



“From Thoughts to Action”

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3rd International Disaster and Risk Conference IDRC Davos 2010

PRESS RELEASE

Davos, Switzerland – Some 800 experts from countries worldwide meeting at the 3rd International Disaster and Risk Conference IDRC Davos 2010 here are assessing the planet’s progress in meeting its Millennium Development Goals (MDGs).

The report card leaves much to be desired.

As IDRC Davos 2010 planners note, the United Nations set targets for items such as climate change 10 years ago and will review them at a special MDG session of the General Assembly this September.

But the IDRC Davos 2010 already calls it “obvious” that human development during the 21st century “will require a much more ambitious and integrated approach than what the current set of MDGs offers.”

The goals on development, security, and climate change came in for sharp criticism from a IDRC Davos 2010 expert panel – especially from Africans on it who suspected that UN diplomats who set the goals had lost touch with reality in the field.

One panel member, Dr. Alfred Lokuji, an associate professor of management at the University of Juba in southern Sudan, says his home villagers would find it strange to hear of going “beyond” the UN’s existing goals with a 2015 revision, since the existing goals remain totally unfulfilled.

“Sudan has not been at peace since the British colonialists left in 1956,” he told fellow experts, adding that without peace, the MDG goals seem completely out of reach.

Uganda’s minister of state for relief, disaster preparedness, and refugees, Francis Ecweru Musa, shares Dr. Lokuji’s scepticism. The MDG takes responsibility for the welfare of some 300,000 refugees.

“We’ve been told the direction,” he told fellow experts, “but we haven’t started to walk yet.”

According to Ecweru, isolation and provincial tradition have led to the growth of warlords throughout the Horn of Africa – not only in Somalia. Thus “good governance” has become a casualty.

British economist Lawrence Haddad, who directs the Institute of Developmental Studies in Brighton, dismisses one notion: that the goals would be greatly improved even if amended by UN diplomats.

Moreover, Haddad says, the problem can't be blamed on illiteracy. His institute invited a dozen members of Parliament – all of them Labourites – to discuss their feelings about the MDGs. All but one had never heard of them, he said, an embarrassing sign that the politicians had lost touch with their Labour roots and working-class ideals.

Another African, Tanzania's founding director of the Institute of Resource Assessment in Dar es Salaam, Adolfo Mascarenhas, worried about another concern.

“The goals are sanitized so that they will be accepted,” he told the gathering, “and then it's back to business as usual.”

Professor Mascarenhas also views UN reviewers as out of touch with farming know-how that has adapted to change in sub-Saharan fields for 200 years.

“Living with suffering hasn't changed in all that time,” he says.

Dr. Haddad wants the UN to recognize that security, development, and climate change each tend to exist in a “bubble that doesn't overlap with the others.” Hence, if the goals are to succeed, any update will need to bring about such an overlap. He adds that measuring progress in terms of gross domestic product doesn't help.

“GDP is a pretty hopeless indicator that ignores poverty,” the panellist insists. “What we really need is some creative thinking. Why can't government create indicators that measure the things we truly care about?”

Lyn Shepard, Conference Journalist

Davos, 1 June 2010

