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Pearson's '69 target still unmet

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Five countries have met or surpassed the foreign aid goal set by Lester Pearson 36 years ago. Canada is not one of them.

Six countries have formally pledged to reach Pearson's target — devoting 0.7 per cent of their national income to development assistance — within a decade. Canada is not one of them either.

The high achievers are Denmark, Luxembourg, the Netherlands, Norway and Sweden.

The aspirants are Britain, Belgium, Finland, France, Ireland and Spain.

It bothers Jeffrey Sachs, head of the United Nations anti-poverty program, that Canada is on neither list.

Although the Columbia University professor was just 15 when Canada's newly retired prime minister issued his 1969 report, "Partners in Development," he considers it a landmark.

It was Pearson who recommended that rich countries adopt a foreign aid target of 0.7 per cent. It was Canada — which then devoted 0.34 per cent of its GDP to development assistance — that set a global example, scaling up its aid-to-GDP ratio to 0.53 per cent by 1975.

The level has now slipped back to 0.28 per cent.

Three years ago, all nations affirmed Pearson's 0.7 per cent target at a meeting in Monterrey, Mexico and undertook to make "concrete efforts" to achieve it.

"Canada should have been Number One (to step forward with a plan)," Sachs said. "It is the home of 0.7."

But the world is still waiting.

Sachs has another reason for singling out Canada for special attention.

At the moment, 11 of the 22 donor countries in the Organization for Economic Co-operation and Development (OECD) have either reached or set firm timetables to achieve the 0.7 per cent goal. "We want Canada to become the next country," Sachs said. "Then we'd have a majority."

"If Canada joined the countries with a timetable, I think we could bring others along. It would put pressure on the United States (which currently devotes 0.15 per cent of its GDP to development assistance). Wouldn't it be great if Canada tipped the balance?"

The federal Liberals have frequently expressed their intention of increasing Canada's foreign aid to 0.7 per cent of GDP. But they've never set a date or given Canadians benchmarks by which to measure their progress.

Prime Minister Paul Martin has said repeatedly that he wants to extend the benefits of globalization to the world's "left-out billions" and make Canada a bridge between the rich North and the poor South. But his budgets have never matched his rhetoric.

Canada currently ranks 12th (using aid as proportion of national income) among the major donor nations. Ottawa transfers \$3.3 billion a year to the world's poorest people. That is less than half of this year's projected budgetary surplus. It amounts to 6.8 days' worth of federal spending.

Despite his disappointment with the level of Canadian aid, Sachs thinks politicians on this side of the 49th parallel at least grasp the issue.

The Harvard-trained economist was in Ottawa, last November, for a meeting with Finance Minister Ralph Goodale. Sachs launched into his usual spiel, highlighting all the low-cost investments the West could make that would produce dramatic returns. He talked about insecticide-laced mosquito nets, free school meals, walk-in health clinics and nutrition supplements for pregnant women.

Then he turned to food production. "What we're proposing is a Green Revolution for Africa," Sachs said. "With the right soil nutrients, yields could be doubled or tripled."

At the mention of soil nutrients, Goodale perked up. "Do you mean nitrogen or phosphorous?" he asked.

Nitrogen, Sachs replied, taken aback. "That's the first sensible question I've had."

Goodale explained that he was a Saskatchewan farm boy.

Sachs applauds Canada's decision to focus its efforts on Africa. "That is the epicentre of the development challenge."

He thinks Canadians understand that addressing the root causes of violence — poverty, disease, hunger, global inequality — makes more sense than pouring billions of dollars into military spending.

And he admires the Canadian tradition of international engagement, exemplified by trailblazers such as Pearson, Maurice Strong, Stephen Lewis and Romeo Dallaire.

Sachs is not asking Martin to boost Canada's foreign aid to 0.7 per cent of GDP immediately. He is merely urging him to lock in Ottawa's commitment to get there by 2015 and spell out how.

It is not an onerous request. Pearson would have expected it of his heirs.

Carol Goar's column appears Monday, Wednesday and Friday.

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