

The Right Way to Aid Africa

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President Bush recently announced a major new initiative to make U.S. foreign aid more effective in fighting poverty around the world. The idea behind the Millennium Challenge Account is that aid should be performance-based: It should flow to those countries and areas where it can be shown to make a real difference in reducing poverty.

In Africa, sustainable economic growth can only be stimulated by investment in agricultural production. Yet for at least ten years, other priorities have diverted badly needed aid money from efforts to spur agricultural growth in Africa.

The U.S. Agency for International Development has recently changed course and announced a major new agricultural initiative. This decision has come just in time, as some 186 million Africans do not have enough to eat and 31 million African children under the age of five are malnourished.

Famines, wars, childhood diseases and AIDS have dominated the headlines from Africa in recent years. There is a compelling moral as well as economic imperative to reduce such high levels of human suffering. We strongly support work to help meet these humanitarian concerns, but experience and common sense dictate that implemented alone -- without investment to spur economic growth -- these efforts will be short-lived. Expanding such activities without the economic growth to pay for them will ultimately lead to their collapse, as outsiders will not fund such activities forever.

Sustainable progress in cutting hunger and poverty will require investment in the places where people live -- rural areas -- and in the work they do -- crop and livestock production, processing and trade. Solid evidence indicates that increasing agricultural productivity will have a significant multiplier effect, helping not only farmers but also local vendors and producers, and generating capital and employment throughout the economy.

But the reverse may occur, with horrifying consequences, when per capita food production falls. In fact, decreases in per capita food production have contributed to many of the disasters in recent years in countries like Rwanda.

We cannot expect long-term stability, let alone sustainable democracy, in the face of widespread hunger and poverty. Low incomes and hunger are also significant obstacles to achieving minimum educational standards, especially for girls. In short, more food and greater rural income are necessary stepping stones for everything else we want to achieve in Africa.

Yet now there is more cause for hope than ever. More than half of the countries south of the Sahara are currently free of major conflict. During the 1990s, 23 countries increased their per capita incomes. Fourteen countries grew an average of 4% per year and another 10 grew more than 3%. And some countries, including Mozambique and Uganda, grew at 7% per year or more.

The Partnership to Cut Hunger and Poverty in Africa, which we lead with co-chairs Yoweri Museveni, Alpha Oumar Konare, Bob Dole and Lee Hamilton, applauds President Bush's foreign aid initiative.

We ask the U.S. to increase specific assistance in five vital areas: (1) strengthening private enterprise by building on the African Growth and Opportunity Act to open global markets to African raw and processed agricultural products; (2) improving agricultural technology development and transfer, including biotechnology; (3) linking food and emergency aid to a longer-term development strategy, like the Food for Education Initiative promoted by former Sens. George McGovern and Bob Dole; (4) building capacity and institutions for education, research, policy deliberations and governance, including property rights and the rule of law; and (5) creating infrastructure for rural Africa.

We believe that the Millennium Challenge program also presents an opportunity for the U.S. to show leadership in another key way -- by showcasing a new model of development assistance. This new model would actively engage African countries and various nongovernmental organizations in both the U.S. and Africa in the development and implementation of new initiatives in the areas outlined above. Together, we can make a real, long-term difference in Africa.

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