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CAN THE **MILLENNIUM DEVELOPMENT GOALS** BE SAVED?

**BYLINE:** By Richard Horton

### **BODY:**

GLOBAL POVERTY IS the most important foreign policy issue of our time, at any rate, it should be. And indeed there are signs that the sheer unrelenting grinding deprivation that keeps 1.1 billion people living on less than \$1 a day is capturing the attention of many politicians for whom realpolitik has usually ruled out the interests of the poor.

Economists have long argued about how to advance **development** for the least advantaged. But in 2000, 147 heads of state translated their rhetoric into commitment, coming together under the leadership of UN Secretary General Kofi Annan to sign on to eight **Millennium Development Goals** (MDGs), from halving poverty to achieving universal primary education, all to be achieved by 2015. (See sidebar, E5.) And poverty reduction was at the top of the agenda as finance ministers from the G-7 nations convened in London on Friday.

There is only a decade to go, but at the moment the MDGs look ludicrously optimistic. As Gordon Brown, Britain's chancellor of the exchequer and a passionate advocate for human **development**, declared last month at meeting of African finance ministers in South Africa, the world is lagging as much as 100 years behind schedule. At present rates of progress poverty in Africa would not be halved until 2150, universal primary education would not be achieved until 2130, and avoidable infant deaths would not be eliminated until 2165.

Some see a chance for a turnaround. Last month Jeffrey Sachs, the Bono of **development** economics, presented the final report of his **Millennium Project**, which Annan had charged with mapping out a strategy to meet the MDGs. While many of his economist colleagues prefer to be gloomy about prospects for the poor, Sachs remains unassailably positive. Despite massive obstacles and perilous setbacks, he concludes, the MDGs remain achievable. The world knows what to do. It is simply a matter of political will and more money.

Superficially, Sachs seems to be right. Lack of money is preventing antibiotics from reaching children with pneumonia, teachers from being trained, food from being grown and harvested, vaccines from being distributed, insecticide-treated bed nets from being used to protect against malaria, and drugs from being made available to treat tuberculosis and HIV-AIDS. While they gave generously after the recent tsunami struck, governments have been reluctant to honor their word to those living under conditions of chronic scarcity.

At the UN's **development** conference in Monterrey, Mexico, in 2002, donor countries pledged to give 0.7 percent of their total national income to overseas aid. But today the average aid to poor countries is still only 0.25 percent of national income. (In the United States, the figure is .14 percent.) The difference between promise and reality is \$130 billion annually. Easier enough, according to Sachs, to cut poverty by half.

There are also appalling differences in progress among developing countries, throwing the differences between rich and poor into even starker contrast. Sub-Saharan Africa in particular endures crippling levels of child and maternal mortality, infectious epidemics, and environmental destruction. Meanwhile, many African nations are trapped in an endless cycle: poverty yields low or no taxes, lack of income prevents governments from investing in public health and other services, a sick workforce further disables the economy, and the cycle continues.

Sachs sees many opportunities for "quick wins." Training highly paid doctors and nurses will take too long. Instead, why not train village

workers in the rudimentary principles of health? Do the same for farming and schools. Start distributing drugs now to treat tuberculosis, malaria, and AIDS rather than waiting for painfully negotiated agreements between government and industry. Stop the damaging disincentive of charging fees for health services. Make those services free and pay for them, at least partly, out of increased aid dollars.

The almost 300 economists, engineers, medical personnel, and other specialists who took part in the **Millennium** Project argue that if such policies are put in place, the lives of more than 2 million mothers and 20 million children will be saved by 2015 which would meet the **goal** embraced five years ago. These are staggering figures well within our reach. It is hard to disagree with Sachs when he says that a mixture of courage and compassion is all that we need to make this happen.

But Sachs' hopes cannot hide a deeper problem facing all global idealists, one that they have so far chosen to ignore. The world has no mechanism to implement the **Millennium** Project's advice. Sachs' only channel for change is Kofi Annan, and given his weak political position it's hard to see how Annan can persuade skeptical governments in particular the US administration, which has failed to fully fund the \$5 billion **Millennium** Challenge Account that George W. Bush announced in Monterrey to live up to the promise that was made in 2000 but has so far been blocked by bureaucracy.

Annan's frail position is worsened by a UN system that operates much like a series of jealous fiefdoms. The World Health Organization and UNICEF compete fiercely over primacy in representing the interests of children, while WHO and UNAIDS do the same over HIV/AIDS. The UN **Development** Program, which housed the work of the **Millennium** Project, should have a leadership role across the UN and between governments in driving through policies to achieve the MDGs. But its able administrator, Mark Malloch Brown, has left UNDP to become Annan's chief-of-staff, leaving UNDP rudderless precisely at the moment when strong leadership is most needed.

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But in spite of all this, there's still hope that 2005 could be a turning point in the history of human poverty. At this week's meeting in London of finance ministers from the G-7 nations, Gordon Brown renewed his call to raise up to \$50 billion in additional **development** aid through an International Finance Facility, which would be funded by binding donations from wealthy countries. At the G-8 summit in July, heads of state will turn their attention to the future of Africa. And in September, the UN will hold a special session in New York to review progress towards the MDGs.

That meeting may be Annan's final chance to swing governments behind his vision for a world without human destitution. He has only six months to recover his reputation, reestablish the trust of the Bush administration, and begin reforms to the UN that will make it an effective instrument to deliver more than hope for those who have no voice at the rich man's table.

He cannot do this alone. It is true that he continues to have strong allies, including Sweden, Denmark, and Norway. But although heads of state have displayed compassion in words, they continue to fail Sachs' second test for success: courage in deeds.

#### SIDEBAR:

##### The **Millennium Development Goals**

ACCORDING TO recent reports, the world currently lags as much as a century behind on the eight **Millennium Development Goals**, which have been embraced by all 191 members of the United Nations but have been delayed through a combination of insufficient funds and governmental inaction. The **goals** are as follows:

- 1) Eradicate extreme poverty and hunger, reducing by half the proportion of people who live on \$1 a day or less and who suffer from hunger by the year 2015.
- 2) Achieve universal primary education, ensuring that both boys and girls complete a full course of primary schooling.
- 3) Promote gender equality and empower women, including eliminating disparities at all levels of education by 2015.
- 4) Reduce child mortality, aiming for a two-thirds decline in the number of children who die before age 5.

- 5) Improve maternal health, reducing by three-quarters the ratio of women who die in childbirth or as a result of pregnancy.
- 6) Combat disease, halting and beginning to reverse the spread of HIV/AIDS, malaria, and other major diseases.
- 7) Ensure environmental sustainability, including reducing by half the proportion of people without access to safe drinking water and significantly improving the lives of 100 million slum dwellers by 2020.
- 8) Develop a global partnership for **development**, including fair and open trade rules, debt reduction for poor countries, and access to technology and affordable pharmaceuticals.

**NOTES:**

Richard Horton is editor-in-chief of The Lancet, a weekly international medical journal. His latest book is "Health Wars: On the Global Front Lines of Modern Medicine."

**GRAPHIC:** CHART PHOTO

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