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In search of coherence **THE MILLENNIUM PROMISE:** Mark Turner reports on efforts to provide a framework to a bewildering array of projects

By JEFFREY SACHS and MARK TURNER

Business leaders who want to fight global poverty may be forgiven for feeling a little choice anxiety. A few hours research reveals a dizzying menu of projects and partnerships all vying for their time, expertise and money; and a host of development experts with often contradictory ideas on the best way to help.

But, according to Jeffrey Sachs, the Columbia University economist who headed the United Nations' flagship study on achieving the Millennium Development Goals, help is at hand. Together with a core group of corporate leaders and celebrities, he is launching a campaign called Millennium Promise: to provide a clear framework for businesses who want to do something, but are not quite sure how to do it.

Instead of a patchwork of separate projects in different places, as is the current norm, Mr Sachs wants to attack rural poverty as a co-ordinated whole, on a massive scale from villages up.

While in the longer term it will be private investment that spurs markets and growth, many people are so poor that what they need is aid. Only once the infrastructure reaches a minimum standard, studies show, does the necessary private investment follow. But no one intervention can provide the magic bullet: the only effective way to tackle poverty is to address health, education, agriculture, communications and other targets at the same time.

To demonstrate his point Mr Sachs is launching a dozen pilot millennium villages and he claims impressive early results. The first round of villages aims to achieve international poverty reduction goals in five years; the next within 10. His Millennium Promise campaign is calling on corporate philanthropists to help kick-start that next phase: a scale-up to 1,000 villages. The final goal is to cover more than 100,000 villages, the vast majority of which would be funded by a combination of official donor support and host countries.

"Most companies that are interested in working in the poorest places don't know how to do it right now," Mr Sachs explains. He says they often complain that they "don't know how we fit in the broader scheme. This provides a framework where all of this makes sense. The private initiative can get this process going. I am counting not only on

financing, but technology and ideas. There's going to be a tremendous amount of learning about best approaches."

Not everyone is convinced by Mr Sachs' approach. Some development experts are wary of a return to socialist-style model villages; others say it is an old-fashioned approach at a time when more sophisticated thinking is emerging on how to develop markets in the poorest areas.

He is often accused of Utopianism or naivety, and of being one whose ideas will shortly take their place in a long line of failed prescriptions. But Mr Sachs and his team insist that the integrated rural development approach was never given a fair chance in the past; it never received enough resources, and ended too soon.

This time, they say, they will do it right, and with governments that are committed. The attraction of his scheme for corporate philanthropists, he argues, is that while they will not replace the need for public financing, it will "fit in a coherent way" into a broader strategy for reaching the Millennium Development Goals: the standard by which development assistance is increasingly being measured.

Those goals are "quantified, time bound, specific, and multi-dimensional," he says. "They really address development in all of the critical aspects." There are many ways in which businesses can get involved. Extractive industries already working in Africa, for example, can take some crucial steps toward helping the communities where they operate.

Technology-heavy industries, such as IT, pharmaceuticals or biotechnology, can do a lot to close the gap between the marginal cost of the goods that they produce, and the market price they are sold for; and can help with training and technology transfer. But others, which have no such obvious connection to the developing world, have a lot to offer: their money, not least, but also influential contacts.

Mr Sachs a man who speaks with the zeal of a 19th century anti-slavery campaigner, claims that getting involved in poverty reduction is akin to other great social changes, such as the civil rights movement. He sees the campaign against poverty as a new approach a growing sense of international instability. "September 11 had a lot to do with it," he says. "There is a pretty deep feeling that the military approach is just not enough." In Europe, he claims, "the mood has changed pretty importantly in last 18 to 24 months. The business community played a role in that."