

How climate change will impact our ability to achieve the MDGs

BY SEBASTIEN BLAVIER, CLIMATE ACTION NETWORK (CAN) EUROPE



Photo: Reus.

CLIMATE CHANGE AND MDGS

THIS YEAR IS the 10th anniversary of many developed countries' signing on to the Millennium Development Goal (MDG) campaign, which gives us the opportunity to reflect, review and learn lessons from what has already been achieved. The substantial accomplishments already made over the past 10 years do not hide the huge challenges the international community must address during the 5 remaining years before the 2015 deadline for achieving their MDGs. These challenges have been amplified by the economic and financial crisis, which has resulted in drastic shortfalls in international support that was promised for MDGs.

But economic shortfall is not the only issue affecting attainment of MDGs - climate change is also presenting significant threats,

especially those related to eliminating poverty and hunger and promoting environmental sustainability. Variations in rainfall and extreme weather events are likely to place additional strains on poorer countries already facing serious challenges from food insecurity, indebtedness, HIV/AIDS, environmental degradation and armed conflicts. Climate change will cause more people already living in the most vulnerable situations to slide into poverty because of the amplification of these challenges, in addition to newly created effects from water scarcity, reduced agricultural productivity, floods, the loss of low-lying lands and islands, desertification and the spread of vector-borne diseases.

One of the most difficult revelations about climate change has been that it is harming the poorest first and worst - those that have contributed virtually nothing to global warming are also the least able to deal with its repercussions. People living in poverty are especially vulnerable to climate change because they have few assets to help them avoid or recover from a shock event. They are often unable to replace or repair damaged property and subsequently are less prepared and more vulnerable to future threats. The world's poorest people often live in places where no one else will, such as in Bangladesh, where population size and competition for land push poor people into areas that are regularly flooded or receding through riverbank erosion. Moreover, people in rural communities generate most of their income from farming, fishing, or livestock rearing and rely on the natural resources available to them. Any changes in rainfall levels, soil fertility, temperature, plant coverage or water-levels can have devastating consequences for their livelihoods.

CLIMATE POLICY IS FALLING SHORT

The international community's attempt to find an agreement to prevent a 2°C global rise in temperature culminated in Copenhagen in December 2009. Sadly, the Copenhagen conference ended up as a missed opportunity of historic and tragic proportions, with the horrific implication that millions more people will now suffer from the dangerous impacts of climate change, not to mention the devastating effects on plants, animals and ecosystems. Many negotiators and observers alike left the Danish capital disappointed, frustrated, angry and gloomy.

The result of Copenhagen was at first – and still is - murky, much like the process of the final days that brought about the three page Accord, which was not binding, adopted or indicative of a process or timeline for moving it from a declaration of intent to a proper



Photo: Guy Bescond.

‘People living in poverty are especially vulnerable to climate change because they have few assets to help them avoid or recover from a shock event.’

legal instrument. Clearly, this text and its substance were neither fair in terms of the obligations of the world’s historical polluters nor ambitious enough to avoid dangerous climate change by keeping global warming well below the dangerous level of 2°C.

On the finance side, through the Copenhagen Accord, industrialised countries committed to giving \$30 billion in “fast start” climate finance to developing countries from 2010 to 2012. This ostensibly “new and additional” (compared to ODA commitment targets) money is intended to prepare the poorest countries for the post-2012 international climate regime. First analyses of the commitments made under this fast start financing promise show that almost all the funds allocated are recycled promises from existing Official Development Assistance (ODA) commitments, mainly consisting of relabeled MDGs. Such repackaged promises will do little to rebuild trust with developing countries after the failure of the multilateral process in Copenhagen, especially since existing ODA commitments (0.7% of GNI) have only been met by a few countries. Even if some synergies between development and climate change issues exist in the implementation of actions, it is absolutely crucial that a distinction is made in the origin of funds dedicated to both spheres. The MDG review process will have to provide clarity regarding funding sources for these two areas to guarantee the poorest people the right to develop in a healthy environment.

CLIMATE CHANGE AND MDG REVIEW

MDG review could represent a huge opportunity to build essential synergies between the fights against both poverty and climate change. Neither issue can be properly addressed separately, so bridges must be established in many fields.

The first synergetic domain could be agriculture and food security. If climate change adaptation imperatives are taken into account while improving food access for the poorest communities, the co-benefits will be higher and allow for improved resilience of locally developed projects.

One could also address the links between emissions mitigation, security, peace and energy issues. Here again, development of local and renewable energy sources (solar, wind) will allow reduction

of greenhouse gas emissions while increasing energy autonomy, which also improves the peace and security context locally.

To maximise such synergies, the MDG review process must involve several different UN agencies, including climate (UNFCCC), biodiversity (UNCBD), desertification (UNCCD) and environment (UNEP), in addition to the UN Development Program (UNDP) already tasked with coordinating global and local efforts to achieve MDGs. Civil Society Organizations have an important role to play in these processes with strong field experience in these cross cutting domains.

For example, Practical Action UK (a UK based NGO), observing that 90% of agriculture is rain-fed in sub-Saharan Africa, has been working with farmers in Zimbabwe to deal with poor soils and very low rates of rainfall, such as initiating rainwater harvesting projects. This solution enabled increased resilience to climate change impacts for the local population, in addition to improving their living conditions and food security. The project shows that solutions exist, but strong and coordinated international support is needed to face the additional challenges posed by climate change.

In parallel to the efforts being made toward achieving MDGs, NGOs will also continue to push for an adequate joint international response in 2010, keeping alive the UN multilateral process under the UNFCCC (United Nations Framework Convention on Climate Change), the only existing process that guarantees fair representation of each Nation. Moreover, the Kyoto Protocol first commitment period ends in 2012 and it is urgent that all developed countries commit to strong emissions reductions from this date.

At the end of the day, strong political will is compulsory to invent, create and develop low carbon and resilient development pathways in developing countries. This kind of trajectory, if well designed and supported, could become a great opportunity for poor people. It now lies with industrialised countries to fulfill their commitments. ●

AUTHOR

Sebastien Blavier, Climate Action Network (CAN) Europe.

For further information visit www.climnet.org