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Development Under Attack

Will the 2005 poverty agenda unravel at the UN World Summit?

Summary

The UN World Summit, being held in New York from September 14th – 16th, will bring together over 170 presidents and prime ministers to review progress on eight global poverty goals agreed for 2015, and agree action on development, peace, security, human rights and UN reform. There is an urgent need for a serious appraisal of progress given that:

- The target of halving the proportion of people living in poverty by 2015 will be missed outside Asia.
- Over 70 countries have already missed the first goal, which falls due in 2005, of achieving equal educational access for boys and girls.
- Africa is currently projected to miss every goal.

Against this backdrop of slow progress and no progress, an emerging consensus on development – based on the Millennium Declaration and funding commitments in the Monterrey Consensus – is under unprecedented attack from the United States, which has sought to strip the summit outcome document of any reference to either the development goals, or to time-bound commitments on aid, debt and HIV and AIDS.

Just two months after the G8 summit in Scotland, and the mobilisation of millions of people around the world calling for action to make poverty history, the UN summit threatens to unravel the modest gains made this year on debt and aid, and jeopardise efforts to get the world back on track to achieve the goals. To prevent this from happening, the UK government must defend existing commitments, and go beyond them by strengthening and expanding the goals, to ensure 2005 is remembered as a turning point in international efforts to eradicate poverty.

1. Introduction

On September 14th, more than 170 of the world's leaders will gather at the United Nations in New York to make decisions with a life-and-death impact for millions of people. The UN World Summit agenda is wide-ranging and far-reaching. Alongside the discussions on peace and security, human rights and UN reform, the General Assembly will sit down to gauge progress on a series of promises made in 2000 to halve poverty, and tackle sickness, illiteracy and environmental degradation by the year 2015.

These promises, set out in eight Millennium Development Goals (MDGs), reflected a growing inter-governmental consensus on the urgent need to overcome extreme poverty in a world of unprecedented plenty. Despite their flaws, they also provide a valuable measure of progress. Yet as the summit approaches, the consensus underpinning the goals is under threat, while progress towards them has been dismal. The first MDG, to achieve equal access to schooling for girls and boys by 2005, has been missed in over 70 countries. The world as a whole is off-track on many of the 2015 MDGs, and Africa is off-track on all of them. This impending failure should be counted in millions of children denied the right to an education, and in millions of avoidable deaths in developing countries.

But rather than mobilise the international community, the UN's response has been to quietly shelve the 2005 MDG, and to ignore the feeble progress towards the 2015

goals in the Secretary General's outcome document. Meanwhile, the US government has launched a wrecking ball against the development agenda, by opposing any reference to the goals, to targets on aid and debt, or to the need for action on Africa. The upshot is a summit that looks increasingly rudderless, and that risks going down in history as a hugely expensive failure.

Without decisive and immediate action in New York to put poverty eradication back at the top of the agenda, and to identify measures to get the world's poorest countries – especially those in Africa – back on track for the goals, the development agenda set out by the UK government in 2005, at the G8 and through the Commission for Africa, risks unravelling. This briefing note summarises the current state of progress towards the MDGs, shows the costs of failure and the benefits of action, and makes recommendations to the World Summit to ensure that real and lasting progress is made to ending poverty and achieving basic rights.

2. Slow progress and no progress

The World Summit is a critical stock-take of progress towards the Millennium Development Goals. With ten years to go before the target date, the decisions taken in New York will decide whether the MDGs are attainable, or become empty promises. The eight goals reflect a break with past approaches to development, by making human need the organising principle of poverty reduction efforts, and by placing country-donor partnerships at the centre of planning and implementation. Despite their shortcomings– they are narrowly quantitative, underplay the responsibility of rich countries, and even if achieved would leave hundreds of millions of people living in extreme poverty – the MDGs are still a major challenge to the world's governments, and an important promise to their people, to tackle the violation of basic social and economic rights.

At present this promise is being broken, as table 1 shows. Substantial progress has been made in some areas, such as access to water, while a number of countries are on track for several or all of the targets. Even in Africa, where on current trends no goal will be met, countries such as Uganda and Tanzania have made dramatic inroads in areas such as education. But although these isolated examples demonstrate the feasibility of the goals, they also highlight the overall lack of progress. For example:

- Poverty has stagnated or worsened in every region outside Asia. In Africa, there are over 100 million more people living in poverty than in 1990.
- The number of people suffering from hunger has increased since 1997, and over 150 million children in developing countries are underweight. The target is projected to be missed in Africa, and South and West Asia.
- On current trends, Africa and South and East Asia will fail to achieve universal primary education by 2015. By the target date, 75 million children in over 80 countries are projected to remain out of school.
- On current trends, the child mortality target will be missed in every region except East Asia and Latin America. In the developing world, 30,000 children die daily before reaching their fifth birthday.
- In Africa, life expectancy has fallen by 15 years since 1990, largely through the effects of HIV and AIDS.

The cost of failure to reach the goals would be massive. Millions of children, most of them girls, will lose out on the opportunity to learn at school. Thousands of preventable child deaths will continue to blight poor and marginal communities. This waste of individual human potential would be an inexcusable tragedy. It would also have major implications for the economic and social development of whole societies. As the box below shows, new research by ActionAid across thousands of villages in seventeen countries where we work reveals the enormous toll on individuals, households and communities of extreme poverty and lack of access to essential services.

**Poor communities give their verdict on the MDGs:
New ActionAid research**

During 2005, ActionAid spoke with over 340,000 people across 5,000 communities in 17 countries, in the course of a research project designed to listen to people whom the MDGs purport to benefit, but who are rarely consulted about their needs and priorities. Participatory field research was carried out in Afghanistan, Pakistan, Nepal, India, Bangladesh, Cambodia, Vietnam, Ethiopia, Senegal, Malawi, Sierra Leone, Tanzania, Somalia, Nigeria, Rwanda, Brazil and Guatemala, capturing poor people's daily experiences, and their views of progress towards the goals. The findings reveal a story of slow progress or no progress, as people face a desperate struggle to survive.

The research shows that achievement of the MDGs is a distant ambition for most poor communities. Chronic under-investment in services, a lack of political voice, and damaging policy changes – often as a result of donor conditions on aid or debt relief – have all contributed to slow or non-existent progress. The research found:

- In one quarter of the villages surveyed across the 18 countries, people had witnessed deaths from starvation and hunger in the previous year.
- In two-thirds of communities, people reported missing meals during the lean season. In one case, in Ksisi village in Ruangwa, Tanzania, interviewees reported that one meal a day had been the norm for at least the last ten years. Roots, wild plants and toxic tubers are often all that is available. These food shortages are taking place against a backdrop of increasingly fragmented landholding, lack of access to affordable inputs such as fertiliser, and to viable prices for their products – often the result of World Bank and IMF programmes that require countries to heavily liberalise.
- Poor households seeking to boost their income often rely on casual labour. Chhorn Phaly, a woman in Cambodia, is typical. She and her husband carry out a range of construction and portering jobs to supplement an average income of 50 cents a day from the family smallholding. Their son, Nak, who was born without fingers on his right hand, left school after just four years of primary education to beg on the streets of the capital, Phnom Penh, from where he can send money to support his parents.
- Women are the hardest hit by slow progress against anti-poverty targets, suffer frequent violent attacks and lack access to land.

The research also showed access to the most **basic services**, such as primary education, basic healthcare and clean water, is an unaffordable privilege for many households.

- 80% of focus group discussions in 3,500 communities identified cost as the biggest barrier to healthcare. More than three quarters did not have health centres nearby, with more than half having to walk between three and ten kilometres to access health services.
- In more than half of all communities surveyed, respondents reported that education costs, from fees to uniforms, meant that some children were unable to attend school.
- Dependence on child labour, especially when household income is low or the demands of farming are heavy, also keeps children out of school.

Distance is another major factor in poor people accessing services:

- Almost one third of communities lacked a primary school, and in Tanzania half of all children had to walk more than three kilometres to reach a classroom. For Yalchacti village in Verapaz, Guatemala, continuing beyond the most basic education requires a 28 kilometre journey to the nearest town. Domingo Cas, a smallholder farmer, is able to send his oldest son to school, but his other children are not so fortunate. His daughter, in common with most girls in the area, never enrolled in primary school. Often, the most basic provision for girls is missing.
- Across the 18 countries, nine out of ten villages housed girls who do not attend school. In 60% of communities, schools lacked toilets for girls - often cited as a key reason for not attending.

For more details on this research please contact the ActionAid press office.

Conversely, achieving the goals would generate enormous benefits, both for the millions of poor people who would stand to benefit from access to essential services, and for a world of unsustainable inequalities. For Africa alone, reaching the goals by 2015 would mean:

- 500 million more people would escape from poverty.
- 30 million child deaths would be averted.
- 350 million more people would have safe drinking water.
- 300 million fewer people would experience hunger.
- 2 million deaths of women in childbirth would be prevented.

The World Summit is a crucial opportunity to appraise the inadequate progress made to date, draw lessons from successes and failures, and agree on the actions needed by both poor and rich countries to reach the goals. Although the target date is ten years away, the goals demand immediate action if they are to be met. Universal primary education requires a major scaling up of access now, in order to work through the seven year school cycle. Likewise, many of the health gains needed to reach the goals on child and maternal mortality, and to reverse the spread of HIV and AIDS, depend on long term and comprehensive strategies.

The Africa Commission and G8 summit in Gleneagles have already focused international attention on poverty reduction, and created a climate of expectation to which leaders gathering in New York must now respond. At the same time, the progress on debt, aid and trade from the G8 was disappointing at best, and many of the commitments were highly provisional. Japan, Germany and Italy have all distanced themselves from recent promises of new aid, and several European countries have sought to water down the agreement to cancel 100% of World Bank, IMF and African Development Bank debts for 18 low-income countries. Unless the World Summit 'locks in' these existing commitments from the G8, and goes further by increasing aid and debt relief and changing direction on trade, the development agenda that the UK has heavily promoted in 2005 will be in jeopardy.

Table 1: Progress towards the Millennium Development Goals (shaded goals off track) §

	goal	target	progress globally *	progress in Africa
1.	Eradicate poverty and hunger	Halve the percentage of people living on less than \$1 a day, and the percentage suffering from hunger	Poverty declined from 28% to 21% between 1990 and 2001, mostly due to India and China Proportion of underweight children fell from 33% to 28% between 1990 and 2003	Poverty rose 2 percentage points to 46% over the same period Proportion of underweight children fell 1 percentage point to 31%
2.	Achieve universal primary education	All children complete primary schooling	83% of children are completing 5 years of schooling, up from 81% in 1998	53% of children complete 5 years of schooling, up from 49% in 1998
3.	Promote gender equality	Eliminate the school enrolment gap between girls and boys by 2005	Girls' primary school enrolment was 92% of boys' enrolment in 2002, up from 87% in 1990	Girls' primary school enrolment was 86% of boys' enrolment in 2002, up from 83% in 1990
4.	Reduce child mortality	Cut the mortality rate among under-fives by two thirds	88 under-fives per 1000 births died in 2003, down from 105 in 1990	172 under-fives per 1000 births died in 2003, down from 185 in 1990
5.	Improve maternal health	Cut the maternal mortality rate by three quarters	450 maternal deaths per 100,000 live births in 2000 (no trend data)	920 maternal deaths per 100,000 live births in 2000 (no trend data)
6.	Combat HIV and AIDS	Halt and reverse the spread of HIV and AIDS, malaria and other diseases	Adult prevalence rate tripled from 1990 to 1.26% in 2004	Adult prevalence rate tripled from 1990 to 7.2% in 2004
7.	Ensure environmental sustainability	Reverse the loss of environmental resources, and cut by half the percentage of people without clean water	92% of people had access to improved water source in 2002, up from 71% in 1990	58% of people with access to improved water source in 2002, up from 49% in 1990
8.	Develop a global partnership for development	Improve trading conditions for the poorest countries, make debt sustainable, increase aid and make essential drugs affordable	Overseas Development Aid fell from 0.33% of rich countries' income in 1990 to 0.25% in 2003	Aid to the Least Developed Countries** fell from 0.09% to 0.08% of rich countries' income between 1990 and 2003

Source: UNDP * all developing countries
§ no trend data for goal 5 or 8

**36 out of 50 LDCs are in Africa

3. Development under attack

In 2000, the Millennium Declaration committed its signatories to meet in 2005 for a major inter-governmental review of progress. Yet the outcome document makes no serious attempt to gauge where countries are in relation to the goals, and has sidestepped any appraisal of goal 3, on equal access to school for boys and girls, which falls due this year and has been missed by a wide margin in Africa, and South and West Asia. This matters not only because gender parity in education is an important objective in its own right, but also because it is an indicator of progress towards the other goals.

As well as neglecting to review progress, the outcome document markedly fails to identify the measures needed to get the world back on track for reaching the goals. The summit addresses five areas: development, security, peace, human rights and strengthening the UN. While all these areas have a strong poverty reduction dimension, and are inter-connected, the development section of the document is the main focus for the MDGs. Yet it is also the section that now makes fewest concrete proposals for action. Earlier drafts made some clear, time-bound commitments on increasing aid, improving the quality of aid, cancelling unsustainable debt, tackling HIV and AIDS and expanding access to health and education. Yet these have now been diluted during pre-summit negotiations, to the point where the text risks rolling back much of the progress made this year. For example:

- On **aid**, earlier drafts committed rich countries to establish timetables to reach the target of giving 0.7% of their income in aid by 2015. This target – agreed by EU member states in May - now looks likely to be removed.
- On **debt**, earlier drafts committed to debt reduction for countries outside the Heavily Indebted Poor Countries initiative (HIPC), based on an appraisal of their MDG financing requirements. This commitment – reflecting recent moves to reduce the debts of Nigeria and other African non-HIPCs - now looks likely to be lost.
- On **HIV and AIDS**, earlier drafts committed to full funding for universal access to treatment by 2010. This commitment – set out in the G8 communiqué and Africa Action Plan in Gleneagles – looks likely to go.
- On **education**, commitments to providing free basic education and full funding of the education Fast Track Initiative – made at the G8 – have gone from later drafts.

Most of these changes are the result of aggressive lobbying by the United States, supported in some areas by Japan, Australia and other rich countries. In part, they stem from their reluctance to make funding commitments. But in other areas, they go beyond this, and seek to break the broad multilateral consensus on poverty reduction reached at the UN Summit on Financing for Development in Monterrey, in 2002. In particular, the US has proposed deleting all 35 references to the Millennium Development Goals, despite signing up to the Millennium Declaration, from which the goals are drawn. The US has adopted a similar approach to other multilateral processes and agreements, by seeking to strip out references on climate change and the Kyoto Protocol, the International Criminal Court and the UN Convention Against Corruption.

As a result of these changes, Tony Blair's announcements at Gleneagles, claiming a major step forward in the fight against poverty, sound increasingly empty. Without a

robust defence by the UK of the development aspects of the summit agenda, there is a real concern that, two months after millions of people around the world mobilised in support of action to make poverty history, the UN summit delivers a worse outcome than the situation *before* the G8. And because the agendas on development, rights, peace and security are interconnected, failure to make progress on development threatens to undermine the entire summit. Instead of achieving a 'San Francisco moment', echoing the meeting in that city that led to the UN's foundation, the World Summit risks being remembered as a backward step in global efforts to realise human rights, and foster peace and stability.

4. What world leaders must agree in New York

When the world's governments meet in New York, they will face a stark choice between business as usual, which will destroy any real prospect of achieving the development goals, and a fundamental change of direction, necessary to reduce poverty and realise basic rights. The challenge is twofold: the summit needs to consolidate the modest gains that have already been made this year, especially in increasing aid and cancelling debt, in the face of attempts by the United States to derail the process. But it must also build on the existing MDG agenda, by strengthening its human rights dimension, by undertaking a serious stock take of the MDGs that identifies the reasons for the lack of progress, and by agreeing an action plan to rescue the goals from failure and irrelevance. Beyond this, action is needed on the other priority areas of the summit to reinforce these efforts.

The current draft of the outcome document is an inadequate foundation for progress. ActionAid is calling on the international community to take the following steps to make the World Summit a success:

- **Defend and strengthen the development agenda**
 - Commit to reach the 0.7% aid target by 2010
 - Agree measures to improve the quality of aid, based on OECD targets, and to stop tying aid and debt to policy conditions
 - Cancel the debts of all low-income countries in line with MDG financing needs
 - Reaffirm the 2010 universal treatment target for HIV and AIDS.
 - Take measures to provide free, universal basic education and healthcare
 - Commit to a just trade and investment system, by ending unfair practices including dumping and forced liberalisation, by expanding market access for poor countries, and by effectively regulating corporates.
- **Expand and strengthen the MDGs**
 - Broaden the definition of poverty in goal 1, to capture its social and political dimensions, and integrate women's rights across the MDGs.
 - Develop transparent review mechanisms that capture poor people's experiences of poverty, and can be used to hold governments to account for progress on the goals
 - Make social and economic rights explicit in the MDGs, and use UN rights machinery to gauge progress towards the goals

- Ensure that multilateral trade agreements, and the policies of the International Financial Institutions, are consistent with the MDGs and human rights obligations.
- **Agree to key peacebuilding and human rights reforms**
 - Establish a peacebuilding Commission and standing fund to assist countries emerging from conflict
 - Agree a comprehensive ban on the small arms trade
 - Implement natural disaster early warning systems
 - Establish a standing Human Rights Council.
- **Reform global governance**
 - Make the General Assembly the chief representative organ of the UN, strengthen the Economic and Social Council, and build coherence across the agencies, funds and financial institutions of the UN system, including the World Bank, IMF and World Trade Organisation.