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Facing the truth about humanitarian aid

By **BILL GATES**

A WEEK ago, Oxfam and Save the Children released a report saying that emergency relief in the Horn of Africa came months late, costing thousands of lives and millions of dollars. Oxfam and Save the Children conclude that humanitarian assistance should be done differently.

The anti-foreign aid establishment is using the report to argue that aid doesn't work and should be cut across the board.

The very fact that US\$2.1bil (RM6.2bil) has been donated to help the victims of the famine is a testament to human beings' generosity. But that fact of our generosity also explains why I am so frustrated by the increasing opposition in many rich countries to foreign aid.

We know people care about the suffering of others. Not only that. They are willing to express their caring by making significant donations, even in very hard times. So what keeps them from supporting government investments to alleviate extreme suffering?

According to public opinion research, many people believe aid is either stolen by corrupt leaders or wasted on ineffective programmes.

Naturally, no one is eager to make investments they're convinced won't pay off.

There is also the argument that aid doesn't work even when it gets to its intended recipients. This claim is not convincing either. In the past

50 years, the number of children who die every year has gone down from 20 million to fewer than eight million. Meanwhile, the proportion

of people living in extreme poverty has declined by more than half. These massive improvements are due in large part to aid-funded programmes to buy vaccines and boost farmers' productivity.

I am confident that we can get the price of AIDS drugs down to US\$300 (RM910) per person per year in the very near future. That will mean that every US\$300 a

country gives to the Global Fund to Fight AIDS, TB and malaria represents a person who will stay alive for another year.

Every US\$300 that's not forthcoming represents a human being who will almost certainly die. That is a stark but realistic way to think about the choices we're making when we debate aid budgets. My hope is that we can convert some of the generosity that goes into humanitarian relief into stronger support for foreign aid programmes.

Many of those suffering in the Horn of Africa were going hungry before there was a recognised emergency in the region. In fact, more than one billion people in the world don't have enough food to eat.

One of the most powerful solutions to this problem is to help poor farmers get more out of their tiny plots of land. In parts of South Asia and sub-Saharan Africa especially, farmers plant low-yielding seeds,

climate change is starting to shrink their harvests, and plant diseases are invading their fields.

New seeds and other tools can help farmers cope with these challenges. For example, my foundation helped fund the development of a variety of rice that can survive

flooding and will feed an extra 30 million people every year in Bangladesh and India.

That additional rice will not only prevent starvation but also help farmers earn more so they can take sick children to the doctor and pay school fees.

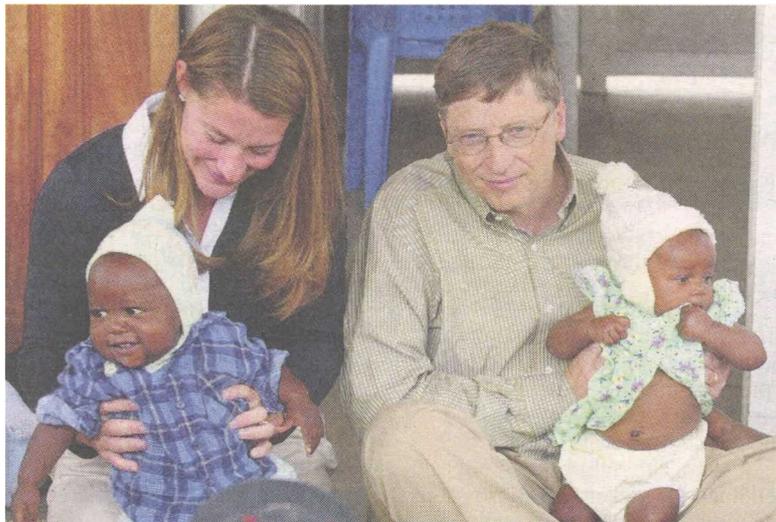
The question is, how do we continue to do the research needed to develop these new tools? Poor countries are investing more in their own agricultural sectors, but they don't have the resources to lead on R&D.

Aid is a key piece of the puzzle, and right now the entire research budget of the group responsible for agricultural science for the poorest is just US\$300mil (RM910mil) per year. It's a shame to see such a high-leverage opportunity generate such ambivalence.

I am proud to live in a world where a stranger's suffering matters. Yet foreign aid, the best way to address that suffering, has a growing legion of critics. That is a contradiction we must remedy, and the best way to do it is to tell the truth about aid. — © 2012 The International Herald Tribune

Bill Gates is co-chairman of the Bill & Melinda Gates Foundation.

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Caring souls: Bill and Melinda Gates during their visit to the Manhica Health Research Centre in Mozambique. The couple hopes to right the misconception surrounding foreign aid. – Reuters