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## Ten-point plan seeks to halve world poverty within a decade

By **Leonard Doyle** Foreign Editor

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Ten-point plan seeks to halve world poverty

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Every year, 11 million children die - most under the age of five and more than 6 million of them from preventable causes such as malaria, diarrhoea and pneumonia.

In some of the most impoverished African nations, less than half of the children are in primary school, fewer still go to secondary school. Around the world, 114 million children do not receive basic formal education.

In a world where more than one billion people live on less than US\$1 a day, sub-Saharan Africa emerges as the worst afflicted. The continent is burdened with a unique combination of foetid poverty, declining life expectancy and falling income per head. All at a time when so much of the developing world, particularly Asia and Latin America, is enjoying economic growth.

The United Nations has devised a cure for such economic stagnation. It includes a massive increase in direct financial aid, but it is also backed up by a host of inexpensive "Quick Win" measures, proposals which could be put in place today if only there was the political will.

Take just one: tackling malaria. Providing nets sprayed with insecticide to cover beds and keep out mosquitoes across Africa and Asia would save the lives of a million children this year if it were rolled out immediately.

Other quick fixes such as ending school fees for primary pupils, providing school meals and essential health care would improve millions of lives at little cost. Fertilisers could promote economic growth and build expertise at local levels.

The first ambitious steps to dispel the pervasive cloud of hopelessness surrounding efforts to end global poverty came in New York yesterday with the launch of a 3,000-page report *Investing in Development: A Practical Plan to Achieve the Millennium Development Goals*.

Written by the Harvard economist Professor Jeffrey Sachs, the head of the UN anti-poverty effort, it calls for a massive increase in aid to poor countries from the \$20bn a year at present to at least \$135bn a year this year. He wants that to rise to \$195bn by 2015, and says that could halve world poverty within a decade.

Only investment on this scale can prevent 700 million people slipping further into preventable disease and extreme poverty, he concludes. Wealthy nations need to contribute 55 per cent more than current commitments, open their markets to exports from Africa and Asia and provide debt relief.

The report is the first event in a series of global initiatives this year focusing on progress against the eight Millennium Development Goals, agreed at the UN Millennium Summit in September 2000. So far, nearly 190 countries - including the entire European Union - have signed up to them.

The goals were introduced to encourage the international community to stop merely talking about making a difference in the developing world and join forces to act. The objective is to achieve the goals by 2015.

The goals aim to:

- Eradicate extreme poverty and hunger
- Achieve universal primary education
- Promote gender equality and empower women
- Reduce child mortality
- Improve maternal health
- Combat HIV, Aids, malaria and other diseases
- Ensure environmental sustainability
- Develop a global partnership for development

Professor Sach's report says: "We have the opportunity in the coming decade to cut world poverty by half. Billions more people could enjoy the fruits of the global economy. Tens of millions of lives can be saved."

If the millennium goals are achieved by 2015, "more than 500 million people will be lifted out of extreme poverty. More than 300 million will no longer suffer from hunger. Hundreds of millions more women and girls will go to school," it says.

The report stresses the link between development, peace and security. "Only by reducing poverty and improving environmental management over the coming decades can a rise in the number of conflicts and state failures be averted.

"If the goals are not met, millions will die who would otherwise live. Countries that would be stable will descend into conflict. And the environment will continue to be degraded."

Failure to achieve the millennium development goals will also have consequences for the spread of disease, mass emigration and threats to global security.

"The system is not working right now - let's be clear," says Professor Sachs. "There's a tremendous imbalance of focus on the issues of war and peace, and less on

the dying and suffering of the poor who have no voice. The overwhelming reality on our planet is that impoverished people get sick and die for lack of access to basic practical means that could help keep them alive and do more than that - help them achieve livelihoods and escape from poverty," he says.

Professor Sachs has previously called for Africa's most indebted countries to refuse to honour their £109bn debt burden, saying: "The time has come to end this charade. The debts are unaffordable. If they won't cancel the debts I would suggest obstruction; you do it yourselves."

These more radical proposals were not included in yesterday's report, with the aim to achieve the widest possible backing for it.

Professor Sachs says: "We have the world's eyes focused on the tsunamis of the Indian Ocean, but the world continues to overlook the silent tsunamis of deaths from malaria which take every month the number of people that died in the Asian tragedy. Every month, 150,000 children in Africa, if not more, are dying from the silent tsunamis of malaria, a largely preventable and utterly treatable disease."

So what would his plans change?

In Brookfields, one of the many slums that climb the hills around Freetown in Sierra Leone women and children with plastic containers of all shapes and sizes seek their daily water from a tiny trickle emanating from an outcrop of rocks.

The air is filled with the smell of smoke and dust. Rather than attend school, groups of children work on stalls selling mangoes, bananas or cigarettes. Others play football or wander aimlessly between the shanties.

Malaria, preventable with a treated bed net costing less than £1, is endemic. It results in preventable death, and is a major drag on the country's attempts to pull itself out of poverty.

Children make up almost half of the country's population, Many are malnourished with tell-tale swollen bellies.

Most recent reports on life-expectancy give children born in Sierra Leone a 57.5 per cent chance of not reaching 40 years of age. As for the country's schools, primary class sizes often exceed 100 and teachers often go unpaid for months.

When Sierra Leone won its independence in 1961, it was the second wealthiest nation in west Africa. After years of civil war, it is today the world's poorest, according to the UN.

Sierra Leone could benefit immediately from the "Quick Win" initiatives aimed at saving lives and promoting economic growth.

As well as mass distribution of bed nets in areas worst affected by malaria by the end of 2007, Professor Sachs also calls for the provision of free primary schooling and essential health care by the end of next year. Another "Quick Win" initiative for the coming year is the massive replenishment of soil nutrients for smallholder farmers on lands with nutrient-depleted soils.

The report would also help schoolchildren, like those queueing yesterday in southern Sudan, near the war-ravaged town of Rumbek. For them formal education must go hand in hand.

The children were waiting patiently in line, each clutching a thin plastic cup. A teacher, who looked no more than a hungry child herself, carefully doled out a thin, grey maize-and-corn gruel that most parents in the West could never convince their children to eat. Each child got one ladle of gruel, which they carried off to eat under the shade of the one tree in the dusty playground. It is the only meal they will get all day.

Yet they are the lucky ones. In the poorest parts of Africa, school teachers have learnt that there is no point trying to educate children if their stomachs are empty. So schools have become soup kitchens; providing one school meal a day for pupils who will not get anything else to eat at home. In richer countries such as Kenya, the government has promised to provide free primary school education for everyone, but it has not yet managed to stop all children going hungry.

The free school meals do more than keep pupils nourished; in many areas, they also encourage parents to send their children to school in the first place. In villages where children are still seen as a source of cheap labour, schools take young workers away from the family farms, while still leaving them with a mouth to feed. With a free school meal, parents know that their children may not be working in the fields, but they are at least not going to take food out of the family pot.

Professor Sachs travelled and consulted widely in drawing up his hard-hitting report. He told *The Independent*: "What we have done in Africa is to put in very small amounts of investment, shockingly small in fact."

Large parts of Africa suffer from a poverty trap, preventing them breaking out of poverty as so many Asian countries have done in the past decade. Dozens of poor countries are saddled with such debt repayments that they are unable to invest in the schools, hospitals, roads and infrastructure they need to emerge from poverty.

The resources needed to break the vicious cycle are within the means of the world's richest countries and their US\$30 trillion economy, Professor Sachs said.

In 1970, the world's nations agreed to provide 0.7 per cent of their gross national income for development assistance. So far, only five countries have met or surpassed the target - Denmark, Luxembourg, the Netherlands, Norway and Sweden. Six others - Britain, Belgium, Finland, France, Ireland, Spain - have made commitments to reach the target by 2015. The US only spends about 0.15 per cent of its GDP on development aid.

Among the 10 recommendations is a proposal that some well-governed, low-income countries be selected for "fast-track status" to receive the massive increase in development aid in 2005 to implement poverty-reduction plans. Among the several dozen well-governed countries that could be fast-tracked are Mali, Burkino Faso, Ethiopia, Ghana, Mauritania and Yemen. But countries with poor human rights records such as Belarus, Burma, North Korea and Zimbabwe would not get large-scale aid. Larger, middle-income countries such as China, Brazil, Malaysia, Mexico and South Africa can afford to eliminate pockets of extreme poverty themselves.

*Additional reporting: Meera Selva, in Nairobi, and Dave Tacon, in Sierra Leone*

#### **ACTION PLAN: THE UN SOLUTIONS**

1. Developing countries should adopt poverty-reduction policies by next year. Strategies need to be bold if the Millennium Development Goals (MDGs) are to be achieved by 2015.
2. Strategies should promote human rights, support public investment, make governments more transparent and focus on women's health and education.
3. Strategies must be inclusive, involving both civil society organisations and the private sector.
4. Rich countries should choose at least six "fast-track" countries that deserve a massive boost in aid very soon as a reward for good governance.
5. Rich and poor countries should club together this year to achieve "Quick Wins", including free malaria medicines, more school meals and abolition of school fees.
6. National governments in developing countries should work with regional bodies to pool ideas and resources.
7. High-income countries should raise official aid from 0.25 per cent of GDP to 0.44 in 2006 and 0.7 by 2015. Debt relief should be more generous.
8. Rich countries should open markets to exports from developing countries. They should invest more in the very poorest countries through electricity supplies and roads.

9. International donors should make sure scientific research prioritises the needs of the poor. An annual \$7bn should be given for research by 2015.
10. The United Nations should co-ordinate its agencies and programmes more effectively, ensuring that all levels in all countries are involved in supporting the MDGs.

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