

Good news for a change

BODHI Times 21 pointed out that both the U.S. and Australia governments are very stingy aid donors. Professor Jeffrey Sachs, head of the Center for International Development at Harvard University, concurs.

The Sachs Report

“The most amazing fact of all this in my view is how the very richest country in the world, the United States, my own country, has failed to engage on this issue. As the U.S. calls on the world for help, for solidarity, for community, the simple fact of the matter is that the world’s richest, greatest, most technologically advanced, most powerful country does the least as a share of its income on behalf of the world’s poor. And what’s more, that share has been falling for the last two decades, not rising.

“The U.S. foreign assistance program has fallen so decisively that U.S. aid as a share of our GDP is now 0.07 of 1% of our national income, **in other words, one tenth of the international norm.** Were the U.S. to honor (that) we would have an additional 60 billion dollars per year to address the problems of the world’s poor. **And to make the world a much more safer and much more equitable home for all of us.**

“We are foolhardy if we think that we can solve the problems of terrorism or any other of the conditions of our global society if millions of people are dying unnecessary deaths of terrible and yet treatable disease which undermine society, undermine moral and demonstrate the gross inequities of our world.”

[The U.N. conference on poverty and development was held in March in Monterrey, Mexico. Many world leaders attended, though none from Australia. The meeting was scarcely noticed. President Bush announced a new aid fund, an extra \$5 billion annually, from 2004. If the U.S. delivers on this promise, it will raise its aid budget to barely 0.1% of its GDP, a tenth that of the Scandinavian nations and Holland.]

Sachs also recently chaired the World Health Organization’s Commission on Macroeconomics and Health. This commission, formed to investigate the links between health and economic development, argued that a far greater investment in Third World health would be handsomely repaid by greater economic growth. It called on poor and rich countries to share the burden of

increasing health expenditure, and for donor countries to provide \$27 billion annually by 2007 and \$38 billion annually by 2015, compared with an estimated \$6 billion for health in 2001. The Commission’s report points out that donor funding needs to continue for two or more decades and must include payment for salaries and systems support.

Although \$27 billion by 2007 seems a large amount, this represents only around one-tenth of 1% of the donor countries’ GNP. Overseas developmental assistance is now around \$53 billion, just 0.2% of GNP of the donor countries, compared with a long-standing international target of 0.7% of GNP established by the U.N. General Assembly in 1970. Sachs asserts that if every high-income citizen of the world denied themselves the equivalent of a bag of popcorn and a movie per year, the Global Fund to fight AIDS, TB, and malaria could be supported at recommended levels.

Many others leaders have called for a fairer and safer world. This coalition of famous and like minds dominated the recent World Economic Forum and included the World Bank’s James Wolfensohn, Bill Gates (whose foundation has now given away an amount equivalent to twice the annual budget of the World Health Organization), the Irish rock star, Bono, UN Secretary General Kofi Annan and even the International Monetary Fund. The U.S. and Australian governments remain out of step, apparently as complacent of the risks to themselves as they are indifferent to the suffering of others.

Good news on global population?

Global population growth rates peaked at just over 2% per annum in the late 1960s. However, the absolute increase to the global population continued to rise, reaching a peak of almost 90 million per annum in the late 1980s. (Because the global population in 1990 was so much larger than in the 1960s—five billion compared to 3.5 billion—this increment was a smaller fraction of the world population than was the annual increase in the 1960s). Recent evidence hints that the global demographic transition (the shift from having many children where several are expected to die to only one or two who generally survive) is accelerating faster than optimists had hoped. Global population may peak below eight billion.

On the down side, increasing evidence shows that malnutrition and environmental

pollution cause significant cognitive impairment to many of the Third World’s poorest people. About 33% of children under 5 years of age in developing countries have growth retardation. This rises to over 50% in some least-developed countries. A recent study in Peru found that children with severe stunting in the second year of life scored 10 points lower on IQ tests than children without severe stunting. Thus, many of the world’s poorest people face an additional burden in order to escape from poverty.

Suzuki on overpopulation

Responding to a question at a recent talk in Hobart, Tasmania, the Canadian environmentalist David Suzuki declined to identify over-population as a major global problem. He argued that overconsumption by wealthy populations is a far more important environmental problem. It is true that a small fraction of the world’s population is currently responsible for most of the world’s ecological footprint. It is also true that attempts by wealthy populations to preach the virtues of smaller family size to poor populations are morally repugnant and unlikely to succeed.

However, it is also desirable, from a human rights position, to greatly increase the living standards of the poor. This will increase the global ecological footprint, even with substantial technological transition. The global ecological footprint already poses a major problem. So does global poverty. The only way the size of the poor world’s population will not become a major environmental problem is if it remains materially poor, or—far less probable—if it experiences a degree of technological leaping, which currently seems fantastic. Advocates for improved living standards for the poor should also support policies that reduce birth rates, such as educating women and raising real wages.

References

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