An Opportunity We Cannot Waste

THE STRUGGLES AGAINST WORLD POVERTY ARE MORE CHALLENGING THAN EVER, GIVEN THE GLOBAL financial crisis. At the London G-20 summit in April, leaders of the world’s largest economies acknowledged that financial recovery could be sustained only if progress is made in alleviating world poverty. Thus, the path to stable worldwide recovery requires that the issues of economic growth, development, and poverty be seen as linked with the key drivers of food, water, and health, just as climate change is now linked to the key drivers of energy and environment.

I co-chaired a 2008 study by the U.S. National Academies that recommended that the president call attention to the needs of global health.* But health is intimately connected to nutrition, and thus to agriculture; and both are affected by shortages of potable and irrigation water. It is hard to imagine successful agriculture without adequate water or healthy farmers, or that good health can be achieved without clean water and nutritional food. And water availability cannot be ensured without careful soil management and healthy individuals to develop and properly use water resources. Thus, health, food, and water are all central to dealing with poverty and the challenge of growth. We can begin to think now on a larger scale—an opportunity not to be wasted. Because improvements in any one area depend on the other two, why not devote a summit at the United Nations (UN) General Assembly to the interlinked broad questions of food, water, and health?

The world still looks to the United States for leadership in such work because of our scientific capabilities and our wealth. We are already demonstrating commitment in a few of these areas, notably in the last administration’s multibillion dollar program to relieve the impact of HIV/AIDS, principally in Africa. But overall, U.S. foreign assistance programs have been lagging in the food, water, and health areas, with funding for the U.S. Agency for International Development (USAID) declining from $8 billion to $6 billion per year over recent decades. Moreover, the numerous federal agencies that provide science and technology–based international aid suffer from lack of coordination in their efforts. Another National Academies study that I co-chaired concluded that USAID, bolstered by new senior administrators with science and technology expertise, should play a major part in overseeing this much-needed coordination.† The Academies’ studies also indicate that an extra $10 billion per year will be needed to set the nation on a productive course in our international aid efforts.

A pledge now by the United States to an expanded program that focuses on strengthening health systems in general, while simultaneously increasing local capacities in food production and water stewardship, would inspire other nations to support such a synergistic program. A UN summit could then be designed to obtain the full commitment of the world community to these interlinked approaches for reaching the UN Millennium Goals. Hopefully, this meeting could take place before the next G-20 summit in September.

It may not be easy to find new resources at a time of world financial crisis. But the poverty-stricken will be the first to be hit by this crisis and suffer the greatest setbacks, adversely affecting industrialized and developing countries alike. An additional $10 billion per year from the United States seems small in light of the trillion dollars that the government has put forward to address the economic crisis, and paltry compared to the sums pledged by the G-20. The United States has terrific research capacity and wide experience in dealing with food, health, and water. The challenge lies in the nation’s continued willingness to put our expertise at the service of humankind. The recent increase in the U.S. assistance budget from $36 billion to over $51 billion by the Obama administration in its 2010 budget is encouraging in this regard.

—Thomas R. Pickering

†The Fundamental Role of Science and Technology in International Development: An Imperative for the U.S. Agency for International Development (National Academies Press, Washington, DC, 2006).