

# 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

Almost 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."**<sup>1</sup> Almost 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."**<sup>2</sup>

This is an ambitious agenda. So much so that it was compared by many leaders to the historic task of slavery abolition in the 19th century. Inspired by the Copenhagen Declaration and the complementary Beijing Platform for Action towards gender equity,<sup>3</sup> citizen groups from all over the world came together to form the Social Watch network. 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 60 countries and the analysis of the available indicators coincide: the promises have remained largely unmet. Unless substantial changes are put in place soon, the targets set for the year 2015 **will not be achieved.**

The numbers that substantiate such a sad conclusion can be found in this very volume. The detailed analysis of each country by the national Social Watch coalitions around the world will be published this coming September (on the eve of the Second Millennium Summit). In area after area, be it health, nutrition, education or provision of essential services like sanitation, progress is insufficient and very frequently we simply do not see any progress.

These are hard facts that cannot be disputed. Unlike electoral promises of politicians that 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 those indicators and comparing them with where 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.

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."<sup>4</sup>

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 speed of advances in social development has slowed down since 1990, in spite of all promises and declarations.

The Social Watch coalition in Kenya found out 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 one of the MDGs but also a valid indicator of how a country is developing. Three out of four countries for which data are available have 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.

The kids 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 elites are 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 one-fifth to the poorest one-fifth was 13 to 1 in 1990 and that that 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

## 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

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 rich and poor countries progress towards gender equity is even slower. 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."<sup>5</sup>

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, and when political leaders are unanimous in expressing their commitment to fight poverty and when the public, perhaps as a result of the expansion in global communications, expresses solidarity in generous and spontaneous ways, such as with the impressive "solidarity wave" that followed the tragic tsunami in December 2004.

The year 2005 will provide opportunities to renew the political commitment of world leaders; particularly at the meeting of the eight most powerful countries of the world in Scotland in July, the second Millennium Summit of the United Nations in New York this coming September and the ministerial meeting of the World Trade Organization in Hong Kong, next December. A world-wide citizens' campaign - the Global Call to Action Against Poverty - has been 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 has adopted the ambitious motto of "Make Poverty History".

But for all that goodwill to make a real difference that people at the grassroots can perceive and statisticians can measure, the mere reaffirmation of the declarations that have proven to be so ineffective is not enough. ■

5 Social Watch Report 2005, German national report.

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