



A Spiritual Evaluation of the Millennium Development Goals



By Dr. Joan Marques

This article reviews the MDGs from a spiritual perspective, laying alongside each other some spiritual and some unspiritual developments regarding the realization of the goals. Among the spiritual aspects are mentioned, the interconnectedness of the goals and their general focus on human wellbeing. Among the unspiritual elements are mentioned the unequal starting points toward realization of the MDGs by various countries, and the harsh rules from the wealthy nations toward the developing ones. The article ends with a presentation of some positive developments from entities and individuals toward their attainment.

Introduction

Ever since previous U.N. Secretary-General Kofi Annan launched the Millennium Development Goals project in 2000, there have been progresses and relapses made in the efforts toward realizing these goals. Awareness around these goals has thus far not been raised to the extent required to make the MDG project a truly successful one. This is unfortunate, because the goals are a true representation of spiritual living. The 8 MDGs focus on highly admirable targets such as “poverty reduction; universal primary education; gender equality; reduction of child mortality; improvement of maternal health; combating AIDS, malaria and other diseases; environmental sustainability; and global partnership. All should be achieved by 2015” (Calderon, 2009). Yet, while the goals can be interpreted as a



spiritual effort toward greater balance in the world, the road toward realizing the goals is not as spiritual as one might think. This article briefly reviews a spiritual and an unspiritual side tied to the realization of the Millennium Development Goals.

The Spiritual Side

Perhaps the most spiritual attribute to the goals is that they are intertwined. It does not require a tremendous mental stretch to realize that alleviation of poverty and hunger (Goal 1) enhances the attention and willpower to attain education (Goal 2) and thereby expand opportunities. Educated people have a greater tendency to reason about issues of equality (Goal 3), so this is where the interconnectedness between these two goals lies. Women who are allowed education and support will make more deliberate choices on child bearing, thereby reducing the degree of child mortality (Goal 4), as well as improving maternal health (Goal 5). Where there is less poverty and more education, there will also be more knowledge and care in combating diseases (Goal 6), and consciously contributing toward a healthier environment (Goal 7). Once a higher level of education and a lower degree of poverty is achieved in the world, a more fertile climate will be created for the establishment of a global partnership for development (Goal 8).

A simple example of the interconnectedness of the MDGs in action is offered by Alaba and Alaba (2009). In their studies on how the persistent manifestation of malaria impedes Nigerian progress toward achieving the MDGs, these authors find that “effective control of malaria is capable of reducing household poverty, inequality, while improving various determinants of welfare and national development” (p. 73).

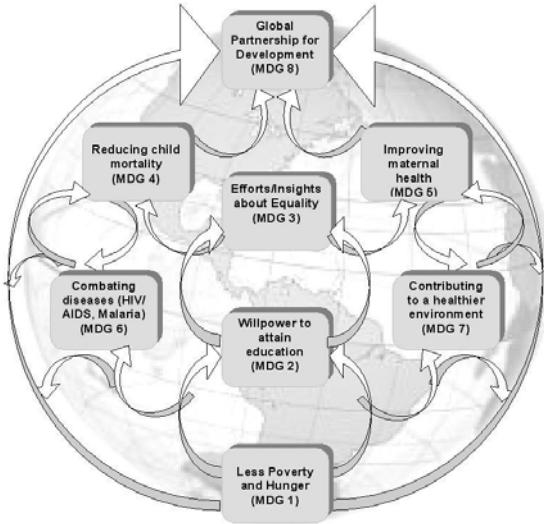


Figure 1: *The Interconnectedness of the Millennium Development Goals*

Another laudable element about the MDGs is that they are geared toward the overall well-being of humanity, which is a highly spiritual perspective in and of itself. Chakravarti and Majumder (2008) underscore that in their statement, “these Goals, which are unique in their ambition, concreteness and scope, can be regarded as benchmarks for progress towards a vision of development. They reflect a vital commitment toward promoting human wellbeing from a multidimensional perspective” (p. 110). Chakravarti and Majumder (2008) continue, “The values implicit in these Goals share the concept of human well-being underlying the human development index” (p. 110). Yet, it is this very aspect of progress benchmarking, mentioned in such positive regard in the above statements that leads us to the dark side, which is next to follow in this review.



The Unspiritual Side

Arguably the least spiritual aspect to the MDGs does not pertain to the goals themselves, but to the divergent developmental starting points of the many countries in the world toward attaining them. Lyman and Robinette illustrate this issue as follows: “Critics charge that the global, rather than regional or national benchmarks unfairly obscure the more limited but still appreciable progress of poorer countries and make achievement of the stated goals nearly impossible for those countries starting from a much lower baseline” (p. 5). This becomes even more disheartening now that we are experiencing a global economic downturn, which causes wealthier nations to hold on tighter to their funds or step up their requirements for support to poorer countries. Various sources have recently cited the threatening words of Koos Richelle, European Commission (EC) director general of the EuropeAid Cooperation Office. An April 2009 edition of The Manila Times, for instance, reported that Richelle had recently warned that images of aid-givers as Santa Claus should be banished from the minds of poorer nations, because the European Union are planning on approaching their financial aid dealings with poor nations in a businesslike fashion. There will be strict demands, according to this report, in which it will be expected that the donor will provide the funds and the donee will come in with a small share of the project funding and an optimal return on performance. In particular, there will be intense watch on the governments of these poor global partners for decent leadership, which, of course, is always a problematic issue (*Editorial: Heed the Words of Koos Richelle, 2009*).

Aside from stricter rules for smaller players, there is also the grim reality that poorer nations are generally easier victimized in a harsh economical time than financially stable ones. Siddiqi (2009) reports that the International Monetary Fund (IMF) has predicted that



Africa's growth will most likely slow from 5.5% in 2008 to barely over 5% in 2009 along with most other developing regions. While Siddiqi presents his predictions for African countries, these predictions can easily be generalized toward most or all developing nations in the world. The effects Siddiqi (2009) mentions are, 1) a decline in the commodities market, 2) decreasing global demand for their services, 3) stricter lending conditions, which was already apparent in Koos Richelle's earlier presented statements, 4) more moderation in foreign direct investments from wealthier nations and their representing corporations; 5) Less family and relative donations from abroad; 6) Plummeting exchange rates; 7) Inter-banking effects, especially as a spillover from major banks that are now in financial distress, and 8) Increasing inflation pressures.

A Ray of Hope

One often-presented argument toward alleviating the paradox of inequality in achieving goals that should lead to more equality is to tailor the MDG targets to the special circumstances of the countries. Feeny and Clarke (2008), for instance, review circumstances in the Asia-Pacific region and find that many poor countries are lagging behind when it comes to data availability and accuracy, and may fare better if the MDGs were targeted to these countries' special circumstances. Authors such as Feeny and Clarke make a good point, considering the fact that the start toward achieving the goals was unequal to start with, and the reluctance toward assistance from haves to have-nots has grown as the global recession broadened.

Another highly positive development toward realizing the MDGs is the increased collaboration among Non-Governmental Organizations (NGO's), and between Governments and NGO's, to make things happen. Rama, Milano, Salas, and Liu (2009) report about one of these numerous connections established. They explain



how KPMG, a major accounting firm, working toward expanding its Corporate Social Responsibility (CSR) practices. “KPMG International has recently entered in an agreement with The Millennium Cities Initiative to provide a range of due diligence assistance on a number of regional cities in Sub-Saharan Africa” (p. 472). Rama et al. continue, “The project is part of a set of initiatives designed to accelerate progress toward achieving the Millennium Development Goals - eight time-bound goals comprising a comprehensive approach to ending dire poverty” (p. 472). Andrus, Crouch, Fitzsimmons, and Tambini (2008) also highlight a cooperative initiative that has already led to great results. They state that the child mortality rate (MDG 4) has been greatly reduced in Latin America and the Caribbean (LAC) thanks to the Revolving Fund of the Pan American Health Organization and the cooperation of Government Health Departments in those countries.

Then there are individuals with global visibility, such as ex-prime minister Tony Blair from England, who is now a visiting professor at Yale and has converted to Catholicism. Bugyis (2009) reveals Blair’s plans, tied to the foundation he started in his post-political life: “Blair hopes to mobilize faith communities around the UN’s Millennium Development Goals, which include, among other things, providing medical supplies to fight malaria in Africa - an initiative that has brought the foundation into partnership with Saddleback Church pastor Rick Warren (author of *The Purpose-Driven Life*)” (p. 17).

Conclusion

The realization of the MDGs by 2015 lies in our hands. Yet, we need to know about these goals before we can massively start working toward realizing them. The simplest thing we can therefore do to help attain them is to spread the word about their existence. Once people know about something of this magnitude, they



will start paying attention and may actually decide to contribute their share toward realizing it. The MDG project is a project worthwhile, if we want to maintain a world where there is dignity and equality among all the living beings, less hate and rejection, more love and acceptance; less greed and selfishness, more generosity and patronage; less finger pointing and more embracing.

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