

Labour's international development policy: internationalism, globalisation, and gender

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Kate Osamor, *A world for the many not the few. The Labour Party's vision for international development* Labour Party 2018.

In March 2018, Kate Osamor, then Shadow Secretary of State for International Development, launched the Labour policy paper *A world for the many not the few*, setting out a future for Britain's aid policy under a Corbynite government. The document is remarkable for a number of reasons: firstly, its conception of Britain's role in the world; secondly, its framing of aid and development policies and the purpose of these policies; and thirdly, its repeated and explicit invocation of a feminist approach to aid and development. This explicit engagement with feminist politics in a field which has been so shaped by patriarchal structures is welcome; but Labour could do with a more critical engagement with the long legacies of imperialism in British policies and the complicated history of the party's own role in this imperial history.

In this policy paper, Labour sets out a socialist internationalist approach to aid: rather than emphasising markets and economic globalisation, instead the world is presented as interconnected through shared rights, needs, duties and responsibilities. The concerns of the developing world are presented as important, in part, because Britain is part of a 'single, interconnected system'; the threats of 'inequality and ecological breakdown' affect 'us all', regardless of where in the world they occur (p10). There is also a strong sense of Britain's moral duty to those beyond its borders, drawing on a universalist conception of the value of human life. The report argues that Britain should, therefore, aspire to be a nation that 'looks outward and is forward thinking' (p12), although how Brexit would impact on this aid policy is somewhat underdeveloped; the UK, for example, is currently the second biggest recipient of EU grants to civil society organisations (CSOs), many of which work to reach out beyond borders.

A world for the many attempts to build a fundamental sense of identification with and solidarity with people in the developing world, claiming that 'what people need and want in the UK, people need and want everywhere': from 'basic needs' like alleviating hunger, to job security, access to free healthcare and education. This draws on non-governmental organisation (NGO) and CSO language, which has long focused on a rights-based approach to aid and development. However, the statement that 'around the world, our needs, our rights and our struggles to achieve them are one and the same' risks downplaying the disparity in human rights and access to basic resources around the world. People's needs might be the same everywhere, but some groups of people are orders of magnitude further away from fulfilling those needs than most people in advanced capitalist countries are.

As well as this rights-based approach, *A world for the many* states early on that 'poverty, hunger, inequality, injustice and climate change are not natural'. This stands in contrast to the de-politicisation of humanitarian crises that often shapes aid and development policy; instead, Labour here is clear that these problems are 'human-made' (p9). The de-politicisation of humanitarian crises – the presentation, for example, of the 1983-5 Ethiopian famine as simply caused by food shortages rather than being the result of a decade of civil war and human rights abuses – is a historic trend in British aid and development policy. This tendency has been encouraged by two factors: firstly, the British government is usually unwilling to recognise crises in the developing world as being rooted in global, historic, systemic inequalities in which the British state has been complicit. Since decolonisation, there has been a particular tendency for Britain to imagine the global south, and especially Africa, as lawless, tribal and suffering – a hopeless, helpless continent – in order to avoid critically considering the long-term effects of colonialism. In turn, a second, associated, factor is that this rhetoric has often been embraced by NGOs. This is partly because it creates a short-term sympathy for the plight of suffering people, but also because it enables them to avoid the charge of themselves being 'political' in their campaigns, which is necessary because British conceptions of 'charity' are built on the idea that charity should be 'apolitical'.

So while constructing our problems as 'human-made' might sound gloomy, in fact this vision is not only accurate but also fundamentally optimistic. Labelling problems as political means that they are also 'avoidable' (p9). Crises illuminate just how interconnected our planet is, but this very interconnectedness means that Britain can have a hand in a 'transition to a fairer and more sustainable global system', building an international community that is 'united across borders in solidarity' (p13). Again, though, the question of Brexit hangs over the report here.

These are laudable aspirations, and it certainly may be possible to achieve them outside the EU; but an international community requires institutions, and Labour needs to have a clear idea of how it would engage with and work to shape supranational and international organisations – the EU among them – in government.

This is a policy paper with a clear sense of history, but on occasion it skirts around some of the historical complexities. *A world for the many* claims that Labour has ‘always been the party of international social justice’ (p5); it is true that this framing sits at the heart of the Labour Party’s identity, and many Labour members are motivated by a belief that their party has a transnational, as well as a national, claim to progressive values and transformative policies. But this is necessarily a vague claim. Later on, we are told that Labour ‘stood in solidarity with Indian independence’ and ‘supported the anti-apartheid struggle in South Africa’ (p11). But both of these arguments skim over complex realities.

Labour was, of course, the party in power during the eventual decolonisation of the Indian colonial state, but that process was well underway by the time that Attlee took power in 1945; Labour was just as implicated in colonial rule as the Conservatives, and many members of the Labour Party and the wider labour movement supported colonialism, sometimes from very similar motivations to those on the right. Many within the Labour Party and movement justified support for Empire by reference to the supposedly improved conditions afforded to British workers by the imperial economy, evidence of a perennial economic strand in Labour’s thinking that often trumped putative internationalism. Likewise, whilst many within the Labour Party (including, of course, Corbyn) campaigned against apartheid in South Africa, and the Wilson government was elected with a public commitment to stop selling arms to the apartheid government, that did not stop Britain from fulfilling a large order of aircraft from the South African navy less than two months after Wilson came into office in 1964. In other words, Labour’s historic engagement with empire, decolonisation and the global south is just as complex and – often – shaming as that of other British political parties.

The other striking historical element in the policy document is its invocation of 1997 as a ‘radical and revolutionary’ moment (p11). The creation of the Department for International Development (DFID) was a manifesto pledge in 1997, one of the first actions of the Blair government, and it underpinned a consistent focus on aid and development. This formed part of the Blair government’s ‘ethical foreign policy’, which is invoked as well in *A world for the many* (p15) – although in fact Robin Cook actually called for nothing stronger than a foreign policy that had ‘an ethical dimension’. It is striking to see this history

celebrated here without the sounding of any critical notes; as such, this is part of the Blair legacy that can still be embraced by Corbynites.

It is also striking that the party's memory is relatively short here: why is 1997 being celebrated, and not 1964 – the moment that Labour took the decision to include a Ministry of Overseas Development (ODM) in their manifesto, the first government department dedicated to aid and development policies overseas and not merely within the British colonial world? The ODM was headed by Barbara Castle for its first year, and built on her own radical support for the anti-apartheid movement, her role in exposing the Kenyan Hola Camp massacre in Westminster, and her connections to newly independent governments and NGOs (her brother, Jimmy Betts, was the Oxfam country director in Tanzania). As early as 1964, the Labour Party made a manifesto pledge to spend 1 per cent of GDP on aid. The ODM did not survive the Heath government of 1970, and the ministry was rolled into the Foreign Office (FO), aid and development becoming only one element in a toolbox of British foreign policy. This pattern, of aid administered independently under Labour but as part of the FO under the Conservatives, continued until 2010, when DFID survived under the coalition government, although many Conservative MPs would still like to see it returned to the FO. Labour's historical memory could stand to be much longer and deeper when thinking about aid policy and about colonialism.

Even though DFID has survived since 2010, as *A world for the many* points out, Conservative aid policy has consistently been distinctly right-wing. Since 2015, aid spending has increasingly focused on recipients or programmes connected to other British strategic or economic concerns, with an increasing impetus for the 0.7 per cent overseas development assistance (ODA) target to be spent outside DFID. (In fact, this is a formal policy – there is a Conservative pledge in place for 30 per cent of the ODA to be spent outside DFID by 2020.) Initiatives like the Conflict, Stability and Security Fund (CSSF) have increasingly funnelled aid toward securitised and militarised approaches to conflict and instability around the world. Conservative policy has presented aid merely as 'charity' rather than 'social justice', leading to a 'sticking plaster' approach rather than a focus on systemic change (pp11-12). And the 'toxic interaction between the right-wing media' and 'successive Secretaries of State who barely believed in the transformative project they were supposed to be leading' has created a Conservative approach to aid focused solely on evaluating aid spending based on 'value for money' (pp12, 32). These criticisms are hard to refute. The Conservative approach to aid is grounded in twin impulses: a reluctance to see aid spending as a transformative mechanism, and a refusal to see it as a moral duty (with a corresponding desire to cut it).

Labour, by contrast, sets out two key elements of its framework for aid and development. Firstly, *A world for the many* insists on the need to focus on inequality as much as poverty, foregrounding structural problems and systemic oppressions as targets of British aid policy. This pragmatic approach would enable not only a more radical, but also a more coherent aid policy, not least because it would go some way to solving the Indian ‘space programme’ problem – what should donor nations do about aid spending when recipient nations move from low to middle income status (and develop things like space programmes), but continue to suffer from many of the economic problems that are the target of aid and development programmes (p28)? Focusing on inequality, rather than poverty alone, enables Britain and other donor nations and organisations to continue their relationships with these countries. A focus on inequality would also allow DFID to look beyond the material, to explore inequalities in power, or voice, or access to influence on global policy. It also problematises Britain’s relationship with organisations like the IMF and the World Bank, which have been repeatedly criticised for their response to economic instability or crisis in developing nations. *A world for the many* says that Labour will use British influence to push these organisations to ‘take action on inequality’ (p16) and promote ‘reform and democratisation’ within these and other international partners (p19); it is tempting, though, to ask how, exactly, Labour will go about doing this.

The second broad framework for aid policy laid out here is the commitment to a feminist aid policy, as part of a feminist foreign policy. This will be launched within the first 100 days of a Corbyn government (p35). The focus on a feminist approach to aid and development is striking, not least because of the various iterations of scandal and disgrace that the #MeToo movement has uncovered in the aid sector in recent months. *A world for the many* asserts that the struggle for gender equality ‘is not going far enough, fast enough’ (p20). Previous governments have, again, focused too much on isolated issues such as child marriage or FGM, without situating these problems within a broader systemic approach; Labour would build an explicitly feminist policy on the principles ‘gender justice, rights, intersectionality and solidarity’ (p20). Perhaps it shouldn’t be striking or unusual to see ‘patriarchy’ explicitly identified within a policy paper, but this feels like the most radical element of *A world for the many*; foregrounding not only the rights of women, but also a structural understanding of gender inequality and oppression within aid and foreign policy, would be a genuine break with Britain’s foreign policy history. *A world for the many* has some concrete ideas for how this would work – increasing support for grassroots women’s organisations, focusing DFID’s technical assistance on programmes that reduce gender inequality, and centring gender within the evaluative structures for aid and development spend-

ing. The very principle – that aid and development, as well as foreign policy more generally, should operate from a feminist perspective – is in itself powerful and potentially transformative.

Overall, this is a refreshing document which builds on Labour's core principles and develops a coherent aid policy. The twin focuses on inequality and feminism build on some of the critical conversations currently happening in the aid, development and humanitarian sectors, and situate the Labour Party within a progressive and transformative approach to international aid. It would be good to see a more thoughtful and critical engagement with Labour's, as well as Britain's, history of intervention in the developing world, and a more explicit engagement with the legacies of British colonial rule, in which Labour was as complicit as other political parties. It remains to be seen how the realities of a post-Brexit political context would impact on this approach, and how Labour would enact some of its more ambitious policies and targets. But *A world for the many* provides the aid and development sector with a lot of food for thought.

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