

Op-eds

Kenya role in implementing MDGs

By Calestous Juma

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We have witnessed a landmark event in the history of development thought and practice, the launching of "Investing in Development: A Practical Plan to Achieve the Millennium Development Goals".

The report was prepared for the United Nations Secretary-General Kofi Annan by the UN Millennium Project, an independent advisory body composed of 256 experts and practitioners led by Prof Jeffrey Sachs.

The UN Millennium Project's report was released as the Asian tsunami disaster focused global attention on the need, scale and effectiveness of aid to the world's poor.

The enormously generous response to the tragedy sent a powerful message that ordinary citizens in wealthier nations do in fact support such aid – if they clearly see the need and if they believe the funds they provide will reach and help the people in need.

The Project's plan addresses these legitimate concerns – and shows that targeted investments in essential public services such as health, education and infrastructure make poor communities less vulnerable to such disasters, and to the hardships of disease, hunger and environmental degradation.

The report is a courageous effort to outline practical measures for implementing the Millennium Declaration adopted by the United Nations in 2000. It represents the most comprehensive effort to address poverty and economic growth in the developing world ever mounted by the international community.

The report focuses on the unprecedented opportunity to improve the lives of billions of people around the world by adopting practical approaches to meeting the Millennium Development Goals (MDGs).

It identifies practical strategies to eradicate poverty by scaling up investments in infrastructure and human capital while promoting gender equality and environmental sustainability. It is a landmark report that will redefine development thought and practice for a long time to come.

The report is an illustration of the exemplary leadership by the UN Secretary-General Kofi Annan in focusing global political attention on poverty and economic growth.

It emphasises that the MDGs are within reach, even for the poorest of countries. But to do so will demand aggressive local, national, regional and international strategies.

These strategies will require enhanced co-operation between developing and developed countries in all aspects of development planning, financing and implementation.

But such co-operation will only bear fruit where developing countries take leadership and ownership on the implementation of the MDGs.

One of the key recommendations of the report is the urgency to identify "quick wins" or areas of immediate action.

Such "quick wins" will not only underscore the feasibility of the goals, but they will also provide strategic entry points for subsequent scaling up.

The most strategic "quick win" for Kenya is the creation of the East African Community (EAC) and the return of peace in the Sudan as well as the reconstruction of government in Somalia.

The creation of an integrated regional market is a unique opportunity that can help Kenya and the region address long-term development challenges as foreshadowed by the MDGs.

Policy emphasis in the region should be on improving productivity, expanding markets, attracting foreign investment and adopting new technologies. These are the kinds of economic measures needed to address poverty.

The first step in taking advantage of regional opportunities is to invest in infrastructure development (energy, transportation, telecommunications, research and development, water supply and sanitation) which will not only facilitate trade, but the construction and maintenance of infrastructure will generate new job and promote human welfare.

Such investments should be linked to the local universities and research institutions. Building new roads using local materials such as cement, for example, should be tied into efforts to enhance the region's civil engineering skills in universities.

Education is another critical starting point. Significant advances have already been made through the provision of free education.

In addition to the emphasis on primary education, Kenya should also provide leadership in bringing higher education to the service of development.

The network of universities in Kenya and the region can play an important role if they focus their curriculum on community development. This is the most strategic way to move Kenya and the region into the knowledge-economy.

The report leads off a year-long series of global initiatives aimed at making the Goals a reality, including a report to UN member states from the Secretary-General in March, which will draw heavily on the Project's recommendations.

With world leaders gathering at the G8 meeting in July and again at the UN in September to accelerate progress towards the Goals, 2005 has become the key year for mobilising international support for the fight against poverty and disease.

Kenya must take advantage of these opportunities to focus political and professional attention on the urgency to promote economic growth and eliminate poverty.

The outlook for the region is promising and the goals are attainable. But seizing immediate leadership is the most critical step that Kenya must make now.

Investing in Development thus offers Kenya a rich source of ideas that could enable the country to serve as a regional champion in poverty eradication and economic development.

With this the region can make important contributions to global