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JUST as world leaders at the recent meetings of the G20 and G8 showed that they would rather forget their promises of more and better aid, the world's poorest countries are showing real leadership in the global effort to make poverty history.

Two reports published in recent weeks — one by Britain's Overseas Development Institute and another by the McKinsey consulting group — show the global recipe for the eradication of extreme poverty is working. This recipe was agreed at the beginning of this century and consists of eight "millennium development goals" — a set of global development objectives agreed by world leaders in 2000. The goals were framed so they would apply to rich and poor countries alike.

Ten years on, as world leaders — including Taoiseach Brian Cowen — are preparing to meet in New York to review their progress towards the millennium goals, there is hard evidence now that these have brought about real changes in the lives of millions of poor people. And, interestingly, 11 of the 20 countries making the most absolute progress towards the goals are among the poorest countries in Africa.

Even if the leaders of rich countries would rather forget the goals, we now have proof that more open and fair trade rules, combined with effective and timely aid, are the drivers behind this success.

If we act now, we can indeed be the first generation that ends global poverty.

It is all the more ironic that, just as the global effort is gaining traction and Africa is climbing out of the poverty trap, the leaders of the world's richest countries are walking away from the success story they themselves helped to create. The investment of the past is now making a tangible and large-scale difference, and Africa's economies are growing at ever increasing rates. McKinsey is predicting the rise of Africa's economic lions, akin to Asia's Tiger economies.

Overseas aid is working and is helping to create new economic partnerships with Africa's 900 million potential producers and consumers. Our aid programme is the catalyst for many of these opportunities — it is Ireland's calling card to the world.

We must, therefore, deliver on our overseas aid promise. We cannot afford not to.

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