

AFRICA: Uneven Progress on Development Goals

Evelyn Kiapi interviews SYLVIA MWICHULI, deputy director of the U.N. Millennium Campaign Africa

KAMPALA (IPS) - October 16 2009. The Millennium Goals cannot be achieved at the United Nations. The UN can create a platform for governments to make commitments but cannot force compliance by member states.

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As the annual Stand Up, Take Action campaign on the Millennium Development Goals kicks off around the world, Sylvia Mwachuli, deputy director of the U.N. Millennium Campaign (UNMC) in Africa spoke to IPS about the need to demand accountability in both North and South.

IPS: What is the Stand Up Against Poverty campaign?

SYLVIA MWUCHULI: It is taking a stand, literally, against poverty. It's an event that The U.N. Millennium Campaign has been carrying out for the past three years in collaboration with the Global Call to Action Against Poverty (GCAP) - a worldwide alliance of over 100 national coalitions made of social movements, women organizations, faith groups, trade unions, community groups, youth organizations and individuals working to tackle poverty and inequality in their countries and the world.

In 2006 we set a new Guinness record of 23 million people when we took this stand up. In 2007 over 43 million people were recorded participating and last year it leapt to a massive 116.7 million people - by far the largest mass mobilization on a single issue ever recorded. By linking the stand up to the political demands in each country the record offers great and variable statistics that GCAP can use throughout the year to support lobbying efforts and other mobilizations.

IPS: What do you mean by 'Standing Up?'

SM: Standing up is a symbolic action to show your support of speech, person or idea. It is a display of solidarity. It shows the strength our united struggle against poverty and inequality.

IPS: Why is this campaign working with citizens and citizens group, faith-based and Civil Society?

SM: The Millennium Goals cannot be achieved at the United Nations. The UN can create a platform for governments to make commitments but cannot force compliance by member states.

Only their citizens and their elected representatives - at the national level - can hold their governments to account for the promises these governments made in 2000 at the

UN General assembly in New York. The U.N. Secretaries-General (both Kofi Annan and Ban Ki-Moon) have repeatedly stated, when talking about the Millennium Goals: "The lacking ingredient is political will."

Political action at the national level is essential. As politics is local, voters are local, and achieving the Millennium Goals needs to become an attractive "vote getter" issue at the national level.

But this requires awareness of the goals and citizen advocacy to remind governments of their promises. In developing countries, increased citizens' demands for accountability foster improved governance and transparency, which are key to achievement of the Goals. Living up to these promises requires public opinion awareness and citizens' advocacy which would suggest to political leaders that they will win - not lose - votes if they support policies to achieve the MDGs.

IPS: Why do we need a campaign specifically for the MDGs? Isn't the UNDP enough?

SM: Research shows that over the years the UN has set some 50 goals for economic and social development - often with more positive achievements than many people seem to realize. But the degree to which "goals set" became "goals met" depended on citizen support and the degree to which these goals were known and owned publicly, beyond the development agencies and UN officials.

Citizen's mobilization is key. As the Goals were set at global level, they can only become meaningful, if they are adopted and adapted for local relevance: they should not be a "one-size-fit-all" cookie-cutter - but should be localized and customized to country circumstances.

IPS: The Stand Up Against Poverty Campaign rolls around once a year. So what do the UNMC's partners and other CSOs do in-between events?

SM: Besides mobilising citizens for a head count, we also do activities that advance our advocacy work. Last year the GCAP Rwanda invited President Paul Kagame to join ten thousand people to stand Against Poverty at the Amahoro Stadium. The president was petitioned to tackle poverty.

In Uganda the National Parliament held a special session and a motion to set up an MDGs caucus was passed. With sustained involvement of citizens and the leadership in agitation for MDGs, we help maintain MDGs at the top of the national agenda.

IPS: What MDG has seen the most dramatic progress?

SM: This is a general question which may hide the tremendous progress being made in individual countries. Different countries are scoring differently. Goals that may be met by one country may not be met by another and the reverse is also true.

That said, the goal of universal primary education is most likely to be met by all. According to 2008 United Nations MDGs report, by 2006 the net enrolment ratio exceeded 71 per cent in most of sub-Saharan Africa.

Great strides are being made on gender empowerment. Uganda, Rwanda, Tanzania, Nigeria, South Africa, Malawi and Zambia are on course to realise this goal.

Ghana and most of the North African states are on course to meet all and even surpass some of the targets.

IPS: Where has there been the most dramatic failure?

SM: There are challenges in meeting Goal Three, gender equality and women's empowerment, and goal five, improving maternal health.

Girls' primary education enrolment still lags behind that of boys and their dropout rates widen as they go up the ladder of education.

African women still die in great numbers while giving birth. In fact, an African woman's risk of dying from treatable or preventable complications of pregnancy and child birth is 1 in 22 compared to 1 in 7,300 in developed countries.

The causes are known; for instance only 35 per cent of births in Africa are attended by skilled health workers and only a handful of pregnant women attend or even have access to both pre- and post-natal care and education. Then the road to the labour ward for the few who make it to hospital is a risky one; the hospital is several miles away and transport difficult.

More often the only available transport is a bicycle, motor cycle or by foot, none of which is suitable for a mother already in labour. Also the attitude of health workers impinges dangerously on the health of expectant mothers if and when they are attended to as and when necessary. Lastly some of the public facilities are, poor equipped, understaffed and oversubscribed.

While children are now better off and can look forward to living beyond the age of five, mothers are dying giving life. Nigeria for instance is two percent of global population but it is responsible for 10 per cent of women dying in child birth!

IPS: What are the major stumbling blocks towards the achievements of the MDGs?

SM: The major stumbling block is failure of political will by both countries of the South and those of the North. The developed countries - except notable few - have not kept their end of the bargain on Goal 8.

With the exception of just 16 countries, Africa's debts have not been cancelled as promised. The countries of the North have not eliminated trade barriers like tariffs on goods from Africa as promised. And they haven't increased overseas development assistance to the levels promised, while the quality of aid is still a source of concern. Germany, France and Italy are punching below their economic weight in Europe and globally to meet their bargain Britain which is more vocal on MDGs is yet to meet the 0.7 percent target.

Whereas African states dedicated themselves to creating favourable conditions in their countries, a look at their national action plans and budgetary allocations, shows a lack of commitment.

Many of them think of MDGs as yet another begging opportunity. MDGs aren't about aid but (about) prioritisation and proper use of our own nationally-generated resources.

In fact, some countries do not need aid at all, they just need a caring, accountable and a democratic government. But all we see are local and international development funds draining into pockets of government officials, politicians, local and foreign private companies. This denies the poverty-stricken, the expectant mothers and the children an opportunity to have an education or to get medication.

Goals number 1 to 7 can only be achieved at the national and local levels and not from New York or London.

IPS: What is Piga Debe? What successes have been achieved with Piga Debe for women's rights?

SM: Piga Debe is a Swahili word for making a loud noise. This is a campaign started to fast track MDGs 3 and 5 that relate to women's health, gender equality and women's empowerment. These are the goals that face the most risk of not being met by 2015 even by countries like South Africa, Uganda, Ghana and Rwanda that have made real progress on MDG 3.

IPS: Besides MDG 3, many of the millennium goals are specifically tied to the situation of women. Goals on maternal health, on education, and ultimately on reducing poverty, which in Africa particularly has a woman's face. How do government and civil society efforts to attain MDGs recognise the fact that reducing poverty is underpinned by women's rights and empowerment?

SM: Seventy per cent of world's poor are women and children. The economic crisis that started in 2008 is expected to have the most devastating effects for women, who perform 66 percent of the world's work but earn only 10 percent of the world's income and own 1 percent of the world's property.

It's against this background that the MDGs 2, 3 and 5 (were designed). It was evident that eradicating poverty is a function of ensuring women rights, ensuring girls attain education and also that women occupy key decision making positions to influence policy.

Governments recognize that poverty has a female face but what is lacking is the political will.

IPS: How has the framework of attaining MDGs helped strengthen development in East Africa?

SM: Greater focus on universal primary education, poverty and women's empowerment and gender equality.

For example Kenya, Tanzania and Uganda have greatly increased budgetary allotment to the education sector, to 20 percent which is way above the global target.

We are also seeing more national funds being devolved, like the Community Development Fund in Kenya. Forty-eight percent of seats in the Rwandan parliament are women.

All this has been as a result campaign initiatives like MDG Parliamentary caucuses set up in Kenya, Uganda and Rwanda.

IPS: With less than seven years to 2015, do you think the MDG's will be met? Wasn't 2015 a farfetched target?

SM: Given the context in 2000 when the Millennium Declaration was adopted, the date was realistic. The MDGs have minimum targets realistic enough to be met by 2015 even in the least developed countries.

It seeks 'halving' the proportion of people whose income is less than US\$1.5 a day by 2015? Why not say eliminate? Why should we halve it? It's because different countries had to work in different situations. Given the resources the world has 2015 is reasonable and the goals are Simple, Measurable, Achievable, Realistic and Time bound.

In the call to action on the MDGs developed before the UN General assembly at the High level Events in September 2008, it was estimated that an infusion of US\$75 billion annually will accelerate the achievement of MDGs globally. This is peanuts compared to trillions of dollars being thrown at greedy bankers and financial speculators who caused the current global financial crisis. It is not bankers who need to be bailed out but the poorest and weakest peoples of the world.

IPS: What should be done differently to hasten the progress and endeavour to achieve the MDGs?

SM: National budgets, Plans and policies need to reflect the MDGs, especially those that still lag behind like poverty eradication, gender empowerment, maternal health and other health related MDGs.

It means that our legislatures at national level and elected councillors at local levels need stay awake to their responsibility of holding the executive to account while citizens at all level need to mobilize and advocate for people-based budgeting and monitor the delivery of services.

The current global crisis has shown us that the orthodox neo-liberal market-driven policies that our governments have embraced uncritically for so many decades cannot solve our problems.

We need to find a strategy that works, a strategy that delivers good health, decent jobs and human security to our peoples. Greed and corruption which have become culture of public officials and private corporations need to be checked ruthlessly as they undermine our development. Indeed corrupt government and individuals should be seen as mass murderers directly and indirectly.

(END/IPS/2009)