

Overview: Unkept promises

"No society can surely be flourishing and happy, of which the far greater part of the members are poor and miserable".

Adam Smith, *The Wealth of Nations*, 1776

Five years have passed since the largest gathering ever of heads of State and government made this solemn promise to the peoples of the world: **"we will spare no effort to free our fellow men, women and children from the abject and dehumanizing conditions of extreme poverty."**¹ Ten years have passed since the leaders of the world solemnly committed themselves in Copenhagen **"to the goal of eradicating poverty in the world, through decisive national actions and international cooperation, as an ethical, social, political and economic imperative of humankind."**²

This is an ambitious agenda. So much so that it was compared by many leaders to the historic task of abolishing slavery in the 19th century. Inspired by the Copenhagen Declaration and the complementary Beijing Platform for Action towards gender equity,³ citizen groups from all over the world came together to form the Social Watch network in 1995. Every year since then, Social Watch has published a comprehensive report monitoring the governments' compliance with their international commitments.

The findings of the national Social Watch coalitions in over 50 countries and the analysis of the available indicators coincide: the promises have remained largely unmet. Unless substantial changes are put into place soon, the targets set for the year 2015 **will not be achieved**. In area after area, be it health, nutrition, education or provision of essential services like sanitation, progress is insufficient and all too frequently we simply do not see any progress.

These are hard facts that cannot be disputed. Unlike the election promises of politicians, which are frequently vague, generic and difficult to pin down to actual delivery, most of the objectives collectively set by the presidents and prime-ministers of the world (known as Millennium Development Goals or MDGs - see box) refer to very concrete targets and indicators. By assessing the evolution

of the indicators and comparing them with the situation in which each country should be in order to meet the targets by 2015, the unavoidable conclusion is that without a major improvement in present trends the goals will not be achieved.

The Basic Capabilities Index developed by Social Watch to summarize the multiple dimensions of poverty and deprivation in a single figure agrees: "If the MDGs were to be met, the 'social map of the world' that accompanies this report should be painted blue, or at least green, by 2015, to indicate that the minimum level of social services has been met. Yet if progress continues to be as slow as it was in the 1990s, there will still be some 70 countries with unacceptable deficiencies in basic capabilities,⁴ and at least 25 will still be painted in 'critical' red."

What went wrong? Were the targets too ambitious or unrealistic? Jan Vandemoortele, who helped develop the targets when he worked for the United Nations Children's Fund (UNICEF) and who is now the highest ranking officer of the UN Development Group in charge of monitoring the MDGs, does not think so: "By and large, the quantitative targets were set on the premise that the progress observed in the 1970s and 1980s at the global level would continue for 25 years from 1990 to 2015. For example, were progress for child survival to continue as in the 1970s and 1980s, the global child mortality rate in 2015 would be two-thirds lower than in 1990."⁵

In other words, the fact that the world has made only half the progress needed to be on track towards achieving the MDGs means that the pace of advances in social development has slowed down since 1990, in spite of all the promises and declarations.

The Social Watch coalition in Kenya found that government expenditures in basic social services had declined from 20% of the national budget in 1980 to only 13% in 1995. Between 1997 and 2001 the country spent 52% of total government revenue on debt repayments.

The number of children dying before their first birthday is not only contemplated in the MDGs but is also a valid indicator of how a country is developing. Three out of four countries for which data are available performed worse in the last 15 years than they did in the 1970s and 1980s. The mortality of children under five years of age was dropping faster before 1990 in 80% of the countries.

Millennium Development Goals

1. Eradicate 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

The children that do make it to their fifth birthday should go to school. That they all do so is also one of the Millennium Goals. Yet progress in schooling has also slowed down since 1990 and the regions moving forward in terms of primary school attendance are Latin America and Europe, which were better off anyhow in comparison. Paradoxically, in the same period university education grew at a much faster rate in each and every region of the world. Which points to the real picture of the social scenario of the last decade: growing inequality. The elite is doing better everywhere. Instead of seeing poverty diminish, we are witnessing a growing social gap.

In the Philippines, for example, the national Social Watch coalition reports that the income ratio of the richest quintile to the poorest quintile was 13 to 1 in 1990 and that the distance grew to 16 to 1 in 2000.

In Colombia, with the second highest inequality rate on the continent after Brazil, the richest 10% of households receive an income 30 times higher than the poorest 10%. According to local "social-watchers" disparities are even higher in the rural areas, where armed conflict displaces peasants from their houses and land.

In both rich and poor countries progress towards gender equity is very slow. The German metal industry union IG Metall refers to "progress at snail's pace". "If women's wages in West Germany continue to move into line with men's at the same rate as over the last 40 years, it will take another 40 years, at least, for women white-collar workers, and far more than 70 years for women in manual jobs, to catch up with their male co-workers."⁶

1 United Nations Millennium Summit, Millennium Declaration, para. 11. New York, September 2000.

2 World Summit for Social Development, Copenhagen Declaration on Social Development, Commitment 2. Copenhagen, March 1995.

3 Fourth World Conference on Women. Beijing Declaration and Platform for Action. Beijing, September 1995.

4 BCI levels lower than "medium".

5 Vandemoortele, Jan, "Ambition is Golden: Meeting the MDGs", in *Development*, 2005, 48(1), Society for International Development, www.sidint.org/development

6 Social Watch Report 2005, German national report.



It is a blatant paradox that measurable progress in health, education, sanitation and the promotion of women slowed down immediately after the end of the Cold War, when the great “peace dividend” was expected, when political leaders were unanimous in expressing their commitment to fighting poverty and when the public, perhaps as a result of the expansion in global communications, expressed solidarity in generous and spontaneous ways, as in the impressive “solidarity wave” that followed the tragic tsunami in December 2004.

A worldwide citizens’ campaign - the Global Call to Action against Poverty - was organized to demand more and better quality aid, trade justice and debt cancellation as requisites for meeting the internationally agreed upon goals. In the United Kingdom this campaign adopted the ambitious motto of “Make Poverty History”.

In the hope that substantive action against poverty could be agreed upon by the G8 - the group of leaders of the eight most powerful countries of the world who met in Scotland last July - millions of people wore white bands, the symbol of the campaign, and a group of celebrities organized “Live8”, a series of simultaneous concerts televised all over the world to what may have constituted the largest audience ever of a single event. Contrary to similar “Live Aid” concerts 20 years ago, the purpose was not to raise money for the poor but to motivate decision-makers to create the conditions that would allow people living in poverty and their nations to earn their own decent livelihoods.

In previous years, *anti-globalization* or *altermondialist* (to use their own term in French) demonstrators tried to make it impossible for the G8 to meet at all, judging that no good could come out of a gathering of the powerful, the self-appointed and the accountable-to-no-one. Some of the meetings were actually disrupted and had to be cut short due to huge crowds blocking the streets. This year in July, not even the bombs that exploded in London disrupted the leaders’ meeting, but the actual decisions taken fell short of the most realistic expectations. A few hours after signing a document saying that aid to Africa would be doubled by 2010, the US Government denied it had made a new commitment to increase its development assistance, one of the lowest in per capita terms.

Charter of the United Nations Preamble

We the peoples of the United Nations determined

- to save succeeding generations from the scourge of war, which twice in our lifetime has brought untold sorrow to mankind, and
- to reaffirm faith in fundamental human rights, in the dignity and worth of the human person, in the equal rights of men and women and of nations large and small, and
- to establish conditions under which justice and respect for the obligations arising from treaties and other sources of international law can be maintained, and
- to promote social progress and better standards of life in larger freedom,

and for these ends

- to practice tolerance and live together in peace with one another as good neighbours, and
- to unite our strength to maintain international peace and security, and
- to ensure, by the acceptance of principles and the institution of methods, that armed force shall not be used, save in the common interest, and
- to employ international machinery for the promotion of the economic and social advancement of all peoples,

have resolved to combine our efforts to accomplish these aims.

In September 2005, monarchs, presidents and prime ministers from all over the world will meet again, this time at United Nations headquarters in New York, to assess their performance in meeting the objectives of the Millennium Declaration. Kofi Annan, Secretary General of the UN, has challenged them to act boldly and simultaneously in three directions: peace and security, human rights and democracy, and development and poverty eradication. None of these can be achieved without the other two. The link between them was already established 60 years ago in the preamble of the UN Charter. No new promises are needed, but action is indispensable. ■