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What can one do with a bag of hot air? – Consequences of the UN Summit in New York for the implementation of the Millennium Development Goals

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What can one do with a bag of hot air? – Consequences of the UN Summit in New York for the implementation of the Millennium Development Goals

Bonn, 27 September 2010. The summit in New York on the implementation of the Millennium Development Goals (MDGs) was not much more than a wet handshake – although quite an expensive one, since a number of government members from many countries had travelled there under the strictest security precautions. The outcome document adopted is not much more than a bag of hot air; it contains nothing but non-binding promises, a superficial balance and a long and thus almost random list with suggestions about how the MDGs can still be achieved by 2015.

A summit that really adds nothing new

It is particularly regrettable that the United Nations (UN) has not succeeded in assigning the MDGs, which are still formulated in a relatively non-binding manner, measurable guidelines for 2015. Thus, for example, one could have given concrete expression to MDG 1b (“full and productive employment and decent work for all”) at least by stating the percentage of employed persons who are to have access to social protection systems by 2015.

Admittedly, the rather disappointing result should not be very surprising: the draft version of the outcome document presented by UN Secretary-General Ban Ki-Moon was colourless, lacking in ambition and unsystematic. There is nothing here to remind one of the powerful words and contents that shape the Millennium Declaration that was adopted ten years ago by the UN under Ban’s predecessor, the Ghanaian Kofi Annan. The only concrete demand that Ban Ki-Moon’s draft version contains – requiring that the rich countries should give 0.7 % of their gross national income for development – was scrapped by the donor countries (including Germany) in the negotiation process before the summit.

At one time, the MDGs were part of a deal between developing and industrialised countries: developing countries were supposed to prove by implementing the goals that they would make

effective use of the development aid provided to them, and in exchange for this receive more financial aid. And now the situation is that while developing countries are still expected to implement the goals, increased aid is not being promised to them by the donor countries.

More efficiency is not enough for achieving the goals

Of course, Federal Chancellor Merkel was right when she emphasised in New York that it is not only the volume of development aid funds that is important. These must also be used efficiently and not be misused – either by donor countries (for their own economic interests) or by developing countries themselves (for the self-legitimation of their governments). However, the responsibility for the sobering balance in the implementation of the MDGs cannot be assigned exclusively to developing countries. In the end it all depends on the volume of development aid. MDG 2, for example, provides that all children in all countries can finish primary education by 2015 at the latest. For many countries, this is a near Herculean task, since they are still reporting primary school attendance rates of less than 70 %. The countries of Europe needed more than 50 years to get from 70 % to 99 %, and now of all places the poorest countries in the world are expected to take this step in only 5 years.

If one still wishes to approach this goal, a massive influx of external support and a more efficient use of available funds are necessary. As a result of the intensified concentration of development aid on education and health, the rise in the primary school enrolment rates has also significantly increased since the declaration of the MDGs – even though not yet far enough to ensure that primary school enrolment would reach 100 % in 2015.

A new course must now be set

Currently the development aid paid by Western donors is stagnating while the support provided

by countries such as China and India is increasing. In 2010, the German share lies at most at 0.4 % of gross national income – far below the 0.51 % that Federal Chancellor Merkel herself had firmly pledged for this year five years ago. If the share was still meant to increase to 0.7 % by 2015, the course for this would have to be set in the federal government budget by now. Moreover, German aid must focus more on measures that are crucial for the implementation of as many of the MDGs as possible.

The outcome document of New York barely offers any orientation here since it lists virtually every conceivable measure. However, scientific investigations show that primary school and adult education, information and education about nutrition and hygiene, good governance, social protection schemes and rural infrastructure are key areas for a rapid implementation of the goals. The German Federal Ministry for Economic Cooperation and Development are considering expanding engagement in some of these areas.

In addition, it is also a question of reshaping the framework conditions of development in a more positive way: to reform the international trading and financial system in a more reliable, transparent and less discriminatory manner, to give developing countries' export products better chances on the markets of rich countries, to improve developing countries' access to technologies and pharmaceutical products and limit climate change, which in many developing countries will significantly alter the conditions for agriculture. Many of these demands are expressly contained in MDG 8. However, in contrast to the other Millennium goals there is still a lack of quantitative specifications regarding what is supposed to be achieved by 2015. It is thus difficult to verify when the goal is achieved. Since there has not been any great progress in almost all requirements of MDG 8 since 2000, it should be admitted that the world has not failed so much in any other MDG as the one goal for whose implementation donor countries have primary responsibility.



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