

Ending World Poverty

by Swanee Hunt, Scripps Howard News Service, April 21, 2004

Health care costs for those living in extreme poverty could be covered by just one dime out of every 100 dollars of rich world income. Statistics like that make me cringe. In the midst of the greatest wealth humanity has ever produced or imagined there still exists a "bottom billion" of people at risk of death because of impoverishment.

I recently heard Jeffrey Sachs, adviser to U.N. Secretary-General Kofi Annan, lay out his goal of eliminating the deadliest poverty over the next 11 years. What stands in the way isn't ignorance. We Americans know how to do it, but we lack leadership to make it happen. We pledged our commitment to the world's poorest countries in September 2000, when U.N. member states adopted the Millennium Development Goals. These eight objectives, addressing education, poverty, hunger, health, the environment, and the status of women are to be accomplished by 2015. They're ambitious, but we have the means and knowledge to achieve them, says Sachs.

Here's the problem: At international forums, wealthy countries like ours have agreed to give seven tenths of a percent of their gross national income for development aid. But the current US level of aid is less than one fifth of that standard. That means we're 57 billion dollars short on our commitment to the world's poor.

When I heard Sachs, he had just returned from Africa, where he witnessed the effects of extreme poverty first hand. In rural Kenya, only twelve doctors were working in a ramshackle hospital without running water, trying to serve a township of 700,000 people. The health minister told Jeff that children were dying everyday because their families couldn't afford a three-dollar malaria-prevention bed net that has repeatedly proven effective.

Jeff asked an Ethiopian farmer if he used his oxen's manure for fertilizer. The farmer said he couldn't, because it was his only fuel for cooking. The forest had already been depleted. Caught in a vicious cycle, the country has a sophisticated plan for reducing poverty but can't implement it without funding.

Hopeless scenarios weren't all Sachs had to report. Over years of countless trips to developing countries, he's seen pilot projects that are working dramatically well: getting girls in school, tripling food productivity on nutrient-depleted soil, treating children for malaria, reducing HIV/AIDS, providing clean drinking water, and promoting women's status in society. Hundreds of such programs have proven successful-but Sachs says we need to bring them to scale.

To do so, the wealthiest countries must double their combined aid, so that they're giving about 60 to 90 billion dollars more each year through 2015. That figure sounds huge while the US is currently struggling with domestic unemployment, skyrocketing health care costs, and a growing working poor. But look at those billions in the context of the spending by the US government.

Our current military spends \$450 billion annually, and last year alone we gave away almost \$250 billion in tax cuts. As this preeminent macro-economist says, ending global poverty "is simply the best bargain in the history of the world."

The Bush administration's spending priorities are often defended in the name of national security and freedom from terror. But those priorities are tied up with strengthening other countries, not leaving their people feeling hopeless. Most Americans would be shocked to find out that our commitment to global development totals less than three percent of our spending for our military. "This is not the way to make us safer," Sachs insists.

Worldwide poverty puts all our lives at risk. Arjun Karki is the president of Least Developed Countries Watch, a nongovernmental coalition of developed and underdeveloped countries. He reinforces Sach's point, saying, "Today, a huge amount of resources goes to fight the elusive enemy, terrorism, while the evident enemies-poverty and want-have been left to grow more dangerous than ever before. Internal conflicts and terrorism stem in large part from deprivation and discrimination and resultant poverty and want."

Let's face it. A billion people are living right on the edge, or falling over, because we don't care. According to Jeff Sachs, we have the technology, human resources, and wealth to make us safer and solve the toughest global problems "not once, but once and for all."