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The 0.7-per-cent solution

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When he released his much-anticipated report on world poverty yesterday, Harvard University's Jeffrey Sachs threw down the gauntlet to Canada. He called on all rich nations to increase their foreign aid spending to 0.7 per cent of gross domestic product, the target set by the United Nations. But in a talk with Canadian journalists, he reminded Canada that it has a special obligation to come through.

It was a commission led by Canada's Lester Pearson, after all, that first set the 0.7-per-cent goal. Four decades later, Canada gives just 0.28 per cent of GDP to helping the world's poor, a miserly sum from a country that claims to be an exemplar of compassionate internationalism. It means that Canada devotes just 28 cents of every \$100 it makes to global charity.

Prof. Sachs thinks Canada, and the world, can do better. If rich nations raised their aid spending from the average of 0.25 per cent today to 0.44 per cent in 2006 and 0.54 per cent in 2015, he argues, they could achieve the UN's goal of halving the number of people living in extreme poverty.

That is no small commitment. It means aid spending would rise from \$135-billion in 2006 to \$195-billion by 2015 (assuming a growing world economy), the date the UN has set for meeting its Millennium Development Goals agreed to in 2000. But given that rich nations have a combined economy of \$30-trillion, it is well within their means. A world that spends \$900-billion a year on armaments cannot reasonably complain that spending \$195-billion on the poor is beyond it. The outpouring of sympathy that raised billions for the tsunami victims in the past three weeks shows the money is there. Prof. Sachs argues that rich countries should direct some of that sympathy to dealing with the "silent tsunamis" such as malaria, measles and AIDS that kill millions every year.

Just five rich countries devote 0.7 per cent of GDP or more to foreign aid: Denmark, Norway, Sweden, the Netherlands and Luxembourg. Six have set a deadline for reaching 0.7: Britain, France, Belgium, Spain, Ireland and Finland. Where is Canada? Prime Minister Paul Martin says Canada should raise its voice in the world, building on its reputation as an engaged global citizen to take on problems such as poverty and ethnic conflict. What better way than to commit himself to reaching Mr. Pearson's goal? What better time than now, when Canadians are still aroused by the plight of the tsunami victims?

As soon as he gets back from Asia, Mr. Martin should meet with his cabinet and hammer out a firm timetable for reaching 0.7. As Prof. Sachs puts it, Canada is "the home of the 0.7." If we are really the compassionate nation we claim to be, the least we can do is reach the goal we helped set.

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