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Report of a speech by Hilary Benn, Minister for Overseas Development, at Newcastle University in February 2007, on the challenge of world poverty.

Benn recalled visiting a refugee camp at Wajid in Somalia. '11,000 people fled the countryside when the drought killed their animals and shrivelled their crops are now live in huts made of twigs covered in pitiful scraps of cloth, surviving on water and food provided by the international community, including Britain, as we always do. There were also three large, proper tents which housed a school run by UNICEF. Rows of children – keen and enthusiastic as any, enjoying – for the first time – the chance to go to school.'

'Experiences like these that have taught me – taught us all – both why development – people being able by their own efforts to change their lives for the better – is so important, and why unless we tackle poverty, injustice and inequality we will never have a safe world.'

'The truth is this. At the beginning of this century in the developing world, pregnancy and childbirth claim the life of a woman every minute – women who die alone and afraid on the floor of a darkened hut with no midwife or doctor to help. 6,000 children will die today from a lack of clean water to drink. Each year malaria kills one million people, tuberculosis 2 million, AIDS 3 million – every-one a human life extinguished: potential unrealised.'

'Because we see these things. We cannot claim any more that we did not know what was happening. And we have a choice. Either, 'I am sorry about the condition of humankind, but we can't do anything and I am going to go home, shut the door, close the curtains, and hope the rest of the world goes away.' Or 'What can we do and how can we do it?'

'Look at our history. Remember how we changed things! Go back 200 years to a time of great change in our society...the great social reformers changed things....The father of public health, John Snow, who demonstrated that cholera was spread through contaminated wells or those who said that every child in Britain should go to school.'

'Campaigns like Make Poverty History are the global equivalent of those 19th century reformers. We have made progress. In the past 40 years, life expectancy in the developing world increased by a quarter. In the past 30 years, illiteracy has fallen by half. In the past 20 years, 400 million lifted out of absolute poverty. Smallpox, and we are nearly there with polio. Yet there is so much yet to do....we must keep the promises made in 2005 at Gleneagles.'

'Lastly, we need hope and encouragement because the thing I fear most is not doubt or criticism or despair but cynicism. Trying to give people the chance to transform their own lives is about putting our better impulses at the service of humankind.'