

# AIDS, Slaves and Geo-engineering

**S**outh African President Thabo Mbeki has offended many researchers and activists by his unorthodox views about the AIDS epidemic. I do not defend Mbeki's assertion that transmission of the virus is not an essential cause for AIDS, but I do support this claim that malnutrition and, especially, extreme poverty are root causes of the African AIDS epidemic. It is misleading to claim that epidemics have a single cause. Each cause itself has a cause or a web of causes. The AIDS epidemic is dependent on many factors, including behaviour, knowledge, education, attitudes and the availability and affordability of medication and medical advice. In the early days of HIV transmission, ignorance of its mechanisms was not associated with poverty. This is no longer the case.

## Underpinning poverty

Although poverty is neither necessary nor sufficient for an individual to contract HIV infection or AIDS, it probably is necessary for an epidemic on the scale currently witnessed in sub-Saharan Africa. The factors that underpin poverty in less developed countries are similarly complex. In addition to epidemic disease, they include chronic national debt, unfair trade, corruption in the North and South, the cost of arms purchases and the consequences of chronic conflict. Economic models of development are conceptually flawed, undermined by forces in favour of continued inequality and inadequately funded.

Butler, CD, 'HIV and AIDS, poverty, and causation,' *the Lancet*, 2000; **356**: 1446-7; *Brit.J.Gen.Pract.*, 2000, **50**:844.

## Geo-engineering

**G**eo-engineering is becoming a fashionable suggestion to repair the planet, including reversing global warming. One possible method is to fertilise the

Southern Ocean with the trace element iron, to encourage the growth of plankton and enable a drawdown of atmospheric carbon into the deep ocean. But the practicality of this has not yet been demonstrated and adverse effects are likely. The enormous scale required further erodes reliance on geo-engineering solutions.

Chisolm, SW, *Nature* 2000; **407**:685-7.

## Disposable people

**T**his term refers not to plastic dolls but to individuals like you and me. Kevin Bales, who grew up in the American South, now works at a UK university. Under cover he interviewed enslaved water carriers in the desert West African country Mauritania, bonded farm labourers who inherit their debt in the Indian state of Uttar Pradesh, charcoal makers in Brazil and prostitutes in Thailand. Bales distinguishes old from new slavery. In old slavery, for example in the US until the Civil War and in Brazil until 1888, slaves were an investment. A high purchase price and economic incentives encouraged owners to maintain slaves as if they were machines.

New slavery seems even worse. Overpopulation and mechanization have led to a global oversupply of low-skilled labour. Consequently, the price of new slaves is low, and there is little incentive to look after their health. When they wear out they are simply discarded. Bales conservatively estimates a minimum of 27 million slaves worldwide, mostly in the Indian subcontinent.

Bales notes that illiteracy and lack of resources leave people particularly vulnerable to exploitation. Innumerate bonded labourers cannot check the interest calculations used by their owners to keep them perpetual prisoners. Others sign documents they cannot read. Recruiters lure Brazilian charcoal makers with glib promises of free food and travel to remote jungle camps, then subsequently inform them

that they cannot leave before repaying transportation costs. Tragically, a sense of honor helps to entrap some of these workers.

Bales, Kevin (1999), *Disposable People, New slavery in the global economy*, Univ. California Berkeley. See also: Anti-Slavery International.

## Protesting globalization

**A**de facto coalition has emerged among trade unionists, environmentalists and Western aid and religious groups (mainly Christian) opposed to massive Third World debt. The Jubilee movement calls for debt forgiveness. If managed correctly, this would certainly help the Third World. Many trade unionists call for the re-erection of tariff barriers. Unfortunately, such a policy would hurt Third World exporters. Supporters of free trade use these contradictions as evidence of their opponents' incoherence.

## Elastic globalization

They have a point. The term 'globalization' is very elastic. The Jubilee movement, trade unionists and the environmental movement are right to protest. They share a common recognition that the powerless are being exploited, but each champions a different population. Jubilee's principal concern is the world's poorest people. Trade unionists care mainly for blue collar workers in developed countries; environmentalists care for nature. None have proposed a solution that assists all three populations. Such a solution — based on sharing, patience and sacrifice — may exist, but these principles seem insufficiently sexy to market. Who wants to be a martyr in a culture where the advertising industry relentlessly promotes a culture of waste and consumerism?

Nevertheless, this movement has made a mark. The bland reassurance of TINA ('there is no alternative') to globalization no longer carries the same certainty.

[www.jubilee2000uk.org/](http://www.jubilee2000uk.org/)