

JEFFREY D. SACHS INTERVIEW (1,395 words)

Since the Millennium Development Goals were put forth as a global challenge, how well have we rallied together to meet the needs of the world's poor?

These goals were set in September 2000 at the Millennium Assembly of the United Nations. In fact, most of them were recycled from commitments at international gatherings during the 1990s. Some countries are making progress but the stunning and sad fact is that the very poorest countries in the world, in general, are falling further and further behind in meeting those goals; and the rich countries that promised to help them to do more have really lost attention, I'm afraid, and are focusing so much on issues of terrorism, war and peace, and their own internal issues, that they're just not paying the attention that they promised to global poverty.

This is necessarily a contract between the rich and the poor, isn't it?

When the goals were set at the Millennium Assembly and then followed up in several important gatherings in which the United States was the key participant, such as at the International Conference on Financing for Development in Monterrey, Mexico, in March 2002, which President Bush attended, the rich and the poor countries said, "We have to do this together." The rich countries acknowledged that the impoverished countries could not fight disease on their own or solve the problems of hunger on their own. They would need help – a lot more help than they receive today. This commitment was put in a very specific promise: the rich countries would make concrete efforts towards raising their development assistance to 0.7% of their GNP. But despite this promise, the situation is worsening throughout Africa and in many other impoverished regions of the world. I think it is really a terrible mistake on the part of the rich world not to be paying more attention to this. It hurts us in the end by contributing to global instability.

When you look at the numbers, however, it appears as though we have a real shot at ending poverty sometime soon.

Well, the crazy thing about all of this is that you'd think we'd be paying more attention to these life and death issues. There are millions of children dying every year of readily preventable or treatable conditions, like the nearly one million children dying of measles, even though there's a vaccine to stop it. There are nearly three million children dying of malaria, even though we have medicines that cure malaria. So you have this stunning challenge, but at the same time there are very specific, relatively straightforward interventions in a lot of cases that could address these problems. Poverty reduction is not rocket science, but the gap between where we are and what we could do if we fulfilled our promises is stunning.

With the work you've done at the Earth Institute at Columbia University, how have you come to know science and its importance in the role of ending global poverty?

It's a wonderful thing to talk to the real practitioners who can help guide you through these problems because sometimes we look at these issues and assume they're too big to confront. Then we talk to people who work on these problems for a living – the scientists, the technology experts, and the engineers – all of whom have very well-targeted, well-designed, often quite straightforward approaches to the problem. Take the case of hunger, for example. I've been visiting farms in Africa in recent years with my colleague Dr. Pedro Sanchez, who is one of the world's leading soil scientists and winner of the 2002 World Food Prize. He is the co-coordinator of the Task Force on Hunger for the Millennium Project. When we go through the African farms in very poor areas of western Kenya or Ethiopia, for example, what look like incidental weeds or bushes to me, are for Dr. Sanchez the solution to the problem. When the landscape is explained properly, Dr. Sanchez has made me understand that the farms in Africa are now operating on soils virtually completely depleted of nutrients. It's a cruelty that the

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women of Africa go out to perform backbreaking labour, farming their land, when the land doesn't even have nutrients anymore to sustain crops. Dr. Sanchez shows how various techniques can triple the yields of these poor farmers pretty quickly, in two or three years. These include straightforward chemical fertilizers but also approaches that he's been championing, like agro-forestry (planting certain kinds of plants near the crops to replenish soil nutrients). The right kind of agricultural extension and some access to these technologies would result in huge increases of crop yields. Farmers would be able to feed themselves and their families. They would be healthier. They would be more resistant to disease. They would actually have a surplus to take to the market and engage in the economy.

How much, Jeff, as a percentage of GDP or in real dollars, would it take on the part of the rich world to turn the conditions around in the world's poorest areas?

When I chaired the Commission on Macroeconomics and Health for the World Health Organization (WHO) during 2000 and 2001, we did a very detailed analysis of what it would cost to address the key killers: AIDS, TB, malaria, vaccine-preventable diseases, respiratory infection in children, diarrheal disease which kills millions of children every year, unsafe childbirth, micronutrient deficiencies, and so on. A team at the London School of Hygiene and Tropical Medicine, led by professor Anne Mills, made a very thorough and detailed costing. What they found was that if you added all the costs, subtracted what poor countries spend on health today and subtracted a plausible increase in health spending by those countries, then the remaining costs (which would have to be paid by the rich countries) would be on the order of about \$25 billion per year. That actually used to sound like a big number, until now: we spent \$87 billion in Iraq and Afghanistan and gave away \$250 billion in the Bush Administration's tax cuts. So \$25 billion a year, from the whole rich world, actually is not all that much, since the combined income of the entire rich world is about \$25 trillion. The \$25 billion that one

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would need to launch a serious attack on the killer diseases in the poorest countries is about one-thousandth of our annual income, or around ten cents for every hundred dollars of our income. In other words, utterly affordable. This would not break the bank. In fact, it would hardly be noticed in terms of our own income. But it would make a world of difference for the poorest countries in the world.

It's astounding that that message isn't more widely distributed and broadcast on a daily basis to remind us of that.

I've wondered why President Bush doesn't get up every day and state these things. Then I thought, "Why doesn't he say it even once?" The fact of the matter is that this message is not understood. The American people, who are very generous people, believe that we're already doing everything we can do. This is a big mistake. They're not told better by their own leaders. Their own leaders say, "Yes, we are generous people," but they don't tell them that because we're generous people we should be doing what we promised, not what we're pretending to do. The United States actually gives the smallest amount of development aid as a share of national income of any donor country in the world. We're just giving about 0.13% of our national income to development assistance. Most Americans think we give 5% of our income, or more! We only give 13 cents out of every hundred dollars, no more than that. That's not enough, nor is it anywhere close to what we've promised to do.

The result is tragedy in Africa, instability, and crises. These crises come back to haunt us in the form of international transmission of disease, bases for terrorism, U.S. involvement in emergency interventions like emergency food aid (which is quite expensive compared to what preventing the emergency would have cost), emergency military intervention, and now rising cost of security spending in Africa. None of it makes sense if we would just follow through on what we promised, and took serious steps toward solving these problems.