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UNDP Unveils Agenda to Spur Anti-Poverty Goals

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UNITED NATIONS, Jun 17 (IPS) - After an economic assessment of some 50 countries, the U.N. Development Programme (UNDP) has come up with a "concrete action agenda" to accelerate progress towards the achievement of the Millennium Development Goals (MDGs).

A new 58-page study titled 'What will it take to achieve the Millennium Development Goals' identifies some of the success stories worldwide and highlights common constraints on progress - both at the national and international level.

UNDP Administrator Helen Clark told reporters Thursday that three crises - food, fuel and finance - "have complicated the road to 2015", the target date to achieve the MDGs.

Clark admitted that progress has been uneven worldwide. "We should not be squandering the opportunities we have," she added.

The study was released in advance of a U.N. summit meeting in September which will assess the current status of the MDGs, and perhaps adopt a plan of action for the next five years towards the 2015 deadline.

The MDGs include a 50-percent reduction in poverty and hunger; universal primary education; reduction of child mortality by two-thirds; cutbacks in maternal mortality by three-quarters; promotion of gender equality; environmental sustainability; reversal of the spread of HIV/AIDS, malaria and other diseases; and a global partnership for development between the rich and the poor.

In its report, UNDP says the resources and the know-how necessary to achieve the MDGs exist.

But an "acceleration of progress over the next five years will need to focus on continuing proven strategies, policies and interventions and making a radical break with those that do not work."

The strategies that have worked include: the abolition of primary school fees leading to a surge in enrolment in Ethiopia; the construction of health clinics in Afghanistan which helped reduce under-five child mortality; and Ghana's nationwide fertiliser subsidy programme that increased food production by 40 percent and reduced hunger by nine percent between 2003 and 2005.

Additionally, the report singles out a national rural employment initiative in India which benefited some 46 million households, and improving opportunities for women and girls in Burkina Faso, Ghana, Mali and Senegal.

The provision of generators to women in all four African countries helped free up an average of two to four hours per day for women, which they were able to spend on education, improving their health and generating additional sources of revenue.

Still, according to the UNDP study, the significant successes in China, India, Vietnam and Brazil on poverty reduction have been negated by setbacks in other regions of the world.

In 2010, it is estimated that an additional 15 million and 19 million people will fall into poverty measured at 1.25 dollars per day and 2.0 dollars per day, respectively.

By March 2009, Botswana's gross domestic product (GDP) had contracted by 5.0 percentage points and unemployment in the mining sector had increased by 9.3 percent.

About 45,000 jobs were lost in South Africa in 2008 and 2009, where manufacturing output fell by 25 percent.

In the Democratic Republic of Congo, 100,000 workers were made redundant in 2009 due to smelter closures. And in Zambia, 6,000 people lost their jobs in the mining sector in November 2009 alone.

Calling for an increased focus on agriculture, the report says that rapid poverty and hunger reduction is the result of high per capita growth driven by agricultural productivity, employment creation and equitable distribution of income, assets and opportunities.

But it also points out that there should be a global partnership creating an enabling environment for the MDGs, particularly delivering on commitments made by rich nations on official development assistance (ODA).

The Organisation for Economic Cooperation and Development (OECD) estimates that ODA flows in 2010 will be around 108.1 billion dollars.

Although this is "significant" says the UNDP report, it still falls short of some 17.7 billion dollars in commitments made by donors at the Gleneagles G8 summit in 2005.

Meanwhile, at a two-day informal interactive meeting in the General Assembly beginning Monday, representatives of non-governmental organisations (NGOs) were particularly critical of rich nations renegeing on their commitments.

"If the poor were a bank", one cynic is quoted as having said, they would have been rescued by now with billions of dollars in bailout money.

But this is not happening, says Roberto Bissio of the Social Watch international network, because the additional money needed to achieve the U.N.'s Millennium Development Goals (MDGs), estimated at around 100 billion dollars a year, is just not forthcoming.

The refusal or reluctance of rich nations to meet their pledges, he points out, contrasts sharply with the trillions of dollars disbursed in the last two years to rescue failed banks.

For a majority of developing countries, particularly the least developed countries (LDC)s, described as the poorest of the world's poor, "the goals are unachievable", Bissio told IPS.

The developed world, he said, did not honour its part of the deal, spelled out in Goal 8, which was to reform the trade system in ways favourable to development, increase official development assistance, transfer technology, and solve debt issues, none of which is happening.

Bissio said the non-compliance of developed countries with their commitments under Goal 8 is not unrelated to the slow progress on the other goals.

"The uneven domestic distribution of resources is another major obstacle," he noted.

During the first years of the 21st century, many developing countries experienced high levels of economic growth, but poverty reduction and job creation lagged behind.

This "failure to deliver on the necessary finance, services, technical support and partnerships " was "aggravated by the global food and economic crises as well as the failure of various development policies and programmes".

Thus "improvements in the lives of the poor have been unacceptably slow to achieve, while some hard won gains are being eroded," he added.

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