

The Millennium Declaration: Mobilising Civil Society Organisations

By John W Foster¹

(Article published in the UNDP Development Policy Journal, Volume 3, April 2003)

A worldwide report of CSO response to the Millennium Declaration and the Goals it proclaims brings to light significant regional degrees of optimism and pessimism concerning the realisation of the different MDGs. It also indicates the importance CSOs attach to policy and institutional reform, along with the ongoing commitment of many to monitoring government performance, as well as to their own practical implementation of strategies for meeting the MDGs within the stipulated timeframe.

On October 1, 2002 the Secretary-General of the UN warned that “*the world was falling short in meeting the objectives agreed by global leaders two years ago in the Millennium Declaration*”. Trends were “decidedly mixed” and while some advances had taken place on the specific MDGs, the broader objectives of the Declaration – including human rights, democracy, good governance, conflict resolution and Africa’s special needs – showed insufficient progress.

The importance of engaging partners in the campaign for implementation, and the role of civil society organizations (CSOs) among them has been noted by the Secretary-General and others concerned with mobilising support for the Declaration and the Goals.

The Secretary-General’s overview is sustained by a survey of CSO responses to the Declaration and the Goals undertaken in mid-2002, almost two years after the General Assembly endorsed them. Undertaken by the World Federation of United Nations Associations (WFUNA) in cooperation with The North-South Institute (Ottawa, Canada), the survey indicates a positive engagement with the Declaration and Goals by many groups in diverse places and with a great variety of initiatives. It also indicates that simple knowledge of the Declaration and Goals may not have permeated deeply enough in civil society. Further, it suggests that there is significant scepticism about the commitment of governments to implementation and about whether the changes in policy necessary to accomplish the vision of the Declaration will in fact be taken by the Multilateral Economic Institutions (the World Bank, the International Monetary Fund and the Organisation for Economic Cooperation and Development) and the UN itself.

Civil Society and the Millennium Declaration

The Millennium General Assembly (GA), which gave birth to the Declaration, engaged scores of heads of states, but not CSOs that continue to lack a clear ongoing status with the GA. Two other events were notable for many CSOs in preparations for this GA session.

¹ Dr John W Foster is Principal Researcher, Civil Society with The North-South Institute/L’Institut Nord-Sud in Ottawa, Canada. Material for this brief essay is based on data submitted to a survey *The Role of Civil Society Organizations in the Implementation of the United Nations Millennium Declaration (2002)*, and the popular report prepared on the basis of that survey: “*We the peoples...A Call to Action for the UN Millennium Declaration*”, New York, World Federation of United Nations Associations (WFUNA), 2002. Available electronically at: www.wfuna.org

In May, 2000, with considerable enthusiasm and participation but extremely limited resources, the Millennium Forum was held at UN headquarters, with more than 1,350 NGO representatives. The Forum produced the *Millennium Forum Declaration*,² which contains an extremely broad and far-reaching vision, along with detailed proposals for reform. The Forum pressed governments and the United Nations for such priorities as:

- ? full implementation of the 1995 World Summit for Social Development commitments
- ? leadership in supervising debt cancellation
- ? introduction of binding codes of conduct for transnational corporations

CSOs were encouraged to monitor and pressure governments to fulfill their commitments, to engage the poor in real partnership in eradicating poverty and exert their best efforts to implement the Universal Declaration of Human Rights.

A comprehensive catalogue of initiatives was elaborated for international action in peace, security and disarmament; facing the challenge of globalisation with equity, justice and diversity; human rights; sustainable development and the environment; strengthening and democratising the United Nations and international organisations.

The Forum strongly emphasised the urgency of implementing the key commitments of the all the major Summits and World Conferences of the 1990s, in human rights, social development, environment, women, population issues and urbanisation. The opportunity to review this implementation in the field of social development was unfolding simultaneously with the Forum, as preparations were completed for the Copenhagen or WSSD plus five”, the special session of the General Assembly known as “Geneva 2000”.

Geneva 2000 is an important marker in understanding the context for the Millennium Declaration and the MDGs. CSO participants in the preparatory process were well aware of the very mixed results detailed in by national reports, international surveys like that of Social Watch and in the report of the Secretary-General to the preparatory process itself. For a number of those who took part in the process, the time was long overdue for a clear examination of the roots and causes of not only of continued poverty but of escalating inequality and polarisation. Further, a number of “northern” and “southern” organisations were dedicated to the eradication of poverty and reduction of inequality in developed, middle-income, transitional, developing and least developed countries, and not simply to targeted efforts for the poorest. If the Millennium was to mark a renewal of global social commitment, then surely the Geneva 2000 Special Session would signal it loud and clear.³

Before the debate on the final Declaration and Plan of Action of the Geneva event was accomplished, however, the Secretary-General, together with the heads of the OECD, the World Bank and the International Monetary Fund launched a joint manifesto entitled *A Better World For All*, which was viewed by a number of leading CSO participants as a pre-emptive strike against their hopes and a co-option of the UN by the international financial institutions. The manifesto was viewed as a donor document rather than as a product of worldwide dialogue.

² Millennium Forum, We the Peoples Millennium Forum Declaration and Agenda for Action: Strengthening the United Nations for the 21st Century, New York, May, 2000.

³ For a summary assessment of challenges and hopes on the eve of Geneva 2000, see, for example UNRISD, *Visible Hands: Taking Responsibility for Social Development: An UNRISD Report for Geneva 2000*, Geneva, UNRISD, 2000.

There emerged from the 1990s, among many of the NGOs and social movements that had participated in the Summits and Conferences, a sense of a new vision for global society that linked the accomplishments of the official deliberations and the parallel summits of civil society. With this accumulation of proposals, commitments and demands came an expectation that the next steps would involve reform of global institutions and provision of adequate resources. The first would remove some of the key impediments to greater equity and sustainability, the second would assure enhancement of the quality of life and the rights enjoyed by the living.

The Declaration and the Goals that emerged in September, 2000 fell significantly short of the hopes expressed by the Millennium Forum and also short of the sort of summation that might have been expected by NGO participants in the World Conferences of the 1990s.⁴ Those that had seen the UN as a defender of the interests of developing countries and as critical of the policies of the “Washington consensus”, which dominated the multilateral economic bodies, saw these GA results as too uncritically allied with the latter frame of policies. Others simply felt that the goals themselves, however laudable, were just too modest and the horizons too distant. Still others were happy that there were at least some specific targets and dates.

Given this background, just how are the Declaration and Goals being dealt with by CSOs today? To what extent have they provoked engagement and action?

The Survey

Motivated by a fundamental commitment to the spirit of the Declaration and curiosity about the actual ways in which the Declaration and the Goals were being received among CSOs world-wide, WFUNA and the North-South Institute undertook an initial sounding in mid-2002.⁵ A survey of CSO attitudes and actions was mobilised electronically in three languages. A brief popularly-written report was prepared on the basis of the survey, utilising as well information submitted to the WFUNA ongoing newsletter, *UN Connections*.⁶

Taking the opportunity of the annual NGO Conference sponsored by the UN Department of Public Information (DPI) in early September, 2002, the World Federation of United Nations Associations launched the report designed to advance knowledge and discussion of CSO responses to the Declaration and the Goals. *We the peoples...A Call to Action for the UN Millennium Declaration* was published in three languages and made available electronically. It noted that many more people needed to be informed about the Declaration and that “many attitudes towards collaboration and policy reform must change.”⁷

The North-South Institute developed an extensive questionnaire in English, French and Spanish. The responding groups were asked about their size in terms of annual budget,

⁴ For an examination of the results and reform expectations emerging from the conferences see John W Foster with Anita Anand, eds. *Whose World Is It Anyway? Civil Society, the United Nations and the Multilateral Future*, Ottawa, United Nations Association of Canada, 1999.

⁵ The project was initiated by the World Federation of United Nations Associations (WFUNA) with the financial support of the Rockefeller Brothers Fund. It was undertaken in partnership with the North-South Institute of Ottawa, Canada and with consultation with the Centre for the Study of Global Governance at the London School of Economics and Political Studies. Work teams based in New York and Ottawa undertook the research with design support from Green Communications of Montreal, Canada. An editorial advisory group of key international CSO figures was invited to assist with the preparation of the published report *We the peoples...*

⁶ WFUNA, *UN Connections*, New York, WFUNA. www.wfuna.org

⁷ “*We the peoples...A Call to Action for the UN Millennium Declaration*”, New York, World Federation of United Nations Associations (WFUNA), 2002. Available electronically at: www.wfuna.org

number of staff, number of people communicated with, type of work undertaken, etc. They were asked a number of general questions about their knowledge of and response to the Millennium Declaration and Goals. The questionnaire had four sections, which focused on goals in five focus areas: poverty alleviation, HIV/AIDS, conflict prevention, environment and renewal of the United Nations.

The questionnaire was e-mailed to roughly 5,000 addresses. The lists were compiled utilising existing UN NGO contact lists, key international NGO networks, and WFUNA contacts. A number of NGO and CSO international bodies were approached for collaboration, and in several cases rather than sharing their lists, sent the questionnaire to their own members or subscribers. The questionnaire was circulated in all three languages on WFUNA letterhead over the invitation and signature of their Secretary-General, Ambassador Donald Blinken. The questionnaire was made available in June and July, not necessarily the most opportune time for groups, particularly in the “north”.

Response was diverse but limited in number; thus, the results can only really be regarded as *indicative* rather than conclusive. They will, however, be useful in establishing hypotheses for further testing in 2003 and beyond.

The open-ended questions in our survey elicited a myriad of responses regarding the Declaration and Goals, extensive and diverse instances of practical initiatives and a significant if not overwhelming sense of engagement. The fundamental view of the Millennium Declaration and the Goals was overwhelmingly positive, if qualified in a number of ways.

About half the groups responding came from 20 OECD countries. The other half were from 44 developing and least developed countries, from Afghanistan to Zimbabwe. Two thirds of the respondents were in English, almost 20% in Spanish and 15% in French. Three-quarters of the groups reported an annual budget of less than US\$500,000, with almost 40% having less than US\$ 50,000 per year. Almost three-quarters reported less than 20 employees. Groups with less than 20 volunteers were 44.5% of respondents, but almost 50% had between 20 and 500 volunteers. Slightly more than 4% of the groups had mail-out circulation of more than 100,000 people, 10% more than 10,000 and 40% between 1,000 and 10,000.

The responding groups tended to be national, sub-national and local, rather than head-offices of large international agencies or movements. The most predominant strategies of work included capacity-building and training, advocacy, research and development project management. Many noted work with women and the economically disadvantaged.

Participation in international forums dealing with key development issues was confirmed by a significant minority, with more than 40% indicating participation in the 2002 Johannesburg WSSD, 20% attending the 2002 Monterrey Financing for Development Conference, almost as many reporting participation in the 1995 Copenhagen WSSD and more than 27% having participated in the Beijing Women’s Conference. Approximately 24% had taken part in the Millennium NGO Forum in 2000. Of course, a number of these participating groups overlapped, but the figures sustain the impression that the respondents were in general quite “linked in” to key international development conversations and UN events.

Almost 40% of respondents reported affiliation with the Economic and Social Council, 28% with the Department of Public Information, 23% with the Conference of Non-Governmental

Organizations in Consultative Relations with the UN (CONGO) and 16% with the United Nations Non-Governmental Liaison Office (NGLS).

Of respondents, 54% reported regular communication with the United Nations Development Program (UNDP), 35% with UNICEF, 25% with ILO, 24.1% with UNIFEM, 19% with UNEP and 28% with the World Bank Group.

Information and Engagement

Given the relatively high level of international engagement of the responding groups, it was a bit of a shock to discover that almost one-third of the responding groups stated that they were **not** familiar with the UN Millennium Declaration and Goals.

Of those familiar with the Declaration and Goals, roughly one-third indicated that “*our organization has a good knowledge of the MD and MDGs and has already incorporated them into our work.*”

More encouraging was the response by almost 50% that they had initiated some activity in direct response to the Declaration. More than 56% reported initiatives aimed at implementation of specific MDGs.

The survey inquired as to whether groups had found the Declaration had had an effect on their access to funding. In the case of HIV/AIDS and conflict prevention, the response was less than 10% positive. With poverty alleviation, it was almost 20% positive, with sustainable development 23% positive.

The majority (63%) rated the UN’s public promotion of the Declaration and Goals as good to excellent. A number of groups suggested means for improving the reach and impact of the Declaration and Goals, many of which were reported in *We the peoples...*

We asked in what ways the Declaration and Goals might be useful to CSOs in advancing their work. Advocacy and multi-stakeholder dialogues were cited as the activities in which they might be most useful. Project development, research initiatives and media relations were also cited.

The survey compiled an extensive list of activities, projects and initiatives on the part of groups of varying purpose, location, composition, size and resource. It is far too diverse to summarise or even to provide a typology in this brief essay. It does testify however, to the depth and quality of engagement required if societies are to gain the benefits that the Millennium Declaration seeks. It serves as a useful reminder amid broad-ranging discussions of government and multilateral policies of the on-the-ground work without which the policies will lack effectiveness.

Adequacy and Likely Success

To what extent did participating groups regard the Goals as adequately addressing the constituencies mentioned? For example, children, women, those affected by HIV/AIDS and the economically disenfranchised were regarded as being adequately addressed by 61 % to 73.6% of respondents. Indigenous peoples (38%) and the disabled (38%) were the least adequately addressed. There were regional variations in the responses. For example, while more than 73% of African respondents regarded the HIV/AIDS constituency adequately dealt with, only 54% of Latin Americans agreed.

Interesting regional variation was marked in response to the general inquiry as to whether the Millennium Declaration and the Goals go far enough. Overall, the balance was slightly negative with 53% considering that they did not go far enough. The most negative respondents were in the OECD countries (66% negative) while respondents from developing countries (62.3%) and least developed countries (70%) were much more positive. Regionally speaking, African respondents were the most positive, Asians less so, and Latin Americans the least positive (54%).

This regional variation was as prominent in response to the question as to whether it was likely or not that the Millennium Goals will be fully realised by 2015.

%	Very likely	Likely	Neutral	Unlikely	Very unlikely
Total	5.6	34.3	21.3	27.8	11.1
OECD	1.5	24.2	22.7	37.9	13.6
D.C.	13.3	40.3	19.4	19.4	7.5
L.D.C.		55.5	11.1	33.3	
Africa 62.5/25 positive.	16.7	45.8	12.5	16.7	8.3
Asia 76.5/11.8 positive	17.6	58.8	11.8	5.9	5.9
Latin America 47.8/34.3 negative	8.2	26.1	17.4	30.4	17.4

There was additional variation according to the subject focus areas specified in the survey. African respondents considered it likely (58%) that the poverty goals would be realised, Latin Americans much less optimistic (40%). Asians were convinced that the sustainable development goals would be accomplished (73%), Latin Americans not convinced (35%). There was less regional variation in the case of HIV/AIDS, with all of Asia much more positive than Latin America. Almost double the number of African and Asian groups considered success in the conflict prevention goals likely, as distinct from Latin Americans.

Contributing Elements for Success

What steps would best insure the successful implementation of the Declaration and Goals? Aid (91.4%) and debt relief (84%) topped the list. Democratic controls and market controls were also being viewed as important.

Respondents were very critical of the level of implementation by governments – their own and foreign. Only 5% considered the response positive in either case. Generally they viewed foreign governments slightly more positively (43.4% fair, 52% poor), than their own (34% fair, 61% poor).

A number of respondents suggested that there should be monitoring of governments' follow-through on their Millennium commitments and that there should be sanctions of governments that undertook policies which undermined their fulfillment.

A repeated demand was for “specific timetables and benchmarks and government commitments to full funding of implementation.” More specificity, evaluation and accountability were requested time and again.

Quite a number of groups reported that they thought the implementation of the Goals was only possible if enough attention was paid to policy dimensions and reform of the international economic system. As one respondent put it, the Declaration and Goals were practical and worthwhile, but “the problem with them is that they focus attention only on the consequences of poverty and social exclusion and not on their causes. It therefore perpetuates a system that tries to put a sticking plaster on the problem rather than trying to address the dynamics creating the problems – which will continue to re-create the problems however much the sticking plasters provide temporary relief. Sticking plasters have their use, but the MDG’s allow the international community to ignore the causes of the wounds and who is responsible for the wounding.”

Some respondents argued that there must be a redefinition of international policies that are viewed as contrary to the Millennium Declaration and Goals or likely to undermine their realisation. The International Financial Institutions, which were viewed in some responses as dictating policies to weaker states, must be changed. Further, the UN was challenged to engage conscientiously with groups that struggle for “another globalisation”.

For some, the problem lies in the definition of the Goals themselves. As one group responded, “the results of the MDGs, even if implemented perfectly will be too little and too late, because they are not ambitious enough. This is the reason we do not take it as a lead in our work, but keep relying on other benchmarks, such as the commitments of Rio, Cairo, Beijing and Copenhagen.”

As “*We the peoples...*” reported, “a repeatedly used word is ‘accountability’. Accountability needs to be two-way, donors and recipients, rich and poor. In this regard women’s, environmental, labour and human rights organisations are undertaking a multitude of projects to make government policies transparent, to increase public alertness of the commitment governments have made at the United Nations and to seek redress where effects are negative or regressive.”

Conclusions

As indicated above, the results of the 2002 survey are indicative, not conclusive. They are an initial test, and the findings are a mine of samples of the sorts of CSO activities and initiatives currently under way. They provide hypotheses for testing and tracing through upcoming annual soundings.

The Declaration and Goals do provide an organising framework for a significant number of initiatives, and there is some evidence of organisations, even quite major NGO aid agencies, reviewing and prioritising their plans in the light of the Goals.

In institutional terms, the terms of funders and planners, while two years have elapsed since the endorsement by the General Assembly, it is still “early days” in many organisations in terms of the internalising the Goals, and the movement from vision through planning to inception of new initiatives.

There remain many organisations and networks that have either little or no knowledge of the Declaration and Goals or a glancing experience with them. A great deal depends not only on

UN information and network activity, but on governments' taking on and publicising the Declaration and Goals and on civil society networks themselves. The survey does indicate, however, that many smaller or local CSOs have already taken on the Declaration and are contributing to the Goals.

An ongoing engagement of the UN, the MEIs and civil society organisations regarding the shortcomings and ambiguities of the Declaration and Goals and regarding policy change is required. A number of CSOs are monitoring governments in the light of their commitments and their promises. Mutual accountability was a concept much touted at the Monterrey Financing for Development Conference and elsewhere during 2002, but it will quickly ring hollow if the calls for improvement in governance in developing countries are not matched with commitments to change regressive policies and inadequate funds on the part of donor governments.

The survey and report were initiated out of the conviction that the Millennium Declaration and Goals will not be accomplished truly without the effective and global involvement of civil society organisations at all levels. They were developed as a contribution, through information, to the success of the effort, but also as a recognition of CSO investment and engagement.

WFUNA and the North-South Institute intend the 2002 survey and the initial "*We the peoples...*" report as prototypes for a continuing effort through at least 2005. Current plans are – funding permitting – to launch an enhanced inquiry to an even more widespread network of CSOs in the first half of 2003 and to develop both a research report and a new 2003 edition of the brief and popular *We the peoples....* A number of other agencies and research groups have assisted and those offering collaboration continue to grow in number.

From Vision to Success

The United Nations, cooperating with the Multilateral Economic Institutions, is in process of launching a full global campaign for the accomplishment of the Declaration and Goals.

The Secretary-General has announced the appointment of Ms Eveline Herfkens, former Netherlands Minister for Development Cooperation, to act as Executive Coordinator for the Millennium Development Goals Campaign. She would help "to spread awareness of them and to build new coalitions for action to achieve them in both developed and developing countries."⁸ The new Executive Coordinator is to work closely with UNDP Administrator Mark Malloch Brown. A campaign director is also being recruited.

In a dialogue undertaken by officials of UNDP with civil society organisations that have extensive campaign experience, held at the World Social Forum in Porto Alegre, Brazil early in 2002, participants from a variety of CSOs in countries like Malaysia, Chile, Brazil and Morocco indicated that a campaign was possible, but faced a series of hurdles. The modesty of the Goals was one difficulty, as a number of survey respondents indicated. The horizon for accomplishment – 15 years – was viewed as very distant and difficult to organise around. But the greatest difficulty for advocacy organizations rooted in ongoing campaigns was that simple quantitative targets were inadequate unless combined with far-reaching policy reform.

Dealing with a related challenge, the implementation of the Monterrey Consensus (Financing for Development), the noted scholar Amartya Sen, in an address to Commonwealth Finance

⁸ UNDP Press Release, 1/10/02 *Secretary-General Warns World Falling Short of Millennium Summit Commitments*. New York, UNDP, www.un.org/millenniumgoals.

Ministers, called on them to pay attention to their civil society critics. There were those, he indicated, who stood outside the “consensus”, whose positions were viewed as dissent, and whom Ministers might tend to ignore. If you desire effectiveness in implementation, Sen advised, then pay attention to the critics. You may discard some of their suggestions, but by taking on board much of what these people say, you will strengthen the result and effect of your efforts.⁹

Learning from relative success could also assist. At a discussion with diplomats, civil society leaders and UN staff convened in New York by WFUNA in November, 2002 attention to successful strategies was advised: “... much could be learned from the success of the Jubilee Campaign on debt relief and the campaign for the International Criminal Court.”¹⁰ Participants in the discussion favored the idea of creating “issue- specific coalitions” around each Goal as one strategy. International monitoring of progress by CSO networks like Social Watch, the Women’s Environment and Development Organisation (WEDO) and Reality of AID is already going on and may provide very timely and useful information.

We the peoples... invites civil society support for a campaign that includes:

- ? “Developing opportunities, networks and coalitions for strengthening the global effort for full implementation of the Declaration, particularly in developing countries
- ? Collaboration with CSOs monitoring progress
- ? Promoting awareness of progress reports in the United Nations and, more broadly,
- ? Creating specific proposals for more effective forms of partnerships between the United Nations and civil society in support of the Millennium Declaration
- ? New initiatives in access and cooperation between civil society, the UN and its agencies and governments at all levels
- ? Institutional reform and development to democratise global governance and serve the values and objectives of the Declaration.”

We the peoples... also suggests some means, including expanding the current UN experiments in stakeholder participation at all levels, which may help ensure a successful campaign, but more importantly that the Declaration and Goals are implemented and surpassed.

The UN Millennium Declaration and Goals are young. The global campaign is still at a conceptual stage. The opportunity for engaging civil society organisations, integrally and in an ongoing manner, remains.

⁹ Amartya Sen, *Delivering the Monterrey Consensus. Which Consensus?* Commonwealth Finance Ministers Meeting, Provisional Agenda Item 9 FMM(02) 13 London, Commonwealth Secretariat, August, 2002.

¹⁰ WFUNA, “The Role of Civil Society in Implementing the Millennium Declaration”, *Summary record*. New York, WFUNA, 20 November, 2002.