

Notes on the Conference organized by AIDE Fédération on the Millennium Development Goals (MDGs): How civil society can overcome the obstacles to reaching these goals (May 9, 2006)

By Katherine Carré, SDI UN Representative

It was a very interesting conference organized by this NGO which focuses on Africa and more specifically on those African countries from which emigration to France is the greatest, i.e. Mali, Senegal and Madagascar.

The Conference - all in French with no interpretation - was well attended. A former UN Secretary General, Perez de Cuellar, as the guest of honor delivered a speech, as did the Minister for Development and the Ambassador of Morocco, the Ambassador of Madagascar, Aide Fédération chiefs and various senior French officials in charge of immigration and integration, and others, including academics and the very popular Special Rapporteur of the UN Commission on Human Rights on the Right to Food, Jean Ziegler.

Some of the points made in the speeches

The audience was reminded that in 1970 the industrial countries had pledged at the UN to utilize 0.7% of their GNP for cooperation and development in the third world but only a few smaller countries had got anywhere near that figure. In 1977, the right to development was declared a right of the same order as all other rights by the UN Commission on Human Rights. At the UN 60th Anniversary Summit, 36 years after the UN resolution, a few developed countries indicated they would attempt to reach the 0.7% of GNP by the year 2015. This shows how, despite good intentions and UN resolutions, Official Development Assistance to the developing world has remained at a very low level.

The gulf between the rich and the deeply indebted poor countries has been widening. Globalization has led to an unprecedented accumulation of material wealth which would need to be more equitably distributed to ensure some sort of global social justice and attain the MDGs. The international community aided by NGOs is looking for new ways of procuring development funds such as international taxes on air tickets, financial transfers and the sales of arms, all of which could be helpful but could not replace a massive transfer of funds from North to South. According to UN calculations a transfer of 50 billions a year would be required to make a real difference, a sum well within the means of the North.

As things stand, there is little optimism. 115 million children of school-going age still out of school and 842 million people underfed; hunger kills, but food is available: world agriculture can feed everyone on earth 2700 cal/day said the food expert. Malaria, HIV/AIDS and tuberculosis continue to take their toll. Every 5 seconds a child dies from a preventable cause. On the whole it seems unlikely that the MDG goal of halving poverty will be attained in many countries.

The lack of development in the developing world constitutes a perpetual risk to world peace and security; it is the cause of large scale South-North emigration and societal problems in the North etc.

Civil Society, with its capacity for innovation, has an important role to play to improving the situation. Needless to say, the developing countries must also assume their responsibilities

In the afternoon the assembly split up into 2 groups, health and education (which I attended) and the other on good governance.

Workshop on health and education

This would have been a good opportunity to provide information on SD in Africa either by writing a paper beforehand or by placing some project profiles on the table or by saying a few words. For projects in French speaking Africa it might be worth also producing information in French.

It was a very lively meeting with almost all those present having a lot to say. Towards the end, speakers had to be restricted to one minute. Most interventions were based on practical experience.

In the main all speakers seemed to converge on the fact that women in Africa should be given more power and lead the way and that university women in particular had a special role to play as catalysis of development. MDGs were criticized by some for not paying special attention to the needs of women, ignoring the fact that the majority of the poor are women.

The head of a Swiss NGO said she had inaugurated a program by which people who felt the futility of Christmas presents were asked instead to give her the money to buy a lamb (yes, a live animal) for poor rural women in Africa for whom she made all the arrangements. To make an impact, she brought along a toy lamb. A doctor from Madagascar gave a demonstration using the same toy lamb on how to keep one's premature baby alive by carrying it kangaroo style in countries where incubators were expensive. The African woman author of "La Prostitution Africaine" explained how the Africans themselves were responsible for trafficking in persons and prostitution as, through dire poverty, they resorted to selling children.

One young French woman had set up her own NGO and a program which could be used as a teaching tool at schools, its purpose being to become aware of health problems and diseases. She had no contacts in the DR Congo and so was very pleased to have the Lemba Imbu school contact and the SDI website. At the last minute, I met a woman doctor from the Congo who was interested in hearing that an SD project in her country was trying to grow Artemesia.

(Since then I heard that growing the Artemesia plant and consuming the leaves against malaria which had proved very effective was being discouraged by WHO. Owing to an expected resistance build-up in mosquito parasites, it should be taken only in combination with other drugs, Artemesia Combination Therapy (ACT). According to one source, this ACT medication produced by Novartis goes through WHO to the Global Fund to fight HIV/AIDS, Malaria and TB [partly funded by Bill Gates] which gives it to governments which pass it on and, sadly, it is always in short supply.)