

Enough excuses, Canada

There are few places in the world as splendid as this one -- and for a tiny fraction more of its bounty, it could easily save millions of African lives

Jeffrey D. Sachs
Citizen Special

Wednesday, June 13, 2007

I've been observing the recent slanging match between Prime Minister Stephen Harper and development activists, including Bono and Bob Geldof, over Canada's commitment to the world's poor. Without getting into the fine points of aid accounting, there is no doubt that Canada's aid commitments these days are rather thin.

In 2002 at a summit in Monterrey, Mexico, Canada joined the rest of the rich world in pledging to make concrete efforts to reach 0.7 per cent of GNP in official development aid. In fact, Canada's effort has stalled at around 0.3 per cent of GNP. But Canada can conveniently hide behind the United States, which weighs in at an even more miserable 0.17 per cent of GNP.

There are few places on the planet as splendid as Canada, so it's truly hard to understand how a prosperous and free people enjoying a life expectancy of more than 80 years have to work overtime to justify spending only 30 cents on each \$100 of national income to help people with a life expectancy of only 40 years. Of course, everything one can say about Canada in this regard, one can say with added emphasis about the United States, which not only spends a meagre 17 cents per \$100 of income on aid, but does so in the shadow of tax cuts for the rich that amount to roughly \$2.50 per \$100 of national income.

What is perhaps most puzzling about Canada is that there are so few political voices, from any party, championing practical approaches to tackling extreme poverty around the world. Many Canadians might fret that there is no reliable place to spend extra money, no places where the aid won't simply be ripped off by the allegedly ubiquitous "corrupt African governments." But Canadians need to understand that they could easily allocate funds to places such as Ghana, Madagascar, Mali, Senegal, and Tanzania, all with multi-party democracies, responsible and highly praised governments, and populations suffering from a lack of doctors, nurses, and safe drinking water. They could also make contributions in kind -- medicines, vaccines, seeds, fertilizers, equipment -- making the aid easier to track and harder to steal.

I've had the chance to review the development plans of these countries in considerable detail. They each have highly meritorious programs in education, malaria control, food production and much more, all programs in which Canada's money -- certainly up to 0.7 per cent of GNP -- could be very well used indeed, and easily monitored. It would be straightforward to get one or more major private-sector accounting firms to do audits on such aid, to further ensure Canada's taxpayers that the aid is indeed invested as planned.



CREDIT: Chris Jackson, Getty Images

A patient in an AIDS ward in Malawi. Development expert Jeffrey D. Sachs argues that Canada and the United States cannot demand that everyone in the world respect the sanctity of our people's lives while ignoring the plight of men and women like this one.

If the aid goes awry, it could be halted.

Here's another possibility. Canada could direct its increased aid to the International Red Cross and UNICEF to support their campaigns to distribute anti-malaria bed nets to Africa's children and pregnant mothers.

I've seen many children in death throes because their families (and governments) could not afford bed nets for them. I'd be ready at any moment to accompany any Canadian leaders to a rural African clinic so that they too can see children in comas, or in respiratory distress as they die of largely preventable and wholly treatable diseases. It would cost each Canadian merely \$100 to fund the \$3 billion required to provide comprehensive malaria control across all of Africa. Canada, on its own, could save more than one million African lives per year.

Let me try one more. I directed a four-year effort for former UN secretary general Kofi Annan on how to achieve the Millennium Development Goals. More than 250 world-leading scientists and development experts donated their time to produce 14 volumes delivered to the world's governments in January 2005. These volumes detailed numerous practical ways to spend development aid to trigger long-term development.

Alas, when my colleagues and I went to Canadian authorities in 2005 and 2006 to mobilize support for such efforts, we were told that the Canadian government was not prepared to do any more at the time, and that we should come back later. In the meantime we turned to private-sector leaders to raise more than \$100 million in private philanthropic contributions -- including \$3 million from Canada -- to demonstrate in partnership with the UN how the aid recommendations would in fact work on the ground.

Here's what the Economist magazine recently reported about that 10-country effort, known as the Millennium Village Project, in one of the sites in Kenya: "In the rural areas, the prospects are often grimmest, as the population swells and landholdings shrink. But a stirring and original experiment is being conducted by the UN, in cahoots with Columbia University's Earth Institute ... to stimulate a clutch of Millennium Villages as models for emulation elsewhere. The early results of Kenya's prototype village, in Sauri in western Kenya, where two-thirds of the people, Luos, live on less than \$1 per day, are astonishing.

"With an annual budget amounting to \$50 a head administered by a UN team consisting mainly of bright young Kenyans, the Sauri villagers have apparently seen their rate of malaria go down from 43 per cent to 11 per cent (due to the provision of bed nets), while school results have leapt (due partly to proper lunches). Maize production has soared five-fold (due mainly to fertilizers) and receipts for crop sales have steadied thanks to a cereal bank."

I am happy to return once again to the Canadian government with the proposal to partner in the Millennium Villages. The project has demonstrated promising results, and the private sector has put in \$100 million of start-up funding. It is difficult to imagine an effort where Canada could make a greater contribution.

What is really needed to make such a commitment? When all of the excuses are exhausted, when the tired complaints of African corruption have been put aside by focusing on well-governed countries, when aid programs have been demonstrated to save vast numbers of lives, and when the possibilities are clear on how to save millions of lives more, what will really matter?

In the end, we need to ask ourselves whether Canada and the United States have both reached the point where we will simply stand by as millions of children die of their poverty each year, while always demanding that the world respect the sanctity of Canadian and American lives?

Professor Jeffrey D. Sachs is the director of the Earth Institute at Columbia University and author of The End of Poverty.

© The Ottawa Citizen 2007

CLOSE WINDOW

Copyright © 2007 CanWest Interactive, a division of [CanWest MediaWorks Publications, Inc.](#) All rights reserved.