

The World; Ending Extreme Poverty Is Realistic, Economist Tells U.N.

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DATELINE: UNITED NATIONS

The world could end extreme poverty within a decade if wealthy nations fulfilled their pledges to increase development aid, Columbia University economist Jeffrey D. Sachs said Monday as he presented a plan to the United Nations for achieving that goal.

But if those countries' governments don't come through with what they have already promised, the poor will continue to get poorer and the world less secure, he said.

"We are not asking for one new promise," he said. "Only the follow-through on what has already been committed."

Sachs is leading the U.N.'s Millennium Project to meet development goals adopted by world leaders at a summit in 2000, including eliminating extreme poverty and hunger by 2015. Almost 3 billion people live on roughly \$2 a day or less, and the report spells out the investments needed to elevate them above the level of bare survival and provide them with the means of leading productive lives.

"Investing in Development: A Practical Plan to Achieve the Millennium Development Goals" is the result of a yearlong study led by 265 development experts and is designed to show "not only that it can be done, but how it can be done," Sachs said.

As he spoke at a news conference Monday, he stacked a dozen reports by various task forces, which flesh out the recommendations, into a pile nearly a foot high.

If endorsed at a summit of the Group of 8 leading industrialized nations in July and a gathering of world leaders at the U.N. in September, the plan is expected to provide a blueprint not only for governments but for international institutions such as the World Bank that oversee major development projects.

Along with a call for a major overhaul of the international development system, it includes 18 "quick wins," simple and cost-effective ways to save and improve millions of lives that governments can implement immediately. The steps include providing school lunches for children, mosquito nets in malaria areas and generators for hospitals and schools.

But to end hunger and poverty in the next decade, the world would have to do much more. In 2000, developed nations promised to take concrete steps toward giving 0.7% of their gross national product for development aid. Today, only five countries do: Denmark, Luxembourg, the Netherlands, Norway and Sweden. Six other countries have committed to reaching the target by 2015.

The United States earmarks only about .015% of its GNP, not including private donations, although that amount may grow.

Sachs has suggested that meeting the aid target should be a requirement for all permanent U.N. Security Council members, a move that has caused consternation in Japan, Germany and India, which are seeking permanent seats on the council.

"We're talking about rich countries committing 50 cents out of every \$100 of income to help the poorest people in the world get a foothold on the ladder of development," Sachs said. "It's utterly affordable."

Countries also committed to work toward eight Millennium Development Goals, including ending poverty and hunger, improving survival rates for mothers and children, combating AIDS and other major preventable diseases, and promoting equality for women.

Those goals may seem unreachable, especially as the first target -- to give girls an equal chance for basic education by 2005 -- has already been missed. The U.N.'s latest assessment showed that sub-Saharan nations would not reach any of the targets by 2015 at the current pace.

But Sachs noted: "We enter 2005 ... with some reasons for optimism both about the human spirit and the readiness of some governments to lead on some of these goals."

Britain, for example, has committed to doubling aid by 2013 to reach the U.N. target. In the wake of the tsunami, British Chancellor of the Exchequer Gordon Brown called for massive debt relief for stricken nations and a "Marshall Plan" for Africa to lift the continent with aid and soft loans the way the U.S. Helped rebuild Europe after World War II.

Heartened by the global response to the Indian Ocean tsunami, Sachs said it was time to reckon with the "silent tsunami" of preventable diseases that kills millions every year, but could be avoided through such simple measures as clean water, inoculations and mosquito nets.

"In Africa, almost as many children die every month from malaria as died in the Indian Ocean tsunami -- about 150,000 children every month," he said.

Some of the recommendations, such as expanding trade and private capital investment, require massive restructuring of governments and transformations of culture.

Such change can't be bought, critics say, but must be developed over time.

There is also healthy skepticism about the way governments use aid. The Millennium Project's research shows that only 30 cents of each aid dollar reaches relief programs in poor countries. The report offers ways to prioritize assistance and strategies to ensure that it gets to sectors where it will do the most good.

It also urges donors to pick at least a dozen countries with track records of good governance and low corruption, and "fast track" aid to them.

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