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Sachs: Breakthrough leadership for the World Bank

Editor's Note: Jeffrey D. Sachs is Professor of Economics and Director of the Earth Institute at Columbia University. He is also Special Adviser to United Nations Secretary-General on the Millennium Development Goals. For more from Sachs, visit [Project Syndicate](#) or follow it on [Facebook](#) and [Twitter](#).

By **Jeffrey D. Sachs**, [Project Syndicate](#)

Last month, I called for the World Bank to be led by a global development leader rather than a banker or political insider. “The Bank needs an accomplished professional who is ready to tackle the great challenges of sustainable development from day one,” I wrote. Now that US President Barack Obama has nominated Jim Kim for the post, the world will get just that: a superb development leader.

Obama has shown real leadership with this appointment. He has put development at the forefront, saying explicitly, “It’s time for a development professional to lead the world’s largest development agency.”

Kim’s appointment is a breakthrough for the World Bank, which I hope will extend to other global institutions as well. Until now, the United States had been given a kind of carte blanche to nominate anyone it wanted to the World Bank presidency. That is how the Bank ended up with several inappropriate leaders, including several bankers and political insiders who lacked the knowledge and interest to lead the fight against poverty.

In order to break this tradition, and to underscore the critical importance of putting a development leader in charge of the Bank, I entered the campaign myself, and I was deeply honored by the public support that I received from a dozen countries, and by the private support of many more. Kim’s nomination was a win for all, and I was delighted to withdraw my candidacy to back him.

Kim is one of the world’s great leaders in public health. He has worked with another great public-health leader, Paul Farmer, to pioneer the extension of treatment for AIDS, tuberculosis, and other diseases to the world’s poorest people. More recently, he has been President of Dartmouth College, a leading American university. He therefore combines professional expertise, global experience, and considerable management know-how – all perfect credentials for the World Bank presidency.

I have worked closely with Kim over the years. He is a visionary, seeing the possibility of providing care where none is yet available. He is bold, ready to take on great challenges. And he is utterly systematic in his thinking,

designing new protocols and delivery systems for low-income communities. He led the effort by the World Health Organization to scale up AIDS treatment for people in low-income countries, and he did an exemplary job.

The US appointment is not the end of the story. The World Bank's 25 Executive Directors, representing 187 member countries, must now confirm the choice from among three nominees. He faces a challenge from Nigeria's esteemed finance minister, Ngozi Okonjo-Iweala, and Colombia's former finance minister, José Antonio Ocampo. Yet Kim is the overwhelming favorite to get the position, especially given his stellar global record of accomplishment.

The past month has brought other reminders of why the Bank counts so much, and why I emphasized the urgent need to professionalize its leadership. Tragically, the government of Mali was overthrown in a military coup. Ironically, an election was scheduled for this spring, so the country was to have a new government soon.

I link the coup and the World Bank for the following reason: Mali is yet another example of a country where extreme poverty, hunger, disease, drought, and famine cause political instability and violence.

I know the country well. Indeed, the Earth Institute (which I direct) has a large office in Mali. Several years ago, Mali's government appealed to me for help to fight the country's worsening poverty. I tried to rally global support for Mali, but the Bank and others barely responded. They did not see the dangers that were so evident to all of us working in villages around the country.

Of course, poverty is not the only cause of Mali's instability. Ethnic divisions, the extensive market in weapons, spillovers from Libya's violence, and other factors have played a large role. But, around the world, poverty is the basic condition that accelerates and intensifies violence.

This year's drought made a bad situation in Mali much worse. I have been saying and writing for years that the dryland regions stretching West to East – from Senegal to Mali, Niger, Chad, Sudan, Somalia, Yemen, Iraq, Iran, Pakistan, and Afghanistan – are a growing tinder box, where climate change, drought, hunger, and population growth are creating ever greater instability.

That instability erupts into war with terrifying frequency. As a development specialist working on the ground in the drylands, I know that no military solution can stabilize this vast region as long as people remain hungry, face famines, lack water, and are without livelihoods and hope. Sustainable development is the only path to sustainable peace.

The US government is finally waking up to this new and frightening reality. The US government is finally waking up to this new and frightening reality. An assessment by America's intelligence agencies, released in February, argues that, "during the next 10 years, water problems will contribute to instability in states important to US national security interests." Of course, not only US security is at stake; so are *globalsecurity* and the survival and well-being of vast numbers of people. And there is no need to wait for the coming 10 years: the grim reality predicted in the report is already with us.

All of this underscores the importance of the World Bank and Kim's role at the helm. The Bank can be where the world convenes to address the dire, yet solvable, problems of sustainable development, bringing together governments, scientists, scholars, civil-society organizations, and the public to advance that great cause. This is a global imperative, and we can all contribute to fulfilling it by ensuring that the World Bank is an institution truly for the world, led with expertise and integrity. Kim's nomination is a tremendous step toward that goal.

The views expressed in this article are solely those of Jeffrey D. Sachs.

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