

## “Fair play on the playing fields of world trade”

**By Jonathan Edwards CBE, Olympic Gold Medalist, based on an address given at the Monument, Newcastle upon Tyne, on Sunday evening, 10<sup>th</sup> April 2005, on behalf of MAKEPOVERTYHISTORY NE**

I'm not sure quite why it is, but some of the most vivid memories I have from my athletics career don't involve me. I suppose it might be something to do with being brought up in the television age, and it's strange that when I remember breaking my world record in 1995, I think of the television pictures and the BBC commentary. Similarly, in the Sydney Olympics of 2000, I competed on the same night that Cathy Freeman won gold, and my recollections of the evening itself are more about her achievement than mine.



photo credit Christian Aid / Robin Prime

And perhaps the most arresting image of all that I have in mind goes right back to the start of my athletics career, and the 1988 Seoul Olympic Games, when Ben Johnson astonished everyone with his world record-breaking performance of 9.79 seconds in the 100 metres. Unhappily, just three days later he was stripped of his gold medal and sent home in disgrace after testing positive for drugs.

So what's all this about sporting nostalgia?

Well today, on this first day of the Week of Action for Trade Justice, we gather because of our concern for the world's poorest people, and in particular about the effect that global trade has on them. And in my mind, the worlds of sport and trade aren't so far removed from each other, and of course what the Ben Johnson story so clearly indicates is that things aren't always fair and just. And as I am passionate about fair play on the sporting playing field, I am equally passionate about fair play on the playing fields of world trade.

**And let me start with a few words about that 'playing field', because at the moment it isn't even level.**

At the Moscow Olympics of 1980, it was alleged that in the javelin competition, the event organisers opened a set of gates every time a Russian competitor was in action,

providing a tail wind for his throw. But the gates were closed whenever anybody else was involved! There is an analogous situation in international trade, where the playing field is often biased against the weakest and poorest.

We have got used to saying that rich countries subsidise their agricultural producers to the tune of 300 billion dollars each year - that amounts to six times the total spent on international aid. We were wrong! In 2003, the amount rose to 350 billion dollars – seven times the amount spent on aid! Incidentally, the overwhelming majority of this money goes to large agri-businesses, not to small farmers. Poor country governments don't have the money to match these subsidies for their farmers.

These policies lead to massive surpluses which are dumped on world markets, leading to the utter ruin of millions of small farmers in the poor countries. “Surely it's not a bad as that”, you say. Well, don't take my word for it; this is the opinion of the independent economists of the United Nations Development Programme: “Major violations of human rights are carried out under the legal imprimatur of international trade, negative impacting the well-being of countless millions of people around the world.” Or consider the opinion, this year, of Mats Karlsson, the World Bank's director in Ghana: “The biggest problem facing farmers in the developing world is the subsidies the West provides for its own farmers. These are deeply unfair.” Note: “the **biggest** problem”!

The playing field of trade isn't level – it's tilted against the weakest and poorest. We don't accept this – we call for “Fair play on the Playing Field of World Trade”

### **Second, at present the competitors are not evenly matched.**

We don't want just a ‘level playing field’ for trade! A level playing field would, indeed, be an improvement on what we've got now, but it would still be a disaster for the world's poor. You can't expect a fair contest unless the competitors are evenly matched, more-or-less.

I used to train with sprinters who competed on the ‘professional’ circuit in Scotland, and their races were handicapped – the fastest runner would be the back marker, and the other runners would have varying head-starts depending on their ability. It is surely a system like this that we need in global markets

The economic dogma of the past 20 years is summed up in two words – “free trade”, involving the unfettered operation of market forces world-wide. The phrase ‘level playing field’ is often used to describe this arrangement. But we say that when applied to the least developed countries, this ‘level playing field’ idea is a nonsense. On one hand, we have massive multinational corporations whose turnover is greater than that of the total income of many poor countries, and on the other hand we have the uneducated, under-resourced poor. The imbalance in the world is now so great that ‘free trade’, involving the removal of all government support and protection in poor countries, amounts to ‘**unfair trade**’.

We don't accept this – we call for “Fair play on the Playing Field of World Trade”. That means that there must be special treatment of the weakest countries and this should include the right for them to support and protect their own producers.

**Finally, at present we have rules that players can ignore.**

Imagine a relay race or boxing match where the rules are optional! But that is the situation with the operations of multinational corporations.

Companies are set up to make a profit and that's fair enough, in principle. They are in competition with each other, jostling for success and sometimes for survival – and that also OK, in principle. But they are run by less-than-perfect human beings – less-than-perfect like the rest of us, that is! They wield enormous power and influence and if they cut corners or behave unethically – and often they do – the effects on poor people can be devastating. There is increasing self-regulation by the multinationals, but voluntary rules simply aren't an effective check on human greed and power. What happens instead is that you get a 'race to the bottom', where would-be responsible companies are placed in an impossible position by the less scrupulous.

We don't accept this – we call for “Fair play on the Playing Field of World Trade” and that means that minimum human rights and environmental standards need to be enforced world-wide.

Bob Geldof expressed his disgust at the present situation like this: “How much harder can we make it?” he asks. “It's not just that we won't write off debts that cripple their economies – we won't let them earn their way out of poverty through trade either. It's a dreary tale: the age-old story of the playground bully, picking on the weak and the vulnerable.”

Make Poverty History says we can do better than this. In particular, in the words of Kofi Annan, “As we enter a new millennium, we must make trade work for the poor”. “Must” is the word and one to stir us to action! Thank you for your kind attention.