



The End of Poverty

In a world of plenty, 1 billion people are so poor, their lives are in danger. How to change that for good

By Jeffrey D. Sachs | Sunday, Mar. 06, 2005

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What is the explanation? Every situation of extreme poverty around the world contains some of its own unique causes, which need to be diagnosed just as a doctor would a patient. For example, Africa is burdened with malaria like no other part of the world, simply because it is unlucky in providing the perfect conditions for that disease: high temperatures, plenty of breeding sites and particular species of malaria-transmitting mosquitoes that prefer to bite humans rather than cattle.

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Another myth is that the developed world already gives plenty of aid to the world's poor. Former U.S. Secretary of the Treasury Paul O'Neill expressed a common frustration when he remarked about aid for Africa: "We've spent trillions of dollars on these problems and we have damn near nothing to show for it." O'Neill was no foe of foreign aid. Indeed, he wanted to fix the system so that more U.S. aid could be justified. But he was wrong to believe that vast flows of aid to Africa had been squandered. President Bush said in a press conference in April 2004 that as "the greatest power on the face of the earth, we have an obligation to help the spread of freedom. We have an obligation to feed the hungry." Yet how does the U.S. fulfill its obligation? U.S. aid to farmers in poor countries to help them grow more food runs at around \$200 million per year, far less than \$1 per person per year for the hundreds of millions of people living in subsistence farm households.

From the world as a whole, the amount of aid per African per year is really very small, just \$30 per sub-Saharan African in 2002. Of that modest amount, almost \$5 was actually for consultants from the donor countries, more than \$3 was for emergency aid, about \$4 went for servicing Africa's debts and \$5 was for debt-relief operations. The rest, about \$12, went to Africa. Since the "money down the drain" argument is heard most frequently in the U.S., it's worth looking at the same calculations for U.S. aid alone. In 2002, the U.S. gave \$3 per sub-Saharan African. Taking out the parts for U.S. consultants and technical cooperation, food and other emergency aid, administrative costs and debt relief, the aid per African came to the grand total of perhaps 6¢.

The U.S. has promised repeatedly over the decades, as a signatory to global agreements like the Monterrey Consensus of 2002, to give a much larger proportion of its annual output, specifically up to 0.7% of GNP, to official development assistance. The U.S.'s failure to follow through has no political fallout domestically, of course, because not one in a million U.S. citizens even knows of statements like the Monterrey Consensus. But we should not underestimate the salience that it has abroad. Spin as we might in the U.S. about our generosity, the poor countries are fully aware of what we are not doing.

The costs of action are a tiny fraction of the costs of inaction. And yet we must carry out these tasks in a context of global inertia, proclivities to war and prejudice, and understandable skepticism around the world that this time can be different from the past. Here are nine steps to the goal:

COMMIT TO THE TASK. Oxfam and many other leaders in civil society have embraced the goal of Making Poverty History. The world as a whole needs now to embrace the goal.

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