

Let's bail out humans too!

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Eight years ago, at the Millennium Summit in New York, in the largest gathering of world leaders in history, the UN Millennium Declaration was adopted. This Declaration commits them to a global partnership aimed at reducing poverty, improving health, promoting peace, human rights, gender equality, and environmental sustainability. One of the products of that momentum was the setting of the 8 Millennium Development Goals to the year 2015 in what was a very innovative approach to international agreed development goals by setting time-bound goals and measurable indicators in order to monitor progress. These Goals are not meant to be a one-size-fits-all universal strategy but their contents apply universally because they reflect fundamental social and economic rights [1].

To eradicate extreme poverty and hunger, to achieve universal primary education, to promote gender equality and empower women, to reduce child mortality, to improve maternal health, to combat HIV/AIDS, malaria and other diseases, ensure environmental sustainability and develop a global partnership for development – these are the 8 MDGs, subdivided into 21 targets and monitored by over 60 indicators. They encompass universally accepted human values and rights such as freedom from want, freedom from hunger, the right to basic education, the right to health and a responsibility to future generations.

We are halfway towards 2015 and some countries, even some regions, are being left behind, are not on track. But what does it mean to be on track? There is no one only development strategy to be adopted, all the solutions have to be tailored to suit each specific context, but the MDGs provide a framework within which all stakeholders can design their action plans.

MDGs achievement relies on commitments done by all counterparts to the process, in a true partnership by which developed countries commit themselves into increasing the Official Development Assistance up to 0.7 per cent of their GNI and to improve the effectiveness of the aid and the international environment for growth and development, and developing countries, under the auspices of national ownership, commit themselves to improve governance and mainstream poverty eradication, and MDGs as a whole, into all their policies. This global partnership is not only about money, nonetheless staying on track for 2015 does require the delivery of all the additional ODA that has been promised and is not being delivered, filling the delivery gap.

A couple of weeks ago, during the UN General Assembly's annual meeting, a High Level Event on MDGs took place in New York. Amidst success stories and identified shortcomings the final outcome was the recognition that 2015 is still within our reach and several governments and institutions made additional pledges, therefore creating a new momentum around MDGs. The EU-15, whose combined ODA accounts for 60 per cent of the total ODA disbursed, set the example by further confirming MDGs as a priority for the Union as a whole and for the Commission in particular. But the EU, too, will need to accelerate progress if it is to reach the collective intermediate target of 0.56 per cent by 2010.[2]

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It is common knowledge that nothing hampers more solidarity than a crisis. It is also a common fact that exogenous challenges, such as economic slowdown, food security crisis, the volatility of energy and commodity prices and global warming are causing additional constraints to the capacity of developing countries to stay on the MDG track. The economic slowdown diminishes the incomes of the poor, the food crisis raises the number of hungry people in the world and pushes millions more into poverty and under-nutrition, while at the same time climate change has already a disproportionate impact on the poor, due to their high exposure to its effects and their limited capacity to adapt to its consequences.

The UN Millennium Development Goals Report 2008 goes even further in recognizing that some of these challenges are the direct result of not having fulfilled our past commitments, such as for instance not having ensured environmental sustainability.

But the Report also brought some good news. The overarching goal of reducing poverty is within reach for the world as a whole; however this achievement will be due largely to the extraordinary progresses made in Asia, notably in China and in India. Political will, coupled with targeted investments, have yielded widespread progress in primary school enrolment [3] meaning that in almost all regions of the world, the net enrolment ratio in 2006 exceeded 90 per cent. Halving the proportion of population without access to safe drinking water is also on track. Just to mention some of the successes.

But while these are achievable goals others are out of track. We are lacking anti-malaria insecticide-treated bed nets, access to improved sanitation facilities, elimination of gender disparity in primary and secondary education, an urgent improvement on maternal health, and to incorporate into all development strategies measures to strengthen community resilience to climate change. In order to respond to this plea, in the High Level Event major commitments were announced, including more than \$4.5 billion for education and \$3 billion for malaria.

The current financial crisis that is forcing countries worldwide to bail out banks every day, casts a shadow on the future of MDGs. This crisis is unpredictable in scope and in depth, and nothing rocks more international markets than insecurity. This crisis may tempt some developed countries to cut back on what some still see as charity: the ODA. And even at present ODA levels, the new emergencies created by the need to adapt to climate change and strengthen resilience of the countries already being affected by its effects, by higher prices of food and energy, by declining commodity prices and remittances, make development assistance look even more insufficient.

Speaking on the UNGA, the prime minister of Norway said that "money is never the problem, when the problem is about money." He was referring to the money spent in bailout operations these past weeks, highlighting that on the case of international cooperation, as in many other areas of international relations, most of the times it's all about a very scarce commodity: political will.

The 76 billion Euros that were used in 2007 for development aid in the world may be considered an important amount of money, although it represents but a small fraction of the billions the US and the EU have used in less than three weeks to bailout their financial institutions and try to stabilize the financial markets; and less than 10 per cent of world annual military expenditure.

Because it is not possible to build a new global economic and financial order on such a short notice, because new ideas are being tested against a very difficult crisis scenario, and facing the urgency to guarantee everybody's right to live free from want, free from hunger, to have access to basic education, to enjoy their right to health and fulfill its responsibility to future generations, a bail out scheme for humans seems the only fast track approach. This is why the forthcoming

Financing for Development Conference in Doha cannot be “business as usual”, and even less a “damage control exercise”. Doha must provide instead the unequivocal signal that the survival and dignity of more one billion people [4], “the bottom billion”, deserve some priority as well, the priority attention of their governments and of the international community.

Ending poverty and achieving MDGs is not an economic problem; it is a matter of agenda. When all stakeholders decide to end poverty allocating the necessary funds, expertise and commitment into building a global partnership, with new instruments, renewed institutions and reinforced sense of common interest and human solidarity, then bailing out the poor of the world can become a thing of the past. But for now it is what we need.

[1] Jan Vandermoortele (UNICEF, New York) Introductory Note, Assizes of the Belgium Development Cooperation, Brussels, 13-14 May 2008.

[2] MDG 8, *Delivering on the Global Partnership for Achieving the Millennium Development Goals*, MDG Gap Task Force Report 2008, United Nation, 2008, p.6

[3] The Millennium Development Goals Report, 2008, DESA, United Nations.

[4] According to recent estimates of the WB, 1,400 million people are below a poverty line of \$1,25 a day.