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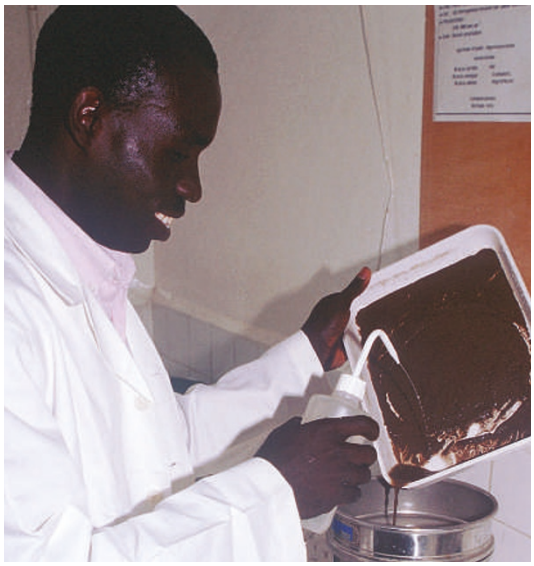
Helping make poverty history

Early in July, the streets of Edinburgh were packed with protestors proclaiming a joint commitment to "make poverty history". Their demand was aimed at the leaders of the G8 group of leading industrialized nations, who were about to hold their annual summit in the nearby resort of Gleneagles.

For most of these protestors, the continued social and economic distress of many of the world's developed nations was primarily due to a single factor: globalization. The implication was that this process must be stopped, if not reversed, if poverty is to be eliminated.

For many developing countries themselves, however, globalization is not the problem but the solution, or at least part of it. Countries in Africa in particular are increasingly looking at the experiences of the emerging economies of East Asia as models of their own development. The challenge is to ensure that globalization works in their interests, not against them.



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DEVELOPING COUNTRIES NEED TO BUILD THEIR OWN RESEARCH CAPACITY.

One factor above all others — as countries like Korea and even China have shown — is likely to make this possible: the ability to master new technology. And this requires developing a basic capacity in science and technology, the bedrock on which this mastery is built.

The determination is certainly there, at least in some countries. South Africa, Ghana and Kenya, for example, have each been exploring ways to build scientific and technological capacity in fields ranging from information and communication technologies to nanotechnology, keen to demonstrate that cutting-edge technology is not a preserve of the developed world.

Tanzania is discussing plans for creating an African centre of excellence in measurement science. And Nigeria has announced plans for its own space programme — emphasising that this will not involve putting a Nigerian into space, but developing ways of using earth observation satellites to assist farmers and town planners.

Many factors are needed to help these efforts succeed. One is the rebuilding of universities that have fallen into neglect across the continent. This has often been the result of aid institutions such as the World Bank that, although correctly identifying pressing educational needs in the primary sector, have failed to recognize that higher education is in many ways just as important.

A second need is a cultural and political shift within African countries themselves. Each needs to see science and technology as part of their own destiny — and thus an important domestic priority — not (as still occurs too frequently) as manifestations of the remnants of colonialist power.

The third need is to develop political mechanisms to ensure that the benefits of science and technology — whether social or economic — are not restricted to small, well-educated elites. They must be shared widely among the population, with a particular focus on the needs of the poor (see www.scidev.net/nanotechnology; the SciDev.Net website provides news and information about the role of science and technology in meeting the needs of the developing world).

Finally, a substantially increased financial commitment from the developed world is required if all this is to happen. Such an increase has been recommended by the Commission for Africa, a body set up in 2004 by British Prime Minister Tony Blair. In its report, published in March 2005, the commission recommended that an extra $5 billion be provided over the next ten years to develop African universities, and a further $3 billion for setting up centres of research excellence.

How much of this money will materialize remains to be seen; ominously — and despite hopes to the contrary — the G8 leaders declined to endorse the commission's recommendations in their final communiqué from the Gleneagles meeting. But at the very least, the debate around the commission's report has helped stimulate a new commitment within Africa itself to the importance of science and technology.

During the post-colonial period, science has not been a priority for countries — or the aid agencies trying to help them — in their struggle with poverty, disease and the food scarcity. As that period comes to an end, both sides are realizing that science and technology are not only a vital component of that struggle, but also key factors in allowing such countries to determine their own destiny.

Making poverty history may still be a long way off. Making science and technology part of the struggle to achieve this is a more realistic — but equally pressing — goal.