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Development: EU Seen As Vital to MDGs

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The EU could set the pace towards achieving the millennium development goals, leading development experts say.

"If the European Union says let's get on with achieving the goals, there's a real chance for a response from the rest of the world," Jeffrey Sachs, director of the United Nations Millennium Project told IPS Tuesday (Jan.. 18).

"Europe is the biggest donor in the share of income, it is the home of the five countries that have achieved 0.7 percent of gross national product (GNP) for official development assistance (ODA) and it is the home of six more countries that recently committed to a timetable to meet 0.7 percent," he said.

"Europe also has a tremendous grassroots movement of great interest in these issues," he said following the European launch of the project's groundbreaking report '[A Practical Plan to Achieve the Millennium Development Goals \(MDGs\)](#)'.

The United Nations Development Programme (UNDP) which financed and supports the report agrees that the European Union (EU) should lead the way.

"The EU's unique strategic partnership with the UNDP and other donor countries will play a vital role in achieving the MDGs by 2015," UNDP administrator Mark Malloch Brown told IPS.

"The EU represents a significant proportion of global donorship, so when you're talking about development you have to come to Brussels," he said. "Europe relies on peer pressure, so it is important that the European Commission (the EU executive) gets the whole of Europe behind the report."

The report compiled by a 265-strong Millennium Task Force outlines a global plan of action aimed at reducing poverty by half and radically improving the lives of at least one billion people by 2015.

The MDGs include a 50 percent reduction in poverty and hunger, universal primary education, reduction of child mortality by two-thirds, cutbacks in maternal mortality by three-quarters, promotion of gender equality, and reversal of the spread of HIV/AIDS, malaria and other diseases.

A millennium summit of 189 world leaders in September 2000 pledged to meet all of these goals by 2015. The UN Millennium Development Project was asked to develop a plan to achieve the goals on time.

A summit in September this year will review progress towards the goals and set the development agenda for the next decade.

The United Nations says more than a billion people still live on less than a dollar a day while a further 2.7 billion struggle on less than two dollars a day. Some 11 million children die each year from preventable diseases like malaria, diarrhoea and pneumonia.

Additionally, 114 million children do not attend primary school, and 584 million women are illiterate.

The 3,000-page project report lists a series of recommendations, some of which Sachs says are "quick wins". These include free mass distribution of five-dollar malaria bed nets which could save the lives of up to a million children a year in sub-Saharan Africa.

The report also calls for a strengthening of UN agencies, funds and programmes. Malloch Brown said the UNDP-EU relationship would be crucial for this.

"UNDP has key expertise and is uniquely placed to be an important delivery vehicle for a number of policy priorities, whereas the European Commission is a key global actor for the establishment of solid foundations for peace and recovery from crisis as well as in the fight against global poverty," he said.

Malloch Brown said that Europe's progress on ODA commitment has largely been positive, but the European Commission must take the lead in following up the report's recommendations. These urge donors to make, maintain or accelerate their commitments to reach the longstanding UN target of 0.7 percent of GNP for development aid.

"There is a great unevenness between the EU's member states who have reached or who are on track to reach the 0.7 target," Malloch Brown said. "The EU is currently trying to achieve 0.33 percent of GNP, but the report recommends they reach 0.44 percent by 2006 and 0.54 percent by 2012."

The five European countries that have met or surpassed the target are Denmark, Luxembourg, the Netherlands, Norway and Sweden. Among the rest, Belgium, Finland, France, Ireland, Spain and Britain have committed themselves to specific timetables to achieving the target before 2015.

Sachs says other countries should not shirk their responsibilities. "Others donors still have a lot to do," he said. "We identified that the biggest financing gap lies with the U.S., Japan and Germany in that order. It is important for the U.S. to do more and for the European connection to the U.S. to do more. This is what the dialogue between Europe and the U.S. should be about this year."

European commissioner for development and humanitarian aid Louis Michel said he backed the report "to the hilt" and said he hoped it would prick politicians' consciences. "I am optimistic about this report," he said. "It shows we have the ways and the means to combat world poverty. But it's all a question of political will. It's important to get politicians up and running."

Michel, a former Belgian foreign minister, also called on world leaders to consider more financial mechanisms to increase aid.

"The report of the Millennium Project lays down the gauntlet to the leaders of EU countries," said Jo Leadbeater, head of Oxfam's Brussels office. "The year 2005 must see substantial new investment to fund a war on poverty. The tiny amounts currently given by rich countries are inexcusable and the poorest are paying with their lives."

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