

Millennium Development Goals

My Lords, whatever reasons lie behind the scheduling of today's debate, it is fitting that in these Houses of Parliament, while the other place is wrestling with the state of our finances and debating the Budget, this House should be addressing the millennium development goals. Whatever our straitened economic circumstances, in the context of the global picture and the parable of Dives and Lazarus, we are the rich, and we live under a moral imperative to consider the poor.

Therefore, I thank the noble Baroness for tabling this important debate. On behalf of these Benches, I welcome her to her post and look forward to working closely with her. I agree entirely with the analysis that she has offered your Lordships' House this afternoon. I also pay tribute to DfID's achievement in working towards the millennium development goals, in particular on primary education. I know that DfID has worked closely with many of the faith community NGOs. We welcome that partnership, too.

As we have heard, we have five years in which to achieve the aim of eradicating global poverty. The meeting of the G8 this week and the MDG summit in September are critical to this purpose, as the global community agrees what needs to be done in order to achieve the millennium development goals within the next five years. Millions of children are still living in poverty—a level of poverty that we in the developed world would struggle to imagine. Every day they face illness, hunger, violence and death as a result of this poverty. Nine hundred million people still go hungry every day in this world. That is surely a scandal of injustice.

Therefore, it is encouraging to hear of success stories as a result of the investment in the MDGs. We must remember that these stories take place locally, child by child and community by community—that is how they are experienced. As we have heard, the number of children in primary education has increased by 30 million since 1999. That is a great achievement. The number of people with access to treatment of HIV/AIDS has increased from 100,000 to over 4 million. That, too, is a great achievement. Figures also show us that the proportion of the world's population living in poverty has fallen from a third to a quarter. That is another great achievement.

However, we cannot be complacent. At the current rate, as we have heard, many of the goals will simply not be reached by 2015, especially in areas such as sub-Saharan Africa. The UN recently reported that the 58 countries that still have not reached universal primary education are not likely to achieve it by 2015 given the current rate of activity and investment.

Therefore, it was good yesterday to hear in the Prime Minister's Statement on the European Council the Council's commitment to the millennium development goals. The noble Lord, Lord Hannay, pointed out that many of our European partners are reneging on their commitment to give 0.7 per cent of GDP, so it was encouraging to hear from our Prime Minister of the Government's insistence that these goals be monitored annually.

As we know, we live in an interdependent world, with all these issues impacting on one another. The recent global financial crisis has shown how intertwined our economies and markets really are. Just as our world is interrelated, so, too, the millennium goals are interrelated. We turn our attention in this debate to primary education, but in so doing we cannot ignore the other goals.

This last week, I was at a conference at Liverpool Hope University sponsored by the Council of Anglican Provinces of Africa. It was led by the wife of the Archbishop of West Africa, who is herself a consultant anaesthetist. The members were all women in leadership in health, education and public service. Their unanimous view, which was

expressed to me cogently, was that the empowerment of women in Africa is key to delivering the goal of universal primary education. Like pick-a-sticks, all these goals are interlaid. We could be tempted to duck our responsibilities. It has been encouraging to hear from the coalition Government that this nation will keep to its commitment of 0.7 per cent of GDP.

With regard to growth in primary education, significant progress has been made. For example, in many countries in Africa the children's enrolment fee is paid through aid, making education free at the point of use. As a result, many more children now attend primary school, but there are still issues of sustainability and quality. Some countries struggle to find sufficient school buildings and teachers. In Ethiopia, one in five children leaves school in the first year. The children most likely to drop out of school are girls, who are responsible in that culture for collecting water, household chores and the care of family members who are ill. The standards of literacy and numeracy remain low, especially in sub-Saharan Africa, where more children of secondary school age are in primary education.

There is still so much more to do to achieve the goal of universal primary education by 2015. The noble Baroness, Lady Falkner, has already referred to the National Audit Office, noting the importance of concentrating not on spending but results and output. Instead of measuring the amount of spending, we should assess the quality of the teaching and the recruiting and retaining of professional teachers. The United Nations recommends the elimination of school fees, particularly for the poorest families. It recommends provision of transport to school, particularly for the rural poor. It recommends free school meals and basic health services being made available in schools, and recognises the importance of adequate teaching materials and the distribution of free textbooks. It is a source of pride that investment in education has increased from \$1.6 billion in 1999 to \$5 billion in 2006, but the United Nations estimates that what is really required annually is a budget of \$11 billion. That is why we need to monitor this annually, as the Government have proposed.

At the United Nations millennium development goals summit this September, it is vital that there is an agreement of a five-year plan to achieve all the goals by 2015. Accountability will be essential—accountability for the developed nations to ensure that they give the money to which they have publicly committed; and accountability for the developing nations, so that they are held to account for the way that money is spent and the outcome of the spending. Innovation is also essential. There must be much more sharing across nations and communities. Progress with each goal must be sustainable. Achieving those goals for 2015, but losing progress by 2020, would not be a success.

The Prime Minister has rightly made much of the big society. This is a vision that should be applied not just to these shores but to global issues. We cannot solve the problems that give rise to the millennium development goals by government alone. We need to activate the whole of civil society internationally. This is happening through the faith sector, NGOs and Comic Relief and other media ventures, but more people need to be mobilised. For example, what about the new academies and free schools? Should they not be encouraged to twin with villages in challenging parts of the world? There should be mutual relationships and parity of giving and receiving. Some of the schools in my diocese of Liverpool do this. Whereas we share resources, science and technology, we receive from the other schools supreme examples of motivation, music and rhythm, and lives lived closer to the earth and the realities of the changing climate. The developing world needs educating but so does the developed world. It needs educating in the realities of what is being called "one world living".

As I close, I call on the Prime Minister, through the Minister, to attend the summit himself in September, and convey to that meeting the priority that he and the British Government place on achieving the millennium development goals and lifting millions of people across the world out of poverty. The Prime Minister's own leadership on the international stage is important as developed nations are called on to redouble their investments and efforts over the next five years.