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HEADLINE: Workable plan to end poverty ... or UN babble?

BYLINE: William Easterly, Financial Post

BODY:

Re: Letter, UN 'Fantasies' Won't Feed Poor, **William Easterly**, Feb. 25

There is something odd about Mr. **Easterly's** continuing assertion that the UN Millennium Project calls for a "top-down" master plan to end poverty, despite repeated explanations to him that this is not the case. Even though so many of our respective findings and recommendations overlap considerably, it's as if he thinks we support a global top-down plan, but want to keep that hidden.

His assertion seems to be based on a simple misunderstanding. The "smoking gun" that he quotes in his letter and in his book is actually not even from our final report, contrary to his claim. The quotation comes from a 2004 short background document outlining how a country could devise its own national development strategy. The document describes an internal exercise of the UN Millennium Project to provide a "first approximation of what a national MDG needs assessment would look like," and a methodology that others could build upon.

Far from "top-down," the Project has consistently advocated that locally tailored, country-specific strategies come from the bottom up, not from New York, a point made repeatedly in our report. If Mr. **Easterly** thinks national governments should not make any strategies or plans to guide their budgets and policies, then that is a point on which we can agree to disagree.

For the record, readers might be interested to read the following excerpt from the UN Millennium Project's actual final Overview report:

"Communities should be both architects as well as recipients of the scaling-up process, by participating in the design of programs and services. The participation of women in community planning activities is essential for success." (p. 35)

Readers can of course verify for themselves that the UN Millennium Project advocates the opposite of top-down planning by reading our main reports at www.unmillenniumproject.org. They can also review the 2004 background document Mr. **Easterly** cites at

<http://www.unmillenniumproject.org/documents/MDG-needs-assessment-methodology-Nov7-04.pdf>.

On that note, it is surprising that Mr. **Easterly's** letter questions the UN Millennium Project's openness to critical examination, particularly since drafts of all the Project's major reports were posted on the Internet for public comment over extended periods in 2004. Indeed, a large number of commentators from around the world offered suggestions for the final synthesis report alone, providing crucial feedback that helped shape the final recommendations.

John W. McArthur, deputy director, UN Millennium Project,

New York

William Easterly responds:

I hardly know how to respond to Mr. McArthur's devastating rebuttal, that the statement on "top-down planning" I quoted in my criticism of aid "plans" came from one particular document by himself, Jeffrey Sachs, and others in the UN Millennium Project -- as opposed to equivalent statements in other documents by the same authors.

Jeffrey Sachs says in his book *The End of Poverty*, in a section on "Planning for Success": "The UN Secretary General ... should oversee the entire effort ... the Secretary General ... should ensure that the global compact is put into operation." (p. 269) and that each country should have no less than five plans, such as an "Investment Plan, which shows the size, timing, and costs of the required investments" and a "Financial Plan to fund the Investment Plan, including the calculation of the Millennium Development Goals Financing Gap, the portion of financial needs the donors will have to fill." (p. 273)

The Main Report of the UN Millennium Project, to which Mr. McArthur refers, says on page 2: "Based on work conducted by more than 250 of the world's leading development practitioners over the past two years in the context of the UN Millennium Project, this report presents a practical plan for achieving the [Millennium Development] Goals." Judge how practical it is reading another blast of bureaucracy-speak from the UN Millennium Project Main Report:

"[W]e recommend that every interested developing country produce, before the end of 2005, an MDG needs assessment and an MDG-based poverty reduction strategy. We further recommend that the Secretary-General request each resident UN Country Team to assist in this process. Most often the outcome will be a revised version of an existing national strategy, including the Poverty Reduction Strategy Paper (PRSP), where appropriate. It should contain a strategy for enhanced investments at the village, town, and city levels, a financing scenario, and a governance strategy to ensure implementation of the program with minimized corruption, based on fundamental principles of human rights.

"The host country should lead and own the effort to design the MDG strategy, drawing in civil society organizations; bilateral donors; the UN specialized agencies, programs, and funds; and the international financial institutions, including the IMF, the World Bank, and the appropriate regional development bank. The contributions of the UN specialized agencies, programs, and funds should be co-ordinated through the UN Country Team, and the UN Country Team should work closely with the international financial institutions. At the headquarters level, the UN Development Group should co-ordinate the activities among all UN agencies, programs, and funds -- with the UNDP Administrator continuing to play a special co-ordination role."

Any bottom-up "civil society organization" (including women's groups) willing to run this gauntlet of top-down bureaucracy -- without any incentive for the bureaucracy to respond to their views -- is welcome to add their comments to those of the umpteen bureaucrats on the Big Plan. This kind of "consultation" is more

like those single-candidate referendums that autocrats like to hold on their own beneficent rule than it is anything like true accountability for results.

I am mystified why McArthur, Sachs and company keep trying to run away from their own arguments -- do they not believe in these arguments themselves? There is nothing in Mr. McArthur's letters to change the characterization of aid's Big Plan in my book *The White Man's Burden*, or the criticism that such planning fantasies have never worked and never will. It would be far better to work on the pragmatic reforms that will hold aid actors accountable for whether aid money actually reaches the poor.

William Easterly, professor of economics (Joint with Africa House), New York University, New York

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