

Means and Ends: The messages from the country reports

The ends were agreed and clearly articulated, the means were (and still are) available. And yet something stands in the way. Among the many obstacles identified by Social Watch coalitions around the world, inequalities and its associated symptoms of inequity and injustice clearly emerge as the main reason why the common aspirations of humanity are not being achieved.

The “ends” are enshrined in the Universal Declaration of Human Rights of 1948 with its commitment to free people everywhere from fear and want. That common objective of humanity spelled out at the end of the Second World War and embodied in the United Nations soon was split into two by the Cold War: on the one side those that cherished civil and political rights, on the other side those that argued social, economic and cultural rights had to be achieved first. In the middle the Third World, the impoverished majority of humanity, successfully struggled for independence but did not manage to translate political self determination into a dignified life for its citizens.

At the end of the Cold War, in the last decade of the 20th century, the UN agenda was revised and updated by a series of world conferences establishing the rights of children (New York, 1990) and of women (Beijing, 1995). The concept of “sustainable development” was endorsed in Rio de Janeiro (1992), asserting that present needs should be met in a way that does not prevent future generations to meet theirs, while the Social Summit of 1995 in Copenhagen committed all governments to free the world from poverty and ensure decent work and “social integration” for all.

The challenge heads of states and governments expressed at that Summit was that “we are witnessing in countries throughout the world the expansion of prosperity for some, unfortunately accompanied by an expansion of unspeakable poverty for others. This glaring contradiction is unacceptable and needs to be corrected through urgent actions.”

At that moment, the “urgent need” was recognized “to address profound social problems, especially poverty, unemployment and social exclusion, that affect every country.” And the leaders understood as “our task” to

Every year the Social Watch national coalitions report on their countries’ progress or regression towards the internationally agreed goals. As UN member states start negotiating a new development agenda and a new set of goals key “means and ends” questions must be addressed: Are the goals relevant? Are the means appropriate?

The country reports are available at www.socialwatch.org. Common themes that emerge are summarized here.

address “both their underlying and structural causes and their distressing consequences.”

Yet, under pressure of the donors that provide the bulk of their budget and without inter-governmental negotiations similar to those of the big conferences of the previous decade, the UN development agencies and the multilateral financial institutions shrank their mandate to a minimal set of Millennium Development Goals focused exclusively on “extreme poverty” in low-income countries and its associated symptoms in health and education.

In his 2005 report to the General Assembly, then UN Secretary General Kofi Annan explained that the MDGs “do not directly encompass some of the broader issues covered by the conferences of the 1990s, nor do they address the particular needs of middle-income developing countries or the questions of growing inequality and the wider dimensions of human development and good governance.” Nevertheless, he argued, “the urgency of achieving the MDGs cannot be overstated.”

The analogy with an emergency was convincing: Let’s focus on those at extreme risk first! But in practice that strategy was not effective. Foreign aid (known in development jargon as “official development assistance” or ODA) and particularly aid directed to the least developed countries, did not increase substantially as a result of that focus on the “poorest of the poor,” in spite of UN resolutions and an explicit mandate in that regard in the

Lisbon Treaty, the unofficial constitution of the European Union.

ODA is not the only way in which richer countries can contribute to development (other options include technology transfer, fair trade terms, debt cancellation, etc.) and perhaps not even the most important. But as it implies direct budget decisions, ODA can be a good thermometer of the “political will” of the donor country. In 2013, which was a “record year,” net ODA from OECD countries stood at 0.3 percent of gross national income, exactly the same percentage as in 1992 and less than half of the longstanding UN target for an ODA/GNI ratio of 0.7 percent.

While the MDGs did not help to substantially improve the behaviour towards the emergency victims, governments of middle income countries did not feel major pressure from those goals to make extra efforts, as the benchmarks were set too low for them. They had basically achieved the goals before the start of the race. In Thailand, the national Social Watch reports how the country claimed to have achieved the MDGs long before 2015, even when those achievements are at risk due to threatened economic instability and “environmental sustainability is more difficult to fins than a needle in a haystack.” Similarly, huge problems of employment and social integration in the developed countries also fell off the UN radar, as no goal mentioned them.

The UN is, of course, a body of universal membership with a clear global mandate to maintain international peace and promote human rights and fundamental freedoms for all. And yet, focusing exclusively on the MDGs created the notion that the organization should only focus on the poorest countries. Such a misrepresentation led the Canadian minister of Citizenship and Immigration to describe in May 2012 as “completely ridiculous” the visit of the Special Rapporteur on the Right to Food to his country. The envoy of the Human Rights Council, a body with universal mandate, was told that he should not get involved in “political exercises in developed democracies like Canada.”

Universality is practiced by the UN Human Rights Council through the Universal Periodic Review (UPR), a mechanism for all countries, Canada included, to report regularly to their peers on their obligations to respect, protect and promote both civil and political rights as well as social, economic and cultural rights.

Further, the UN Conference on Sustainable Development, meeting in Rio de Janeiro in 2012 emphasized that the “sustainable development goals” to be negotiated multilaterally should be “action-oriented, concise and easy to communicate, limited in number, aspirational, global in nature and *universally applicable to all countries* while taking into account different national realities.”

The logical conclusion is that all countries will have to report on actions taken towards those universal aspirations. For the Social Watch coalitions this is not new. They already bring together citizens from richer and poorer countries in all continents. The methodology of checking commitments against accomplishments is common, and the problems and obstacles faced are also surprisingly similar.

Impacts of the crisis

The feeling of crisis, frequently of catastrophic dimensions, permeates many of the national Social Watch reports in the last two years. In some cases the crisis is rooted in history. The report from the Democratic Republic of Congo, for example, situates the origin of the crisis in

the collapse of copper prices and the simultaneous increase of oil prices in 1974, forty years ago. This imbalance in trade was made worse by bad governance and strong demographic pressure from young people entering the labor market in search of jobs every year. Persistent armed conflicts and lack of social policies or job creating economic policies make the situation worse and currently there are 16 million people (out of 66 million total population) suffering malnutrition and a majority of the population without formal jobs or any social security protection.

The Social Watch report from Armenia also points to a prolonged crisis, in this case beginning 25 years ago when the Soviet Union (of which Armenia was a confederated republic) collapsed. The impact on Armenia was “catastrophic”: about 1,000 industrial enterprises ceased to function, agricultural associations were disbanded in 1020 agricultural formations, and more than 1 million people became unemployed. The country still faces a huge drain of the population that migrates abroad in search of jobs, plus “problems with monopolists, the shadow economy sector and corruption.”

The Czech Republic, previously seen as having performed a successful transition from the Warsaw Pact into the European Union, now faces severe hardships, with “unemployment at 10 percent, government reforms undermining the economy, antisocial and anti-family policies, corruption among politicians and capital flight into tax havens, destruction of the instruments of environmental protection, inability of the media to aptly inform on domestic and foreign affairs and low level of cooperation to address the crisis among civic actors.”

In Italy, the Social Watch coalition reports on the deterioration of the living conditions of a large part of the Italian population, especially the “working poor.” Fifteen percent of total employed, or 3 million workers are poor, compared to 10 percent in Denmark or 6 percent in Sweden. Almost one third of Italians are at risks of suffering poverty or social exclusion and income inequality has widened. The richest 10 Italians own as much as the poorest 3

million. The proportion of Italians who cannot afford an adequate full meal at least every two days, doubled in 2013 and affects one in every eight Italians. Yet, in a context of strong and generalized reduction of public spending, the Ministry of Defence got a budget increase in 2013-2015, 25 times higher than that of social policies.

A similar frustration emerges out of the Portuguese Social Watch report, which denounces “increasing unemployment, impoverishment and increasing vulnerability of powerless groups and communities” as the major consequences of austerity policies. Given the high levels of unemployment and poverty already being experienced in Portugal, and the findings that early anti-crisis measures disproportionately affected poorer people, very serious impacts might be anticipated on vulnerable groups, putting at risk the more elementary economic, social and cultural rights. For these reason, the authors recommend “the implementation of a human rights based approach to national budget and welfare state reform, allowing the social protection of the powerless and dis-empowered groups.”

South Korea was hit both by the Asia financial crisis in 1997 and the global financial crisis in 2008. According to the Korean Social Watch report, the impressive economic growth (GDP doubled between 2000 and 2010) helped hide “gaps between regions, industries, social strata, and sectors” and dubious practices such as the concentration of funds in the hometowns of former presidents. In 2013, “the economy has recovered but inequality and polarization of poverty got worsened.” The lack of social protection transformed the working poor, the self-employed and small business owners into a new vulnerable group, joining the ranks of the traditional vulnerable groups: indigent children, female household, the disabled, and the elderly.

The federal government of Canada shares the obsession with deficit reduction at all costs. Federal programme spending as a share of the economy is at its lowest level since the 1950s and the lowest of any national government in the industrial world. Cuts to federal-provincial

health, social, and equalization transfers alone will amount to USD 60 billion over the next decade. The result has been a reduction to health and social services for Canadians at the time when they need them most—during Canada’s slow recovery from recession.

While inequality in Canada may be less extreme than in the U.S., it is growing at a faster rate in Canada and it is also highly racialized and gendered. Women, Aboriginal peoples, new immigrants, people with disabilities and ethnic minority communities all carry a disproportionate burden of lower incomes and lower employment rates. For every dollar earned by white Canadians, racialized Canadian workers earned only 81.4 cents. For every dollar earned by men in Canada, women earn 76.7 cents (working full-year, full-time).

Inequalities

The ILO’s June 2014 World Social Protection Report 2014-15 states that “contrary to public perception, adjustment measures are not limited to Europe. Since 2010, world governments embarked into premature expenditure contraction, despite vulnerable populations’ urgent need of public support. In 2014, the scope of public expenditure adjustment is expected to intensify significantly, impacting 122 countries, of which 82 are developing countries.

Thus, many countries experiencing fast economic growth are not seeing the benefits of that prosperity. The report of Social Watch Philippines offers this dramatic example:

In 2011, GDP increased by USD 17 billion; on the other hand, the collective wealth of the forty richest Filipinos rose by USD 13 billion in the same year (or a collective 37.8% jump). This means that the increased wealth of the country’s richest forty individuals is equivalent to the bulk —76.5 percent or more than three fourths— of the country’s overall increase in income last year, reinforcing perceptions of an “oligarchic” economy.

Philippines’ economic growth rates have averaged at 5.1 percent since 2000, so that now, the country is heralded as one of the more important emerging economies. In the meantime, poverty incidence has remained high, reaching 26.3 percent in 2009, 25.2 percent in 2012, and 24.9 percent in the first half of 2013.

Ghana is another “model country” that has seen sustained economic growth over the past decade and “graduated” from to the level of a lower middle income country. Yet the Ghanaian Social Watch coalition reports that “despite the seemingly impressive growth recorded, income and regional income disparities continue to be an issue and in some instances have in some instances been exacerbated: 28 percent of the population according to the UNDP (2010) continue to live on less than a dollar a day and more than half of Ghanians live on less than USD 2 a day. Income disparities are compounded with gender inequities. Women in Ghana continue to be too heavily represented among the poor, with rural women in particular experiencing high levels of poverty.

In India, the economy has also been growing at phenomenal pace during the last decade, and yet employment in the organized sector has declined in absolute numbers from 28 million in 1999 to 27.5 in 2008. India’s dependence on international aid, especially for the financial resources is minimal. In fact India’ had declined bilateral aid from many countries, but it lags behind dramatically with respect to gender equity, poverty, hunger and infant and maternal mortality rates. The absence of inclusiveness in the development model is the primary cause, according to the report of the National Social Watch. Instead of enabling the people to acquire the basic needs such as food, sanitation, water, health care, the Government is promoting ‘non-inclusive growth’ and sought to provide the subsidized basic social services with associated problem of inefficiency, corruption, and so on.

Chile has claimed to be the best performing Latin American country in terms of meeting the MDGs, yet the Chilean Social Watch report argues that the deep-rooted inequalities

have not been addressed and thus the public is not happy with the declared achievements. When the poverty reduction figures are disaggregated by age and gender it becomes obvious that women and children are lagging behind. In 2011 and 2012, massive mobilizations of students demanding free education were received with sympathy by the public, as the young demonstrators were clearly non-violent and creative in the streets. The struggle for better education became a symbol of discontent with the whole neoliberal model.

Similarly, in Dominican Republic the national Social Watch report concludes that two decades of economic growth “have not resulted in genuine human development,” with rural communities and women at a clear disadvantage. Lack of proper governance and access to state services is one of the causes (one fifth of the population lacks identity documents) and the informal economy another, as some half of the economically active population lack access to social security. Women comprise a majority of university students but their salaries are lower than those of their male colleagues and, contrary to expectations, that gap is increasing since 2000, despite improved education for girls.

Peru and Zambia, two countries rich in minerals, have also experienced high economic growth during the last years, but with diverse social impacts. Peru registers sustained economic growth of six percent a year since 2000, and in this case, yes, poverty has been reduced, through a substantial investment by the State in social assistance programmes, particularly the so called “conditional cash transfers” (where poor families receive money if, for example, they send their kids to school). Millions of households living in poverty now depend on those cash transfers and the Peruvian Social Watch report wonders if that is sustainable in case of a fall in commodity prices. Infant malnutrition has dropped significantly and maternal mortality decreased. Yet, Peru still has a high incidence of tuberculosis and disparities are blatant, between the three geo-ecological regions of coast, highlands and forest, between rural and urban and between

rich and poor quarters of the same city. Discrimination based on race and gender is visible in the gaps between private clinics and public hospitals, elite universities and public education.

For the period 2006-2009 Zambia's economy grew at an average of 6.1 percent per annum, pulled by Chinese demand for Zambian copper. Yet, due to tax incentives and holidays, the mining companies' contribution to the treasury is quite low. Further, there is little transparency and accountability for the resources that government receives from taxes and royalties. As a result, the Gini coefficient that measures inequality increased from 0.64 in 2004 to 0.67 in 2008. The Zambian Social Watch coalition reports that "the (economic) gains have not been felt by the most vulnerable sections of society."

Similarly, in Azerbaijan, where extractive industries have led to more revenue, employment remains high. While oil and gas account for half of GDP, the sector hires less than 1 percent of the work force. Construction, highly dependent on government spending, is responsible for most of the new jobs created. Prosperity has reduced poverty, but at the same time the share of the poorest quintile in national income also diminished.

Policies do matter and El Salvador provides a dramatic example. The country was severely affected by the global economic and financial crisis that started in 2008 with the fall of Lehman Brothers. The economy shrank 3.5 percent in 2009 and then stagnated and is now very slowly recovering. The Government of the Frente Farabundo Martí para la Liberación Nacional (FMLN) executed several plans to support the historically excluded, such as senior adults, women, children and rural population. Those policies allowed it to continue reducing poverty in spite of the crisis and to achieve major improvements in health and education. The Salvadorean Social Watch report celebrates these achievements but wonders about their sustainability. Because of the high sensitivity of the economy to global volatility, structural changes are needed, argues the national Social Watch report, such as a fiscal reform that

raises domestic resources to base social welfare in genuine domestic funding.

Brazil, Argentina and Uruguay are among the few countries that managed to reduce poverty and inequalities at the same time. Uruguayan Social Development minister Daniel Olesker, in dialogue with Social Watch explained last February that "policies to ensure basic incomes improved the income of the poorest sectors and salary policies raised the income of workers faster than inflation, while at the same time we introduced fiscal policies that affected the distribution of wealth." In 2005, when the current governing coalition arrived to power, Uruguay was still suffering the social and economic impact of a severe financial crisis that erupted in 2002. So we started fighting poverty in 2005... but already in 2007 we started with the tax reform," explains Olesker. "And then came health reform to provide universal coverage and in 2008 the reform of education. While poverty was still an important problem, we started to do simultaneously structural reforms and anti-poverty policies. The link between the two generated a virtuous circle that allow for economic growth while poverty was reduced and income redistributed. This is the main lesson we learned."

Official Development Assistance (ODA)

In this context of crisis in developed countries, and Europe in particular, ODA diminished in 2011 and 2012. It recovered in 2013, but in relative terms reached only 0.3 percent of total domestic product of donor countries, less than half of the 0.7 percent promised decades ago. The Belgian Social Watch report explains the political dilemma: "In times of crisis, when poverty is scaring the Europeans, businesses are closing and the welfare state is being dismantled, development cooperation needs to be redefined." In fact, thanks to effective campaigning of civil society, Belgium has chosen to reinforce its UN contribution and in supporting UN development efforts it mainly contributes to the

regular budget of the organization, instead of supporting pet projects with earmarked funds as is common practice among many donors.

Aid needs to be assessed on its quality and not just on quantity. Forty percent of Korean aid, for example, is "tied," meaning that it can only be used to buy Korean goods and services, a limitation that reduces the effectiveness of aid and in some cases can be seen as a hidden subsidy to its own economy. Further, Korea prefers to assist middle income or low middle income countries rather than the least developed countries (LDCs) that need aid the most. According to the Korean watchers, this is because the purposes of Korea's ODA are economic cooperation and energy resources of recipient countries rather than humanitarian.

Similarly, Malta, a "new donor" within the European Union, prioritizes bilateral aid over multilateral contributions. Civil society criticizes the Government for not being transparent in how ODA funds are being allocated and which organizations and initiatives are benefiting from it. The Government seemingly invests a great amount of ODA funds in the detention or repatriation of irregular migrants, including many asylum seekers. Further, scholarships to foreign students are also counted as ODA.

In Switzerland, pro-development civil society groups such as Alliance Sud have been campaigning on the return of "stolen assets." In 2011, the Federal Cabinet arranged to block unlawful assets from Cote d'Ivoire, Egypt, Libya and Tunisia, saying they are to be returned as soon as possible. "The goal nevertheless should be to prevent any more stolen assets from entering Switzerland," says the Swiss Social Watch report. "To date, urgently needed tightening in anti-money laundering and the exclusion of dictators' funds is still pending."

Contrary to the trend amongst OECD donor countries, in Switzerland civil society campaigning has succeeded in making the development budget grow by about 9 percent annually until 2015. However, Swiss contributions to climate funds are now coming from the increased ODA budget. The Government argues that this is all *new and additional* money, as

requested by the climate agreements. Alliance Sud, the national Social Watch coalition, argues that this money is indeed *new* since it was earmarked for climate finance recently, but it is not *additional* as long as it comes from ODA.

This debate around the meaning of ODA related terms is generalizing, as the OECD has kicked off a process to re-discuss what constitutes “aid” and how to account for it. According to the current definition by the OECD’s Development Assistance Committee, ODA comprises all flows by public institutions to developing countries aimed at promoting well-being and economic development. If these take the forms of loans, not grants, then in order to be listed as ‘assistance,’ they should be ‘soft’ loans (at below-market interest rates) and contain a significant concessional component.

A study now before parliament in the Netherlands proposes five different alternatives to redefine aid, all of which include ‘innovative financial instruments’ in the definition and more lax rules on loans, so as to count as ODA credits currently excluded. One proposal is to exclude ‘middle-income countries’ completely from the list and concentrate cooperation, reduced to 0.25 percent of GDP, in the lowest-income countries. Another is to target this same percentage to the poorest countries and reach the 0.7 percent figure by counting as ODA all types of financial flows to middle-income countries, including funds aimed at ‘facilitating success for Dutch companies abroad’— particularly in the water and sanitation sector where the Dutch are perceived as having a comparative advantage.

The report regrets that under the current rules “public funding for private initiatives is also omitted from the ODA statistics in the cases where fiscal measures (tax expenditure) applied by the government encourage private initiatives, even though they act as a lever to release private funding flows.” It notes that the Netherlands currently spends public monies on ‘international public goods’ such as mitigating climate change, global security and social assistance to refugees and migrants, and proposes to change the definition

of ODA so that these can be recorded as such. This would add to Dutch ODA some 300 million euros per year spent on UN peacekeeping operations and 330 million euros budgeted as future contributions to combating climate change.

This changes in how aid is defined can result in many countries reaching the 0.7 percent target simply by counting as aid the activities of their corporations abroad, or worse, large corporations could access the aid budgets, privatize profits if their investments are successful and socialize the losses if they fail.

The report from the Dutch Government notes that these proposals “would in all probability raise objections from the G77” and could “compromise other policy discussions.” The reason is not difficult to guess. In 2009 the advanced economies pledged during the Copenhagen climate change conference to increase their contributions to mitigating climate change to USD 100 billion a year by 2020. This USD 100 billion would double current annual ODA. If the new OECD standard accepts climate funding as ODA and not as a separate and additional commitment, the Copenhagen promise would be met basically by relabeling present funds.

These changes in ODA have obvious implications in developing countries, as both governments and civil society organizations see funding from those sources diminish. In the case of Zambia, the local Social Watch reports a reduction in the contribution of ODA to the national budget; thus in the 2013 budget, “76.8 percent of expenditure will be financed through domestic revenues, 4.6 percent will be financed from grants from ODA, while the balance of 18.4 percent will be raised from external and domestic borrowing. Paradoxically, they add, this has a positive side-effect “as it means the Government must now focus on internal accountability to its citizens.” Yet, accountability remains an area of weakness. “Year after year the Auditor-General reports many cases of abuse, misuse and misapplication of colossal sums of money in the public service. But very little action is taken.” There is need to put in place measures to guarantee

citizen participation such as effective decentralization” conclude the Zambian watchers.

Governance

Corruption emerges as a major obstacle in many countries. The Ugandan Social Watch report denounces that “the misappropriated resources would have contributed to poverty reduction, narrowing of gender gaps, improvement of health, education and other social services, access to safe drinking water, and addressing the environment sustainability.” But in neighbouring Tanzania the local Social Watch report identifies another form of wasting resources: tax incentives. After much effort inviting foreign companies to invest in the country, Tanzanians aren’t seeing the expected results. Incentives and tax evasions are so high that little is obtained to enhance the national income.

A regressive tax system is also hindering Nicaragua from benefitting from the historic opportunity provided by democratic transition and the “demographic bonus.” The recent reduction of the fertility rate has produced a situation in Nicaragua where a majority of the population is young and of working age without having to care for a disproportionately big younger generation, as happened to their parents, or having a big older generation to care for, as will happen to their children. This “bonus” is being wasted because the few jobs generated by an economy based on agricultural exports are informal, badly paid and do not even allow workers to escape from poverty.

The art of living in peace

They suffer from extreme poverty, ill health, and hunger, but Afghans define the lack of security as their greatest problem. The Government of Afghanistan has added peace as a new goal to the eight global MDGs, recognizing its critical role in achieving all other development aspirations. “World communities have learned the art of living in peace and have developed foundations to sustain peace and security.

Afghanistan after three decades of war and conflict also needs to learn the art of living in peace” argues the national Social Watch report. The key to that is seen lies in education... and in the fulfillment of Goal 8 of the MDGs, the global partnership for development.

While some countries, such as Italy, are reportedly following the path of “military Keynesianism,” using public spending on defense to stimulate domestic demand for consumption and investment, war and conflict are nightmares for all countries suffering from them. In Lebanon, for example, the flood of Syrian refugees is a major humanitarian crisis. Official figures from Lebanon estimate the number of Syrians to be about 1 million while UNHCR estimates the number to be about 750 thousand. Most of them are living in very difficult conditions. Lebanese authorities have been reluctant to provide them with any support, limiting their role to organizing the registration process, thereby trying to hold the international community responsible for the refugees’ dire situation.

In addition, the polarization of the country politics and the sectarian nature of the regime makes implementation of development policies very difficult. In 2004 Prime Minister Hariri nominated a multi-ministerial committee for poverty eradication and MDG implementation, but he was assassinated in 2005 before taking any tangible steps in this regard. Another multi-ministerial committee was nominated in 2006 to suggest a national strategy for social development, which was never implemented owing to the Israeli war on Lebanon in that same year. In 2010, the Minister of Social Affairs proposed a national strategy for social development which was not presented to the council due to the resignation of Prime Minister Mikati’s Government and the delay until April 2013 in the formation of a caretaker government. Thus the main obstacle to true citizenship in the country is still the partition of state offices and institutions among the different religious confessions.

Conflict is bad for people and for business alike. Thus, the Social Watch report from Bahrain quotes the international credit rating

agency Standard and Poor, in its lowering the country’s rating because of “severe domestic political tensions, high geopolitical risks, stagnating real GDP per capita, and the fiscal dependency on sustained high oil prices.” Many of these factors are self-inflicted by the ongoing stifling of democratic dissent and the intensification of racial and anti-religious practices. In 2012 and in the aftermath of the democratic movement starting in February 2011, officials increased employment discrimination against Shi’a seeking government jobs, expanding restrictions to include general government departments dealing with information and making it more difficult for them to be hired in education and health. The only explanation is that of punishing Shi’a for expressing their democratic wishes, concludes the report.

In the case of Iraq, the economic and social costs of the prolonged conflict are obviously enormous, but impossible to quantify because the national census has been postponed four times since 2007, under the pretext of security concerns. The survey is required by the article 140 of the Constitution to reach a settlement over the internal dispute areas, but according to the Iraqi Social Watch coalition, powerful political blocs have been delaying indefinitely the census because it will affect state budget allocations and the impact on provincial level quotas as well. This lack of a basic assessment tools leads to lack of transparency, corruption and mistrust among groups that further fuels the conflict.

The alternative plan proposed by civil society organizations requires the Government to design and implement comprehensive and smart policies to reduce poverty, improve the educational system and empower women. The government doesn’t seem to be listening but voters did, electing more women to parliament in 2014 than the number stipulated by the legal quota, in a clear show of trust.

The active leadership and participation of women was key to the success of the January 25 Revolution, as Egyptians call the movement that ousted president Hosni Mubarak. It is the fourth Egyptian revolution in the last

130 years, explains the national Social Watch report. “The modern Egyptian national movement has consistently sought three goals: self-government in the basic sense of allowing Egyptians to be in charge of public offices; independence in the international community and effective domestic sovereignty, in particular with regard to the national economy and the ability to secure socio-economic justice in the distribution of national wealth and income.” Democracy is central to the movement, not just as a utopian goal—one whose practical implementation would be indefinitely deferred—but rather as the necessary foundation. The success or failure of Egypt’s transition will have a significant effect on the rest of the Arab world and civil society has a crucial role to play.

Having experienced conflict and political instability in their own country, the Social Watch report of Nepal concludes that “the root causes of the conflict include not only the severity of poverty and inequality but also the sense of entrenchment—that opportunities are limited or non-existent for the poor to climb out of poverty. Therefore, addressing constraints on the inclusiveness of development is critical in order to make a real difference in the lives of ordinary Nepalis and reduce the risks of instability. Systemic changes in the development approach must be undertaken to adequately address the needs and priorities of the excluded and marginalized sections of the society. A stable political structure upon which well-informed policies, institutions and mechanisms can function over time is a major determinant for people’s empowerment and strengthening Nepal’s peace and fragile democracy.”

Development is a complex process of transformations. Corruption and conflicts are obvious obstacles, but they can be understood as a consequence as much of as a cause. The Somalia Social Watch report formulates the difficult question: Why is progress is more or less the same in the stable areas of Somalia, where the situation is less complex and access is smooth, as in the conflict-ridden areas?

In searching for explanation, the Somaliland Millennium Development Report concluded that the direct implementation of programmes, without local coordination, resulted in inappropriate prioritization and increased delivery cost. Not utilizing the existing development expertise and obtainable facts and figures, and not taking into account the priorities of local beneficiaries turned aid into “rain, where no one has a say about when, where, and how much to rain.” In such cases the aid organizations themselves are perceived by the public as clouds that carry such rain.

The dozens of organizations that work in these stable areas conduct needs assessments prior to their interventions, as a practical way to discover the needs of destitute people. However, these assessments are seldom used to refine objectives, develop new strategies or design new interventions that are tailored to the needs of the targeted people. They are very often used for validating ideas of pre-decided objectives of a certain project.

Villages are visited and plenty of needs are discovered, including many dire needs that are not in line with the project in hand. If that project does not address the needs mentioned by the communities, such needs are ignored. Even worse, their needs are not shared with the concerned stakeholders. One rural villager, addressing a team commissioned in 2012 to conduct assessments in that area, stated: “Every month, two or three assessment teams come to our village enquiring about our needs. We tell them the challenges we face. They disappear and do not come back. I wonder what kind of needs these people look for that they are not seeing in our communities.” What the villager does not see is that intervention objectives are selected first and information to justify them is then searched for.

Things are much the same with respect to baseline studies, used to set up indicators to monitor activities and evaluate progress resulting from the intervention. Destitute people looking for any kind of aid exaggerate as the interviewers make clear from the beginning what kind of information the study is looking for it. Sometimes they point to other needs

that they have, but they are told that the intervention is confined to only one need, and that the study is merely assessing its severity. The interviewees continue exaggerating, and as the interviewers are only hired for this task, the other needs are not reported back. As a result, organizations that do want to address these needs look in the wrong places, and the suffering continues.

In the process of setting new development goals for the international community, values such as democracy, civility or inclusiveness are extremely difficult to quantify and measure, and yet they are essential for well-being. The Venezuelan Social Watch report highlights that point. Since the turn of the century, income poverty has declined dramatically, falling from 54 percent of households in 1998 to 32 percent in 2011, while extreme poverty fell even faster, from 23 to 9 percent. However, violence and insecurity is on the rise and the rate of homicides more than doubled in that same period. “Public space and social activities are reduced during the evenings and generalized violence affects the enjoyment of rights by the more vulnerable sectors” observes the report. “Night classes are being reduced in secondary education, teachers are reluctant to attend schools in high delinquency areas, hospitals close night-time emergency services and intense therapy units are clogged with assault victims.”

The Social Watch report from Slovenia offers another illustration of civil society trying to make sense of optimistic official statistics that do not reflect the malaise perceived by citizens. Officially there were 936,000 active workers in 2011 and 111,000 registered unemployed. In November 2012 registered unemployed remained more or less the same, but the active workforce shrank to 807,000. As unemployment is one of the main causes of poverty and social exclusion, it is important to explain how within a period of just one year close to 130,000 people (more than the entire registered unemployed workforce) were deleted from the public register of employment seekers. Forty thousand of them may be explained by unpaid housework, but this still leaves up

to 90,000 unaccounted for. Ten percent of the entire workforce became invisible!

Environment

Environmental destruction is, along with conflict, a major obstacle and, like conflict, it can originate from internal factors or be imposed from abroad. In the case of Costa Rica, the local Social Watch report takes pineapples as an example of how narrowly defined objectives can be counterproductive. In search of higher economic growth, the Government sought foreign investors with tax exemptions for export-oriented pineapple producers. In a few years, this crop resulted in land erosion and agrochemical contamination of rivers and groundwater because of the mishandling of wastewater. It also produced loss of biodiversity and wildlife poisoning by pesticides, air pollution with fungicides, flies and pests due to poor waste management, as well as a high concentration of toxic substances in the hair and urine of pregnant women and children residents of communities near the pineapple plantations. As tax exempted pineapples replaced tax-paying banana production, the finances of local governments were affected and therefore their provision of social services. Finally, as a result of civil society pressure, in 2012 the municipality of Pococí declared a ban on pineapples on grounds of the water contamination.

In Bangladesh the national Social Watch report also finds efforts to reduce poverty undermined by environmental constraints, but in this case the cause is climate change over which local and national authorities have no say. Despite remarkable progress in primary schooling, gender parity in primary and secondary education, decreased extreme poverty, lower infant, child and maternal mortality, improved immunization coverage, and fewer incidence of communicable diseases, the country and the vulnerable people in particular suffer the impact of cyclones and monsoon floods directly related to climate change. The Government has earmarked more than USD 10 billion in

investments for 2007-2015 to make Bangladesh less vulnerable to natural disasters. But despite this effort, the direct annual cost of natural disasters over the last 10 years is estimated to be between 0.5 and 1 per cent of GDP. "If Bangladesh is lagging in achieving MDGs due to climate change, who will be the responsible?" asks the report, emphasizing how climate change, "exaggerated by greed, steals from future generations, penalizes the poor and puts diversity at risk."

In Sri Lanka, the Social Watch report looks for solutions to similar problems: Experiences of farmer organizations and people's organizations over the last 15- 20 years show that ecological agriculture is a very effective way to overcome hunger and poverty and reduce ill health and ecological destruction caused by conventional chemical farming, which has also become very expensive since all chemical inputs are imported. Government has had to spend huge sums of money to provide chemical fertilizer at subsidized prices— about USD 100 billion is spent annually on the fertilizer subsidy alone. It has now been found that chemical agriculture leads to severe health problems and death. In Padaviya in the North Central Province around 20,000 people have died of a mysterious kidney disease proved to be caused by arsenic or Cadmium poisoning due to chemical agricultural inputs. In the North Central Province the people affected by this disease is over 100,000.

Sri Lanka still has a very large percentage of small farmers who are concerned primarily with producing their food, growing mainly rice, vegetables, pulses, yams and potatoes. In the late 1990s, the Government adopted World Bank policies that would push these people out of their land and agriculture, getting them to migrate into cities to find non-farm employment. This however, has not worked and still large numbers of people live in rural areas.

Young people have waged three armed rebellions that killed around 10,000 people in 1971, about 60,000 in 1988-90 and over several hundred thousand in the northern war that lasted for 30 years. Trying to make the country attractive to foreign investment over the last

36 years has failed and only cost the country a tremendous increase in foreign debt.

"It is foolish to expect the very creators of these crises to find solutions" concludes the Sri Lankan Social Watch coalition. "In finding solutions it is necessary to find ways in which the poor and hungry people take over the tasks of overcoming hunger and poverty. Since they do not have capital and since borrowed capital cannot be expected to support a process that does not benefit capital such a strategy will have to depend on capital to a minimum and use the free gifts of nature to the maximum through non-chemical agriculture."

What about the MDGs?

In his 2013 report to the General Assembly, Secretary-General Ban Ki-moon optimistically stated that the Millennium Development Goals "have succeeded in placing people at the centre of the development agenda" and as a result "many countries — including some of the poorest — have aligned their policies and resources with the Goals to make unparalleled gains."

Yet the reports from the civil society organizations working on the ground are more sceptical, not just about the progress they perceive but also about the usefulness of the framework. The international community is now actively engaged in discussing a new set of Sustainable Development Goals, as decided in 2012 by the Rio Summit, and a new development framework to substitute the MDGs when they "expire" in 2015 (the so-called post-2015 agenda). It is therefore interesting to cite the opinions of the protagonists of the anti-poverty struggle at the grassroots level directly:

In Zambia, for example, "The MDGs are too minimalist and quantitative, ignoring issues related to quality are not dealt with. In education, the good rates of primary school enrolment and completion hide the poor quality of education many children receive. Having good reading, writing and arithmetic skills is an essential part of quality." And in Bangladesh: "The MDGs are seriously lacking of ownership, participation and partnership, which are the core principles in implementing

pro-poor development strategies. The poor are the best experts on their own situation, but the goals and targets have been set with a top down approach. Those suffering from deprivation have not determined the priorities and have had no role in defining the concept of poverty and of what is needed to reduce poverty and suffering in the Bangladeshi context."

As some of the MDGs are "non-universal" they promoted policies targeting populations located near the poverty line, the "low hanging fruit." The people who were most distant from the line were often neglected and have seen their living conditions deteriorate. In Armenia, for example, programmes intended to eradicate poverty and achieve equality were sentenced to fail, since the interests of local oligarchs dominated over the national priorities. "We have not won poverty but poverty won us," people say. Similarly in Benin, the MDGs have neglected sectors essential for the poor, such as agriculture, while three quarters of the poor live in rural areas and urban poverty is partly due to the lack of rural development. The MDGs do not take into account a multidimensional approach to poverty, overlooking the link between poverty eradication and inequality, which requires redistribution policies.

In Cyprus, where the MDGs failed to account for disparities in initial conditions, they also "exhibit an agenda and not a strategy for development. The MDG agenda does not present an overview of the structural causes of poverty and social exclusion. Thus, the emphasis placed on "outcomes" rather than on the actual "processes" that lead to development is perceived by many as the main weakness. And in Finland: "Several problems hindering the achievement of the MDGs are rooted in the structures of the global economic system, which discriminates against developing countries and in other structural biases based on such things as gender or ethnicity. Setting up a new agenda will be futile if these structures of impoverishment are not addressed. Other deficiencies have been a closed and donor-led formulation process, the impossible reduction of broad structural problems into eight goals, the inability to take into account the special

needs of fragile states, and the lack of parallel goals for rich countries. Both extreme poverty and extreme levels of wealth hinder more equitable global development; in order to diminish inequality we need to address both poverty and wealth in their structural terms.”

In Paraguay, too: “The MDGs have a reductionist view, leaving aside goals of human life as well as international agreements and commitments such as the International Covenant on Economic, Social and Cultural Rights, the Convention on the Elimination of All Forms of Discrimination against Women (CEDAW) and the various summits and conferences on decent work, population and sustainable development. They focus on results and not on the structural causes; they do not address all the dimensions that make people poor or vulnerable. Nevertheless, on the positive side the Paraguayan coalition sees the MDGs as a “valuable tool for monitoring the few commitments made by the State towards Paraguayan citizenship.”

Protest and propose

Malaysia is one of the countries depicted as on track to achieve most of the MDGs by 2015. But the national Social Watch report concludes that “when the achievements are disaggregated and examined more closely, it is apparent that much more needs to be done.” Moreover, a proposed trade agreement, namely the proposed U.S.-led Trans-Pacific Partnership Agreement (TPPA) now poses a risk to all efforts at improving the socio-economic welfare and future of all Malaysians. The proposed TPPA, which Malaysia is negotiating with 10 other countries, as well as the proposed European Union-Malaysia free trade agreement (FTA) pose a larger spectre of corporate-driven liberalization than previously seen or attempted.” These agreements threaten irreversible changes to the fabric of Malaysian public life by putting in place legally-binding mechanisms to tip the balance of policies, laws and regulations in favour of the protection of corporate interests.

The TPPA, in particular, would not only do away with nearly all tariffs among TPPA

countries, but would also commit their governments to reforms and protections for foreign investors, such as enhanced safeguards for intellectual property (IP) holders which will impact on agriculture, technology-related industries, health, education, etc., freedom to carry out profit-making operations with minimal restrictions which raise environmental concerns, and limitations on state-owned enterprises, with implications for government-linked companies with socio-economic prerogatives. In addition, the TPPA’s investor-to-state dispute settlement (ISDS) mechanism would allow private foreign corporations to sue governments in international arbitration tribunals for any act, policy or law – including those put in place to protect the environment or public health – that the corporations argue have “expropriated,” or threaten to expropriate, their investments, profits and even expected profits.

As the crisis lingers, in many countries a risks is perceived that citizens may become disillusioned with democracies that do not deliver on their promises. In Hungary, the Social Watch report dramatically denounces the development of “a system that has turned against the democratic ideals of the world.” This adds that “political life is characterized by a murderous policy divergence, confrontation and a dangerous ideology-based polarization. The majority of the society is struggling with unjust and unequal relationships without even the hope offered by mutual solidarity.” However, this is not happening without resistance and civil society organizations, progressive groups and individuals have already started to form new coalitions of civic groups, movements, trade unions and opposition parties. The CSOs of the Hungarian Social Forum Network actively participates in these new movements.

In Malaysia, a nascent ‘green movement’ steered by grassroots civil society leaders is being empowered by tens of thousands of ordinary citizens who have not been cowed from rallying onto the streets of Malaysia to make their concerns known. The historic scale of the green movement has demonstrated that environmental issues, among other public interest

concerns, can no longer be dismissed by invoking ‘Malaysia’s development’ aspirations as trumping over socio-economic, political and civic rights. The Government must address them straight on as a systemic problem of lack of transparency, and disregard for people’s rights and the environment.

Similarly, in Slovenia, high levels of corruption and the fraudulent behaviour of key figures of the economic and political elite, combined with a falling quality of life for the majority have led to mounting discontent. Resentment and outrage first exploded in Maribor, where a combination of national and local factors contributed to massive protests against the mayor and members of the town council. The Facebook group “Franc Kangler should resign as Mayor of Maribor” got more than 40,000 supporters (in a town that has a population of 95,000) and mobilized the first massive protests.

Inspired by the sheer force and scale of protests, other towns quickly followed suit. The banners of protestors and group statements carry divergent, yet clear messages. The revolt is both local (after the first uprising in Maribor, revolts took place in 27 other towns) and national, systemic and personal (against mayors and the current government). A minor yet important component was also the international dimension with some demands for withdrawal from NATO and protests against the EU.

While the revolt against political figures, joined under the common slogan “Gotof je!” (You are finished!) was predominant, protestors also called for systemic change – such as the end of party politics, corruption, theft of common goods, casino capitalism and exploitation of workers. The response from the political elite was not surprising. The ruling party called the protestors zombies from the socialist regime, mercenaries of the opposition and marionettes of “godfathers in the background.” A common criticism from government and often repeated in the subservient mass media was that the protests have no clear message and offer no solutions. While the demonstrations themselves were more contra than pro

anything in particular the parallel insurgence of people's initiatives and civic movements has introduced a plethora of highly constructive proposals spanning the full spectrum of necessary shifts in orientation. The message of the uprisings was clear – the revolt is much more than just a protest against the current government and mayors, it is a revolt against the entire establishment.

In a study titled "World Protests 2006-2013," economic policy analysts Isabel Ortiz and Sara Burke examined strikes, demonstrations, rallies, riots, road blockages, occupations and other protest actions in almost 90 countries worldwide. Those in 2010 were double the number in 2006 and doubled again in the first half of 2013, including 15 with over 1 million people participating. Between 2006 and 2013, there were 70 events with global demands, but nine out of ten were directed at national governments. These occurred worldwide, but were more numerous in the high-income countries as a result of the financial and economic crisis and its aftermath, followed by Latin America and the Caribbean. In the Arab world the greatest number of recorded protests took place before the Arab uprisings in Egypt and Tunisia. The majority of the violent riots happened in low-income countries, almost half of them in Sub-Saharan Africa, mainly as a result of sudden increases in food and energy prices. The largest demonstrations happened in Egypt, where 17 million people took the streets against President Mohamed Morsi before his overthrow by the military, and in India, with a 100 million demonstrators

against poverty and inequality. In some cases, demands grew, as was the case in Brazil, where huge marches against the price of public transport turned into protests against corruption.

The authors cataloged 843 protests in four categories. In over half the total (488), protests were motivated by issues of economic justice, against austerity measures, unemployment, poverty, taxes and inequality. Over 40 percent (376) were directed against the political system, protesting corruption, demanding democracy, justice and transparency. Global justice was the generic theme of 311 protests, directed specifically against the IMF and other international financial institutions, trade agreements or to protect the environment. Finally, 302 events aimed at gaining or defending rights, including ethnic/indigenous/racial rights; right to the Commons (digital, land, cultural, atmospheric); labour rights; women's rights; right to freedom of assembly/speech/press; religious issues; rights of lesbian/gay/bisexual/transgendered people (LGBT); immigrants' rights; and prisoners' rights.

The authors identify two "jumps" in the growing number of protests over five years. The first, in 2007, relates to the increase in fuel and food prices resulting from the global financial crisis and the second, in 2010, coincides with the expansion of the austerity measures worldwide. In 2013, at least 119 countries were experiencing cuts in government spending as a result of increased public debt (in many cases after rescuing failed banks) and lower economic growth. Globally, only

two in five people of working age were employed and 900 million workers fail to escape poverty due to low wages. Austerity measures implemented in 2010 and 2013 include tax increases (mainly in socially unjust direct taxes like VAT), elimination of subsidies, reduction of wages of civil servants, labor flexibilization or reforms of the pension system.

"Protests that appear random are linked by a set of policies adopted by Ministries of Finance and generally advised by IMF surveillance missions," conclude the authors. In contrast, the second group of events is more subtly linked: "The occupation of Puerta del Sol in Madrid (calling for "¡Democracia Real YA!"), Syntagma Square in Athens ("Demokratia!") and Zuccotti Park in New York ("Democracy Now!") spread because the grievances in one place—frustration with politics as usual and a lack of trust in the usual political actors, left and right, coupled with a willingness even on the part of the middle classes to embrace direct actions—resonated in the other places. Frustration with politics as usual and politicians, coupled with a willingness even on the part of the middle classes to embrace direct actions, led thousands of people to occupy public spaces in large assemblies that became experiences of democracy and a new form of protest, based on principles of autonomy and solidarity."

Almost four in ten protests achieved some satisfaction of their demands. The "contagion" of examples and the non-satisfaction of the craving for real democracy and economic justice is likely to feed further movements. ■