

Labour knocks out a radical new vision for development

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Did the internationalist cause just get another 400,000 activists? **Hazel Healy** reports



A teacher at School for Life, a DFID supported programme, in Ghana, 2012. Photo: Henry Donati/DFID ([CC 2.0](#))

Since Jeremy Corbyn became leader of the Labour Party, I've had the unfamiliar experience of agreeing with politicians. Or perhaps I should add, agreeing and believing that they mean what they say.

This trend seems set to continue for me after attending Monday's launch of a [new policy paper](#) from Labour's Shadow Development Secretary [Kate Osamor](#). Echoing the party's manifesto from the 2017 General Election the paper, 'A World for the Many, not the Few', rolls out the simple – but in

these times increasingly radical – idea that we should want the same for those in other countries as we do for ourselves.

Osamor's blueprint, which aims to set the direction for the Labour Party's programme for government, represents a step change from the past for five key reasons.

1. Firstly, in the way it came to be. True to Labour's new trademark consultative style, Osamor canvassed 55 voluntary organizations, including those from the Global South, to draw up the document. That includes an ['International Development Task Force'](#) advisory group with seasoned advocates from groups such as Health Poverty Action, Global Justice Now, War on Want and others. These weren't accidental choices. As Osamor told a full committee room in the Houses of Parliament on 26 March, 'It's time to be radical again – the state of the world demands it.'

2. This vision calls for systemic change and action on the root causes of poverty. Aid, it says, should not be reduced to charity, tinkering around the edges; this is about challenging a broken economic system – about fairness and justice. Stay with me – I haven't started writing a **New Internationalist** keynote article by mistake, this actually appears in a mainstream political party's manifesto. (According to Global Justice Now's Nick Dearden – who is on the taskforce, it should be said – this is the most exciting plan to emerge from such an institution in the Global North for the last 20 to 30 years.)

To achieve this, Labour promises policy coherence: to tackle tax and trade, defence and diplomacy, and ensure that other departments do not work against development objectives. It will mean an end to taking with one hand and giving with the other – not, for example, selling arms to Saudi Arabia as it wages war on Yemen, while handing out humanitarian aid to Yemenis being starved and bombed by Saudis.

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3. The plan puts inequality, not just poverty reduction, at the heart of development policy. Although the detail on how to do this is lacking at this stage, Labour promises to institute a new metric to make up for the failings of GDP: using the Palma ratio (the ratio of income between the richest 10 per cent and the poorest 40 per cent) to measure progress. Such a move would help keep the focus on aid on the poorest people, no matter where they live, as we called for in our [40th anniversary issue](#).

4. The plan contains pressing, time-limited promises that would have immediate impact. I may be cheating a bit here to include some of my favourite highlights but they cover many key, concrete demands made by **New Internationalist** magazine over the past decade: defunding Bridge academies, a much criticized low-cost private school chain currently supported by Dfid that featured in our [Bad Education](#) issue last September; taking a stand against using poverty-porn imagery to raise funds for charities, something we first [raised](#) in the 1980s; and the need for universal access to healthcare that was laid bare by [the tragedy of Ebola](#) in West Africa.

5. The paper makes noises about tackling the technocrats. As well as promising to restore the moral purpose of international aid, the document vows to rebalance power in favour of local NGOs that are 'muscled out' of disaster zones by a powerful aid industry – this is particularly relevant since the sexual abuse scandals which have showed aid workers straying so very far from the founding principles of humanitarianism.

I like to think that putting an end to haemorrhaging money on consultants with technocratic abilities but an underdeveloped sense of justice would help resolve problems of the abuse of power and neo-colonial approaches in general. Connected to this is the promise of a 'feminist international development policy', which among other things promises to triple funding for grassroots women's groups – proven to be the most effective way to combat violence against women, compared to either wealth or political representation, according to a 40-year study conducted in 70 countries, as we [pointed out](#) in our [feminism issue](#).

What happens next? Kate Osamor is warming up. This is the first bold shot across the bows of what can feel like a narrow, inward-looking country under Conservative rule. In response to the policy paper, *The Daily Mail* printed a fairly half-hearted rebuttal hinging on its use of the word 'feminist' and chose to stick with the now familiar foe that is Jeremy Corbyn, rather than lay into Osamor, an MP of working class, Nigerian heritage from Tottenham.

But *The Mail* and the tabloid press – who have made cutting Britain's aid budget a rightwing cause célèbre – will be a force to reckon with if any of Osamor's ideas get put into practice.

And then I realize that whether the British public are ready for this or not, if the 400,000 or so feted new Labour activists get behind their party's revamped vision for international development, we will be able to get moving with a culture shift that would see justice out at the heart of aid, way ahead of the next election.

International development may have lost its way, but this manifesto might just offer a real chance of finding it again.

***New Internationalist's** latest edition exploring the challenges facing modern-day humanitarian action is out on 1 April, 2018.*