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POINT OF VIEW/ Jeffrey Sachs: A strengthened commitment will yield support

04/26/2005

Germany took a step of great international leadership earlier this month by announcing a timetable for increasing its official development assistance (ODA) to the world's poorest countries.

In an April 7 statement before the U.N. General Assembly, Germany's U.N. ambassador, Gunter Pleuger, announced that Germany would increase ODA to 0.7 percent of its gross national product by 2014. With this step, the world comes considerably closer to achieving a great breakthrough in the fight against extreme poverty.

This is also an extremely important moment for Japan to reconsider its own aid budget.

The background to Germany's announcement actually goes back more than 40 years to 1961 when the U.N. launched its ``Decade of Development.'' The plan called for industrialized nations to give 1 percent of their national income to help poor countries achieve economic development. By the end of the decade, that standard had become further refined.

The rich countries were to contribute 0.7 percent of their income in the form of aid and 0.3 percent of their income in private donations.

The 0.7-percent standard was formally adopted by the U.N. General Assembly in 1970 after it was recommended by a commission led by then Canadian Prime Minister Lester Pearson.

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Originally, the rich countries agreed to reach 0.7 percent by the year 1975.

This was not accomplished. By the time 1975 rolled around, aid levels as a share of GNP were falling, rather than rising. By 2000, aid had declined to around 0.2 percent of GNP, even though the wealthy nations had somewhat regularly restated the famous 0.7 percent of GNP target in the intervening years.

Indeed, only five countries-Denmark, Luxembourg, Netherlands, Norway, and Sweden-have so far lived up to the 0.7 pledge.

At the start of the new millennium, the world's leaders once again took up the challenge of extreme poverty. They adopted the Millennium Development Goals (MDGs) in 2000, calling for poverty, hunger and disease to be cut sharply by 2015.

For each goal, they established quantitative and measurable targets and indicators to measure progress or the lack thereof. Once again the world seemed pointed in the right direction.

In 2002, the MDGs were bolstered by another agreement, the Monterrey Consensus, in which rich and poor countries agreed to be true partners in the quest to cut extreme poverty and thereby meet the set targets. In particular, they reiterated the long-standing ambition, this time declaring that all Monterrey Consensus signatories would "urge developed countries that have not done so to make concrete efforts to reach the target of 0.7 percent of GNP as official development assistance."

Many developing countries are meeting their Monterrey commitments.

They have improved their governance, strengthened the policy environment supporting the private sector, and are partnering with civil society.

As acknowledged by the international community, countries like Bangladesh, Ethiopia, Ghana, Mozambique, Senegal, Tanzania, and many others are ready to scale up their investments in health, education, basic infrastructure, and improved environmental management.

They are, however, lacking the resources to meet the MDGs on their own.

Since 2002, the great drama has, therefore, been whether the world's wealthy countries would finally

meet the long-standing 0.7-percent target to enable the poorest countries to break out of the poverty trap and achieve the MDGs.

From 2002 until Germany's announcement, six countries-Belgium, Finland, France, Ireland, Spain, and Britain-declared a timetable to reach 0.7 percent of GNP by 2015.

These countries, together with the five that had already achieved the goal, brought the total committed to 11, exactly half of the 22-member Development Assistance Committee, also known as the ``donor club."

Germany's announcement earlier this month brings the total to 12, more than half of the 22 donor countries.

Now that Europe's biggest economy is on track to reach 0.7 percent, it is very likely that all 15 of the EU donor countries will soon announce a timetable to achieve the same. In fact, the 15 EU donor countries as a group are likely to set a shared timetable to reach 0.5 percent of their combined GNP by around 2009 and 0.7 percent by 2014.

Germany deserves special congratulations for honoring its international commitments at a moment of tremendous fiscal strain.

The nation still bears the heavy fiscal costs of unification, as well as the mounting pension costs of an aging population. The government has been working hard to keep budget deficits under control.

Yet, Germany's leadership has recognized something of fundamental importance: Increased aid is not merely a matter of convenience for the world's poor, but a matter of life and death. By choosing to help the poorest of the poor, Germany has also chosen to help ensure global stability, since extreme poverty is one of the major risk factors in causing political upheavals and violence.

The reason Germany's announcement is really so crucial is that increased aid, if properly targeted to well-governed poor countries, can make a profound difference to the development prospects of the world's poorest countries, especially in Africa.

The U.N. Millennium Project, an independent advisory body which I directed on behalf of U.N. Secretary-General Kofi Annan, showed in its January

report that specific and practical investments in poor countries to, for example, raise food production, fight disease, keep children in school and conserve the environment, can make a profound difference in the fight against extreme poverty.

If all donor countries, including Japan and the United States, honor the 0.7 percent of GNP commitment, there will be enough overall aid to finance these critical investments and enable the poorest countries to achieve the MDGs.

The next move belongs to Japan.

Despite the country's tremendous track record in providing highly effective development assistance, Japan has been cutting its aid budget as a share of GNP over the past several years.

Its aid is currently only around 0.2 percent of its GNP. This is one of the lowest aid ratios of all the high-income countries.

With Germany now committed to reach 0.7 percent of GNP by 2014, the worldwide attention on Japan is increasing. Will Japan also abide its Monterrey pledge? Governments of poor nations in Africa and Asia are watching intently.

In many ways the signs are promising.

In recent weeks, Japan has announced several new aid initiatives, such as a program to support poor villages in Africa, a move to give Africa millions of anti-malaria bed nets, and a plan to double the overall level of aid to Africa. All of these moves are very encouraging.

But now more is needed to enable Japan to decisively reverse the many years in which aid has been falling, and thereby emulate Germany and the other countries in meeting the aid commitments made in the past few years.

It is gratifying to see the positive worldwide reception of Germany's initiative among the U.N. diplomats. Germany is likely to be rewarded for its generosity and responsibility through enhanced diplomatic support from developing countries, including their increased support for Germany's bid for permanent membership in the U.N. Security Council.

Germany can take a proud bow for a decision that is both bold and correct. Let's hope that Japan can

similarly take such a bow in the nearest future, and also win the international support that it would generate.

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