

Putting the weight on us for G-8

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Sitting in a circle with a group of farmers in a village in Mali, Jeffrey Sachs asked if they knew of children who had died.

They were shocked -- not by the content of the question but by the fact anyone would bother to ask.

"A man stood up and said, 'But Mister, so many children. So many children are dying all the time.' "

The Columbia University economist and United Nations consultant, one of the most respected voices in the West for the impoverished world, was not shocked by the answer.

He has seen children convulsed in malaria's death throes, shrunk from hunger and orphaned by AIDS. He has helped put together the big picture behind those faces: 8 million people a year, 6 million in sub-Saharan Africa, dead from poverty-related causes.

And he and his allies have come up with a relatively small figure standing between the developed countries and the conquest of those killers.

"Extreme poverty can be reduced, and indeed eliminated, in our generation," Sachs told journalists last week in a national conference call. "What it will take is increased investment."

How much? To the American who would mutter, "Uh-oh, more handouts," Sachs offered background and perspective.

In lending support to British Prime Minister Tony Blair's recent call for a doubling of aid to Africa to \$50 billion a year, he pointed out that the well-off countries are nowhere near their goal of 0.7 percent of gross domestic product in foreign aid.

And whereas the European Union has agreed to hit 0.5 percent by 2010 and 0.7 percent by 2015, the United States -- second to last in foreign aid as a percentage of wealth -- stands at 0.16 percent and has refused so far to set a numerical goal even though it signed off on the 0.7 declaration in 2002. While AIDS funding has been hiked by the Bush administration, total U.S. aid to Africa is \$3 billion a year.

"The image Americans have that we push huge amounts at Africa and it all goes bad or goes away is simply wrong," Sachs said. "It is one of the great American myths."

Sachs spoke, as did Blair a few days ago at the White House, as a prelude to the G-8 summit in Scotland next month, which Sachs called "a very important moment" in "a make-or-break year" for the international Millennium Development movement, which aims to turn 1 billion people from prisoners of poverty into nourished, doctored, educated, employed and peaceful contributors to the world's economy.

His recurring theme: They die because what would be easy for us is impossible for them.

An anti-malaria mosquito net costs \$7 and lasts five years, but hundreds of thousands, even millions, of potential victims can't afford it. A village in Mali gets food drops or goes hungry when its farmers want fertilizer. A woman in Chad has 12 children instead of five because she has no access to birth control and because she knows only some of her babies will survive.

It adds up to 3 million children's lives lost every year for no acceptable reason. Debt forgiveness won't help matters very much, and government reform so far hasn't brought much help to those that have reformed.

It takes money, Sachs said. Available money. U.S. money. Astute money. "All governments are sharing. I urge in every possible way that the United States do its part, for the spirit of America and for the security of

America. It all hangs in the balance."