

## The state of the world's children: Canada's paltry aid contribution

As we approach another G8 summit that will again attempt to focus the attention of wealthy nations on the health and development problems of the world's poor, it is difficult to avoid noticing the chasm between the Canadian political agenda — focused on the interests of 32 million people among whom overnutrition is common and going hungry rare — and the international agenda of agencies such as UNICEF, focused on the plight of 1 billion children who live and die in poverty, mostly in families who earn less than US\$1 a day — “dollar-a-day poverty.”

Future historians will surely record the present rancorous chapter in Canadian politics as a stagnant time. They will note Parliament's paralysis-by-scandal, its incoherence over Kyoto, the gun registry, military spending and immigration, divisions over the definition of marriage, and inexhaustible promises to assuage the nation's dissatisfaction with health care (in a country that already ranks in the top 5 or 6 in health and health care spending). Meanwhile, amid the narcissistic ferment of domestic politics, a scandal of a different kind is ignored: the failure of our government to fulfill its promises with respect to international aid. For we continue to fall far short of our commitment to contribute 0.7% of GNP as official development assistance. Even the recent 2005 budget and promises of an additional Can\$3.4 billion over 5 years will not redeem us, for this amount will barely keep pace with inflationary growth in GNP.

UNICEF's 2005 report on *The State of the World's Children*<sup>1</sup> is, sadly, also a record of stagnation. Childhood in much of the world remains “an empty word and a broken promise.” The Millennium Development Goals that relate to childhood remain “seriously off track” in the categories of gender inequality (121 million children, mostly girls, do not attend school), childhood survival to age 5 (10.6 million children die each year from preventable diseases, many vaccine preventable) and families and women (500 000 women die in childbirth and 15 million suffer injuries, infections and disabilities in pregnancy or childbirth; over 2 million children under 15 have HIV/AIDS).

Experts agree that childhood could be retrieved among many of the world's poor if wealthy countries contributed more money toward basic needs — food, shelter, education and minimal health care. And so, why is it that Canada ranks only 13th among the 22 OECD countries in percent-

age of GNP devoted to official foreign aid? With current aid donations standing at 0.28%, it would take only an additional 2.3% of the federal budget (an average of \$134 per capita) to reach the international goal set by the Pearson Commission in 1969.

Pondering the roots of our collective failure to respond, James Maskalyk, a former *CMAJ* editorial fellow, recently commented on the plight of a 14-year-old girl being treated in a clinic in Zimbabwe for disseminated herpes secondary to HIV. She was in the care of her grandmother because both her parents had died of AIDS. (Indeed, 15 million children under the age of 18 are orphaned by HIV/AIDS.) He writes (see Dr. Blog at [www.cmaj.ca](http://www.cmaj.ca)):

“Where is everyone else? Why aren't we all over here?” But I know the answers to that question, that our ability to empathize drops logarithmically with geographical distance, the rate of its decline taken to the power of how many degrees of separation lie between us and the problem. With the algebraic distance, our thoughts turn to our problems, more pressing not because of their weight, but because of their closeness.

That is of course the reason for our lack of interest, neglect and intense focus on what we can see — ourselves. But wouldn't it be great if our parliamentarians simply made one serious, nonpartisan commitment: that together, regardless of the timing and the rancour of the next election, they will at the next sitting of Parliament pass legislation committing the government and the people of Canada to bring our development assistance budget to 0.56% of our gross national income by 2010 and to 0.7% by 2015 (targets recently established by the European Commission).<sup>2</sup> The amount of new or reallocated money is trivial in relation to our collective affluence. We should adopt these targets, announce them at the G8 summit and then meet them. — *CMAJ*

### References

1. UNICEF. *The state of the world's children 2005. Childhood under threat*. Available: [www.unicef.org/sowc05/english/fullreport.html](http://www.unicef.org/sowc05/english/fullreport.html) (accessed 2005 June 6).
2. European Commission. European Commission welcomes Council's decision to set new ambitious targets for development aid [news release]. EU document IP/05/598. 2005 May 24. Available: <http://europa.eu.int/rapid/pressReleasesAction.do?reference=IP/05/598&format=HTML&aged=0&language=EN&guiLanguage=en> (accessed 2005 Jun 10).