

UN summit on poverty gets mixed reviews

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Leaders of global faith and humanitarian groups have given mixed reactions to a New York summit evaluating the United Nations' Millennium Development Goals, which were set forth a decade ago in an effort to reduce global poverty.

Political leaders at the summit acknowledged that progress toward achieving the eight MDGs by 2015 is not where it should be. In a final "outcome document" for the September 20-22 UN summit, participants recommitted themselves to achieving the goals, which include the eradication of extreme poverty and hunger.

Church leaders have applauded the progress made so far to reduce global poverty but say more must be done.

The general secretary of the World Council of Churches, Olav Fykse Tveit, told UN secretary-general Ban Ki-Moon in a letter that "without significant transformations in global economic frameworks, the attainment of the MDGs by 2015 is endangered."

Referring to the high-level summit on the MDGs, Tveit's letter expressed concern that governments need to do more to address the root causes of poverty. The WCC leader said that if this is not done, justice-oriented reforms will not be possible. "In today's globalized world, efforts by nations to meet the MDGs are more and more contingent on an enabling international economic environment," wrote Tveit.

The world leaders meeting in New York failed to decide on what some observers claim must be done to tackle the most pressing problems hindering the elimination of poverty. "We need action on hunger, poverty, trade and human rights, and we need it now," John Nduna, general secretary of the Geneva-based ACT Alliance, one of the world's largest humanitarian and development networks, said after the meeting.

The ACT Alliance noted that what was agreed to in New York is long on promises but short on detail and contains few of the practical agreements needed to realize the MDGs by their target date. The MDGs are intended to halve by 2015 the number of people experiencing hunger and living on less than \$1.00 a day. World Food Program statistics recently released show that one in seven of the world's population goes hungry each day.

"This is not the forgotten few we are talking about, it is the forgotten billion," said Nduna. He added that the ACT Alliance believes poverty and hunger can be eradicated if politicians are willing to embrace innovative thinking.

This, noted Nduna, includes investing in smallholder agriculture—the main source of livelihood for people in poverty—and changing current global food policy into one based on the right to food. He said there is also the need to eliminate all export subsidies in developed countries, because these allow Western agriculture producers to sell their goods cheaply to the developing world—and poor farmers get squeezed out in the process.

David Beckmann, president of the Washington-based advocacy group Bread for the World, told a September 22 forum at the Yale University-backed Church Center for the UN that he viewed the future with some optimism.

"I am just profoundly hopeful because hundreds of millions of people have escaped from extreme poverty in the last 20 years," Beckmann said. Calling the progress made on poverty "the great exodus of our time," he added, "This is God moving in our history. This is our loving God answering the prayers of hundreds of millions of people."

Still, others at the Yale event were pessimistic, arguing that not enough is being done. Melinda St. Louis, deputy director of Jubilee USA, a faith-based group working for debt forgiveness for poorer nations, said advocates for the poor need to focus less on "specific goals and benchmarks and actually start talking about economic justice."

Yale professor Thomas Pogge noted that while there are "millions of success stories," the UN Food and Agriculture Organization reported that in 2009 the number of chronically undernourished persons had, for the first time, risen above 1 billion people. He said that the poor continue to face an "enormous headwind." —*ENI*