!! And it's all for a good cause!

Shahid Malik MP's closing statement addressed the question about the effectiveness of aid directly and gave some tips to HeadsUp users who would like to continue their involvement in the debate:

I couldn't agree more that the British public need to see where their money is going and how it has helped the poor. All of the money spent by the UK Government to help poor countries is accounted for in the Department for International Development's Annual Report (see www.dfid.gov.uk). Our web page can also tell you more about who and how we are helping. Does aid work? Yes. We have many examples of where as a direct result of aid people's lives are better. In Mozambique for example, where 50% of the national income was provided by aid, poverty fell from 70% in 1996 to less than 55% in 2003.

I would really encourage you to find out more. As well as the DFID website, the websites of the many excellent NGOs (Action Aid, Save the Children, Oxfam, and

many others) are a good place to start. You could encourage your school to join the Global Schools Partnership which links schools in the UK with schools in developing countries (see www.britishcouncil.org/globalschools). You might want to volunteer to work in a developing country yourself. The UK's PLATFORM2 programme will send 2,500 young people between 18 and 25 to live and work in poor countries over the next 3 years. (See www.myplatform2.com).

Human Rights or Poverty?

Forum Summary

Should countries or sportspeople boycott the Beijing Olympics over its human rights record? What about playing against the Zimbabwe cricket team given Robert Mugabe's oppressive regime?

Debate around this issue centred largely on the participants' responses to the Olympic Torch protests in much of Europe. It proved a useful backdrop to discussion and provoked heartfelt debate amongst participants.

Lord Howell's comment on politics and sport marked a useful starting point for a complex debate:

Sport and politics should be kept as far apart as possible, but there are limits to this maxim and it requires very careful judgment to decide when those limits have been reached. Generally, dialogue and contact do much more good than stand-offs and isolation. But again it is not clear-cut. Contact with nasty regimes may merely bolster them.

This complexity was reflected by the range of opinions put forward. These participants felt very strongly that the UK government should not have allowed China to have a leg of the Olympic relay in London:

Britain should not have allowed the relay to come here. China is using it to make it appear more of an open, welcoming and democratic state, but the fact is that all the protests have brought China and Tibet into the spotlight all around the world. This attention should be exploited by Western governments - it should be relatively easy right now to put immense pressure on China. The UN and Britain should change their callous attitudes- we need to become more involved in world affairs and stand up against injustice. Gordon Brown's total protest against China is not to touch the flame and not to go to the opening ceremony. What's that going to achieve? Nothing- except for perhaps more Chinese military crackdowns on the Tibetans.

I believe that any countries who think that what China is doing is wrong should boycott the olympics. This would show that we are serious about human rights and are actually going to do something about it.

Many participants felt that a strong message sometimes needs to be sent:

I think that the olympics should be boycotted because once China knows that it does not have any support it will have to do something about the appalling lack of human rights. However I do think that it is unfair on all the athletes. China should not have been allowed to do it in the first place because many people knew at the time that human rights in China were terrible and I find it unfair to boycott them this late on but if it is the only way that the Chinese government will do something about the human rights then we should boycott them

The debate was well balanced as many participants took the opposite view and felt that a boycott would be a bad solution:

i think that boycotting the games would just be cowardly, it would be like saying we recognise the problem but we're not going to do anything about it, just avoid it. I think if people or countries feel strongly about it then the best way forward is through talks with the chinese government or declare war, after all thats what our government seems to do in every other situation. Why is it justified to go to war in Iraq to get rid of an oppressive government but not acceptable to do the same with China? Also, the Olympics are supposed to be about bringing countries together to have fun and celebrate our talents, if some people boycott the games and some don't this could lead to lots of arguements, i.e. if England decided to boycott the games but our allies such as the US didn't support us, then the friendship between our two countries could be badly damaged. To solve this, a unanimous descision should be reached although there will always be people who disagree with the final decision.

The need to keep sport and politics separate, as mentioned by Lord Howell, was supported by many:

Yes, definately sport is used as a "political pawn". People who deny this have obviously not read the rest of this discussion, because isnt that exactly what is happening with olympics 08? In my opinion, sport should be for the unity of countries not to seperate them and if we boycotted the games, we would be attempting to separate China from our world unity.

the olympics has been a long standing tradtion for centuries. there is no chance we could stop the games but i do agree we must do something about the human rights record. it is wrong but i am sure there is a better way of changing china's ways than stopping one of the biggest events in the world that only comes about every four years.

This difficult line between politics and sport was discussed at length:

I believe that we should not boycott the beijing olympics due to the fact the in retaliation they will only take revenge on london 2012. The issue between sport and politics should be apart evn though it is a seriuos issue about human rights. Maybe a democratic vote should be called.

No communist country should b given the olympics, the Chinese government have tight internet restrictions and no free speech. The Chinese were learning how to give a smile and a wave to welcome the other countries for the olympics!!!!!!!

i think the olympics should go on however what is happening in tibet and china is wrong. I think a peaceful protest of some sort should take place but, at the same time the olypics is one of our most treasured universally cultural events and it is wrong to stain its rich history in this way. I beleive that china should be stripped of the olympics and it be held elsewhere, until they can prove that they themselves show the respect and unity the olympic rings symbol.

A fair amount of debate centred on the tactics used by the protestors, as shown by these contrasting viewpoints:

I admire those who were protesting against Beijing taking over Tibet and treating them unfairly, but to interrupt the Olympic Torch event, an event that everyone has been looking forward to and enjoys, was just unreasonable. They could have kept their protesting to the sidelines, rather than try to disrupt something that has been around for decades.

I believe that the protesters are doing is silly. What I mean by what they are doing, I mean using violence. They can shout out loud about there beliefs, but to use violence is stupid. I admit the police are fighting, but trying to grab the torch? What is the point?

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Forum Summary

Is the EU the right place to produce trade sanctions against oppressive regimes? Are there any negatives to sanctions?

The final thread of discussion focused on what practical steps are useful in helping to encourage oppressive regimes to reform. This thread didn't receive the traffic that the others did possibly due to the amount of discussion around similar issues in the previous thread on China and the Olympics.

Lord Howell sounded a note of caution around sanctions and their desired effect:

(Sanctions), can backfire. Sanctions from one direction can create loopholes in others, and outside pressures can actually stimulate internal energies and improvisation, and strengthen a country's resolve to defy the world. .

Many HeadsUp participants were mindful of the unintended consequences of sanctions:

well...I think that there are many bad things to sanctions because like if da kids are dying...then it has to stoppage.

Others were more robust:

sometimes powerful aggressive nations can just ignore sanctions - they need to be stronger!

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Conclusions:

The UK needs to help but be careful how it distributes aid
Aid does work but the impact of Live 8 was doubted
Sport and politics is a confusing mix
Sanctions need to be applied carefully

Young people involved in this debate came to the following conclusions:

Participants felt that the UK needs to help foreign countries be careful about how it distributes aid. There needs to be accountability for how the aid is used so it makes a real difference.

Aid does work but the impact of Live 8 was doubted. The majority of participants felt that aid can do a lot of good but it must be used in the right way. Live 8 was seen as a positive event but it didn't make the difference people had hoped for.

Sport and politics is a confusing mix. Many participants felt that people were right to protest against China but felt such issues are better dealt with on a national level.

Sanctions need to be applied carefully. In order to avoid unintended consequences, the UK must be careful with how it applies sanctions.

The range of enthusiastic and relevant legislators taking part online during all three weeks gave the debate added momentum and a stamp of parliamentary approval from the young people's collective viewpoint.

Human Rights or Poverty? was a particularly topical issue for a HeadsUp Forum and therefore one that was welcomed by young people who participated alongside MPs from across the political spectrum. It provided a secure, structured but non-sanitised platform for young people to voice their perspectives on many aspects of human rights.