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opinion

Tackling world poverty

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WHAT WOULD it take to wipe out illiteracy, hunger and diseases such as malaria around the world? Surprisingly little, it turns out, for the world's richest nations to help its poorest.

According to a recent report sponsored by the United Nations, an annual investment of less than \$200 billion from rich nations over the next decade could reverse the poverty, hunger and disease that plague more than a billion people.





The report comes from the Millennium Project, an ambitious effort to save millions of mothers and children and to accelerate development to help close the gap between industrialized and underdeveloped countries. At a summit in 2000, 189 world leaders adopted eight specific Millennium Development Goals to be achieved by 2015. The goals aim to reduce extreme poverty and hunger by 50 percent; achieve universal primary education; promote gender equality; reduce child mortality by two-thirds; reduce maternal mortality by 75 percent; reverse the spread of HIV/AIDS, malaria and other major diseases; clean up the environment; and create a global partnership for development.

The latest report from the project, released this month, indicated that the goals could be achieved if rich nations gave roughly 50 cents per \$100 of their gross national product, even though those nations have already promised to contribute about 70 cents per \$100 of GNP. Only five nations -- Sweden, Denmark, Norway, the Netherlands and Luxembourg -- have honored the 70-cent pledge. Six others, including Britain, France and Spain, have at least set timetables to honor their commitment. The United States has done neither.

It's imperative that all the major industrialized nations make good on their promises. Even though the Millennium report urges poor countries to root out corruption in their governments, adhere to the rule of law and spend more of their own resources to combat poverty, those efforts would be grossly insufficient to realize the goals. And the recent tsunami shows how unforeseen natural disasters can wreak devastation and reverse even the modest progress that some countries in Asia -- the region with the largest number of poor people -- manage to achieve.

The report outlines 17 "quick wins" that would help keep momentum going toward the larger goals, including eliminating fees that prevent poor children from attending school, distributing insecticide-treated bed nets to prevent the spread of malaria, and planting more trees to provide soil nutrients and timber.

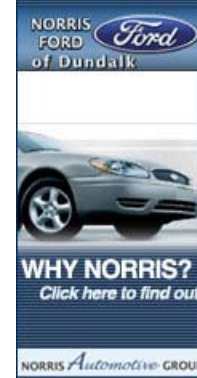
While such short-term goals should be pursued, the larger picture should not be obscured. As the project notes, "A world with extreme poverty is a world of insecurity." If the United States really wants to bring more stability to the world, it should be leading the effort to realize the Millennium goals, not lagging behind.

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