

Professor Jeffrey Sachs briefs the UN Economic and Social Council on the devastating impact of HIV/AIDS

On 1 May 2002 the United Nations Economic and Social Council was briefed on HIV/AIDS by Professor Jeffrey Sachs, Director of the Center for International Development of Harvard University and the Special Adviser to the Secretary General on the Millennium Development Goals. A web cast of the briefing can be accessed on the United Nations web site (www.un.org/webcast). Professor Sachs said that beyond the very grave impact on human lives and entire populations, HIV/AIDS had devastating consequences for economic development in developing and transition countries. This was particularly true in Africa, which accounts for 75 per cent of people world-wide living with HIV/AIDS. He urged a dramatic scaling-up of access of the world's poor to adequate HIV/AIDS prevention and treatment regimes as a matter of priority for rich and poor countries alike.

“There has been shockingly low investment by rich countries in HIV/AIDS affected countries”, Professor Sachs said and pointed out that “without money it is impossible to fight the disease”. Professor Sachs stressed that since market forces responded to the imperatives of profit, they *could not* and *would not* take care of the health needs of poor countries. He lamented the fact that the bulk of research and development focussed on the diseases prevalent in rich countries rather than those that kill the most people and retard development in most of the world. In illustrating this point, he noted that the total biomedical research of the public and private sectors is estimated to be around \$60 billion per year. Research outlays for malaria, which is mainly a developing world disease, are only around \$100 million per year. Because of the relative insensitivity of the market to health needs of the poor, development assistance for prevention, testing and treatment of HIV/AIDS is *indispensable*. Professor Sachs noted that the empirical evidence shows that even with appropriate policies and domestic mobilization of resources, poor countries cannot alone reach the minimum amount required to maintain minimal health standards.

Professor Sachs noted that the needs to be addressed by the recently created Global Fund to fight AIDS, Tuberculosis and Malaria far exceeded its resources. According to UN estimates, \$8 billion are needed to efficiently combat HIV/AIDS – an amount which is expected to rise to \$15 billion by 2007. So far the Fund has received in pledges only one-tenth of the amount required. He noted that world military expenditure per year was \$800 billion compared to the \$25 billion estimated by the WHO report of the Commission on Macroeconomics and Health required for global public health needs. Professor Sachs said that timely and bold action could save 8 million lives per year. He reminded the Council that the cost of intervention to stop the spread of the disease was much less than what would be required to deal with its economic consequences.

Professor Sachs acknowledged that there was a new spirit of international cooperation since the International Conference on Financing for Development held from 18-22 March 2002 in Monterrey, Mexico, but he characterized this as *fragile*. He expressed the hope that this spirit would translate into specific targets for the Children's Summit, the World Food Summit and the World Summit on Sustainable Development to support the goals already agreed to by the Heads of State and Government at the Millennium Summit.

Professor Sachs also spoke of the risks in Asia and the transition countries, which could see their development undermined by their inaction on halting the spread of HIV/AIDS. He said that the prospects for stopping the spread of the HIV/AIDS were quite positive since, unlike during the Black Plague of the Middle Ages, the world now has the technology to effectively fight it. He contended that currently, the combination drug therapies are very effective in prolonging life, if taken reliably, (although there is the danger of drug resistance.) He noted that there are some promising scientific leads for prevention and a number of vaccine trials are under way at Merck and at Harvard and Oxford Universities with funding from the Gates Foundation.

He expressed the view that public health has to take precedence over intellectual property rights but acknowledged that ways have to be found to take care of the interests of both. In this connection, he said that differential pricing and the use of generic drugs were ways of achieving this. While compulsory licensing is an appropriate response that has been effective in Brazil and India, he noted that this approach was only useful in countries, which had pharmaceutical industry with an adequate production capacity.

Professor Sachs expressed the hope that the Economic and Social Council in its upcoming High-Level Segment meeting -- to be held from 1-3 July 2002 in New York -- would send the message that HIV/AIDS is a fundamental barrier to development and that the Global Fund should be fully funded. He also urged that each United Nations agency should help those countries that receive assistance from the Global Fund to monitor, evaluate and management the funds entrusted to them, so as to increase effective and credible use of these funds.

The Economic and Social Council was established by the United Nations Charter as the principal organ to coordinate the economic, social, and related work of the United Nations and the specialized agencies and institutions. The Council has 54 members, elected for three-year terms by the UN General Assembly. In 2002 the President of the Council is H.E. Ambassador Ivan Šimonović from Croatia. The Council generally holds several short sessions throughout the year to deal with the organization of its work, as well as one four-week substantive session in July, alternating between New York and Geneva. The substantive session includes a high-level segment, attended by Ministers and heads of UN agencies, the International Monetary Fund (IMF), the World Bank and representatives of civil society, to discuss major economic, social and humanitarian issues. In 2002, the focus of the high-level segment will be on the contribution of human resources development, including areas of health and education, to the process of development. The web site of the Economic and Social Council is <http://www.un.org/esa/coordination/ecosoc/>.