

How Africa can Achieve the Millennium Development Goals

The recently released United Nations midway point assessment of Africa's journey towards achieving the eight millennium development goals (MDGs) by 2015 shows that no single country in sub-Saharan Africa is on track to achieve any of the goals. The report is hopeful that the goals are achievable in most African nations before the year 2015. Many perceptive commentators on the African condition are far from being convinced on the necessity of these bogus plans for Africa that are long in expectations and promises but far removed from the local context. To accelerate the drive towards achieving the MDGs in Africa, the UN scribe Ban launched the MDGs Africa Steering Group on September, 14 with a clear mandate to find ways and means of helping African nations to get on track in efforts towards achieving the millennium goals.

The first of three challenges the Group resolved to address is to identify effective mechanisms for implementing the MDGs for health, education, agriculture and food security, infrastructure and statistical systems. Five of the eight goals seek to cut by half the proportion of people living on less than a dollar a day and suffering from hunger; ensure that all boys and girls complete a full course of primary schooling; cut the mortality rate among children under five by two thirds; reduce the maternal mortality ratio by three quarters; and halt and begin to reverse the spread of HIV/AIDS and the incidence of malaria and other major diseases. In a joint statement, the leaders said; "Our organizations will work together to review international implementation mechanisms and support governments in making the investments needed to achieve the MDGs."

The second challenge they set for themselves is to improve aid predictability. "Our organizations will make our own aid more predictable," they said. "We will also work with other donors to help establish country-by-country schedules for official development assistance to rise to meet existing commitments, so that African governments can plan effectively for the practical investments needed to achieve the MDGs."

Thirdly, they pledged to strengthen joint efforts at the country level. "Starting in a subset of African countries, we will launch an intensive collaboration among our organizations to support governments in preparing and implementing strategies that are ambitious enough to achieve the MDGs," they declared.

While these commitments are lofty and very attractive, they do not address the root cause of poverty and under-development in Africa. In the first place, we must admit that African development is unpredictable. The predictability of social progress and development can only happen in those societies where there are basic social, political, and economic structures which are resistant enough to other unforeseen variables that impinge on the socio-economic process. The foundations for national development in Africa are very superficial and largely fragile, because of the political and economic structure of African nations which make them susceptible to unstable governments, corruption, ecological disasters, and ethnic and religious conflicts. This makes long term goals and planning largely unrealistic.

Thus, setting benchmarks and timeline for development is often counter-productive because they ignore the fundamental elements of development, which should be put in place in the first place in most African countries: human and cultural development, constitutional and participatory democracies. Long term development goals in Africa are often hampered by the failure to address the immediate short-term concerns that relate to the human capital and the shape and structure of political, economic and social institutions that determine the direction of African societies.

The MDGs are imposed on Africa countries without sensitivity to the peculiar problems and challenges facing individual African countries. Africa is a continent of 53 countries; each country has its own peculiar history and challenges. How can the MDGs be realized for instance in Zimbabwe which is suffocating under the iron hand of the worst dictatorship that has gripped an African country in the last thirty years? How can the MDGs be a reality in Darfur and other

parts of Sudan where the basic question is about identity, nationality, and survival? Are the challenges of national reconciliation facing countries like Rwanda, Congo-Kinshasa, Sierra Leone, Cote d'Ivoire, and Liberia the same as that of South Africa, Nigeria or Kenya, where the concern is how to evolve a constitutional democracy what will help actualize the hidden human and natural resources of these countries?

One would think that a more country-specific approach should have been adopted in pursuing clearly defined and context specific challenges that meet local needs and goals. More sadly, is the fact that some of the parties that are in the African steering committee for the realization of the MDGs like the World Bank and the International Monetary Fund were the same banks that created the debt burden in Africa. Their exogenous neo-liberal capitalism and worn-out death-dealing economic orthodoxies stifled the African economies through the much hated Structural Adjustment Program. The stringent conditionalities tied to loans and economic assistance to African countries by these two organizations are part of the reason that African countries cannot make any economic progress. Development in Africa can never be based on mercenary solutions championed by the World Bank, the IMF, and the World Trade Organization. Their past failed policies in Africa, which are now being keyed into the steps for realizing the MDGs in Africa, will harm the weak and struggling economies of most African countries.

In the final analysis, African countries must take control of their destiny. The repeated failure of the promises made to African countries by the international community should challenge African countries to seek African solutions to African problems. A holistic approach to socio-economic change demands the understanding that human development does not subsist only on economic variable. Change should be situated within the social, political, cultural and economic values and institutions of Africa. The most solid foundation for sustainable development in Africa is the infrastructure of human capital, especially anchored on emerging skills midwived by locally based science and technology, supplemented with skills and technology from other civilizations and cultures outside Africa. This cannot come about unless African countries evolve a stable and enabling environment for human development. This obviously is not a task which any country outside Africa can do for Africans.

The 30-member Organization for Economic Cooperation and Development (OECD) of industrialized, market-economy countries can only support Africans when the suitable environment has been created. Development, partnership, and co-operation should be in the area of trade, education, skills and technical transfer and exchanges, and support for building the foundations of a stable society, and the building and development of educational and political structures. This is what I recently saw in East Africa, where a number of Canadian groups supported by CIDA were promoting and financing grass root based women organizations and self-help projects in rural communities. Most of these projects were originated by the local communities. Realizing the millennium goals in Africa will demand a new set of targets, a new country-based approach, a new direction that addresses African development through grass roots actions and direct initiative, the kind that is going on in some hidden corners in East Africa through Canadian individuals and groups. The time for bogus plans and proposals for Africa by the international community which raises much hope with little success should be considered over.