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Development-Kenya: `Drastic Actions' Required for UN Goals to Be Met

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While a decade may seem a substantial amount of time to some, it is all too short for those who are pushing to have the Millennium Development Goals realised.

The prospects for achieving the goals (or MDGs) appear especially bleak for sub-Saharan Africa, Kenya being a case in point.

"Unless drastic actions are taken, Kenya is unlikely to achieve to the Millennium Development Goals by 2015," the country's minister of health, Charity Ngilu, said Tuesday at the Nairobi release of a report entitled 'Investing in Development: A Practical Plan to Achieve the Millennium Development Goals'. (The principal launch of this document took place Monday in New York.)

The 3,000-page report was compiled under the auspices of the United Nations Millennium Project, established by UN Secretary-General Kofi Annan to set out a strategy for reaching the MDGs.

The eight goals were formulated during the UN's Millennium Summit in 2000 in a bid to improve living standards around the globe by 2015. They include halving the number of people who are living on less than a dollar a day and reducing global hunger by half (more than one billion of the six billion people on earth currently live below the poverty threshold).

The goals also call for the promotion of equality between men and women by rooting out gender disparities in education, universal primary education, a two thirds reduction of mortality amongst children under five - and a reduction by three quarters of maternal mortality.

In addition, the spread of HIV/AIDS and other diseases is to be reversed, environmental sustainability ensured - and the development of poor countries addressed through fair policies on trade and debt, amongst other matters.

Child mortality in Kenya currently stands at 114 deaths per 1,000 births, and maternal mortality at 414 deaths per 100,000 births.

Ngilu has sought to remedy this situation by shepherding a bill through parliament that would provide free health care to Kenyans through the introduction of a national insurance scheme. President Mwai Kibaki later refused to sign off on the bill, which critics say would prove too burdensome for tax payers.

However, Planning and National Development Minister Anyang Nyong'o was quoted earlier this month as saying the bill had not been shelved, and that a revised version of the scheme would be ready for implementation by March.

In addition, the health plan reportedly received the endorsement of Jeffrey Sachs, the American university professor who directs the Millennium Project - this during a visit to Kenya that took place over the weekend of Jan. 8-9.

Others have also called for Kenyan authorities to take decisive action against poverty and under-development in the coming months.

"The year 2005 needs to be a year of action as opposed to a year of politics, a year in which government business is done for the poor in order for things to move forward," Paul Andre de la Porte, the UN's resident coordinator in Kenya, said Tuesday.

'Investing in Development' sets out 10 recommendations to assist the international community in achieving the MDGs, notably that aid to poor countries be substantially increased.

While the UN General Assembly agreed in 1970 that countries should set aside 0.7 percent of their gross domestic product (GDP) for development assistance, only five have done so: Denmark, Luxembourg, the Netherlands, Norway and Sweden. Britain, Belgium, France, Finland, Ireland and Spain have promised to reach this target.

The United States, with the world's biggest economy, is also its biggest donor at present. However, this assistance amounts to just 0.15

percent of GDP, far below the target of 0.7 percent.

The report recommends that wealthy countries open their markets to developing states, many of which have been severely disadvantaged by the subsidies paid to farmers in rich nations. Poor states should be helped to build the roads, ports and electricity infrastructure that are central to improving competitiveness.

'Investing in Development' also proposes a number of "Quick Win actions" to "save and improve millions of lives and promote economic growth". These include the widespread and free distribution of malaria bed-nets, eliminating primary school fees and increasing the provision of free school meals.

The recommendations note, furthermore, that governments need to "adopt development strategies bold enough to meet the Millennium Development Goal (MDG) targets for 2015."

Kenya's government says that its 'Economic Recovery Strategy for Wealth and Employment Creation', launched in 2003, goes part of the way to identifying areas that officials need to focus on to achieve development.

According to government statistics, about 56 percent of Kenyans currently live on less than a dollar a day.

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