

UNITED NATIONS SUMMIT – WAS IT WORTH IT?

Peter Henriot

Was it worth it? That's a question that kept coming to me during my two weeks in New York City for the United Nations meetings around the Millennium Development Goals (MDGs). Was it worth the time and expense of travel from Lusaka to New York? Was it worth the time and expense for dozens of heads of States and Governments (including President Mwanawasa) to gather at yet another meeting to talk about world problems?

I wondered about the worthwhileness of my talking to strangers (and some friends, too) about Zambia's need for total debt cancellation, fairer trade relationships and improved quality and quantity of aid. And I questioned the worthwhileness of over 25 hours of speeches by 151 presidents, prime ministers, kings and princes, with multitudes of platitudes and varieties of vagaries.

Personal Lessons

For me personally, there were some benefits. Participating in the official civil society meetings within the UN buildings the week before the actual Summit of world leaders, I heard calls, challenges, and critiques that echoed much of what we have been saying back in Zambia about poverty eradication not being simply an economic problem but a moral problem. There was plenty of passion but also plenty of good common sense and sound analysis.

I chaired a panel at a large discussion session on the role of the IMF in meeting the MDGs by 2015. A young Kenyan debt activist noted how conditionalities imposed by the IMF have hindered advancements on education, health and other social issues. An economist from the UNDP put several hard questions to the IMF about their definitions of debt sustainability that missed a focus on development sustainability. And a key IMF official struggled to answer objections raised by a mixed audience of diplomats, NGO representatives and government participants. All this had plenty of relevance to Zambia!

The civil society meetings, anticipating the Summit gathering, repeated again and again: "No more promises, time for action!" What was encouraging was to find so many people from many parts of the world and many walks of life who knew Zambia, knew our wonderful potentials as well as our tough problems. At a time of so much focus on Africa, I was glad to be coming from what our Zambia National Tourist Board calls "The Real Africa"!

A moment of fun occurred one morning when the Global Compact Against Poverty (GCAP), a world-wide anti-poverty coalition, performed a "stunt" just a block away from the UN buildings. Ten of us men, dressed in fine black business suits, stood in front of a large football goal post. Small children, women, students and poor people made efforts to kick footballs past us into the goal post. The footballs were labeled with the MDG targets of cutting poverty and hunger, improving gender equality, promoting health and education, preserving the environment, etc. But we men, representing "world leaders," blocked all the scores – no MDGs by 2015!

Henry Malumo, the GCAP coordinator in Zambia, tried to score a goal for poverty eradication but I disappointed him by successfully blocking the kick -- only for purposes of the "stunt," of course!

Organisational Disappointments

There weren't any "stunts" at the Summit of world leaders. But there were plenty of disappointments when the mammoth programme ended late last Friday evening. In what was to have been a serious recommitment by the international community to meet the challenges of development, promote security and human rights and reform the structures of the United Nations, the Summit fell far short of expectations. As a detailed analysis prepared by GCAP lamented: "World leaders have missed an historic opportunity to take clear steps in the fight against poverty and towards human sustainable development, instead simply recycled, rehashed and repeated old promises."

Immediately prior to the Summit, the United States of America had objected even to a mention of the MDGs in the final text. President Bush did relent on this incredible demand and stated support for the MDGs in his speech. As more than one commentator noted, the shocking revelation during Hurricane Katrina of deep and uncared for poverty in New Orleans may have brought at least a moment of sense, if not sincerity, to Bush.

The final 35 page document from the Summit is filled with ambiguities. What words should be used in condemning terrorism (could it ever be "justified" for people's resistance under oppressive foreign occupation?). Why was nuclear non-proliferation and disarmament not mentioned in the text (the fault of both big and small powers)? How clear should be the commitment for rich countries to contribute 0.7% of their GDP to aid for poor countries (the USA again resisted any such target)? Would the pledge by the G8 in early July to cancel 100% of the debt of HIPC countries like Zambia be fulfilled (everything depends on the decisions coming from the IMF and World Bank meetings in Washington DC later this week)?

What nations should be admitted as permanent members of the Security Council (Nigeria and South Africa were competing with India and Brazil and other world powers)? Would there be a new Human Rights Council to replace the discredited Human Rights Commission based in Geneva (several countries with questionable human rights records resisted this move)? Should trade be "free" or "fair" (plenty of problems coming up for the December meeting in Hong Kong of the World Trade Organisation!)?

United Nations Secretary General Kofi Annan has an almost prophetic role in all of this activity. Despite management troubles in this huge organisation, he remains a clear voice for the poor of the world, for human rights and for peace. Africa can be proud of this "son of the soil."

Meaning for Zambians?

As I listened to the debates (I was fortunate to have media credentials, thanks to THE POST, that let me in to the tightly guarded UN buildings), I kept asking what all this means for the ordinary Zambian. In the midst of my two-weeks away, a Jesuit friend of mine sent me an e-mail message to remember the real struggles of "Mrs. Tembo" – one of the thousands of Zambian women who make great efforts in urban compounds and rural villages to meet the daily needs of their poor families. After all, the millions of words of speeches and documents should be evaluated on only one basic criterion: *what does all this mean for the poor?*

So was it all worth it – my participation in the UN meetings, and the meetings themselves? In the short term, yes, I believe so, if only because it renewed personal and organisational commitment to greater social justice and peace. In the long term, we still will have to see what the follow-ups are in the months and years ahead. The MDGs speak of 2015 as the

target for achieving so many good things. That's ten years away – and for people in Zambia with abbreviated life expectancy, that's simply too long away!

So the real test is what is done very soon, not in United Nations meetings in New York, but back home in Zambia in the days ahead. This puts into context the need for immediate and popular constitutional revision, the requirements for free and fair electoral reform prior to the 2006 elections, the obligation to have a pro-poor Budget and National Development Plan, the responsibility for every politician to honestly ask what her or his stance means for the poor of Zambia.

Will we meet that test?

[1240 words]

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