

Jeffrey D. Sachs

The Class System of Catastrophe

Disasters often hit the poor the hardest. It doesn't have to be that way

Though the epicenter of last week's disaster was in the Indian Ocean, the devastating toll was felt worldwide. European tourists apparently numbering in the thousands were drowned alongside the tens of thousands of victims who lived on the coasts of East Asia, South Asia and Africa. A world divided by ethnic and religious disputes suddenly faced its common humanity—and common mortality—in a disaster of shocking geographic reach. At least for the moment, the world has united to aid millions of vulnerable people trying to piece their lives back together in the wake of the devastation.

Yet there is a more subtle message as well in the life-and-death arithmetic of last week's disaster.

Undeniably, most of the people who died—and most who now struggle to survive—are poor. If the tsunami had hit rich regions instead, the loss of life would have been vastly lower. While all of us are vulnerable to the furies of nature—earthquakes, droughts, floods, epidemic diseases, blights and pests—these scourges systematically claim the lives of the poor in vastly greater numbers than they do the rich. Yet therein lies one key answer on how we should proceed in the wake of this disaster.

Consider last fall's devastating hurricanes in the Caribbean and U.S. Southeast. Haiti lost around 2,000 lives, while the U.S. Southeast, hit roughly as hard in meteorological terms, lost a few dozen lives. Or consider the worldwide aids epidemic, in which the impoverished countries of sub-Saharan Africa, with just 11% of the world's population, have 64% of the cases and 74% of the deaths. Or consider that both Darfur, Sudan, and the U.S. Southwest are suffering from deep and persistent droughts. In Sudan, the droughts have led to hunger, disease and bloodshed, while in the U.S. the droughts have led to economic loss but not loss of life.

What the rich world suffers as hardships the poor world often suffers as mass death. The rich, unlike the poor, can afford to live in fortified structures away from floodplains, riverbanks and hillsides. The rich, unlike the poor, have early-warning systems—seismic monitors, weather forecasts and disease-surveillance systems. The rich, unlike the poor, have cars and trucks that

enable them to leave on short notice when a physical disaster threatens. And rich countries, unlike poor ones, can quickly mobilize food, drinking water, backup power generators, doctors and emergency medical supplies in the aftermath of disaster.

If rich countries continue with business as usual, responding generously to the current disaster but failing to address the dire underlying situation of the world's poor, the world will repeatedly confront the tragic arithmetic of life and death. This is not merely a sound forecast based on the likelihood of future earthquakes, droughts, floods, landslides and epidemic diseases. It also reflects the grim fact that life-and-death disasters of the poor are with us every day.

As many as 3 million impoverished children will die this year of malaria, although easy prevention (bed nets to ward off mosquitoes) and treatments (antimalarial drugs) exist to save those children. Tens of millions of Bangladeshi citizens are being poisoned daily by drinking well water that is laden with natural arsenic, yet the rich world has not seen fit to help resolve this long-recognized crisis. And the list goes on. The failure of the U.S. and other countries to respond to such utterly solvable crises results not only in massive unnecessary death but also in a vicious circle of poverty and political instability that often pulls the U.S. directly into the fray. After the Bush Administration's initial

pledges of \$15 million and then \$35 million for tsunami relief were roundly criticized, the U.S. raised it to a more realistic \$350 million. But at just \$1.20 per American, even this increased number should be seen as simply a down payment on aiding the world's poor. Almost three years ago, the Bush Administration signed a pledge, the Monterrey Consensus, to "make concrete efforts" to provide 0.7% of national income in assistance to the world's poor. Currently, the U.S. provides less than one-fourth of that pledge, just 0.15%—a mere 15¢ out of every \$100 of U.S. income.

If the U.S. raised its level to 70¢ we would save millions of lives and enable many more to escape their poverty and their extreme vulnerability to natural disasters. Currently, our military spending outpaces our development aid by roughly 30 to 1. U.S. leadership in another battle, the fight against global poverty, would not only help restore the hope and confidence of a shaken planet but would also do much to promote the U.S.'s own long-term security as well.



ILLUSTRATION FOR TIME BY RICH LILLASH

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