

NATIONAL POST

UN 'fantasies' won't feed poor

National Post

Saturday, February 25, 2006

Page: FP19

Section: Financial Post: Comment

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Source: Financial Post

Re: John W. McArthur's letter (Feb. 18) in response to Peter Foster (Do-good Goals, do-bad Outcomes, Feb. 15)

Mr. McArthur cites the multiple "inaccuracies" of my forthcoming book, *The White Man's Burden: How the West's Efforts to Aid the Rest Have Done So Much Ill and So Little Good*, and at the end he says his letter covered "just a few inaccuracies in Mr. **Easterly's** work."

After all these unspecified accusations, Mr. McArthur is apparently able to pin down just one purported "inaccuracy" at this time: that "The [United Nations] Millennium Development Goals have nothing to do with Mr. **Easterly's** notion of a top-down 'Big Plan.'"

In the next breath, Mr. McArthur himself says that his and Jeffrey Sachs' UN Millennium Project (run from New York) "recommended an action plan" to reach the Millennium Development Goals (MDGs) using from the top down "more than 250 leading experts." To verify UN MDG planning, let readers who have lots of patience read through the following text full of the word "plan" (and its synonyms "strategy" and "framework"). The text, which is in the UN Millennium Project's own report issued in 2005, speaks about the top-down Big Plan better than I can:

"In each of these countries, the Project and local research partners built upon international best practices to identify... the input targets that would be needed for the country to achieve the MDGs by 2015.

"These estimates cover hundreds of interventions ...that need to be provided to meet the Goals. ...The second stage of the planning process will be for each country to develop a long-term (10-12 year) framework for action for achieving the MDGs, building upon the results of the MDG needs assessment. ...This MDG framework should include a policy and public sector management framework to scale up public spending and services, as well as a broadly defined financing strategy to underpin the plan. The third stage of the planning process will be for each country to construct its medium term (3-5 year) poverty reduction strategy (PRS) and, where appropriate, its Poverty Reduction Strategy Paper (PRSP) based on the long term MDG plan ... and should be attached to a Medium Term Expenditure Framework (MTEF) ... Fourth, both the 10-year framework and three-year PRS should include a public sector management strategy... Bringing together a wide variety of inputs from expert resources, the Millennium Project secretariat has been co-ordinating a multi-step process to develop a methodology for country-level MDG needs assessments."

If this is not a top-down Big Plan, it could definitely play one on TV.

Mr. McArthur seems to fear that critically examining UN exercises like the Millennium Development Goals will undercut support for foreign aid. I am as concerned about the world's desperately poor people as he and Professor Sachs are. I differ in that I think only critical examination and bottom-up searching -- with lots of local involvement and feedback -- will find the things that work to actually get results for poor people (which would increase support for foreign aid).

Alas, the United Nations planning fantasies hold nobody accountable for anything, and thus do nothing to immunize a single child or get clean water to a single adult. Such good things will only happen when individual officials and aid agencies are held responsible for delivering the goods, to help the world's destitute help themselves.

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Illustration:

• Black & White Photo: Sunil Malhotra, Reuters / A girl loiters with a begging bowl in a New Delhi street.

Idnumber: 200602250176
Edition: National
Story Type: Business; Letter
Length: 566 words
Illustration Type: P