

January 22, 2005

EDITORIAL

A Proposal to End Poverty

It is so easy to sit back in the affluence of our comfortable lives, protected from scourges like malaria and extreme poverty and hunger, and nitpick to death the United Nations' landmark action plan to eradicate poverty and hunger and the plagues they spawn. Indeed, no sooner had the long-awaited report, bearing the stamp of the Columbia University economist Jeffrey Sachs, hit the street this week than some economists took shots. "Utopian central planning by global bureaucrats," carped one.

There is certainly much to debate about the details of Mr. Sachs's report, which calls for rich countries like the United States to drastically increase foreign aid to poor countries in an effort to halve poverty in its many forms - hunger, illiteracy, disease - by 2015. But this is not a time for armchair quarterbacking. The United Nations report is a bold initiative that refuses to accept hunger as the inevitable fate of so many Africans, Latin Americans and Asians. There will be and should be a debate about it as world leaders prepare to meet in September on the antipoverty goals, but it is vital that it not turn into another excuse for inaction.

Mr. Sachs's report lays out, in real terms, the myriad ways to help poor people. The beauty of his ideas is in their simplicity: Provide mosquito nets for children who live in malaria-infested regions. Eliminate school and uniform fees to ensure that poor children don't stay home because they can't afford to go to school. Provide farmers in sub-Saharan Africa with soil nutrients to ensure healthier crops. Reform and enforce legislation guaranteeing women and girls property and inheritance rights.

None of this is rocket science, although many will try to make it seem so. The strongest, and probably most legitimate, critique of approaches that flood poor countries with money is that many of these poor countries are run by corrupt governments that will stash most of the donor money in private Swiss bank accounts. That has certainly proved true in the past, particularly in Africa, where the poor have stayed poor while a succession of despots have run country after country into the ground.

But it is counterproductive to make poor people suffer because they have bad governments. Mr. Sachs says now is the time to try the radically different approach of giving bigger amounts of real, quality aid directly to recipients on the ground. That means money to clinics and schools, to build generators and buy medicine and food, instead of the usual low-interest loans to benefit companies back home.

The United Nations proposal calls for rich countries to increase their foreign aid to 0.7 percent of G.D.P. by 2015. That's a target that these very same rich countries, flush with good will at the start of the new millennium, set for themselves. In 2002, world leaders, including President Bush, supported a declaration promising to "make concrete efforts" toward the 0.7 percent target.

Three years later, Sweden, Norway, Denmark, the Netherlands and Luxembourg are already there. The United States remains far behind, at 15 hundredths of 1 percent. So, let's get started, America. The world is waiting.