

Poor Countries Must Invest in Science and Technology

Task force views promoting technological innovation as a powerful cure for fighting poverty

17 January 2005, New York—Developing countries will likely remain mired in poverty unless they can do what developed countries have done to achieve sustainable growth: incorporate science, technology and innovation into their economic strategies. However, science and technology have been given neither the urgency nor the priority they deserve in international aid.

The solution is to focus on expanding the use of new sciences and technology in developing countries—speeding the development and adoption of such things as improved medicines, electronics and farming techniques—as a way to reduce poverty and human suffering, according to the report—*Innovation: Applying Knowledge in Development. Report of the Task Force on Science, Technology and Innovation*—from the UN Millennium Project’s Task Force on Science and Technology.

The task force report is part of a detailed global action plan for fighting poverty, disease and environmental degradation in developing countries. The report was produced by a team of science and technology experts from developed and developing countries led by **Dato’ Ir Lee Yee-Cheong**, president of the World Federation of Engineering Organizations (WFEO), and **Professor Calestous Juma**, a professor of the practice of international development at Harvard’s Kennedy School of Government.

The Science and Technology Task Force has drawn up practical options for countries to promote innovation for development. For example, according to the task force:

- **Countries should use infrastructure projects as opportunities for technological learning.** Every stage of an infrastructure project, from planning and designing through construction and operation, involves the application of a wide range of technologies and associated institutional and management arrangements. This technological learning can promote the private sector and stimulate development.
- **A society’s ability to adopt new technology is tied to the quality of its higher education system.** Higher education is at the centre of the development process, but assistance to poor countries often focuses mainly on primary schools.
- **Governments need to promote business activities in science, technology and innovation** through government procurement and tax incentives with a particular focus on stimulating the expansion of small and medium businesses.
- **With support from rich countries investments must be made in currently underfunded research** in areas of particular interest to developing countries, such as agriculture, environmental management, and public health.
- **International organizations and donors need to focus on science and technology and strengthen their expertise in this area.**

The Science and Technology Task Force has spent the past two years studying how developed and developing countries have made effective use of science and technology to transform their economies. The task force focused on the practical implications of both existing and cutting-edge advancements, an exercise that included convening a special working group on genomics and nanotechnology.

The report calls attention to the critical importance of science and technology to meeting the commitments forged in 2000 at the Millennium Summit, where world leaders agreed to make the fight against poverty—and all of its faces—in developing countries their priority. The summit inspired the Millennium Development Goals, which are built on the recognition that, from health to the environment, from education to gender equality, a growing list of development issues can no longer be managed solely within the boundaries of a single nation.

The effort to give science and technology a higher profile in development is part of the UN Millennium Project, which was commissioned by the UN Secretary-General in 2002 to develop a practical plan of action for enabling developing countries to meet the Millennium Development Goals and reverse the grinding poverty, hunger and disease affecting billions of people. As an independent advisory body directed by Professor Jeffrey D. Sachs, the UN Millennium Project submitted its final recommendations in January 2005.

The Science and Technology Task Force is one of 10 Millennium Project Task Forces that together comprise some 265 experts from around the world, including members of parliament; researchers and scientists; policymakers; representatives of civil society; UN agencies; the World Bank; International Monetary Fund; and the private sector. The UN Millennium Project Task Force teams were challenged to diagnose the key constraints to meeting the Millennium Development Goals and present recommendations for overcoming the obstacles to get nations on track to achieving them by 2015.



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