

Civil Society Takes Action

José Lim



José Lim has been a member of San Lorenzo Ruiz CLC since 1988 and is currently serving as Coordinator. He is a member of the Metro NY CLC Regional Council.

Born in the Philippines, José has traveled extensively and lived and worked on four different continents. He received his B.A. Degree in Economics and Management from American University in Cairo, and completed graduate level courses in management at the Asian Institute of Management in The Philippines.

His professional career has run the gamut from financial analyst to management. He is currently working as a real estate broker in New York.

José also lends his talents as a trustee for the Philippine Pastoral Center as well as serving as a World CLC NGO Representative at the United Nations, each in Manhattan.

He is married to Lenore, fellow CLC member/professional artist and teacher at the United Nations International School. They are parents to two adult children, Marie Claire, who works for Citigroup and Justin, a law student at Seton Hall University.

A Report on the United Nations Department of Public Information/Non-Governmental Organizations Conference on Millennium Development Goals

An interesting revelation was made to me after I joined Christian Life Community fifteen years ago. Fr. Dan Fitzpatrick, S.J., mentioned at one of our meetings that CLC has an accreditation to the United Nations as a Non-Governmental Organization in consultative status with the Economic and Social Council. It was big news which served to reinforce the concept that CLC truly had a global presence and concern for the larger world. Born in the Philippines and having lived in Korea, Pakistan, Egypt, Italy and Canada prior to coming to the United States, the thought was very happy and reassuring.

Therefore, when I was asked if I would be interested in becoming a CLC UN/NGO Representative last year, I was quick to accept, even without knowing exactly what it entailed. Fortunately, the experience has been most rewarding in terms of acquiring a deeper understanding of our world's economic, social and political problems, which are being addressed at the United Nations through cooperation of member states and civil society.

I am pleased to share some observations and thoughts from my attendance at a three-day conference September 8—10th, 2004, entitled, "Millennium Development Goals: Civil Society Takes Action," where some two thousand seven hundred representatives from more than seven hundred worldwide non-governmental organizations (NGOs) gathered together at the U.N. Headquarters in New York City with the aim of supporting worldwide efforts to mobilize civil society in order to achieve the Millennium Development Goals (MDGs). World Christian Life Community participated as one of the NGOs and was represented by Joan Woods, Sylvia Schmitt, Mars Custodio and myself.

THE MILLENNIUM DEVELOPMENT GOALS

The MDGs which were adopted by one hundred eighty-nine countries at the Millennium Summit in the year 2000, are eight specific goals for tackling hunger and poverty, improve education, health, the status of women and the environment in virtually all parts of the world. These are minimal goals and are to be achieved by the year 2015. Failure to achieve these goals will be a failure of humanity for hundreds of millions of people living below one dollar a day in their struggle for survival, human rights and security.

Unlike the bold unmet pledges of the past, the MDGs are different—the goals are measurable with target dates and regular review dates every step of the way. Moreover, with the unprecedented political support by all developed and developing U.N. Member States and with the NGOs and civil society demanding and putting pressure on governments to deliver on their commitments, real changes are achievable in the lives of our people.

The MDGs to reduce poverty and improve people's lives are:

1. Eradicate extreme poverty and hunger
Target 2015: Halve the proportion of people living on less than a dollar's pay a day and those who suffer from hunger;
2. Achieve universal primary education
Target 2015: Ensure that all boys and girls complete primary school;
3. Promote gender equality and empower women
Target 2005 and 2015: Eliminate gender disparities in primary and secondary education, preferably by 2005, and at all levels by 2015;

4. Reduce child mortality
Target 2015: Reduce by two-thirds the mortality rate among children under five;
5. Improve maternal health
Target 2015: Reduce by three-quarters the ratio of women dying in childbirth;
6. Combat HIV/Aids, malaria and other diseases
Target 2015: Halt and begin to reverse the spread of HIV/Aids and the incidence of malaria and other major diseases;
7. Ensure environmental sustainability
Target 2015: Halve the proportion of people without access to safe drinking water
Target 2020: Achieve significant improvement in the lives of at least one hundred million slum dwellers;
8. Develop a global partnership for development
Targets: Develop further an open trading and financial system that includes a commitment to good governance, development and poverty reduction—both nationally and internationally; address the special needs of least developing countries, landlocked developing countries and small-island developing states; deal comprehensively with developing countries' debt problems; develop decent and productive work for youth; in cooperation with pharmaceutical companies, provide access to affordable essential drugs in developing countries; in cooperation with the private sector, make available the benefits of new technologies—especially information and communication technologies.

The MDGs are doable. Our world has the resources, technology and the coherent plans to achieve these goals. There is an unprecedented political will throughout the world to achieve the goals by the 2015 target date. We only have to look at the progress of China in recent decades to be convinced that we are capable of rapid development. For most of the last millennium, China was an economic failure until it became a great success story. To a lesser degree, the same can also be said of India, which was one of the economic failures of the twentieth century. In the last ten years, however, it has made tremendous progress.

Even some African countries have achieved success on specific targets in relatively short time. For example, Mozambique has cut poverty from seventy percent to fifty five percent, and has doubled the number of children in school. In Uganda, the prevalence of HIV infection has dropped. In Rwanda, following the genocide, women's groups undertook to support orphans and rebuild society. Now, women comprise fifty percent of the Rwandan Parliament.

In Thailand, new infection rates have gone from one hundred forty thousand per year in the early nineties, to around twenty thousand today. Such achievements demonstrate that rapid progress is possible, given good policies and partners' support.

However, the MDGs can be achieved only if all governments, rich and poor alike, international institutions and civil societies are relentless in assuming ownership of the goals and together share the responsibility of meeting them. The developed countries need to provide more financial and technological resources and remove unfair trade practices in order to respond more effectively to the needs identified by less-developed countries. On the other hand, less-developed countries need to provide a large percentage of their resources for basic necessities (safe water, food, health care, education, housing and the creation of jobs with decent salaries and working conditions), eliminate the vast internal inequalities and corruption that stand in the way of progress and poverty reduction.

At the same time, corporations and the private sector must accept responsibility for conducting business in a way that contributes to sustainability and socially equitable growth. And, civil societies must play a crucial role as movers for change and in monitoring the implementation of policies and commitments by both the developed and developing countries, as well as the impact of business activities. They must be vigorous in holding all

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RELATED WEBSITES

United Nations website:
www.un.org/millenniumgoals

Millennium indicators —
<http://millennium.un.org>

Official UNDP website —
<http://undp.org>

*click on Millennium
Development Goals*

*and the World Bank MDG
website* — www.worldbank.org

and

www.developmentgoals.org

the parties accountable and to be ready to apply the necessary pressure when commitments are not being kept.

There was a general consensus among the speakers at the conference that since the MDGs were launched four years ago, the progress achieved to date has been uneven and not on track in some regions. On poverty eradication, only fifteen percent of countries are on track. In Sub-Sahara Africa, there is no change and there is even negative change relative to targets on poverty, child mortality, maternal health, spread of malaria and environmental sustainability. The World Bank estimates that forty-six states might be classified as weak or failing, which means that one third of a billion people are living on less than one dollar per day. At the current trends, the MDGs would not be met by the 2015 target date.



Our NGO representatives: Mars Custodio, Joan Woods, Sylvia Schmitt and Jose Lim (at a session)

STEPS REQUIRED NOW

Yet, it is not too late, if in the next eleven years there is a concerted effort to scale up action on three essential fronts.

First, reform must be immediately instituted in developing countries and Africa must double its economic growth rate.

Second, the delivery of basic human services key infrastructure must be accelerated now with great urgency.

Third, rich developed countries must speed up implementation of their ends of global development partnerships, especially in opening their markets to

exports and in living up to promises to give seven tenths of a percent of their Gross National Products (GNPs) for overseas development assistance (ODA).

For the past thirty years (and most recently again in 2002, in Monterrey), rich developed countries have pledged to commit seven tenths of a percent of their GNPs to ODA. At the moment, only Denmark, Luxemburg, The Netherlands, Norway and Sweden have met this target. Five other countries have committed themselves to meet this goal of their GNP: Ireland by 2007, Belgium by 2010, France and Spain by 2012 and the United Kingdom by 2013.

In 2003, the total ODA by developed countries reached only sixty eight and a half billion, which represents a quarter of one percent of donor countries' total gross national incomes. This is inadequate and must be immediately addressed if the seventy five billion dollars yearly funding needed to achieve the MDGs is to be available. The United States, for example, must do more than the sixteen billion a year it gives in ODA, an amount equivalent to less than one tenth of one percent of its GNP. If it can commit four hundred and fifty billion a year to military spending, it certainly should be able to commit more annually for peace and development. The war in Iraq alone has already cost one hundred twenty-three billion and the amount is rising, to an amount seven and a half times that it provides in yearly overseas development assistance.

Rich countries must also do their part to bring about open and free trade, particularly in agricultural products upon which a majority of the population of the world's poor countries depend for their livelihood. Agriculture was an infinitesimal proportion of the GNP of developed countries, but for developing countries, it was as high as ninety percent. A World Bank study in 2002 showed that the full elimination of agricultural subsidies in rich countries would increase rural income in low and medium income countries by sixty billion per year. This is equivalent to almost the total worldwide aid. Therefore, with open and fair trade, there would be substantial improvement in the lives of millions of people in poor countries where agriculture is the only way of life.

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Debt is a major obstacle to the provision of safe water, food, education and health care of the heavily indebted poor and most middle income countries. There is a need by the rich creditor countries to exert more effort to work for the forgiveness of foreign debts of the poorest countries that are being financially strangled by the burden of servicing their debts. Sub-Sahara Africa pays ten billion dollars every year in debt service, which is four times as much as the countries in the region spend on health care and education. Each day, developing countries pay rich countries seven hundred and seventeen million in servicing debts. Every baby born in the developing world owes four hundred and eighty two dollars at birth, a staggering amount for people living on less than one dollar a day.

OUR ROLE

Through individual and group missions, CLC from its inception has been engaged in all aspects of the MDGs. It is embodied in our General Principles, particularly in GP #8, which identifies our mission as “His mission of bringing the good news to the poor, proclaiming liberty to captives and to the blind, new sight, setting the downtrodden free and proclaiming the Lord’s year of favor.” In CLC, we have an inherent ownership in the MDGs and a full stake in their achievement.

Although most of the work around MDGs is actually taking place at the country level, there are a number of things we, as individuals, can do to help achieve them. First of all, let us not forget the power of prayer. The task begins with each of us and it is through prayer that we can hope to bring about conversion and the courage to fight for social justice which, in essence, are the MDGs. Let us also continue to pray for strength and enlightenment for our leaders in government, civil society and in the private sector, as well as for ourselves, so that there is a sustained focus and commitment to the MDGs.

Those of us living in rich countries should hold our governments accountable to their pledges to give at least seven tenths of a percent of their GNPs for overseas development assistance. MDGs numbering one through seven do

not have a chance of being achieved without the developed countries meeting their ends of the global partnership of MDG number eight. Since it is the only goal that does not have a target date, it is very important that we, through our local government representatives, continue to apply pressure to our government to turn promises of developmental aid into action. And, we must insist that this is done without political considerations other than where it is most needed.

On the other hand, those of us who live in aid recipient countries, must act as watchdogs against corruption and as advocates for reforms that lead to transparency and accountability in the use of foreign development assistance. Good governance is an important ingredient in achieving these goals and we must demand that of government leaders. It is the responsibility of developing countries to utilize precious limited resources in a coherent and most efficient way.

The success in achieving the MDGs will depend on each of us doing our share in bringing them to the consciousness of our families, friends and co-workers within our own communities. To do that it would be necessary to be able to provide a continuous flow of information about the MDGs. This can be easily obtained by going to the official United Nations website: <http://www.un.org/millenniumgoals>

Other helpful websites can be accessed at:

Millennium indicators — <http://millennium.un.org>

Official UNDP website — <http://undp.org>
click on *Millennium Development Goals*

and the **World Bank MDG** website —
<http://www.worldbank.org>
and

<http://www.developmentgoals.org>

Achieving the MDGs is not impossible. But, it requires that each claim these goals as our own and take personal responsibility so that it does not become another broken promise. The cost of failure in achieving the MDGs is unimaginably high. At stake are the peace and security of our world and the opportunity of humanity to build God’s Kingdom on Earth. ☸



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