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Comment

Three little words

As the leaders of the UK's Make Poverty History campaign prepare for a key meeting next week, Ken Burnett assesses the impact of the slogan that could change the world

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"Like slavery and apartheid, poverty is not inevitable." Photograph: David Cheskin/PA

The ambitious proposition explicit in the Make Poverty History campaign may not yet have succeeded in changing political agendas, far less in eradicating poverty. But it has certainly captured the public's hearts and minds.

In record time Make Poverty History has become a bigger brand than all the individual charities and development agencies put together. After less than one year it has evolved into the biggest cause-related branding success ever, with 85% name recognition and more than 8m white bands sold.

Sensing a changed reality, the media now treat the poor and their stories with a new respect. Make Poverty History has stimulated an appetite for change and a belief that change is possible. Plus it's transformed grinding poverty from something whispered in shame into arguably the hottest media topic of our time. Well ... perhaps after a political leadership contest, or the war in Iraq.

But the campaign will have to work hard to maintain the commitment of its supporters if, as time passes, it should for any reason appear to be stalling or failing to deliver on its huge aspiration. Make Poverty History could be the three most powerful words in the world, or it could turn out to be just an empty slogan. Or worse - having raised expectations it might see them dashed to oblivion, setting the cause back years as, in our complacency, we slide back into accepting the biblical dictate that The Poor will be with us always.

Ending poverty was clearly never going to be quick or easy, yet we now believe that it is possible. But if the UN's eight development goals for 2015 are seen to falter, billions of poor people will be condemned to continue living as they do today, in conditions the world has now judged as patently unacceptable. The world's poor people would surely find such failure incomprehensible.

United approach

So how can it be that, instead of redoubling their efforts, the coalition of good causes behind this remarkable campaign appears to be starting 2006 by packing up and moving on to new agendas? Why are African and Asian campaigners concerned that there may be moves afoot to dilute and sideline the MPH message, that individual charities might be seeking to shift the focus, to give their brands prominence instead? Perhaps in time all campaigners get nobbled or lose their fizz. But surely not in a cause as huge as this? To avoid descending into irrelevance, many are convinced that the Make Poverty History Campaign needs a united approach more than ever.

"The public's enthusiasm for MPH has surprised everyone," says Ezra Mbogori, executive director of MWENGO, the influential Zimbabwe-based non-governmental organisation that functions as Southern Africa hub for the Global Call to Action Against Poverty (G-Cap).

"We need to capitalise on that. Now is not the time to hesitate. We're only just beginning to build grassroots mobilisation in Africa. We can't let the opportunity to keep poverty on the front burner slip away. This is one of those moments when we all have to stand together."

Ramesh Singh, chief executive of ActionAid International, based in Johannesburg, echoes the concerns and disappointment of many southern partners. "Expectations have been raised," he claims, "and the job is not yet done."

His sentiments are shared by Kumi Naidoo, secretary general of Civicus and chair of G-Cap, and others. But the coordinator of the UK MPH coalition, the umbrella group Bond, is anxious to allay any concerns,

"Fragmentation is not what's going on," claims Bond's Richard Bennett. "We have no intention now of lowering the pressure. Just because the campaign is ending, it's not the end of the game."

Three goals

This seems reassuring, if a little confusing. But Bennett explains that from the outset MPH was conceived as a time-limited campaign with just three goals:

- Ensuring significant policy change in 2005
- Creating a climate in which further policy change is inevitable
- Generating a step change in the level of public support.

How much of point one was achieved is arguable. But if two is to have any chance of success, three has to be sustained, even augmented. But will that happen without continuing the unified campaign, under its great slogan?

"Last year a unique combination of circumstances meant the world's focus was on the UK. It's time now for us to return the favour," says Mr Bennett, "and work in solidarity with the global campaign."

Whether or not his coalition members are equally committed remains to be seen, particularly the big charities with big brands of their own that need nurturing and which might be eyeing MPH's 2005 achievements enviously.

Views on just how much policy change was actually achieved in 2005 still seem divided between Bob Geldof's triumphal "mission accomplished" claims post Gleneagles and Kumi Naidoo's response at the time that "the people have roared but the G8 has whispered". But to portray MPH as just another campaign milestone would be unfair, and would do scant justice to the huge amount of work, energy, passion, sacrifice and commitment that made 2005 a most extraordinary year of achievement in the fight against poverty.

Mission not yet accomplished

Nevertheless, the goal is far from reached. And the campaign's very success should perhaps be causing its originators to rethink, to extend their original timeframe and capitalise on current momentum.

Concerns about where next for Make Poverty History in Britain often go hand in hand with claims that Oxfam's recent I'm in TV commercials cleverly trade on the awareness and goodwill generated by MPH yet fail to use the phrase even once.

Adrian Lovett is Oxfam's campaigns director and, for the last 15 months, project director of its role in MPH. He feels Oxfam has been very loyal to the coalition and has no intention now of abandoning the rallying cry. Stressing Oxfam's mission is to overcome poverty not just mitigate or assuage it, he claims to be deadly serious about keeping up the momentum. "We want to see that slogan become a reality," he says.

'2005 changed everything'

So why doesn't their I'm in ad campaign mention MPH? "We're not allowed to use the phrase in a TV commercial, because it's been judged to be political. But be assured Oxfam will continue to support using Make Poverty History as a banner. It does appear, in some of our press ads," he explains. Mr Lovett vigorously dismisses notions of back-peddalling. "Anyone who thinks 2006 can mean a return to 'business as usual' in the campaign to end poverty has got it wrong. 2005 changed everything. We have established a new ambition and a new determination and we can't go back." Which is reassuring. But one sure thing is that public interest doesn't extend to this kind of detail and has moved on since 2005.

In the cafes and bars that I sit in people are not loudly debating the G8 outcomes or which agency is campaigning on what sub-issue. They're not interested in the agendas of individual coalition

members. They're not even debating that people might just be daft enough to imagine that they really could make poverty history. Remarkably, they seem to have accepted that. They've bought the idea that, as Nelson Mandela put it, like slavery and apartheid, poverty is not inevitable and can be brought to an end. For them, the question is "When?"

What's needed now is leadership, belief and concrete things supporters can do. So surely, for its founder organisations, everything else is just "stuff to do"? The rest of their agendas should be subordinated to making this one dream a reality. No one doubts that the struggle against poverty will be shorter and surer if all components work together, rather than if each decides to focus on doing their own thing.

So what happens now to the white band we've worn day in day out these last 12 months? We've eaten with it, slept with it, swum with it, it's never been off our wrists. Is it now time for a change?

I think not. We must continue wearing it until our goal is reached. Poverty now can become history. But only if all those dedicated to the cause keep it as top priority, explicit in the banner beneath which they have all united.

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