

Bob Geldof at Helsinki seminar: poverty can be eliminated only through trade

Musician and Third World advocate addresses business seminar in Helsinki

Rock musician **Bob Geldof**, a renowned as an advocate of the poor in Africa, was in Helsinki on Tuesday to speak about corporate responsibility to executives in a special event organised by *Helsingin Sanomat* and the development cooperation organisation *Plan*.

"Business goes to wherever there is business", Geldof told *Helsingin Sanomat* before the seminar. He backed up his views with a long list of figures.

Whereas the developing world needs direct foreign investment of about 40 per cent, the figure in Africa is generally two to three per cent. "If we exclude investments into the mining industry, the figure is 0.5 per cent", Geldof says.

"The situation is tragic."



Bob Geldof

Poverty can be eliminated only with the help of trade, Geldof says. In his view, products from the developing world should be given better access to the markets of the West, and African countries should be allowed to refine their own raw materials, so that the value of their foreign trade might grow. The support that Western countries give to their own industries distort trade, and Geldof feels that they should be eliminated.

"Europe absolutely needs African products. For instance, we must not be dependent on Russian energy: it would be political suicide."

Geldof emphasises that Africans have not caused global warming and the massive problems that result from it. He feels that it is a "cosmic injustice" that global warming affects Africa disproportionately, as the poorest have hardly any means of protection, as climate change chases millions of people from their homes.

Geldof emphasises that developed countries must not use the climate issue to block the development in the poorest countries.

Bob Geldof appeals to the selfish motivations of potential aid-givers. "Tourists at Spanish holiday destinations favoured by Finland as well come face to face with African refugees", Geldof points out. "Many of them die on our shores. If we want to prevent social upheaval in Europe, we must help the Africans stabilise their conditions and to get their economy onto a stable foundation."

Geldof does not declare himself to be an optimist, or a pessimist.:

"I am a pragmatist. I have a very practical attitude toward things", he says. "If one thinks consistently and logically, one understands that globalisation is an organic economic model. In 40 years at the latest, if not before, Africa will be linked up with the world's economic network."

At Tuesday's seminar invited guests discussed matters including whether or not a successful company can afford to show responsibility.

Geldof pointed out in his presentation, that more than ten million Chinese - one per cent of the population - will be lifted out of poverty because of trade. Strong economic growth is also helping people in Mexico and Brazil get out of poverty.

Geldof emphasised the importance of individual rights such as democracy and equality. However, he feels that there is no point telling a child living in abject poverty about such rights, if the child's main concern is whether or not he or she gets enough to eat this evening.

He was especially critical of the agricultural subsidies paid by rich countries. He noted that cattle farmers in Finland get about 2.5 US dollars a day in EU agricultural subsidies, which would be a large sum in the poor countries.

He expressed amazement at the high taxes paid in EU countries, where the money is then used to boost surplus production of agricultural goods.

Music also has an important significance in the fight against poverty. In Britain the punk movement was both a musical style and a way to tell those in power about unsatisfactory conditions.

Since the 1980s Bob Geldof has been active in promoting the cause of the poor and hungry in Africa.

Geldof said on Tuesday that the previous time that he was in Finland, he spent a night in a police jail. This time, he had no such problems - "I understand that corruption is at a very high level in Finland", he said, to the amusement of his audience.