

MDGs by 2015: “It’s Possible!” But Is It?

Peter Henriot

In the midst of all the flurry of the debate over the new Constitution for Zambia, we must not forget some other very important topics that affect the daily lives of all our citizens. Topics like poverty, education, health, women’s rights, environment. These topics, of course, are central in the draft Constitution, being very well treated in Part VI, the Bill of Rights, where economic, social and cultural rights are enshrined.

But these important topics are also taken up in the lively discussions going on now about the “Millennium Development Goals” (MDGs). These are the goals drawn up and pledged in 2000 by the United Nations Millennium Summit of 189 Heads of State and Governments. The eight goals, with 18 targets, cover the range of human improvement and livelihoods desired by all peoples. In mid-September, the UN will hold another Summit of world leaders to examine progress on meeting the goals by the targeted date of 2015.

In preparation for the UN Summit, the Ministry of Finance and Development Planning will this week hold a conference to explore the attainment of these goals here in Zambia. Stakeholders will be expected to evaluate how Zambia has been doing since the commitment was made to the MDGs and what prospects there are for achieving the goals by 2015. The adverts for this government conference optimistically highlight the very positive thesis: “It’s Possible!”

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Eight Goals

Before answering that question and agreeing or disagreeing with that positive thesis, let’s look at what these goals actually promise and what it would mean for Zambia. I want to use some simple language to describe the goals, to move away from the development “jargon” that might obscure just how powerful – and beautiful – the goals really are. Here is what the eight goals call for by 2015:

1. *Poverty and hunger*: cut in half the number of people who live on less than one US dollar a day and who suffer from hunger.
2. *Education*: make sure that all children start and finish primary school.
3. *Girls*: be sure that as many girls as boys go to school.
4. *Infants*: cut back by two-thirds the number of children who die before they reach the age of five.
5. *Mothers*: cut back by three-quarters the number of women who die when they are having babies.
6. *Diseases*: stop terrible diseases like HIV/AIDS, malaria, TB, from spreading and make them less common
7. *Environment*: cut in half the number of people who lack clean water, improve the lives of people who live in slums, and promote policies that respect the goods of creation.
8. *Global partnership*: promote greater cooperation among all nations with special concern for fairer deals for poor countries in trade, aid, debt, new technologies, etc.

True Development

These MDGs, we can all agree, present a picture of human development that is certainly very desirable, highlighting conditions considered necessary for the well-being of the human family. For me, they sum up the elements required to attain true development, defined as “the movement from less human conditions to more human conditions.” This is a people-centred view of development, one that asks as the very first question to evaluate any policy, project, programme or plan, at any level: “What is happening to the people, especially, what is happening to the poor?”

To achieve the MDGs in Zambia by 2015 would mean tremendous improvements in the lives of all our ten million citizens. Today, 70% to 80% of the people live below the poverty line, unable to meet basic daily needs, life expectancy is under forty years, infant and maternal mortality rates are among the highest in the world, and our health and education systems are sadly lacking in basics. Achieving the MDGs should be what we hear our leaders – those presently in government and those who would like to come into office – talking about in very concrete and creative ways.

What Is Required?

To attain the MDGs here in Zambia, indeed, anywhere in the world, three key things are essential. Firstly, we have to have the *knowledge* of the right steps to take, e.g., big steps like building dozens of new schools and training hundreds of new teachers, and small steps like providing mosquito nets to households in malaria zones. We need wisdom. Secondly, we need adequate *resources* to move efficiently and quickly to take the right steps. We need money resources (generated from inside the country and coming from outside the country), as well as personnel resources.

Thirdly, and I would venture to say, most importantly, we need the *political will* to make the hard decisions to move us forward to attain the goals. Political will is more than rhetoric that gains headlines in newspapers today but achieves nothing on the ground tomorrow. Political will is making the hard choices, making the unpopular moves, even taking real risks, when it is clear that these are the best choices, wisest moves and safest risks to improve the lives of the people. It is a matter of putting priorities into planning, priorities into budgeting, priorities into implementation.

For the past several years now, the Catholic Commission for Justice and Peace (CCJP), in its astute analyses of the national budget, has repeatedly said: “The problem for Zambia is not *resources* but *priorities*!” Yes, we can admit that there are scarce resources in the country, but we also have to admit that resources can always be found when they are for priorities that government considers important. (How else can we explain the paradox that funds for motorcades to the airport or for new vehicles for top officials always seem readily available, but funds to provide drugs in the hospitals or to supply books in the schools always seem severely limited?).

What a difference it would make in Zambia if in all of the political debates today the possibility of attaining the MDGs became a central feature. Then we might read less headlines in the papers like: “X Says Y Is a Liar!” or “A Is Insane, Claims B” or “The Q Party Is Stealing from the People,” and more that tell us: “X Calls for New Educational Policy” or “Y Explains Need for Economic Rights in the Constitution” or “Z Party Releases Full Manifesto Based on Eradicating Poverty.” We could move from the politics of *personalities* to the politics of *policies*!

Potentials

Last year, the UNDP released a study in Zambia that revealed that only the goal of improving gender equality and women's empowerment was "probable" to achieve by 2015. While the country has high "potential" in other areas like universal primary education and dealing with diseases and environmental challenges, it is "unlikely" to reach the targets for dealing with poverty, hunger and maternal health needs. But this year we have some promising hopes of debt cancellation and more focused efforts for national development planning. Will this improve our chances of attaining the MDGs?

"It's possible!" But is it? Let's hear our government officials, politicians, civil society and church leaders, trade union officials and business leaders tell us what they *think* – and what they are willing to *do* to make that possibility a reality!

[1210 words]

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