

Science and International Development: Working together in the fight against poverty

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2005 is an important year for the UK and for the world. It is the year in which the UK has chosen to make Africa and climate change the two priorities for its Presidencies of the G8 and the EU. It is the year in which we all have a unique opportunity to take decisions that could make poverty history.

Science and technology are an essential part of our fight against world poverty. For centuries we have seen new vaccines, medicines and new crops transforming peoples' lives. Achieving the Millennium Development Goals is, I believe, the greatest moral challenge faced by our generation; science and technology is one of our greatest assets in trying to do so. As John Smith said in 1993, we now need to "seize the opportunities which a modern world makes available".

In doing this we very much welcome the support, and scrutiny of Parliamentarians. The House of Commons Science and Technology Select Committee has played a particularly important role and their recent report, while recognising the high quality of much of our work, called on DFID to place a greater emphasis on the part science can play in international development.

We agreed with much the Committee had to say. We have already responded positively. We are, for example, increasing our central research budget by 58%, from £86 million last year to £136 million by 2007-08. Earlier this year we created a new senior post of Chief Scientific Adviser within DFID, to which we have appointed Professor Sir Gordon Conway. Sir Gordon has already made a valuable

contribution to the Department and is now in the process of developing DFID's science and innovation strategy.

To illustrate the impact science can have on real peoples' lives, take this example. DFID-funded research in Zambia showed that when HIV-positive children were treated with an antibiotic called co-trimoxazole to avert some of the infections they were susceptible to, the anticipated death rate fell by 43%. In fact, the decline in the number of children who needed treatment was so dramatic the trial was stopped early to focus on this success. This research has led to important changes in policy and key organisations such as WHO and UNICEF are now spreading the word about the benefits of co-trimoxazole.

But, with the support of the international community, I believe scientists and policy makers in developing countries can make a still greater impact on peoples' lives. To do so they need to join forces even more closely and there are four main areas where I believe action is needed to make this happen:

Capacity – Developing countries need the local capacity to undertake, and to use, science and research. They also need the capacity to be "intelligent customers" of science and technology, able to make informed choices about the role that science and technology should play in their development.

Evidence – This Government is committed to an evidence-based approach to policy making. Evidence-based policy development



should be an integral part of good governance in developing countries too. And this cannot happen if they do not have access to the evidence that science, and the scientific process, can bring to the table.

Affordability – Science and research should deliver practical, affordable and locally acceptable solutions. This is essential if the products of research are to be adopted and incorporated into policy and practice.

Partnerships – Governments cannot tackle poverty on their own. For science to really make the contribution it can, developing countries need to encourage and promote partnerships between scientists and policy makers; partnerships that include both the public and private sectors; and, most importantly, partnerships that include poor people.

Both the Commission for Africa report "Our Common Interest" and the report of the UN Secretary General for the Millennium Review Summit "In Larger Freedom" rightly stress the importance of science and technology in addressing the Millennium Development Goals. We agree with their conclusions. Through our combined efforts, we can end hunger and halt the spread of HIV.

The global community will be reviewing progress towards the Millennium Development Goals in September. Despite some important steps forward, we know already that we will have to do much better to have any chance of meeting the Goals by 2015. And we are increasingly recognising that this also means making ever better use of science and research.