

Urgency and determination on UN poverty goals

Western Mail – September 2005

THE Tsunami at the end of 2004 tragically revealed the destructive power of nature and also the human potential for compassion. Three hundred thousand people died and the whole world was galvanised to try to alleviate the suffering. It was an international relief effort of huge and unprecedented proportions.

Other tragedies are less visible and can be prevented. Far away from the television cameras 1,200 children die every hour. This is the equivalent of three Tsunamis each month. Every single day young lives are lost in poverty and because of poverty. As many as 10 million people die each year as a result of abject destitution.

There has been progress on aid and debt relief for the world's poor, largely as a result of the Make Poverty History campaign, the Gleneagles G8 Summit and the determination of Tony Blair and Gordon Brown to be at the vanguard of change. Events this year have also revealed in no uncertain terms that the public in Wales and across Europe care deeply about these issues.

This week's UN Millennium Review summit was to be the crucial watershed in our efforts to do more to end unnecessary deaths, disease, illiteracy and poverty. Yet coming to New York this week I was pessimistic about what could be achieved in the struggle to create a more just and less unequal world.

The international leaders who arrived in New York on Tuesday came to discuss progress on the Millennium Development Goals. A blueprint for change set by the international world in 2000, the goals promised to transform the fortunes of the developing world. At the moment most countries are off track on many of the goals, which include cutting world poverty in half by 2015 and tackling hunger and disease. New York was the chance to put efforts back on track.

At the UN headquarters there was no disguising the bruising experience the negotiators had been through. From the start, the biggest difficulty was getting the United States on board. The Bush administration continues to deny they signed up to spending 0.7% of GNI on development and as such currently spend a mere 0.16% of GNI on such assistance.

Just as annoying was their decision to delete the words 'Millennium Development Goals' from the text under discussion. After much wrangling they eventually backtracked from this position and even Bush himself made a commitment to say the words 'Millennium Development Goals'. This was indeed real progress. That 190 countries managed to rein in the world's superpower in such a way is in itself remarkable, bearing in mind their staunch position a week ago. One has the sense that perhaps the US has been affected by the harrowing sights of its own people suffering from the effects of the hurricane and floods in New Orleans.

For its part, the EU has long been at the forefront of efforts to meet the Millennium Development Goals. As the developing world's most important trading partner, the EU is responsible for buying 85% of African goods. The EU also accounts for 55% of the development aid spent worldwide and this is projected to rise to 63% by 2010. 80% of the increase in official development aid announced by the G8 countries at the Gleneagles summit earlier this year will come from the EU and its Member States. With few specifics in the New York outcome document, our task now will be to make sure that countries like Australia and Canada stick to these commitments.

Of course, there still remains a lot to be done on trade, particularly in Europe with reform of the Common Agricultural Policy. Agricultural over-production and the dumping of surplus food on markets must end. Sub-Saharan Africa's share of world trade has shrunk from three per cent in 1950 to less than one per cent today. This situation cannot be allowed to continue. The trade aspects of the UN document agreed in New York yesterday are particularly disappointing as they back off from the stronger reforming language used at the G8 and elsewhere. There was no commitment to tackle export subsidies, although there were several mentions of liberalisation.

On the issue of human rights, the chance for real progress was missed as Russia, China and developing countries insisted on leaving out essential details about the management of the proposed new UN human rights body. With regards to terrorism, the summit agreement text drops language that would have described as unjustified deliberate killing of civilians but also deletes Arab proposals that would refer to the right to resist foreign occupation. These are both lost opportunities.

Kofi Annan himself expressed deep disappointment at the New York agreement, particularly at the absence of all mention of disarmament and nuclear proliferation. The UN General Secretary admitted they had not achieved the sweeping and fundamental reform they hoped for. Though he welcomed the last minute deals on development and human rights, he stressed that "we have collective responsibility to protect the population from war crimes, ethnic cleansing and crimes against humanity". He gave world leaders a clear warning: "You must pledge to act if another Rwanda looms."

The battle lines drawn in New York this week were vast and difficult to penetrate. Nonetheless, some progress was made. Despite the inevitable long negotiations we did get 16 pages of detail on development and previous commitments have been confirmed. To have had no result would have been a disaster.

The summit has also concentrated minds. Commitments of 0.7% of development aid and promises of debt relief would not have happened at the European Council or at Gleneagles without the impetus of the Millennium Development Goals and this week's impending meeting. The subsequent difficulties caused by the US were overcome to permit an agreed international position, flawed though it is.

We still have much more to do. We are the first generation to have the knowledge, technology and resources to put an end to extreme poverty, but time is running out. The world has been watching the wrangling at the UN this week and the coming years world leaders must deliver the promises they reaffirmed in New York or they will be held to account. The world must act

with urgency and determination to give hope and life to the developing world. The lives of billions of people rest upon these pledges. No country will be forgiven for not making every effort to achieve them.

All of us wanted more but now we must work with what we have and the collective will must be behind the progress the world wants to see. I hope the US took the point when Kofi Annan said: "Whether the challenge is peace, nation building or responding to natural or man-made disasters we have seen that even the strongest amongst us cannot succeed alone." That is why on the 60th birthday of the UN we know that we need it now as much as ever.

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