

2005 General Assembly Summit (posted on cebo.org site)

In Sept. 2005, 170 heads of state attended a major UN Assembly to consider a formidable agenda: the most sweeping changes in the UN's 60 year old history, the five year assessment of the Millennium Development Goals, and spurring of progress towards these goals. The MDGs represent agreement at an international level on plans for the world's future. Creating the plan, and achieving agreement from many nations, has been no small matter.

To highlight a few of the goals: they attack the worst scourges of humanity--the direst poverty, hunger, disease and environmental change. The goals are comprehensive, specific, doable with political will, and measurable, with a timetable to be achieved by 2015. In 2000, world leaders made pledges for these goals. Now the UN is assessing progress and forming strategies for further advances.

To quote Kofi Annan: The cost of missing this opportunity will be millions of lives that could have been saved will be lost: many freedoms that could have been secured, will be denied, and we will inhabit a more dangerous and unstable world.

During the past 6 months, intensive consultation with many nations resulted in a document agreed upon by world leaders. Extremely sensitive issues such as proposals for limiting the veto in the Security Council, and criteria for composition of the Human Rights Commission, have been discussed. A major obstacle is the U.S. administration in the person of John Bolton, assigned the task of opposing the moral and practical influence of the UN. He undermined the patiently acquired momentum for consensus. He aims to rewrite the document with innumerable changes. This tactic ignores the U.S. government's commitment signed onto in 2000. The purpose is to oppose many economic, social and environmental priorities of other nations. These last minute manoeuvres are an attempt to sabotage global efforts to alleviate poverty and disease, to bring fairness to trade and aid, and deny any response to the problems of the environment and global warming.

The U.S opposes the International Criminal Court, an attempt to bring agreed upon law to the world's worst abuses. The U.S. government resists dismantling the nuclear powers' arsenals, while at the same time opposing nuclear proliferation. The U.S. government objects to the creation of a standing UN peacekeeping on the ready, created by participating governments and remaining under their command.

In all these areas, the US is trying to dominate the agenda. The future promises to be a rough ride. How well are we doing on the Millennium goals? A few points for overview: Goal-- to halve between 1990 and 2015, the proportion of people whose income is less than \$1 a day, and halve those who suffer from hunger. During the 1990's extreme poverty dropped in much of Asia, changed little in Latin America, the Caribbean and northern Africa, worsened in sub-Saharan Africa, where poverty is now almost 50%. Much of the reductions come from progress in China and India.

Goal--to achieve universal primary education. There has been much progress in this area. In five regions 90% or more children are enrolled in primary school. Sub-Sahara has made some progress, but still over a third of its children are out of school. Progress is lagging now in some areas where improvement had begun. Child mortality has dropped, but progress has slowed. There was improvement in gender equality, but progress is uneven. Malaria, a worldwide disease is being combatted more effectively, as is tuberculosis with a new treatment strategy.

Two basics, safe drinking water and sanitation have improved worldwide. For these necessities, the goal has to be 100%. Safe drinking water access has increased from 71% to 79%, and sanitation from 34% to 49%, still a long way to go. If present trends continue, the year 2015 will have two and a half billion people without improved sanitation, greatly affecting the incidence of disease. The target demands a big increase in investment. Improving the everyday lives of the world's people is the great moral challenge of our times. It also happens to be in our self-interest, to enhance our security. The world has reached the stage where the task is doable. The moment is now.

Phyllis Ehrenfeld, Representative to the UN from the National Service Conference of the American Ethical Union. Sylvain Ehrenfeld, Representative to the UN from the International Humanist Ethical Union.