

***Millennium Development Goals
2000-2009 – Challenges and Opportunities***

Background and Context

In September 2000, the international community under the leadership of the United Nations agreed to adapt *eight dire global challenges to create a sustainable development* in countries where people live on less than a dollar a day. The eight Millennium Development Goals (MDGs) range from halving extreme poverty to halting the spread of HIV/AIDS and providing universal primary education, all by the target date of 2015.

These goals are unique in that they are backed by a consensus of governments throughout the world. They were set as aggressive goals but also ones that were understood to be achievable with equally aggressive actions by the member nations involved. They are also people-centric and measurable, two important considerations in setting any goals with the intent of transforming communities from the “bottom up.”

Since 2000, the UN has reported significant success in many areas of the MDGs in some specific parts of the world. According to the World Bank 2008 report, poverty in East Asia and Pacific regions has decreased from 56% in 1990 to 18% in 2005. As well, South Asia has cut its poverty rate from 51% to 40%. Unfortunately, sub-Saharan African countries are still lagging behind, and malnutrition has only declined from 20% in 1992 to 16% in 2004.

Furthermore, the recent hike in food prices is jeopardizing the limited gains the MDG made in reducing hunger. Combined with the global financial crisis, this has produced concerns that by some estimates the number of people living on less than \$1 a day may rise by about 40 million, and people living on less than \$2 per day could increase by 100 million.¹ The world’s poorest people, most of whom live in Sub-Saharan Africa, South

¹ UN News Service, January 29, 2009

East Asia and Latin America have nothing to do with the causes of the global financial crisis and yet they are burdened with another "grim" and uncertain future because of it.

Challenges and Opportunities

In 2005, as part of the Santa Clara University Global Women's Leadership Network's (GWLN) annual leadership training, Women Leaders for the World (WLW), I presented on the MDG Global Challenges and Opportunities for which at the time research showed that²:

- *Approximately 121 million children are out of school worldwide.*
- *Some 39% of all primary school-aged children either do not attend or have no access to formal schooling.*
- *More than 113 million children never go to school of any kind.*
- *Approximately 250 million children are involved in part- or full-time work, many of whom are in exploitative situations.*
- *HIV has infected more than 60 million people worldwide, and each day 14,000 people are newly infected, more than half of them under age 25.*

Since presenting at WLW in 2005, I have been tracking the progress and the challenges the MDG faces. I became even more interested to see how the latest global financial crisis may have impacted the program. In the wake of this crisis and partly because of it, according to the *World Bank Global Monitoring*, even though some countries are making good progress towards achieving MDG goals, most countries in Sub-Saharan Africa lag on all MDGs, including poverty reduction, and Southeast Asia falls behind on human development.

Such inconsistency creates major setbacks and challenges for the UN to fulfill its promise of "halving extreme poverty by 2015." Suffice to say, through no fault of their own, many people in poor countries have become victims of the crisis. The crisis is

² UNICEF, UN Population Fund

more prevalent in Sub-Saharan Africa, where people cannot afford to buy and/or produce food. It is no wonder we often see televised images of people fighting over loaves of bread or sacks of grain in these countries of crisis. Such poverty is dissolving the fabric of humanity before our very eyes.

In the midst of all this, the attention and direct action that countries are placing on MDG issues is beginning to produce some results. Those results point to new and creative ideas that are emerging to help alleviate poverty in the region. For example, in the latest MDG 2008 status update provided by The World Bank, the proportion of people living in extreme poverty (those surviving on less than \$2 a day of income) fell from 41.7% (1.8 billion people) in 1990 to 25.7% (1.4 billion) in 2005. At this pace the MDG target of halving extreme poverty will indeed be met at the global level by 2015.

With respect to another MDG issue, specifically the education of women and girls, although the precise goal in this area has not been met yet, very promising progress has been made in reducing gender inequality and access to primary and secondary education worldwide. Some highlights from *The World Bank Global Monitoring* are summarized below:

- *The greatest disparity in girls-to-boys schooling is found in regions with the lowest primary completion rates and lowest average incomes, so the focus of work in this area has emphasized primary education percentages and working with the most impoverished.*
 - *South Asia has made the most progress.*
 - *The Middle East and North Africa have also made strides in reducing gender disparity, as has Sub-Saharan Africa.*
 - *Latin America and the Caribbean and East Asia and the Pacific have reached gender parity in secondary education and are close to reaching it in primary schooling.*
 - *Overall, all regions except Sub-Saharan Africa are broadly on track to meet the gender parity target.*

Unfortunately, there are other areas of the MDGs that are not yet met which present great danger of possible setbacks. According to the recent UN and World Bank report, Sub-Saharan Africa has not shown progress in poverty reduction and the number of poor individuals has increased substantially. The healthcare system in most African countries still lags in providing adequate treatment for those infected with HIV/AIDS, malaria and other epidemics. Most important, the many episodes of civil unrest and border conflict, including the genocide in Darfur, hinder progress in lowering child mortality rates and improving maternal health.

Closing Thoughts

Since its inception, MDG has been a great tool in focusing on and raising awareness of extreme poverty, healthcare, education, maternal health, equality and other dire global issues. After focus and awareness comes, of course, the need for prompt action. Part of that action came from the world's governments at the Rio de Janeiro summit in 1992, where they pledged to provide 0.7% of their collective GNP to address these issues. The UN is calling on the G-8 countries to fulfill their pledge in order to provide the necessary support to the world's poorest people.

These challenges, however, are about far more than providing funding. These challenges cannot be met by any one government or entity, nor even by dealing with one issue at a time. These issues are systemic, intertwined with societal, institutional, geographic, and global economic forces that require equally systemic responses. The momentum in many of these MDG areas is also sufficiently stagnant that small solutions, however well meaning, are simply not enough.

What this points to is the need for a very different kind and level of solution. It requires a massive concentration of collective innovation from a variety of non-profits, NGOs, multilateral organizations, governments, corporations, foundations and individuals, all working together to tackle these critical global issues. As such, any long-term sustainable solutions involving these various groups will demand:

- Involving the indigenous members of the community. These members have vested interest in creating a sustainable community where they can support their families. Developing and then harnessing the will of that community is the only way to ensure change happens at the deepest possible levels.
- Understanding the nature of the systems that have sustained the status quo and the nature of the systems that will be required to sustain systemic change.
- Bringing together dramatic new forms of public/private partnerships to bring together the best of both worlds, to provide a stronger support network for these emerging regions and their people.
- By providing infrastructure, education, financial, and trade support, enabling individuals, local governments, and small businesses within these emerging economies to grow in a more stable manner and with higher value-added components to their enterprises.
- Targeting new enterprise growth in areas that can enhance food supply, healthcare services, and educational solutions within the local communities.
- As solutions begin to take hold, monitoring how the underlying problems and symptoms may shift, and then quickly redirecting resources for the next generation of solutions needed.

These are big and complex global challenges, requiring co-creative collaboration on a scale never seen before. We believe the world can achieve this, but it will take leadership and skill blended with selflessness and humility on a grand stage to make it happen. We must make our own pledge to see that this happens for the benefit of all the world children and the greater good of society.

Resources:

- **United Nations**
- **UNICEF**
- **UNESCO**
- **USAID**
- **NetAid**
- **ANPPCAN**
- **UNDP**
- **WomenWatch**