

The greater tsunami

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THE APPALLING loss of life and destruction caused by the Dec. 26 tsunami have been met by an unprecedented outpouring of aid by individuals, charities, and governments. As this assistance helps devastated Indian Ocean communities to recover, private and public donors should not neglect the less apocalyptic killers around the globe that could be tamed if the world were as generous as it has been in this disaster.

Jeffrey Sachs, the Columbia University professor who heads the United Nations Millennium Project, calls the global poverty that lies behind so many preventable deaths a "silent tsunami." Every month, more than 150,000 children die from malaria alone. Each year, AIDS kills 3 million worldwide, a number equal to 10 times the tsunami toll. Water-borne diarrhea and famines, often caused by drought, also take a toll.

On Jan. 17, the Millennium Project issued a plan for reducing extreme poverty by half and saving millions of lives by 2015. The plan calls on industrial nations to commit to doubling their aid to poor countries. On average, this would mean increasing aid from about a quarter of 1 percent of total national income to half of 1 percent. The United States lags far behind even that lower level. US government aid to poor countries has increased during the Bush administration, but it is still just 15 hundredths of 1 percent, the lowest level among the major donor countries.

Britain puts the United States to shame. It is pushing to improve conditions in Africa in three ways: debt relief, increased aid, and better trade terms. Britain's chancellor of the exchequer, Gordon Brown, describes the measures as a "Marshall Plan" for Africa. Reducing the subsidies that the European Union and the United States put on their farm goods is crucial. For much of Africa, agriculture should be the key to reducing poverty, but the continent's products, such as cotton, often cannot compete in world markets against subsidized competition from industrial countries.

The Millennium plan recognizes that some African countries are hamstrung by corruption or inefficient government. It suggests focusing major efforts on several countries, including Tanzania, Mali, Ghana, Mozambique, and Senegal, that are likely to put the assistance to good use.

Nancy Lindborg, president of the nonprofit aid organization Mercy Corps, recently returned from tours of her agency's projects in the Indian Ocean. She called the charitable response to the tsunami "phenomenal," but she worries that governmental support might be subtracted from programs elsewhere. This won't happen if the public understands the toll that tidal waves of poverty, ignorance, and disease take on millions of people, every day of the year. ■