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Seeds Bush planted haven't borne fruit

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Guest Columnists

A year into his administration, on the kind of day in Washington, D.C., that hints at the spring to come, President Bush stunned the international development world by promising a new initiative with the potential to fundamentally shift the way in which the United States reaches out to the poorest people in the developing world.

We listened with hope as he announced creation of a Millennium Challenge Account that would dramatically increase funding for the types of development programs that can bring self-sufficiency to the 1.2 billion people now living on less than \$1 a day.

The account was to provide \$5 billion annually in additional development assistance by 2006, but only for nations that rule justly, invest in their people and pursue sound economic policies. Bush sent a signal to our friends in Africa, Asia, Latin America and the Middle East that this was a leader who understood that fighting global poverty was as important as fighting global terrorism.

But the seeds Bush planted that spring, which we have cultivated through our networks and alliances, have not yet borne fruit. The transformative program was underfunded in the first year and could be shortchanged even more next year if the president does not prevail on Congress.

Granted, the Bush administration has soldiered ahead with the program, establishing a new agency to run it and naming Wall Street executive Paul Applegarth to head it.

Robust funding in exchange for the right type of reform is the essence of the "compact," which the administration calls this arrangement with recipient nations. What will President John Kufuor of Ghana or the leaders of the 15 other eligible countries say to their people if they implement these reforms and America does not honor its part? And how will their citizens react afterwards?

This program, however, is about more than the money.

Nations must ensure that the programs they implement are at least as focused on poverty reduction as they are on economic growth. Otherwise this compact may fail to improve the lives of those people it is intended to help. One way to ensure such a focus is by giving the poor and those who represent them a voice at the tables of power in discussions on how the funds will be spent.

The program is critical, but it is only one tool of an overseas assistance policy that includes help for all the other nations not yet eligible for it. Funding for this program cannot come at the expense of core development programs funding education, refugee and disaster response, healthcare, vocational and agriculture training, reducing hunger and promoting women and girls.

American officials must also recognize that their overseas assistance is only one tool of a broader, poverty-focused international strategy. Only through a true partnership between international donors, with the participation of recipient nations and their people, can we hope to raise the living standards of those in the developing world.

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Seeds Bush planted haven't borne fruit *continued*

And there is an international framework for doing just that, endorsed four years ago by the United States and 188 other nations. The U.N. Millennium Development Goals provide a realistic framework and measurable benchmarks that by 2015 could reduce mother and child mortality, alleviate hunger, provide basic education to all children, promote women's equality and combat such infectious diseases as HIV/AIDS.

With these elements in place, Bush and other world leaders are poised to help lift hundreds of millions of people out of the crushing poverty that has drawn such stark lines between the developing and developed world. But realizing the promise of that spring day three years ago will take more than rhetoric, and it will require the world to rediscover the sense of international partnership that, regrettably, seems so rare these days.

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