If president George W Bush would only live up to his own words at the UN and commit the US to fighting poverty, disaster and disease, says Jeffrey Sachs, he could mobilize billions of people in the war on terror and make the world a much safer place.
war on want?

“US politicians who ridicule multilateral institutions do not have to battle issues like the loss of fisheries on Tonle Sap lake in Cambodia”
expected $100 billion price tag of a war against Iraq would therefore be enough to avert about 30 million premature deaths from disease if channelled into a sustained and organized partnershhip with the poor countries.

There is a way out. It is to empower the UN to do what it truly can do. That is to organize a global response to the challenges of disease control, hunger, lack of schooling and environmental destruction – an effort in which the US would be a full participant and financier, in exactly the manner that it has repeatedly pledged.

Don’t underestimate the UN

The idea that the UN system could provide real leadership on the great development challenges will strain credibility in some quarters. A steady drumbeat of criticism of the UN agencies during the 1990s, led by right-wing US congressional leaders, has left the impression of nearly moribund institutions busy securing patronage slots for friends and relatives and disconnected from the rapid advances we have seen in technology, finance and globalization.

When I began my own intensive work with the UN agencies three years ago – as chairman of a commission for the World Health Organization (WHO), and then more recently as a special adviser to the UN secretary general for the Millennium Development Goals – I was not quite sure what I would find. The truth is almost the opposite of the views propagated by the UN-bashers. Despite a decade of criticism and budget cuts, the UN’s specialized agencies have far more expertise and hands-on experience than any other organization in the world.

Even the World Bank, with its knowledge base and ability to disburse and monitor funds in some of the most difficult settings in the world, can address problems of health or the environment or other specialized concerns only in partnership with the UN agencies with responsibility in those specific areas.

No bilateral donor agency can substitute for the scale of UN expertise and engagement, although these agencies can be important partners in a global effort.

While the Bush administration is prepared to spend $100 billion to rid Iraq of weapons of mass destruction, it has been unwilling to spend more than 0.2% of that sum ($200 million) in the past year on the Global Fund to Fight AIDS, TB and Malaria.

This underappreciated capacity is why the UN system has vastly outperformed expectations in Kosovo, East Timor and other tough assignments in recent years. An agency such as the WHO has a unique mix of technical expertise, legitimacy in all corners of the world and especially an operational presence on the ground in dozens of the world’s poorest and neediest countries.

Agencies such as the Food & Agriculture Organization (FAO) in Rome have been objects of meritment and ridicule among right-wing US senators and congressmen in recent years. But, of course, the constituents of those senators and congressmen have never had to battle against the loss of fisheries in Tonle Sap Lake in Cambodia or against drought in AIDS-ravaged southern Africa, as the FAO does each day.

The UN, in conjunction with the World Bank, should be asked to take the lead in establishing Global Frameworks for Action surrounding each of the major development goals. These frameworks would outline, in broad terms but with budgetary guidelines and timetables attached, the specific ways in which the governments of rich and poor countries, the private sector, philanthropists and civil society could get organized to win the fight against poverty and disease.

Realistic plans would be based on four Ss – scale, science, specificity and selectivity. First, the UN plans should address each issue on a scale that counts. Just as there can be no burrahs for weapons inspectors who visit only a small fraction of possible weapons sites, there must be no faking it with small-scale AIDS projects that might save one village while leaving whole nations to die. But true scale will cost money, and especially more money from the US.

Second, the UN should mobilize the best science available, as it has done with climate change and the Intergovernmental Panel on Climate Change or with health and the WHO and UNAIDS. This means an open, inclusive and consultative process in each area of concern, drawing on national and international scientific academies, public and private research centres and academia.

Third, any plan of action must recognize the specificity of conditions on the ground. There is no single strategy for fighting AIDS, preserving forests or combating malaria. Everything depends on physical geography, culture, history and other very local factors. The best way by far of bringing global science to bear on local conditions is to invite national governments and civil society in each country to prepare their own plans of action, with the understanding that programmes of merit will be funded at the international level.

That is the strategy of the Global Environment Facility and the Global Fund to Fight AIDS, Tuberculosis and Malaria. It should also be the strategy behind similar efforts to expand primary education or provide water and sanitation to impoverished regions.

Fourth, any plan of action must be selective, directing donor assistance only towards regions that will use it well, and taking a hard-headed approach when corrupt governments are likely to squander the help.

Here the US has it just right in demanding the linkage of aid to good governance and reasonable economic policies. The fallacy in the US approach has been that even well-behaved governments receive only a tiny fraction of the financial help they need.

Our interconnectedness on the planet is the dominating truth of the 21st century. One stark result is that the world’s poor live – and especially die – with the awareness that the US is doing little to mobilize the weapons of mass salvation that could offer them survival, dignity and eventually an escape from poverty.

It is time for Bush to take seriously his own statement at the UN that “our commitment to human dignity is challenged by persistent poverty and raging disease”. If he would only lead his country to that end, he would mobilize billions of people in the fight against terrorism and he would fulfill his own call upon the world to “show that the promise of the United Nations can be fulfilled in our time”.

**Jeffrey Sachs**

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