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Foreign aid skeptics thrive on pessimism

By Jeffrey D. Sachs

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THE DEVELOPING world often seems like highway traffic. Countries such as China, India and Chile are in a slipstream of rapid economic growth, closing the technological gap with the industrialized countries, while nations such as Nepal, Niger and Sudan are rushing in the reverse direction, with rising unrest, confrontation, drought and disease. The costs of the economic failures are enormous for the whole world because conflicts, terrorism, the drug trade and refugees spill across national borders.

But drivers can change direction, and so can countries. India, China and Chile were hardly success stories in the 1960s and 1970s. All were in turmoil, beset by poverty, hunger and political instability. Their economic transformations show that today's "basket cases" can be tomorrow's emerging markets.

Those who contend that foreign aid does not work — and cannot work — are mistaken. These skeptics make a career of promoting pessimism by pointing to the many undoubted failures of past aid efforts. But the fact remains that we can help ensure the successful economic development of the poorest countries. We can help them escape from poverty. It's in our national interest to do so.

The first step out of rural poverty almost always involves a boost in food production to end cycles of famine. Asia's ascent from poverty in the last 40 years began with a "green revolution." Food yields doubled or tripled. The Rockefeller Foundation helped with the development and propagation of high-yield seeds, and U.S. aid enabled India and other countries to provide subsidized fertilizer and seeds to impoverished farmers. Once farmers could earn an income, they could move on to small-business development.

A second step out of poverty is an improvement in health conditions, led by improved nutrition, cleaner drinking water and more basic health services. In the Asian success stories, child mortality dropped sharply, which, in turn, led to smaller families because poor parents gained confidence that their children would survive to adulthood.

The third step is the move from economic isolation to international trade. Chile, for instance, has become the chief source of off-season fruit in the U.S. during the last 20 years by creating highly efficient supply chains. China and India have boomed as exporters of manufacturing goods and services, respectively. In all three, trade linkages were a matter of improved connectivity — roads, power, telecommunications, the Internet, containerization.

Today, the skeptics like to claim that Africa is too far behind, too corrupt, to become a China or India. They are mistaken. An African green revolution, health revolution and connectivity revolution are all within reach. Engineers and scientists have already developed the needed tools. The Millennium Villages project, which I and a group of colleagues developed, is now rapidly expanding in 10 countries in Africa and is showing that this triple transformation — green, health and connectivity — is feasible. Improved seed varieties, fertilizers, irrigation and trucks have all helped convert famine into bumper crops in just one or two growing seasons.

Malaria is under control. Farmers have access to capital to make the change from subsistence to cash crops. Children are being treated for worms and receive a midday meal to help keep them healthy and in school.

Skeptics said that African peasants would not grow more food, that fertilizers would go missing, that bed nets would be cut up to make wedding veils and that local officials would block progress. The truth is the opposite. In any part of the world, the poorest of the poor want a chance for a better future, especially for their children. Give them the tools, and they will grasp the chance.

Aid skeptics such as professor William Easterly, author of the recent book "The White Man's Burden," are legion. Instead of pointing to failures, we need to amplify the successes — including the green revolution, the global eradication of smallpox, the spread of literacy and, now, the promise of the Millennium Villages.

The standards for successful aid are clear. They should be targeted, specific, measurable, accountable and scalable. They should support the triple transformation in agriculture, health and infrastructure. We should provide direct assistance to villages in ways that can be measured and monitored.

The Millennium Village project relies on community participation and accountability to ensure that fertilizers, medicines and the like are properly used. Millennium Promise, an organization I co-founded, champions and furthers the development of the Millennium Villages project. It has partnered with the Red Cross, UNICEF, the U.N. Foundation, Centers for Disease Control and the World Health Organization to get anti-malaria bed nets to the children of Africa.

In this fragile and conflict-laden world, we must value life everywhere by stopping needless disease and deaths, promoting economic growth and helping ensure that our children's lives will be treasured in the years ahead.

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