



Sachs: Serving up soil for dinner

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Thursday, September 15

The ecologists, environmentalists, and conservation specialists at the World Summit on Wednesday rightly complained that their critical agenda gets short shrift in most discussions of extreme poverty.

In panel discussions throughout the day and evening, these leaders made the point that environmental degradation and long-term climate change threaten to undermine the good that will be achieved by building more infrastructure, schools and clinics in low-income countries. If livelihoods collapse in poor countries because of prolonged droughts, soil erosion and fisheries depletion, prospects for any kind of sustained escape from extreme poverty will fail.

Yet environmental concerns are more typically ignored than engaged with in the poverty reduction strategies of poor countries. Just one example: even as the farm soils in Africa are being utterly depleted of nutrients, donors are responding by shipping more food aid (and typically too little too late) rather than working with African governments and communities to rebuild soil nutrients so that crop yields can be improved from disastrously low levels.

Yet perfectly sound [methods – both chemical and organic – exist to replenish the soils](#), and indeed help Africa to overcome its ever-deepening food crises.

On climate change, the situation is even worse. The world's climate is already changing, and in complex and potentially devastating ways (including the increased destructive energy of hurricanes). Yet there is almost no concerted international effort to help the poorest countries to adapt to these changes, even as they get hit by increasingly frequent and ferocious droughts, storms, temperature stress on crops, and other ills. The climate change debate remains almost solely about [“mitigation” – the critical challenge of limiting new greenhouse gas emissions – rather than “adaptation”](#) (adjusting to the climate change already in train and intensifying).

At the level of national governments in the least developed countries there is very little capacity even to address these issues. They require complex expertise in climate, hydrology, agronomy, and ecology that rarely exists in rich countries – much less the poorest of the poor.

In my work with colleagues in the UN Millennium Project, we have found considerable expertise at country level engaged on policy issues of health care and infrastructure, but too infrequently on ecology and climate. As a result, the issues are almost never discussed when strategic economic decisions are being taken.

At a dinner on Wednesday night during the Summit, the world's major environmental conservation groups announced a new joint initiative to combine the fight against poverty and the fight for the environment. This is a worthy and timely effort, but it will work only if more intellectual and financial resources are directed urgently to national policy making in poor countries, rather than to global advocacy or particular local projects.

In particular, teams of specialists in climate and ecology should connect with policy makers in agriculture, infrastructure, and health, to ensure that the critical challenges of climate change and environmental degradation are built into mainstream thinking on growing more food, securing safe drinking water, and fighting infectious disease.

The Summit “outcome” declaration gives a perfect mechanism for action. The document calls on all countries to prepare and begin to implement millennium development goal-based national development strategies no later than 2006. Since the seventh goal of the MDGs is “environmental sustainability,” all countries are being called upon to prepare comprehensive strategies that address the interconnection of poverty and environment.

Real work will soon get underway, work that will translate into increased donor aid flows in 2006 and after. If environmental concerns are to have a central place in those strategies, a concerted effort to mobilize the needed special expertise is urgently required. In effect, the world's environmental community is being invited and challenged to deliver practical advice at country level in the world's poorest and

most fragile countries.

Wednesday, September 14

One of the important “side events” at this week’s summit was a meeting of leading scientists and engineers to discuss the ways that science could play a bigger role in the fight against extreme poverty.

Nobel Laureate [Richard Axel](#) of Columbia University spoke eloquently about the potential breakthroughs that science can offer in the fight against malaria and other killer diseases, yet the dramatic under-funding of such efforts.

[Sam Pitroda](#), one of the most creative and accomplished engineers of India (and that’s saying a lot) spoke about the tragedy that the planet’s best minds are directed at solving the problems of the rich, not the problems of the poor.

Dr. [Seth Berkeley](#), the long-time pioneer and activist for an AIDS vaccine, spoke of the critical need for scaling up the partnership of public and private institutions in the fight against AIDS and other diseases.

Yet for all firepower in the room, the crème de la crème of international science, the event was very much a “side” event in the way that development is currently practiced in the world.

Science and engineering are routinely shunted aside by the financial and political types of the international system. Development policy has been taken over by financial experts who routinely fail to realize that, at the end of the day, development will come by applying improved science and technology, not just better financial management.

For many years, the [World Bank was utterly bereft of scientists](#) and scientific inputs. Fortunately, this is now changing. The new World Bank President, Paul Wolfowitz, is [intent on focusing](#) World Bank efforts on real, science-based, and evidence-based investments, especially in Africa, and especially focused on agriculture, health, and infrastructure.

The US is little different from many developing countries these days. [The Bush Administration is anti-science](#) whenever scientific findings conflict with conservative ideology.

Thus, climate change, evolution, stem cell research, environmental conservation, and a host of other areas are managed for short-term political gain, and inevitable long-term societal loss.

The President’s lack of awareness of the most basic environmental threats to [New Orleans](#) is an example of [national leadership cut off](#) from proper scientific and engineering inputs.

We need, urgently, to recast the field of “economic development” and the role of development advice. The dominance of the IMF and World Bank in the past 20 years has led to a marginalization of ecology, public health, agronomy, epidemiology, climatology, hydrology, and other critical disciplines that are literally life-and-death issues for the world’s poorest of the poor.

The World Bank will have to divert its almost single-minded obsession over “governance” and “institutions” to focus more systematically on helping bring to bear the science on how to grow more food, use information and communications technology, adjust to ongoing climate change, and promote control of infectious diseases ranging from malaria to avian flu. These are not tasks that economists can solve on their own.

I direct a whole research enterprise, the [Earth Institute](#) at Columbia University, devoted to the proposition that scientists, political analysts, and economists, can and indeed must work fruitfully and productively together towards shared goals of sustainable development.

The results are phenomenal in our experience – leading away from generalities to practical on-the-ground solutions for tough and challenging problems. And to the delight of all sides, all parties to the enterprise need each other. Happily the economists have something quite real to add, once they’ve learned from, and listened carefully to, their colleagues in engineering and the natural sciences.

UN Secretary General [Kofi Annan](#) has called for the systematic incorporation of cutting-edge scientific knowledge into the practices of UN organizations and the advice given to member governments.

The scientific community is raring to go, to move from the side to the center of the action where it belongs. Tapping this expertise will lead to faster and sounder solutions to the toughest problems we face, in combating hunger, disease, and environmental degradation.

Tuesday, September 13

While the governments negotiate to find a least common denominator on which they can agree, the [2005 World Summit](#) is being flanked by an impressive number of commitments from businesses and private philanthropists to take action on their own, indeed to lead their own governments in the fight against extreme poverty. The call for individual responsibility in the fight against global poverty - in which private citizens, businesses, foundations, and scientists act even when their governments don’t - is catching on. And like other great movements of the past, including the fight against slavery and the fight for civil rights, it may very well prove to be the case that governments are the last to act, following the lead of private trailblazers.

The [Clinton Global Initiative](#) is surely the most visible of these efforts, drawing upon former President Bill Clinton's ability to mobilize friends from in and out of government and industry. Clinton seems intent on achieving practical actions, following the path set by America's great former President, [Jimmy Carter](#), who has proved what post-Presidential leadership can mean in the fight against disease, hunger, and tyranny. If President Clinton takes a page from [President Carter's playbook](#), the results could be spectacular.

President Carter himself has teamed up with a group of universities, private philanthropists, and celebrity-activists in a new effort, serving as Honorary Co-Chairman of [Millennium Promise](#), a new initiative launched yesterday on the occasion of the Summit. This effort, which teams up with the [UN Millennium Project](#), which I direct, will be a broad-based partnership of universities, non-governmental organizations, and private individuals, to spur private action on the Millennium Development Goals. President Carter and I are joined on the Board of Millennium Promise by corporate leaders, heads of major Universities and foundations, and leading voices in the fight against poverty including Angelina Jolie.

The centerpiece of the effort will be the [Millennium Village](#) concept, in which communities of around 5,000 people in rural Africa and Asia are encouraged and enabled to take the lead in fighting poverty, through an integrated strategy that focuses on agriculture, health, education, and infrastructure. The early examples of such integrated efforts are remarkable. A Millennium Village in western Kenya was able to quadruple food production this past year by helping farmers in the community to get access to improved seed varieties and fertilizers. This help came at a cost of a few dollars per capita, with benefits in higher food yields that are multiples of that. The village has also been able to build a clinic, step up the fight against malaria, and provide school meals for all of the children in the community.

[Other business meetings](#) around the Summit are seeing leading companies pledging to make their technologies available on a mass basis to impoverished regions. It's often the case that the marginal cost of supplying these cutting-edge technologies is very low compared to patent-protected prices in rich-country markets. The market prices of drugs, software, and communications technologies are often much higher than cost, with the margin reflecting the returns to earlier research and development. It often costs just pennies (or less) for a company to provide its software and medicines to impoverished communities for products that sell for tens or hundreds of dollars in the rich-country markets. The companies know that they recoup their R&D outlays in the rich-country markets.

Much of the attention in the fight against poverty has been directed at what rich and poor-country governments will or won't do. The answer, too often, is that they won't do much, or not enough. Despite all odds, the fight against extreme poverty is transforming itself from an official aid effort to a broader-based movement. Government remains critical - particularly to providing the large-scale financing that is needed. But in much of the world private initiatives are likely now to lead the way, in terms of innovation, proof of concept, and mobilization of public awareness and support.

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Monday, September 12

The negotiations on the draft declaration for the [World Summit](#) - which opens on Tuesday - have been nothing short of bizarre. The United States government has fought a relentless battle to dissociate itself from specific obligations regarding international development, and has tried repeatedly to quash obligations that it has taken on the past. All of this has been taking place at a time when the US itself has become an aid recipient, in the wake of [Hurricane Katrina](#).

The opening salvo a couple of weeks ago was the remarkable assertion by the United States government that the [Millennium Development Goals](#) do not even exist, so that the phrase itself should be expunged from the document. This was news to the rest of the world, who were gathering at the Summit first and foremost to find ways to reinforce the Millennium Development Goals. The US claimed that it had signed the [Millennium Declaration](#) but not the Millennium Development Goals.

The argument was not very impressive. All 18 of the targets of the Millennium Development Goals - to halve hunger, fight disease, reduce maternal mortality, ensure access to safe drinking water, and more - are explicitly part of the Millennium Declaration. With 190 countries standing in opposition to the US position, the US relented.

The longer battle has ensued around official development assistance and the target of 0.7 percent of GNP in official development aid. It seems at times that all US foreign policy regarding economic development revolves around the US insistence to pay almost nothing to help the poorest countries.

US official aid levels are 0.16 percent of GNP, an increase from 0.10 percent when President Bush took office but still the lowest or second lowest of all donors (tying with Italy for the bottom slot). US aid levels for Africa are 0.03 percent of GNP, meaning that the US gives Africa just 3 cents in aid for every \$100 of US GNP. Much of the rest of US aid still goes to "strategic" countries such as Pakistan, Turkey, and Egypt, or to US consultant salaries.

Why the US government is so dead-set against doing more to help impoverished and dying people is one of the great mysteries of our time. It's not as if the poorest countries are asking for an open checkbook or an unconstrained line of credit. They are asking for rich countries to honor a modest commitment, a mere 0.7 percent of GNP, roughly one seventh of what the US is spending this year on the military and one third of what the US has spent on tax cuts in the first Bush term.

Just as with the Millennium Development Goals, the US government has worked overtime to huff and puff that it never signed the 0.7

target, and thus should not be bound by it. Even if it were true that the U.S. had never signed on, the sight of the world's richest country denying a long-standing international target in this manner is stunning. The US signed on to the 0.7 target in the [Monterrey Conference on Financing for Development](#) in March 2002. It has since bobbed and weaved to evade the implications of that agreement.

In paragraph 42 of the [Monterrey Consensus](#), the US and other signatories declared that they “urge developed countries that have not done so to make concrete efforts toward the target of 0.7 percent of GNP in official development assistance.”

The European Union took up its pledge, and has defined “concrete efforts” as a new timetable to reach 0.56 percent of GNP in official aid by 2010 and 0.7 percent of GNP by 2015. The US on its side has simply been claiming that the target does not exist, and telling some in the corridors that signing [the Monterrey pledge](#) had been a mistake.

This aggressive position has continued down to the details. The US has fought commitments to a “Quick Win” against malaria through the mass distribution of insecticide-treated bed nets and effective medications. It has resisted commitments to quick wins in other areas as well. In the end, every specific target and timetable to help the world's poorest of the poor has come under US fire.

The US fight against the fight against poverty would be bizarre at any moment (remember John Kennedy pledging “to those peoples in the huts and villages across the globe struggling to break the bonds of mass misery, we pledge our best efforts to help them help themselves, for whatever period is required”) but it has been especially shocking in the face of Hurricane Katrina. The US is accepting aid from UN agencies, Mexico, Europe, and others, at the very moment it is working overtime to avoid or evade commitments to the poorest of the poor, who are dying by the millions each year due to insufficient assistance from the donor countries.

There is a silver lining in all of this, believe it or not. The American people have been aghast at the failures of Washington to prepare for, and then address, the hurricane. They have been shocked that [President Bush could declare](#) that “I don't think anyone anticipated the breach of the levees [in New Orleans]” when that risk was notorious and [had been discussed for decades](#).

Similarly, whenever they have gotten a glimpse of the UN negotiations, they have been shocked. Though the American people know little about the Millennium Development Goals (since President Bush has perhaps never even uttered the phrase), editorial writers around the country, in both liberal and conservative regions, were dismayed that the US delegation was working in America's name to undercut the world's measurable and monitorable poverty alleviation targets that provide a clear framework for accountable results.

Perhaps the most notable bottom line this week will be that the voices of the poor are finally piercing the deep layers of indifference and misdirection.

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