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“UN adviser says Ireland could help Africa grow more food”

--BY Christine Newman

Global development conference: Ireland could make a phenomenal contribution and lead the way in helping Africa grow more food, internationally-renowned UN adviser Jeffrey Sachs said in Dublin yesterday.

Mr Sachs, economist and special adviser to UN secretary general Kofi Annan on the millennium development goals, said because the Irish Famine was at the core of Ireland's identity, it knew the tragedy of famine and knew what could be done.

At a major conference on Ireland and Global Development, at Trinity College Dublin, Mr Sachs said Africa needed to grow more food and develop better home-grown agriculture. The science and practical techniques were there but Africa needed help to put them in place.

"If Ireland would take up that task, because very few donor countries have, and lead the way in saying let's help Africa grow more food, let's help Africa to have a green revolution, this could be a phenomenal contribution of Ireland, one that befits its history and understanding," he said.

Ireland understood practicalities and in its current generation had made one of the great development breakthroughs albeit at a much richer level, he said.

Irish people could understand the extreme food crisis in Africa right now, he said.

Mr Sachs said there were practical steps that could make profound differences in controlling diseases such as Aids, in growing more food and in building infrastructure and productivity. Ireland had a very distinguished tradition in aid.

"Ireland could really take a lead which nobody else has so far and obviously with its famine knows the shocking tragedy and knows now what can be done. It's a real opportunity for Ireland," Mr Sachs said.

Referring to last year's G8 summit, he said the promises were important. This year's promises had been clearly defined - how to fight malaria, how to make sure children were in school and how to get healthcare.

"On the ground there's also been a little bit of progress but the real on-the-ground progress needs to be speeded up right now. But I'm not unimpressed with what's happening and I don't think we ought to be cynical about it," he said.

On trade talks, he said nobody could agree or had the political will to take significant steps. However, while trade was important, aid was the decisive story right now.

Challenges included the focus and expenditures on war.

"I thought the Iraq war was a devastatingly wrong choice. I continue to believe that. It continues to threaten the development agenda," Mr Sachs said.

Minister of State for Development Conor Lenihan said the Government would launch its first White Paper on development co-operation in the autumn to outline the direction and focus of efforts in the area of development assistance

Philip Lane, TCD's Institute for International Integration Studies director, said the White Paper would shape Ireland's development policy for years to come and it was therefore imperative to get it right.

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