

## Labour sets out to overhaul neo-colonial development policy



MP Kate Osamor

In 1792, pioneering British feminist and social justice activist Mary Wollstonecroft wrote in her seminal book, *The Rights of Women*, “It is justice, not charity that is wanting in the world.” 226 years later, Kate Osamor, the Shadow Secretary of State for International Development, a black feminist with a background in social justice activism, has anchored that fundamental truth in Labour’s vision for international development, ‘*A World For the Many, Not The Few*’. In doing so she has committed the Labour Party to putting social justice at the heart of its international agenda and listening to the voices of those facing the greatest injustices: women in the global South.

For too long, politicians and to their utter shame many in the development sector have ignored the true driver of global poverty: neo-liberal capitalism, a failed economic system whose rules are stacked in favour of corporate elites. They have stayed silent on the culpability of Britain in promoting unfair trade rules, creating new debt burdens, forced privatisations and entrenching oppressive neo-colonial power dynamics on the international stage. At best, they have promoted the myth that charitable giving or development aid by itself could ever address the political and economic systems that cause global poverty, at worst they have peddled ‘poverty porn’ – racialised and gendered images of the ‘helpless’ people of the global South that require saving by white saviours.

‘The World for the Many, Not the Few’ is a radical vision for how the UK should approach international development. It pinpoints the greatest challenges to just and sustainable development: enduring poverty and soaring inequality; public services under siege around the world; a climate

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crisis threatening lives and livelihoods and forcing mass migration; and everywhere, women bearing the brunt of the burden.

These challenges are not new. War on Want has been campaigning on these issues for decades. In 1952, it launched with a leaflet which said: “Transcending all our immediate problems, this gap between the rich and the poor of the earth is the supreme challenge of the next 50 years”. We were often one of the few organisations willing to tackle the root causes of poverty and inequality around the world: colonialism, imperialism and later, neoliberalism. Now, after just over 60 years, not only has the [IMF been forced to admit the significance of global inequality](#); we’re in with a chance of a British government that understands this reality – and is prepared to act on it.

What is new and potentially ground-breaking is the vision and ambition of Labour’s new policy paper, [A World for the Many, Not the Few](#). Amongst the paper’s most important proposals are making inequality reduction a binding commitment for the department; democratising global financial institutions dominated overwhelmingly by the wealthiest states; tackling climate change by promoting energy democracy; reversing the privatisation of aid spending and public services; and finally putting feminist principles where they belong, at the heart of development strategy.

Beneath all this lies a commitment to social justice which promises to take international development away from the charitable model and towards a model that could actually transform the rules of a global system rigged to benefit the rich.

This would have some profound implications. For decades, overseas aid spending has been used to [promote neoliberalism in and control over the global South](#). Once powerful movements across the global South liberated themselves from direct military and colonial control, economic control through a neo-colonial development model has preserved the dynamic of domination by the global North. Since the rise of neoliberalism in the 1970s this system has held back human rights and living standards in the former colonies while preserving the rights of a global elite to [exploit land, labour and resources in poorer countries](#).

This exciting step forwards hasn’t come from nowhere. The policy is so ambitious only because it has emerged from dialogue, not just with a panel of experts but with decades of experience of social movements such as [La Via Campesina](#) and other grassroots groups on the front lines of social justice struggle. By centering voices from the global South and understanding the connections between gender, race, class and other forms of discrimination that conspire to marginalise and oppress, it ensured that those of us on the panel with roots in these global movements could feed their thinking into the policy.

The echoes of radical voices can be heard throughout the proposals, not least in the assertion that any genuine commitment towards eradicating poverty and contributing to a more equal and peaceful world will need all government departments to join the effort. It’s no good having the Department for International Development advocating for human rights or peace-making efforts while the Foreign Office is fuelling a global arms trade and the Home Office is just calling for taller walls around Fortress Europe. That is why the policy paper is calling for coherence across government and strategic initiatives on key issues like trade, taxation and international debt as well as the arms trade.

This ambitious new policy faces a multitude of formidable obstacles: a battle for hearts and minds in the face of rising poverty at home a divisive right wing media, and politicians who dream of constituting a new Empire 2.0; a global development model built along neo-colonial and neoliberal

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lines of infinite growth on a finite planet; and a ferocious backlash against feminist principles, particularly when articulated by women of colour. And beyond all this, we are right to question what might happen when the idealism of 'a world for the many' collides with the interests of the City of London and UK multinationals with everything to lose.

But for the first time in a long time, we have a Development Secretary waiting in the wings with real answers to questions on international development which many in the global South had long given up even bothering to ask us. She believes Britain can be more than a used car salesman loaning out British money to mop up a fraction of the damage done by British bombs. And we applaud her for asserting that women are not just the hardest hit by poverty but also as the most powerful agents of change.

For the first time in a long time, a step forward has been taken in Westminster. But to turn those policy proposals into more than just words, it requires a genuine movement of people in the UK, willing to promote a new internationalism; a movement that refuses to only locate its politics domestically and turn a blind eye to the people of the global South being sacrificed to ensure the well being of the global North; a movement dedicated to realising the right of all people to a dignified life and is accountable to those on the frontline of struggle; a genuinely intersectional movement for global justice.