KIDS WITH MACHETES

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Category: Observations

Last night BBC 3 showed a film called *Kids With Machetes: Stacey Dooley Investigates* which looked at the issue of child labour in Cocoa Production in Ivory Coast (watch it on Iplayer). Anything involving the cocoa area of Ivory Coast has an immediate attraction for me, so I made sure I was in front of the TV and ready to go when it was shown. There were a couple of really good things about the show:

- It was wonderful to see the village scenes and to listen to Ivorian French being spoken. The gestures, the sounds: everything was so familiar and it took me back to life in Gouabafla.
- The show effectively refuted the oft repeated rumour that there is child slave labour in Ivory Coast. Yes, children do work in the fields, but they work on their parents' farms the way that children all round the world do. This doesn't mean it is good or right, but it isn't slavery. Stacey Dooley drew a clear distinction between what is happening in southern Ivory Coast and the sweat shops she has visited in Asia. As you'll see, I've got a number of qualms about the programme, but this one clear, well made point was very important: it is bad enough that people have to live in poverty without well intentioned people accusing them of slavery.

That was the good stuff. Unfortunately, there was a lot of bad stuff.

The central story of the film was that children were working in the fields because they didn't have a school to go to. And horror of horrors, they worked in the fields with machetes! The reason the children didn't go to school was that the village couldn't afford to build a school because of the low price being paid for their cocoa by the middlemen and shippers. However, along came a rather dizzy 22 year old blonde, Stacey Dooley, who single handedly raised money and built a school for the village. Everything is now fine and the kids don't need to go to the fields any more or carry machetes. Happy ever after.

Let's unpick what happened a little. Though we were never told, the village Stacey was visiting was populated by immigrants from Burkina Faso or Mali (the names were definitely not local to that part of Ivory Coast). Those immigrant populations have been discriminated against for years and were actually chased out of this region of the country during the civil war.Â The question was never raised, but my suspicion is that the lack of schooling in this village was related to an ethnic question, not finance.

Money for cocoa. Yes, the middlemen in Ivory Coast do exploit the farmers and it is wrong. But far worse are the restrictionsÂ placed on the export of cocoa from the country. The EU restricts the importation of chocolate which would sell for a higher price and so the Ivory Coast is condemned to only sell the raw or semi-processed cocoa beans. This effectively bans the development of an industry which would really help the country.



Children and Machetes. An awful lot was made about how horrific it is to allow children to go into the fields with machetes. The problem is that machetes are the universal tool in that part of the world: kitchen knife, tin opener, digging tool, bush clearer..... the list of uses for a machete are endless. Everyone uses a machete at some point in the day; children and adults alike. It may not fit in with British health and safety rules and some kids do wound themselves - but it is a normal part of life. To make a big horror story out if it was demeaning.

School or field work. The programme basically made a simple statement. Either the kids go to school or they work in the fields. But it is far from that simple; where do the programme makers think the kids spend their school holidays? Ivorian cocoa farmers don't all go to Majorca for the summer - everyone has to work and the kids spend their holidays in the fields with their parents. Not only that, but in government run schools it is not unknown for the kids to be told to bring a machete to school and for the whole class to spend a day working in the teacher's fields.

But the worst aspect of the film was the way in which this young British woman breezed in and solved all the problems for the local people without serious consultation with them. "What do you think of *my building*?" she said as she showed the villagers the new classroom. To see the dignified head of the family being talked down to by this young woman thought she had solved all of their problems was humiliating. Celebrity aid culture at its worst - except that Stacey Dooley isn't a celebrity.

It is good that the kids in the featured village got to go to school. That was a good outcome. But to imagine that this means that they won't be working on the family farms as well is to ignore the reality of life in that part of the world. Equally, unless Ivory Coast gets better economic breaks from the West, the schooling the kids receive is unlikely to lead to gainful employment and they will stay on the land.

Celebrity handouts and one-off interventions do nothing to address the underlying issues that keep people living in poverty and which force their children to work on the land. As long as we keep giving money to put sticking plasters on the problem without addressing the underlying issues nothing is going to change. We need an intelligent approach to aid which stimulates local development and entrepreneurship: but sadly this doesn't make good TV. Perhaps someone should buy the commissioning editor of Kids With Machetes a copy of Dead Aid: Why Aid Is Not Working and How There Is a Better Way for Africa. Just a thought. Over simplification does no one any favours and solves no problems.

Rant over - normal service will be resumed later.