

Why Aid Does Work

Viewpoint

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Aid works, when it is practical, targeted, science-based and measurable.

Hence, we have seen the successes of immunisation campaigns for children in impoverished countries, against diseases such as polio, diphtheria, and measles.

These clear aid triumphs have saved the lives of millions of children. Similar aid-backed successes have been achieved in the fight against African river blindness, trachoma, leprosy, and guinea worm.

To make these successes sustainable, however, the aid in an area like health needs to be complemented by practical and targeted aid in other areas like schooling, safe drinking water, and especially agriculture.

Shoots of growth

Perhaps the key to Asia's economic takeoff in the past 30 years was the successful Green Revolution of India, China, and much of southeast Asia.

When Asian farmers could grow more food, feed their families and communities, and diversify into cash crops and into non-agricultural activities, the economic takeoff could get underway.

The Green Revolution itself was heavily spurred by timely and targeted aid from the Rockefeller Foundation, the US government, and other donors.

Undeserved bad press

Aid has received a bad press in recent years, but for utterly the wrong reasons.

Current aid flows suffer from four inter-related flaws:

- the aid is too little to solve the problems at hand
- the aid is excessively directed towards the salaries of consultants from donor countries rather than investments in recipient countries
- the aid is not well spread across sectors, with a particular neglect of agriculture in recent years

- the aid is not properly coordinated among the donors themselves, leading to a plethora of disconnected projects, rather than a true national strategy

The greatest need for more and better aid is in Africa. If the donors would help Africa to fight disease and to achieve a Green Revolution as occurred in Asia, we could get past these seemingly endless debates by enabling Africa finally to escape from the trap of extreme poverty.

Ironically, when under-financed and flawed aid programs have fallen short, public opinion in some quarters has turned against aid itself rather than in favour of more and better aid.

The US government and its allies have tended to blame the poor for these "aid failures," making an unfair blanket charge of "corruption," rather than acknowledging truthfully the shortcomings of the donor efforts themselves.

Atlantic divisions

Europe has recently realised the need for more and better aid, pledging to increase donations to 0.7% of EU GNP by 2015.

The Bush administration by contrast is still battling against increased aid flows.

America's lack of adequate aid funding, alas, continues to imperil not only the poorest countries but also global stability itself, and therefore the very national security of the US.

The UN World Summit offers a critical opportunity to get the aid strategy back on track.

All donor countries, including the US, have committed to making concrete efforts towards the target of 0.7% of GNP in aid, but the US, unlike Europe, has not followed through.

All of the world's governments have committed to supporting the Millennium Development Goals, but the Bush administration is now attacking those shared international goals because of its aversion to the increased aid needed to achieve them.

One big test of the forthcoming summit, therefore, is whether the US government will stick stubbornly with its overwhelmingly military approach to global security - an approach that is palpably failing - or whether it will finally wake up to the realisation that by helping the poorest of the poor, it could also help the richest of the rich to benefit from a safer and more prosperous world.

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