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US must show more leadership on poverty: Wolfensohn

By Lesley Wroughton

WASHINGTON (Reuters) - The United States needs to show greater moral and economic leadership if it wants to be an influence in the developing world amid the rise of emerging powers like China, former World Bank head and Citigroup advisor James Wolfensohn said on Thursday.

Addressing a private-sector conference, Wolfensohn said it was important that the United States remains the dominant global force in tackling global poverty.

"It isn't an option for the United States to withdraw, it just isn't an option," he told the Initiative for Global Development conference, a network of leading U.S. business leaders and former government officials pushing for increased U.S. involvement in ending global poverty.

Wolfensohn said U.S. contributions to eradicate global poverty were well below what the country should be spending and it needed business leaders to raise that awareness.

He said he recently traveled to Africa where increased Chinese business interests were evident,

illustrating the Asian powers' economic push into developing economies.

"There is a changing balance of which we are now seeing the beginnings of," Wolfensohn said. "It's not just us rich people sitting in fancy hotels in the United States. We're seeing the beginnings of an emergence of a different perception."

"The framework is changing really quite dramatically and so as you look at the issue of poverty we're looking at it in a different way than we did 50 years ago, even today," he added.

Wolfensohn said it was a matter of priority, not money, that should get the U.S. to boost its efforts in eliminating global poverty.

"It's a question of how we look at our children, it's a question of what we say to the next generation ... it's a question you think of at the end of your life," he added.

Wolfensohn said he supported business efforts like the Initiative for Global Development because it illustrated a growing sensitivity and willingness by American corporations to make a difference in the lives of the world's poorest.

The initiative was co-founded by Microsoft Chairman Bill Gates, William Ruckelshaus, former Environmental Protection Agency head; philanthropist Bill Clapp, former governor and senator Dan Evans; and retired general and former chiefs of staff chairman John Shalikashvili to influence U.S. policymakers to help end poverty.

The conference included panel discussions by anti-poverty and development experts and former chief executives.

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"The business voice has to be strengthened by assembling leaders from all over the country and be much more active in terms of advocating for things that we know work for development," said Jennifer Potter, managing director of the Initiative for Global Development.

Potter said the initiative would also try to bring expertise and skills of the business community to ensure aid was effective. "We think that the skills of the business community often aren't factored in to programs that are often done by the government or the nonprofit sectors," she added.