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# ***The Millennium Development Goals (MDGs): Useful Instrument or Distraction***

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## **MDGs: A Debatable Initiative <sup>1</sup>**

The Millennium Development Goals originated in the Millennium Declaration Resolution by heads of State and Government at the 2000 UN General Assembly and subsequent events. Although they embody a commitment to reduce global ills such as poverty, they seem a pale embodiment of the hopes of the UN global conferences of the 1990s, like those of Copenhagen and Beijing. From the point of view of civil society organizations (CSOs) specifically, they are too limited, general, modest and lacking in specific accountability for the northern wealthy countries in aligning their own national interests with international priorities.

By 2015, all 189 United Nations Member States pledged to:

- 1) Reduce by half extreme poverty and hunger
- 2) Achieve universal primary education
- 3) Promote gender equality and empower women
- 4) Reduce child mortality
- 5) Improve maternal health
- 6) Combat HIV/AIDS, malaria and other diseases
- 7) Ensure environmental sustainability
- 8) Develop a global partnership for development

Simultaneously, the UN set up indicators, very broad but somewhat concrete tools, to measure the progress of each these goals, although goal 8 lacks the specific times and targets of the others. For example, the second goal to achieve universal primary education, includes three indicators: net enrolment ratio in primary education, proportion of pupils starting grade one who reach grade five, and literacy rate of 15-24 year olds.

However, the MDGs Resolution lacks a more specific understanding of who will be held accountable for the goals completion. As noted, the last of these goals does not state clear targets and timelines, nor does it mention the commitments of developed countries to a more equitable international system and to increased resource flows for development. This assessment is essential in particular regarding northern, wealthy governments and their implication in the process of development.

Civil society's positioning vis-à-vis these MDGs and the UN's campaign for their accomplishment are critical components because they can be used to provoke development debate, enhance and flesh out the goals themselves, and go far beyond,

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<sup>1</sup> **Note:** *This paper is a brief and preliminary contribution to discussion. For more thorough and up to date treatment of these issues see We the peoples...2005. The UN Millennium Declaration and Beyond, Mobilizing for Change: Messages from Civil Society (NSI/WFUNA, 2005)*

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whether by pressing for MDGs +, or regionally or sectorally appropriate goals and targets. But can they be “owned”, can they be appropriated and modified by democratic means?. “Democratic” in this case means that all actors affected by the goals, and not just the rich and few who set them will have a say in the approaches used to achieve them and how they are prioritized. As the West African Civil Society Forum on the MDGs stated in February 2003 “the role of civil society organisations in the implementation of the Millennium Development Goals will be a role of questioning, monitoring, criticism, alternative seeking and advocacy”. The role of civil society is thus to develop and propose alternatives and to demonstrate that other economic and social options are possible at both national and sub-regional levels.

A review of the present position of key actors working towards the Goals’ attainment will help bring forth the specific limitations and potential involvement of CSOs and the UN in this process of implementation.

### **Reporting on the North’s Inaction**

In reality, only a few northern governments such as Denmark and Sweden have begun to restate their development programmes and to evaluate their contribution in terms of the MDGs. The Washington-based Center for Global Development (CDG), examined the behaviour of OECD nations in its 2003 report Ranking the Rich. The disparity between wealth and the provision of development assistance was notable for some countries. Two of the largest aid providers, the United States and Japan, were at the bottom of the scale; the Netherlands at No. 1. Other works on the MDGs present similar disparities. The 2004 meeting of the World Economic Forum (Davos, Switzerland) received a report from its Global Governance Initiative, which sounded a horn of alarm about failures (and a few success stories) in achieving progress toward the MDGs. Noting that governments cannot do it alone, but that neither civil society nor the corporate sector can take up all the slack it lamented:

Too often the governments are scarcely trying. Across the board the world is failing to put forward even half the effort needed to meet the world’s basic goals. The time has come to demand better.

Essentially, these reports make clear that knowing the MDGs will not thwart national governments towards eradicating the world’s stated ills.

On the same note, UN’s MDGs provide enough of a framework for other actors, such as corporate leaders and CSOs, to take initiatives and help achieve these goals. There needs to be specific methods of communication, accountability and UN development-related mechanisms in place to ensure all actors play their role effectively. Furthermore, the lack of precision and accountability means the goals may remain a bit intangible and be overwhelmed by other priorities. This deficiency creates a distance between the actors involved and their resolve to eradicating them through global cooperation.

### **The Mechanisms**

The UN system, with leadership not only from the Secretary-General but also by UNDP head Mark Malloch Brown, is committed to pressing implementation. Since 2000, there have been opportunities for reviewing and implementing the goals in the General Assembly and through the organization of other bodies. At the same time, the Secretary-General reports on progress. However, most of this process is monitored through a rather paternalistic relationship between northern and southern partners, where the latter play child to the former. This relationship is especially evident where

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the bulk of report, through the UNDP process is by developing countries on a pre-arranged framework, but developed donor countries may or may not offer reports of their own design. In some cases, civil society has been consulted in the preparation of country reports. In an increasing number of cases civil society is undertaking “shadow” reports on its own initiative.

The UNDP is in charge of obtaining reports submitted by developing countries on the implementation of given MDGs. The reports themselves are created to varying degrees with the participation of civil society organizations. Evelyn Herfkens, former Dutch Development Minister and head of the Millennium Development Goals Campaign, has attempted to energize national and international popular campaigns for the accomplishment of the goals. So far, many CSOs at the national level and international CSO networks are engaged with the MDGs. Some agencies are even re-phrasing their work and measuring their progress by applying the framework of the MDGs. In Sweden, for example, they are actively engaged with government in the national campaign to educate the public and to press forward government policy. In the Philippines CSOs have applied the framework right down to the municipal level, evaluating government budgets and priorities in the light of the MDGs.

Yet, while developing country governments are reporting through the UNDP system, only some northern government – principally Nordic authorities – have moved to reframe their development work in MDG terms and to develop national reports on progress. Dr. Jeffery Sachs heads Columbia University’s Millennium Project, through which a series of teams of experts examine and develop approaches to policies necessary to accomplish the MDGs. He believes that the attainment of the goals can come through a yearly investment of \$75 billion. He further comments that, “the amount of money needed is small enough to be barely visible in the world political economy, while its impact could be enormous.”

Inasmuch, the mechanisms may be in place but there is no clear priority setting when it comes to how the mechanisms could function more efficiently through, partly, more conscious budget allocation coming from the North to combat “real” international problems.

### **An Example: Goal 6: Modesty or Tragic Inadequacy?**

One of the real problems facing the world today is the spread of infectious diseases such as AIDS. This is of course a monumental challenge, as the “arc” of infection moves through Africa, confronting India, China, S.E. Asia, the countries in transition, etc.

In terms of the HIV/Aids virus, there are more than 40 million infected, and 20 million dead. The fact that current efforts are insufficient and the goals far too limited can be seen as failing to stop a contemporary holocaust.

The goal itself is quite modest in relation to the fact that it says nothing about the living, the 40 million whose lives are under severe threat and the many more who will join them. The truth is that many of these lives can be extended or saved if it were more of a priority. The indicators outlined by the UN Secretary-General in his most recent MDG progress report are extremely limited. Although to be fair, the Secretary-General in his progress report on the Goals indicates the importance of treatment, looking at the rate of condom use and the number of orphans left behind due to HIV/AIDS, malaria and other diseases does not fully bring us closer to aborting the spread of viruses.

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Even the WHO's ambitious target of 3 by 5 people, i.e. 3 million people in treatment by 2005, is pretty modest if you are one of the 37 million not on the list. These numbers are especially monumental knowing that thus far only around 300,000 people are in treatment (2004).

The main challenge to overcome in order to achieve Goal 6 is financial. The Global Fund on AIDS, Malaria and Tuberculosis has yet to acquire the required US\$3 billion, and is nowhere near reaching the \$4.5 billion target for 2005. Self-imposed responsibility and the cooperation of wealthy nations towards this goal are limited due to the conflict in aligning global and national interests. For example, the USA projects a defence budget of just over \$400 billion for the next fiscal year, and the \$81-150 billion being spent on Iraq is supplemental to that.

On the other hand, the Canadian government agreed, after two years of negotiations with the WTO, to facilitate the export of cheap generic drugs for AIDS and other public health needs in developing countries. This is an important step but also demonstrates why every delay in moving forward and funding is so regrettable.

To put more emphasis on the necessity of fighting these diseases, there needs to be more concerted efforts in understanding the causes of the diseases' spread, the different contexts within which they exist and in allocating enough resources to combat them before they kill and infect more people. Furthermore, there need to be specific frameworks within which the UN and its international partners at the government and non-government levels work in attaining not just this goal but all MDGs. The framework must be evaluative in nature and effective in influencing players to be more responsible in following through with their promises, and even pushing some to be more vigilant in their concern for international problems.

### ***Measuring Accountability: Strategic Options and Approaches***

#### **Monitoring and Evaluation: The Use of Goal Eight**

There has been a good deal of ink and air time spent on the fact that while the Goals set targets which must largely be met in developing countries, and detailed reporting frameworks are being administered by the UNDP and other agencies to document progress, the wealthy countries have no specific standards they must meet, no equivalent accountability mechanism.

One approach can be to take the MDGs as they are, to take up the indicators outlined in the Secretary-General's Annual Progress Reports, and to rate the progress being made by governments. CSOs can offer help, press for greater energy and resource application or offer proposals for alternate means of achieving goals.

CSOs are demanding greater monitoring and evaluating of the process. The World Federation of United Nations report entitled *We the peoples...2003, reports:*

"A large number of respondents believe that governments should report on progress towards MDGs in a manner directly related to each of the goals. There is an appreciation that government reports should include comparisons with other countries and that the reports should be sent to the United Nations. Civil society groups, including United Nations Association are organizing conferences and inviting

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responsible representatives from government to report publicly on progress in achieving the MDGs. Although the focus of the survey question was on accountability, many respondents talk about CSOs pressing for government transparency.”

Transparency is an essential foundation for measurable accountability. There are a number of initiatives on the part of multilateral bodies and NGOs to establish frameworks for monitoring and evaluating the progress of the governments of wealthy countries with regard to the MDGs. A few governments are developing their own internal indicators.

One international NGO network, Social Watch, will develop a report for 2005 in which the performance of a number of developed as well as many developing countries will be examined. The Women’s Environment and Development Organization (WEDO) has been very interested in enhancing the indicators applied to those goals, particularly ones affecting women, and in monitoring and reporting their evaluation of progress.

On the same note, the North-South Institute is currently planning to focus its major annual examination of Canadian development performance, the Canadian Development Report, on the MDGs, and may include some evaluation of where Canada stands vis-à-vis the MDG markers.

### **Changing the Economic Context**

There is another approach, which was raised at an MDG forum during last year’s High-level Session of the General Assembly. The Third World Network’s Martin Khor recently published a short booklet entitled *Bridging the Global Economic Divide: Proposals for Millennium Development Goal 8 on Global Partnership for Development*.

In this booklet, Khor notes that wealthy countries, which have greater decision-making power in the Bank and the Fund, and although challenged quite effectively at Cancun, still dominate the WTO. Inasmuch they have a key role in defining the external economic environment that can considerably determine the ability of developing countries to meet the MDGs and other development objectives.

Khor cites five examples embodying this point:

- The continuous fall in commodity prices of export commodities has caused tremendous income and foreign exchange losses to many developing countries and persistent poverty at the community level.
- Financial instability and sharp currency fluctuations caused by large inflows and outflows of external funds have led many countries into financial and economic crisis.
- Inappropriate import liberalization policies, often encouraged or forced by conditions imposed on recipient countries by international financial institutions have often led to the impoverishment of farmers or loss of industrial jobs.
- Cutbacks in social sector expenditure and the introduction of a “user-pay” principle, in structural adjustment policies have contributed to the deterioration of social well being of vulnerable and poor groups.
- The continuation of the debt crisis in many countries.

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Khor also remarks that getting policies right is essential to achieving the MDGs and that Goal 8 on global partnership should therefore focus on getting international economic structures, policies and rules right. He goes on to discuss reforms of the WTO, the World Bank and the IMF that would assist in this regard.

At the same High-Level Session of the General Assembly, a group of NGOs and social movements – including the ICFTU, WEDO, Social Watch, CIDSE, etc – put forward a paper on the reform of global governance, which could contribute to getting the policies and the decision-making about the policies “right”. This policy paper is entitled *A Political Agenda for the Reform of Global Governance*.

## **Opportunities for Engagement**

### **a) Multilateral Opportunities**

- **MDG Review**

The year 2005 is an opportunity for a comprehensive review of progress. The UN Secretary-General each fall reports on the state of achievement and the challenges (the 2005 report will be published in late May). In 2005 a whole series of official bodies, governments and CSOs are considering reports and events that will provide not only an assessment but also advice and resolve for the next stage of work.

- **Financing for Development: Opportunity for Systemic Engagement**

The results of the 2002 Monterrey World Conference on Financing for Development, the so-called Monterrey “Consensus”, showed an ongoing process of follow-up which overlaps considerably with the MDGs and particularly with the macroeconomic policies which condition the potential for achievement of the Goals. The Monterrey “Consensus” includes:

- Many of the key constituents of economic policy related to development as well as governance.
- A Civil Society critique of the consensus signalling key issues that need to be engaged.
- A tentative process but one involving key multilateral economic institutions, civil society and the private sector. NGOs already are developing a practice through the International Facilitating Group on Financing for Development (IFG), etc.
- Reviews offering the opportunity to look at how the whole system is working, utilizing the objectives set in Monterrey but with linkage to the MDGs.
- 2005 as a key year in the evaluation of progress in both overlapping streams

### **b) National opportunities**

There have already been significant initiatives regarding MDGs and national engagement with civil society.

The UNDP has developed approaches to partnerships, and in the preparation of national reports in a number of countries is seeking the involvement of CSOs. More than 50 of these reports are now available on line and more are in preparation. Some additional work has been done on relating the MDGs to PRSP initiatives in general and in specific situations.

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UNDP has, during 2003, held regional forums, for example, in West Africa (February, 2003) and Southern Africa (July, 2003), in which civil society participants and perspectives have been integrated. Reports of these meetings, including discussion of such themes as the “customization” of the MDGs to particular national settings are available.

### **Final Thoughts**

***“If we pass up this chance, what are we saying about the value of human life?” - Jeffrey Sachs***

Less than 11 years are left before the target date for achieving the MDGs. As an international cooperation tool, these goals can unite the UN, national governments, CSOs and other actors in their work for a better future, where sustaining human life is central and resource allocation is equitable. All actors involved in the implementation of the MDGs must recognize and work to redress the structural disparities in governance institutions.

### **References:**

1. *The Center for Global Development, Ranking the Rich, 2003*
2. *World Economic Forum, Global Initiative Report 2004*
3. Khor, Martin. Bridging the Global Economic Divide: Proposals for Millennium Development Goal 8 on Global Partnership for Development.

### **Some Links:**

UN FFD: [www.un.org/esa/ffd](http://www.un.org/esa/ffd)

UNDP MDGs: [www.undp.org/mdg/](http://www.undp.org/mdg/)

WFUNA: [www.wfuna.org](http://www.wfuna.org); Third World Network: [www.twinside.org](http://www.twinside.org)