



engineers without borders
ingénieurs sans frontières

Transcript: Stephen Lewis, February 7

Thank you, everyone. I'm a little nonplussed by the elegant hyperbole of the President of the University of Toronto. I have never asked anyone before tonight to travel with me on a regular basis and do the introductions as often as possible but I'm inclined to voice that request to the President who was extraordinarily generous and extraordinarily kind and I'm even more remorseful and awkward given the reference to the matter of the honorary degree because, of course, I went to 4 post-secondary citadels of higher learning for a remarkable number of years and managed never, but ever, to acquire a degree. Indeed, although the president may not know this, I flunked out of U of T twice: once as an undergrad and once from the law school. It was an impeccably consistent performance. But I cannot tell you with what pleasure I am here tonight and, since you have momentarily divested yourselves of dessert, I am going to turn to the subject matters I wanted to reconnoitre and share with you some disparate thoughts and try to weave them together into some symmetrical whole by the end.

I am tremendously impressed with Engineers Without Borders. I actually can't get over it. The growth in one year in this organization is positively supernatural. Indeed, I deliberately found myself in a snowstorm last year, when I was invited to speak, in order to be able to measure the intervening growth and return on this occasion. And I can't help but feel that the commitment and sophistication and capacity of what is happening with all of you in this room is really quite remarkable. I read the material that was given to me with an almost religious fidelity. I saw the range of the projects: people involved in water, people involved in IT, people involved in energy and health and food processing and a variety of agricultural engagements. I love the fact that virtually every continent in the developing world was touched upon, and that there was a good deal of work being done on issues and communities in Canada. I read the annual report and I was astounded at the searing honesty with which you engage some of the issues. This is completely unorthodox in the lexicon of the way non governmental organizations behave. You even admitted publicly that you had failed twice, in two projects, one in Bolivia and one in Chile. But of course you hadn't failed at all. You had merely encountered difficulties in dealing with local non governmental organizations, indigenous NGOs which all of us who have done some work in the international development field know is a regular phenomenon.

It's very, very difficult out there. People are struggling. They don't have the same apparatus, they don't have an infrastructure, they have a great deal of pain. I work with a little foundation which occasionally dispenses dollars to deal with AIDS at the grassroots in Africa and there are times when months will go by before we get a response to an email or get clearance on a project proposal to send money. And when we pursue it, determinedly, try to understand what in God's name is going on, we've got money to go to Zambia, to go to Kenya, to go to Botswana, to go to Namibia, why is it not being requested? And you find that the people you have been dealing with have died, or you find that the people you have been dealing with are so ill they can't get back to you. And you understand that the expectations which reside at this end are never accurately mirrored at the other end. And one of the most important things about international development is to recognize the tremendous sophistication and resilience and commitment and generosity which lies particularly at the village and community level of developing countries around the world and it has to be respected and engaged as partners. But it also has to be understood that it's very, very tough work, that a lot of damage has been done to these countries on what we call the macroeconomic level. You work at what economists call the micro level. You go right in to the communities and into the countries and you work on specific projects whether it's water or food processing. But at the macro level, those economies have been so damaged in so many ways by the depredations of the international financial institutions that they are only now beginning to recover and we have to give it some time. Nothing enrages me more as I travel around the African continent than to see the legacy of the structural adjustment programs which were imposed in the late 1980's and early 1990's by the World Bank and the International Monetary Fund. Programs of almost insane economic conditionality. So that the health sectors were stripped bare and the education sectors were stripped bare and people who were absolutely impoverished were forced to pay user fees for services which they had previously taken for granted. And children who were in school suddenly had to pay school fees in order to enter a classroom and were thereby excluded year upon year. And investment mechanisms and financial mechanisms and trade mechanisms manipulated and imposed in ways that ravaged those economies. And now, now the World Bank says to the world: 'We were wrong, Structural adjustment was an error.' But the damage, the damage that was done to the social sectors, the damage that was done to the fabric of the societies is fought to this day. So one of the realities we deal with when we are working in the developing world is to understand the legacy. Not to make the assumption that somehow these countries have twisted and manipulated and battered themselves. Because, in truth, that has happened from time to time but the distortion of the

economies, the poverty you see, the struggle you attempt to overcome, that's in very considerable measure an inheritance of the economic lunacy which we imposed on so many of those countries for so many years.

I wanted to make just a few discursive points. Number one, I love the idea that the 'sans frontières' that the model 'without borders' is spreading everywhere. I have now met 'Accountants Without Borders', 'Actuaries Without Borders' - why they would want to impose their arithmetic nuttiness on anyone is beyond me. These are people who dream about logarithms. There's a palpable sickness, it's a pathological imbalance to which they're addicted. But those who belong to presentable professional disciplines like the people in this room, that's an entirely different matter, qualitatively sound, heartwarming. And the idea that so many people lawyers, social workers, everyone piling into this idea of 'without borders' and Engineers Without Borders is one of the exemplary developments. When you look at the original model that it came from, *Medicins Sans Frontières*, it's really fascinating to see the way it has evolved. The doctors who work for MSF are not merely now in emergency areas. MSF is now actually fashioning the agenda around a number of health crises in various countries. I'm absolutely fascinated that in Mozambique, in Rwanda, in Tanzania, in South Africa, it's MSF which has put in place the treatment regimens with anti-retroviral drugs which will serve as a model for the entire continent, when the World Health organization announcement of putting 3 million people into treatment by the year 2005 is actually realized. A little NGO, with chapters in Belgium and France and Canada and elsewhere actually fashioning the model, proving to the world that in the poorest countries, we call them 'resource constrained environments' you can actually do treatment involving the world's worst pandemic. You can do it with pre-qualified fixed drug combinations meaning the people take just two tablets a day. You can demonstrate to the world that adherence rates are over 95%. You can show that the side effects are negligible. You can demonstrate that communities can get involved and overcome the normal patterns of stigma and discrimination. You can demonstrate that you can train health workers, doctors, nurses, pharmacists, community health workers, counsellors. All of it done by MSF. It's just fascinating to me as I wander around - I was in Geneva last week meeting for an extended period of time with the World Health Organization people who are responding to the need for treatment in Africa and I asked them: 'On whom will you model your intervention?' And they said "Well, MSF seems to be doing it, that's what we'll do." When the government of South

Africa finally cracked and agreed to introduce treatment the model they will use is the model in a township adjacent to Capetown called Khayelitsha where MSF has been doing treatment successfully for years. But it's more than that, they not only have moved the work they do into another plane but they actually have engaged in the great ideological struggles. When the legislation to amend the patents in Canada comes before the House of Commons over the next couple of weeks to permit the manufacture and export of generic drugs, the problems in the bill, and there are problems, will be addressed by MSF. MSF will appear before the parliamentary committee, probably in the person of Dr. James Orbinski, who is on the medical faculty of the University of Toronto, a lovelier person of greater integrity I have, I don't think in my adult life encountered, I think you have had him speak to EWB on a previous occasion. James will make the submission, and as I stand here I'm telling you there won't be a single member of parliament who won't be moved and persuaded by what he says because when MSF marshals a case, it marshals it with irrefutable precision. And that's terribly important. Because they've moved from the engagement in the field, to the advocacy engagement with government. Medicins Sans Frontieres has also done some of the best work internationally on Doha, on the international trading regimen, on the behaviour of the World Trade Organization, on questions of intellectual property rights. What I'm saying is that this is just the beginning for you. You are just plunging into the contact at the grassroots, around projects that transform the lives people lead, there is nothing more noble, but it is just the beginning of the engagement. Because gradually you will be able to create models in concert with other partners and where you are the lead organization. And the models will be replicated by others. And you'll fashion special relationships with governments and instead of having 30 or 40 volunteers in the field, you'll have hundreds of volunteers in the field. In fact, there will be no one left to attend classes, which is probably what is most desirable. And the president of the University of Toronto will personally confer degrees upon you for 3 years of virtuous volunteerism. And then when you are situated so strongly in the life of the community and the life of the country you'll find yourselves engaged in public advocacy around the issues and then that public advocacy will evolve the government of the people of Canada and what began as a small organization incrementally building with life and excitement and the enthusiasm which courses through this room tonight you suddenly find yourself at the centre of the ideological debates which animate this world. And you'll be on the right side of the debate because you will be informed.

And that brings me to the second broad point I wanted to make which was the whole thought of volunteers and the way in which people join communities for 3 months, 4 months, 6 months, 7 months - just standing outside prior to eating dinner here tonight I met people who had been in Ghana, people who had been in Cameroon, people who were on their way to Zambia, people who were on their way to Cambodia, people who had been in Peru - and I thought to myself what an astonishing experience it is and must be. There is a renaissance in this cynical and difficult world of young people engaging in international development. When I was at UNICEF between 1995 and 1999, travelling constantly I saw that all the time, I couldn't get over it. Frankly it was a renaissance in significant measure of young women. Young women on the front lines of the most difficult situations imaginable. I saw them in refugee camps, I saw them in displaced people camps, I saw them in conflict areas, in the most egregious and threatening of life's situations, there were young people, primarily women, putting themselves on the front line to defend the human condition. And when you talked with them, they would always say that they weren't interested in engaging in a relationship, they weren't interested in all of the camaraderie which was necessary usually in your early, mid, late 20's early 30's, what they wanted to do was to make a contribution. I couldn't get over it. I remember vividly, standing on the planes of Goma, after the incredible exodus from Rwanda of more than a million people after the genocide in 1994, and watching the UK chapter of Save the Children, looking after all kinds of lost young kids who had not been in any way reunited with their parents, could not find their parents, and all the workers for Save the Children UK were young men and women in their 20's who had given up everything back home just to plunge into the fray. I remember going to northern Uganda where that lunatic religious sect the Lord's Resistance Army was regularly abducting young boys and girls taking them across the border into Sudan, turning the girls into sex slaves and the boys into child soldiers. There were more than 20,000 children abducted from northern Uganda over the last decade. A third of them are dead, a third of them made it back and a third of them are lost forever somewhere in the hinterland of Sudan their entire young lives destroyed. But if you go to the little communities of Gulu and Kitcomb, and you go to the reception centres which have been established to receive the youngsters, the adolescents who have fled, you'll find young people in their 20's and 30s doing all of the psycho-social, emotional work with these kids trying to restore them to some semblance of emotional equanimity. It's overpowering in its commitment to a fellow human being. And when I was recently in Zambia, during the famine, complicated ferociously by HIV/AIDS, all of the people who were handing out the food for the World Food Program at the feeding centres were young volunteers who had

given up everything else just to be part of a process of human betterment. I can't get over it. And I salute you for it. And I love the fact that it's happening. And I was chatting earlier with the President and he was saying outside that its so exciting to see the idealism which throbs now in this kind of collectivity. And that you are not overcome by all of the cynical behaviour of so much of the political apparatus but you understand that you can break through that apparatus and establish contact at community and village level where people's lives are so profoundly affected. And, boy, do they need you. And you need them.

That leads me to the third point which is to congratulate you on having concentrated so strongly on the Millennium Development Goals. I gather in one of your more collective rambunctious spasms late last night you saluted Paul Martin and reminded him that he had to maintain his commitment to the Millennium Development Goals. A useful procedure, I encourage you to do it at midnight again tonight because like all Liberals he requires repetition. But if you look at those Millennium Development Goals and I've lived with them for some time within the context of the United Nations, they are pretty tough. The prospect of cutting poverty in half by the year 2015 is inconceivable in most of Africa and large parts of South Asia. We have a billion 300 million people living in poverty, under a dollar a day, today we have 3 billion people living under less than 750 dollars a year. We have made some encroachments on poverty, mostly as a result of the growth of China and some commensurate growth in India, but overall, the poverty is deepening and intensifying in many developing countries and the rift between the haves and the have-nots is ever more profound. Then there's the question of getting everyone into primary school, but there are 120 million young kids who are eligible for primary school who are not in school, a figure you are probably familiar with, 57% of whom are young girls. Then there's the question of gender equality in primary and secondary schools as a manifestation of that inequality. And I want to tell you that if there is anything more elusive in this world than gender equality I have not discovered it. And if there is anything more important than gender equality, I have not discovered it. Because the absence of gender equality is resulting in the vulnerability and targeting of women for so many depredations - from sexual violence to communicable diseases that it's absolutely heartbreaking. And that is shown pretty vividly in the next Millennium Development Goal which is of course ameliorating the phenomenon of HIV/AIDS and malaria in much of the developing world. And we are making very, very little progress on malaria, and, frankly, we are making incomparably minute progress on HIV and AIDS. I attend meeting after

meeting, go to conference after conference, read document after document, in the intellectual ether all of the plans are laid and everything will be transformed and then you turn to the people on the ground and they are dying in inconceivable numbers. I was in David Livingstone Primary School in Harare, Zimbabwe not long ago in a little grade 5 class of 10 year olds. They were really sweet kids and the teacher was teaching them a life skills lesson. She wanted to draw on the reality of HIV/AIDS in a somewhat circuitous way and she told all the kids to write down on a piece of paper what it was that worried them most and to put the scraps of paper into a box. And she would then draw them out one by one and indicate to them what they might talk about. And the kids laboriously and studiously, these sweet little kids furrowed their brows and wrote on their pieces of paper and dropped the paper into the box. 8 out of every 10 pieces of paper had the word 'death'. These are 10 year olds! Death of a father, death of a mother, death of an uncle, death of an aunt, death of a friend. And when the teacher said to them: 'What do you do with all of this death? How do you handle it?' And the children said: 'Prayer' And the teacher said 'And if prayer isn't enough?' The children said: 'Well we'll call directly on God.' They said it with a great earnestness. And when the class was over - these were actually very sophisticated kids. They knew everything about the transmission of the virus. They knew all of the risks and hazards. They understood the use of condoms as though it was a regular, everyday event. They were 10 years old. I said to the teacher, I didn't understand that constant reference to prayer and God and she said to me 'Mr. Lewis, you didn't understand. These children go to funerals at lunch. They go to funerals after school. They go to funerals on the weekends. They know nothing but funerals for their leisure time. And if you know nothing but funerals what you are driven to is prayer and God.' And it's true you know. If you drive down the streets of many of the urban centres in southern Africa today and you see a clutch of students in their bright uniforms you think they're in a school yard and they part for a moment, and you suddenly see they are in a cemetery. And it reminds me of when I visited the little catholic AIDS Action centre in Vindhuk, Namibia, which is a networking centre for people living with AIDS, and when I reached there the thing they wanted me most to see was the income generating project out back. So I went out back and a group of men were making paper maché coffins for infants, about this big. And when they put the handles on the coffins they said to me: 'Mr. Lewis, we can't keep up with the demand.' The numbers are grotesque. Grotesque. And the only thing possibly more grotesque than the numbers is the targeting of one sex. There has never been a communicable disease which has zeroed in so ferociously on one sex.

This is a real battle around gender equality. Because in the presence of AIDS, gender inequality is fatal. We are depopulating parts of the African continent of its women. There are between 25 and 30 million people living with AIDS between the ages of 15 and 49 and 57% are women. And if you narrow it to the ages of 15 and 24, 10 million people living with AIDS, 67% are women and girls. Now these women are tremendously vulnerable but they're also tremendously resilient. But the cultural patterns are terrifying. And the degree of sexual violence, the absence of property rights and inheritance rights, the inability of young girls to go to school, the perpetual discrimination around household duties and any of the household benefits - it is a terrific struggle. And what is so impossibly frustrating about it is that the pattern that is now emerging lies in the recognition that the women who are most vulnerable appear to be in what they believe are monogamous marriages. Wives are infected by their intimate partners. You see, the response to the AIDS pandemic rendered in a phrase has always been 'ABC', A standing for abstinence, B standing for be faithful and C standing for condoms. That's the mix which has been applied in country after country. But if you are in a marriage or if you have a regular partner abstinence is not a factor, be faithful is assumed and condoms are rarely worn in an intimate regular relationship. And that's where the infection rates are climbing. These are profoundly difficult social and cultural questions and they are deeply rooted in the rights and empowerment of women who have to have the sexual autonomy to negotiate safe sex or to say no to sexual overtures or to refuse to deal with any of the men who - Carol Bellamy, the executive director of UNICEF regularly calls the 'Sugar Daddies of Africa' - who prey on younger women. The vast reality is that women are absolutely struggling for survival in many parts of the developing world and that is a factor which has to be recognized as you move into these countries and you deal with these phenomena. I was speaking with the young man from Cameroon who was saying that it was necessary to deal with health matters in relation to the projects he was engaged in because everyone understood that HIV/AIDS was penetrating the entire social fabric. And in the process of disrupting the social fabric you get whole sectors falling apart. I just can't get over it. I realize that I lose (I don't want to be self indulgent) but I lose a certain capacity to communicate, to engage in it coherently. I cannot believe what I see every time I travel to the continent. I just can't believe it. You look out into the agricultural sector and there are homes which have no more household food security because the women who do the farming are too ill or have died. You look at the teaching sector, the education sector, there are more teachers dying than are graduating from teacher's colleges. You look at the health sector you find that the level of infection among doctors and nurses and pharmacists and community health workers is identical

to that of the general population. You look at the private sector and you find that companies are hiring 2 or 3 people for every job in order to be sure that they have 1 person to fill the job. You see in front of your eyes the methodical erosion of the capacity of a country. I remember going to a little unlicensed community outside of Lusaka, Zambia of 10 to 20 thousand people who were anxious to have a visit. They had built a little community centre, they had built a little school, they wanted a visitor to come, I went to see it, as is always true in these visits they ask you to say something. They sat down, about a thousand of the villagers on a stony knoll outside the community centre and I suddenly saw visually what I had always understood intellectually but had never quite confronted before. Sitting in the front row were a number of young women in their teens with their babies at their breast and everybody else was old. I said to them "How many of you are grandmothers and grandfathers?" and nearly every hand went up. I said "How many of you are looking after orphaned children?" and nearly every hand went up. And I suddenly understood as I looked at it visually there were no people in their 20s, 30s, 40s and 50s. Everybody was very young or very old. And what has happened in countries like Zambia and Malawi, and is creeping into other countries in West Africa like Cote d'Ivoire and Cameroon is this methodical year after year of the loss of life of the productive age groups between 15 and 49. And after that happens, you don't have to have 30 or 40 percent prevalence rates, you can have 10, 12 or 15 percent prevalence rates, and if it goes on and on, year after year, for a decade it takes the heart out of a country. And then there are the orphans. I won't even negotiate that with you. These lovely children wandering the landscape of Africa, bewildered, angry, lonely, homeless, hungry. Communities try to absorb them but one more person shoves them right over the impoverished brink so the grandmothers look after them, but the grandmothers are impoverished and too old to look after them so when the grandmothers there's no one coming up behind so then you have child headed households little girls of 11, 12, 13, 14 looking after their siblings. There's a madness to it. There's something so morally outrageous about it. That we have allowed this to happen. With all these bloody commissions of inquiry into the faulty investigations into weapons of mass destruction, I wish for heaven's sake one day there were a commission of inquiry to understand how it's possible that the western world could have defaulted so abysmally on its obligation to the human condition. Do you know, Human Rights Watch did a recent survey in Swaziland where they found a number of child headed households where the age of the child heading the household was six. How is that possible? May I tell you one story? In July and August of last year I went with Graca Machel to Uganda and Zambia. Graca is the former minister of education in Mozambique, the former first lady of Mozambique.

She is married to Nelson Mandela. She is in every sense Mama Africa. She carries with her a formidable charismatic presence. She is a remarkably lovely and empathetic person. And I have been lucky to have worked with her in the last number of years. And we went to Uganda, ground zero of the pandemic, the district of Rakai, where the first case of AIDS was discovered in 1982, still a district afflicted by the consequences, a lot of child headed households, the local people wanted us to see the households. We went into one hut, there were five kids, 3 girls, 2 boys. The girls were 14, 12 and 10. The boys were 11 and 8. We sat down on the floor of the hut. I had the two little boys on my left. Graca had the three little girls on her right. She shooed out all the media, all the hangers on, all the United Nations hotshots, all the NGO's, we were left with but one interpreter. I hadn't the faintest idea what to expect. And Graca turned to these little girls and she said to the 14 and 12 year old: 'Have you started to menstruate yet?' And the little girls with a perfect, African, shy, whispered fragility said 'Yes' and Graca said 'Do you know what it means? Has anyone talked to you about it? Do you discuss it at school? Do you discuss it with other students? Do you discuss it in the community?' And as I sat and listened to the conversation, I suddenly understood that I was witnessing the first act of parenting that these young girls had ever had, on an issue, on a reality, which must be one of the most important moments in any young girl's life. And I thought, this is what has happened across a continent. The parents are gone. The knowledge and the values that are transferred down from generation to generation are gone with them. These heroic lovely young kids struggle without the nurture and affection to which every child appeals. I said to the youngsters when Graca had finished 'Who tucks you in at night?' And they looked at me nonplussed. And the older girl said 'I tuck them in at night. Nobody else comes in at night.'

The fact of the matter is that it is a continent that's struggling. And it need not be. There is no reason on the face of the earth why we are losing millions of people unnecessarily. Africans know how to do prevention, often innovative, inspired and creative. Africans know how to do home based care, community based and faith based organizations intervening. Africans know how to interrupt the transmission of the virus from mother to child during the birthing process with the use of a miracle drug called nevirapine. African's know how to do treatment with anti-retroviral drugs and have trained many people to do the treatment if they can get the drugs. The African political leadership which was in a state of silence and denial has significantly come around. The African religious leadership which was so slow to respond has significantly come

around. There is nothing that would not mobilize that continent to stop this bloody carnage in its tracks except for the persistent lack of resources. Resources to buy the goods, resources to fix the capacity, resources to mend the infrastructure. We are going to spend something in the vicinity of 200 billion dollars on the wars in Afghanistan and Iraq and reconstruction of both those countries. And we have to grovel, humiliatingly for pennies to respond to a pandemic which is taking the lives of more than 3 million people a year. And I want someone to explain to me why that isn't the most grotesque default in contemporary history.

What you're doing when you enter countries of the developing world, is to show a real and imperative solidarity and to demonstrate that in the developed world, there is a consistent sense of wanting to collaborate, to share, to affirm, to be of help. It's unimaginably important. I cannot stress it strongly enough. I didn't deal with the millennium development goal of infant mortality rates because they are going up rather than down. Maternal mortality rates are going up. The environmental situation is in a calamitous state mostly because there is no one to tend to the environment any longer. That's why there are so many projects involving water and sanitation and the refurbishing of societies, projects which you are particularly adept at responding to. There is so much work to be done and you have such professional disciplines and you bring something which is so important. While I was at UNICEF, UNICEF pulled out of the hardware on water projects. The only people who were providing the hardware and the work was the international NGO Oxfam. We required engineers desperately and we bought them at munificent prices. But your volunteerism changes that equation. I want to tell you that I think as you know, those of you who have travelled to these developing countries, there is nothing in this life more important, more rewarding, more valuable. I went for the first time in my life to Ghana in 1959. I've had a love affair with the continent ever since. It changed my life. I had absolutely no particular affiliations. I had left my astonishingly lamentable career at the University of Toronto. And I went off to work for a wonderfully heretical organization called the Socialist International in the United Kingdom, and I got an invitation from something called the World Assembly of Youth to go to a conference in Accra for a week. I said I'd go and represent the millions of socialist youth in Canada -there were 7 of us at the time. I go to Accra and instead of staying a week I stayed in Africa for well over a year criss-crossing the continent. Teaching, writing, whatever came along. I loved it then, and I love it now. It's unbelievably heartbreaking what is happening, but let me say that the strength, the capacity, the generosity, the

sophistication, the decency, of the people of that continent even in fratricidal episodes has to be seen to be believed. And it's true of Latin America and it is true of most of Asia. I really salute you. And I beg you to take some chunk of your life and give it to the developing world because it is a contribution on the one hand for which you will receive a lifetime of gratification.