

Comment

Making Hard Choices in a Shared World

● Salil Shetty

*“The world is my country, all mankind are my brethren,
and to do good is my religion.”*

Thomas Paine

In this brief introduction to this special edition of the *Trócaire Development Review* on the Millennium Development Goals (MDGs), I want to convey both the urgency and the opportunities that 2005 presents in dealing with some of the world's most pressing problems. I also want to underline the importance of this ongoing analysis on the implementation of the MDGs.

There are many crises facing the world today but I would like to focus on what is increasingly recognised as the single most important crisis: that is the *crisis of poverty and inequality*. Unfortunately, we have all become insensitive to the scale and urgency of this crisis. As we speak, two out of six people in the world, almost 2 billion people live in poverty. It is estimated that 30,000 people, mostly children, die every day from poverty. This is equivalent to a silent Tsunami every six days or 100 jumbo jets crashing every day. Half a million mothers, no less, died last year for no justifiable reason –during pregnancy, child birth and from poverty. Almost 3 million people died from AIDS last year. At least 120 million children are denied the right to primary

education and do not attend school. One billion people do not have access to sanitation, most of them women and girls. All in all, the 1990s were seen as a lost decade for the poorest countries in the world. In at least 54 countries, per capita incomes actually declined during that period and the number of people living in extreme poverty increased by 100 million.

The paradox, of course, is that at the same time the world has never before seen so much prosperity. The 90s were a decade of unprecedented economic progress in the rich world. The 1,000 richest people in the world are now said to have personal wealth greater than the 600 million people living in the so-called least developed countries. Ironically, aid to Africa which was \$33 per capita a decade ago, is now down to \$27.

Stirred by the sheer magnitude of this violation of basic human rights and troubled by the potential backlash of such deprivation for the majority of the world's population, in the largest ever heads of state gathering in history in September 2000, world leaders committed themselves to the Millennium Declaration. In this document, they rededicate themselves to the Universal Declaration of Human Rights and to the right to development and to free their fellow citizens from the indignity and suffering of abject poverty. At the turn of the century and the millennium, they recalled the outcomes of the different United Nations Summits in the 90s and gave themselves 15 years, up to 2015, to meet a set of very minimal but concrete Goals and targets, now known as the Eight Millennium Development Goals.

In doing this, they knew that the world has enough financial resources to address all these problems. Best estimates are that an additional \$50-100 billion could help achieve all the Goals in every country in the world within the next decade. To put this figure in perspective: the world spent \$900 billion on arms alone last year. In the past we could say that we did not have the technology, knowledge or resources to address these issues of meeting even the basic needs of all human beings. That is simply not the case any more.

Putting poverty at the top of the agenda

Let me outline four reasons that make it hard to continue considering global poverty as a second order problem. First, the suggestion that we have to address either domestic poverty and exclusion or the global one is a false choice. We simply have to deal with both and the fact is that today we have the resources to

do both. In any case, often the causal factors or the attitudes and paradigms that lead to exclusion and poverty are no different in rich or poor countries. With 11 million children dying every year in the developing world when we have the resources to prevent it, turning our eyes away raises serious ethical questions. Everyone on the planet has the right to food, shelter, education, respect, dignity and the right to lead a life free from poverty. Whether you look at it from the point of fairness and social justice or a more profound question of the moral universe, it is hard to hold the view that we cannot and should not deal with global poverty.

Clearly, you cannot win public support for fighting global poverty in rich countries by telling the public that they spend more on pet food each year than it costs to feed the entire population of Africa or that in spite of the much greater health needs in Africa, most African countries spend 500 times less than most western countries on public health on a per capita basis. In Sub-Saharan Africa, life expectancy is down to 46 years of age, compared to about 77 in Ireland and the UK. My former colleague Sam Musa from Sierra Leone who was 50 years old used to often say that he is simply lucky to be alive.

Second and happily, the public both in Ireland and abroad has made it clear that they do not need any convincing. In fact, they want us to do more. And if we do not they will do it themselves anyway. The unprecedented response to the Tsunami proved that beyond doubt. As British Chancellor Gordon Brown recently said: "Humbled first by the power of nature, we have since been humbled by the power of humanity, the awesome power of nature to destroy, the extraordinary power of human compassion to build anew." The Tsunami response only confirmed what the OECD Public Opinion surveys are consistently showing in the western world - that the public want to do more to make the world a fairer, safer and more prosperous place for all. Citizens in rich countries want more solidarity and justice in the world.

The third set of reasons to act is somewhat more controversial, particularly in the current political climate. There is enough evidence that if we do not act now we are actually moving into increasingly dangerous and uncharted waters. As Bono recently said: "We have the cash, we have the drugs, but do we have the will? Some say we can't afford to. I say we can't afford not to."

The three global issues of security, climate change and migration mean that poverty can no longer be ignored. As the recent UN Report on this subject makes clear: "We live in a world of new and evolving threats, threats that could not have

been anticipated when the UN was founded in 1945 – threats like nuclear terrorism and State collapse from the witch’s brew of poverty, disease and civil war. In today’s world, a threat to one is a threat to all.”¹ The Report goes on to say: “Development has to be the first line of defence for a collective security system that takes prevention seriously. Combating poverty can not only save millions of lives but also strengthen states’ capacity to combat terrorism, organised crime and proliferation. Development makes everyone more secure.” The World Bank estimated that 9/11 increased the number of people living in poverty by 10 million and cost the rest of the world \$80 billion – an amount which could have been usefully deployed in poor countries to achieve many of the Millennium Goals.²

The other issue of a similar nature is the impact of climate change and there is no better time to talk about this than today when the Kyoto Protocol takes effect. The Report from the Working Group on Climate Change and Development from UK NGOs and the Inter-Governmental Panel on Climate Change both remind us that the impact of climate change will be disproportionately borne by poor countries, increasing inequities in food, health status, water etc. The Report is clear: “Global warming threatens to reverse human progress, making the Millennium Goals for poverty reduction unachievable. Cuts in emissions of greenhouse gases of 60-80% (relative to 1990 levels), far beyond Kyoto Protocol targets are essential to avoid dangerous climate change and ensure some form of equity at the global level.” On the seventh Millennium Goal, we have no choice but to work together to keep this shared planet on a sustainable path that respects human development and human rights.

Increased poverty and inequality are certainly a push factor for people to migrate from poorer countries and areas. As long as inequity and imbalances between labour demand and supply are growing among countries, people will seek every opportunity to better their livelihoods. Although migration is a complex issue, it is generally understood that dealing with some of the key causes of migration, i.e. poverty and conflict, is as important as respecting the rights of immigrants.

The final and most compelling reason is that in 2005 we have a real chance of making a big difference. The world needs to put development back on the agenda, away from the obsession with security and the so-called “war on terror”. The heads of state meeting in September 2005 to review progress in the Millennium Declaration and Goals is very important. This is preceded by the

G8 leaders meeting in Scotland which will focus on poverty, Africa and climate change. The UK also holds the Presidency of the EU in the second half of this year and at the end of the year, there is the Ministerial meeting of the World Trade Organisation in Hong Kong which will also have a major impact on global poverty.

We hear a lot of rhetoric from various governments. But the best way to ensure governments will actually act is when there is pressure from citizens to hold them to account for their promises. We at the Millennium Campaign are focusing on this,³ supporting citizens who seek to hold their governments and international institutions to account for achieving the Millennium Goals. The good news is that things are beginning to change. For a start, many of the poorest countries in the world are already showing that these Goals can be achieved if there is political commitment, even in most adverse circumstances as faced by Sub-Saharan Africa. Malawi, Eritrea and The Gambia are some examples in primary education and Bangladesh, Ghana and Mozambique are all picking up on the health front, as well as Thailand, Uganda and Senegal on AIDS.

There is a long way to go if the Goals are to be achieved by 2015. At current trajectory, many of the poorer countries of the world are off track. However, with enough public pressure in 2005, we could generate the political will to bring it back on the rails.

Footnotes

- ¹ UN (2004), *A More Secure World: Our Shared Responsibility*
<http://www.un.org/secureworld/>
- ² For up to date figures on MDG costings see
<http://www.developmentgoals.org/Data.htm>
- ³ www.millenniumcampaign.org