Belgium and the Millennium Development Goals (MDGs)

Policy note

in view of the
UN High Level Plenary Meeting, New York 20-22 September 2010

The world undeniably is progressing on the MDGs. But this progress is too slow and too partial to achieve the goals by 2015. This is worrisome, all the more so because the MDGs are, and will remain, at the centre of the Belgian development cooperation policy. Consequently the High Level Plenary Meeting of the General Assembly of the UN is obviously of essential importance. And as this summit meeting will take place under the Belgian EU presidency, we have extra reasons to fully dedicate ourselves to it. The present policy note wants to lay the substantive basis for our political commitment.

**The High Level Review Meeting, a Summit about concrete achievements in the field for human development and poverty eradication**

The MDGs are in essence a set of goals about human development and poverty eradication. Poverty is much more than a lack of income and material wealth. It also relates to social exclusion and denial of fundamental rights. Poverty blocks people in their personal development and prevents them from living a productive and creative life in harmony with their needs and interests. Therefore the Summit next September must focus through the MDGs on human development and poverty eradication. Of course, the concept of development contains many other vital aspects. But human development and poverty eradication are sufficiently important to deserve a summit of their own.

As the 2015 deadline is rapidly approaching, the Summit must as a matter of urgency concentrate on questions as: How can we speed up concrete progress in the field? What has worked and what not, and for what reasons? Which lessons can be learned from the successes and failures? The General Assembly organizational resolution of 4 December 2009 puts it correctly: the Summit must be a comprehensive review of successes, best practices and lessons learned, obstacles and gaps, challenges and opportunities, leading to concrete strategies for action.

**The MDGs, embodied in the UN Millennium Declaration, a matter of collective responsibility**

Our approach of the MDGs is based upon the UN Millennium Declaration of September 2000. It is worth reminding that the Millennium Declaration is a well balanced text covering a broad range of policy areas. We want to place the MDGs explicitly within this broad approach which, inter alia, emphasizes that human dignity, equality and equity are a matter of collective responsibility of all countries. Furthermore, the Declaration mentions six values that are essential to international relations: freedom, equality, solidarity, tolerance, respect for nature and shared responsibility. In the chapter on development and poverty eradication, the UN Millennium Declaration mentions the right to development and the need to create an environment conducive to development. The
Millennium Declaration also states that, among others, good governance at both domestic and international level is crucial in order to achieve the MDGs.

**The MDGs, a tool for awareness-raising and political leverage**

Since their launch 10 years ago, the MDGs have been an unprecedented success in galvanizing politicians, NGOs, donors and the media in the pursuit of human development. Thanks to the MDGs, poverty eradication gained a worldwide visibility it never had before. The advocacy and mobilizing role of the MDGs must be therefore be maintained and even strengthened. The September Summit is vital in this respect as well.

Moreover, the MDGs are a useful tool and criterion for measuring progress or lack of progress. Statistics are indispensable for sound policies. There is much more to it, though. Statistics can also be powerful weapons in the political debate. They can and must provide citizens with tools to hold their authorities to account at local, provincial and national level. This is “ownership” as we want to see it.

**The MDGs, “a compass, not a GPS”, and, first of all, a matter of development policy and good governance**

As mentioned before, the MDGs lead the way towards human development and poverty eradication. Like a compass, they have shown the goal. But the MDGs do not provide a blueprint for developing countries’ strategies or for donor policies. It belongs to each and every country to “translate” the goals into concrete policies, effective budget allocations and adequate administrative measures.

Unfortunately, the MDGs seem to have been too much a donor agenda. Although numerous developing countries have integrated MDG-related objectives into their development strategies, they have all too often failed to take concrete actions. Strategies have been insufficiently implemented through adequate budget allocations and effective administrative measures. This is particularly regrettable because, while foreign aid evidently has a role to play, reaching the MDGs is first and foremost a matter of effective policies of each country. This entails, inter alia, the effective use of domestic resources and the creation of an environment conducive to private entrepreneurship.

Effective policies aren’t possible without good governance, respect for the rights and the dignity of men and women, combating abuses such as corruption, and peace and security. Foreign aid can only yield results if minimum requirements are met in these fields. We therefore intend to seize the Summit to insist more than ever on the need for sound policies and good governance. Indeed, as we have seen, both are key elements of the UN Millennium Declaration.

**The MDGs, also a “pact” between donors and developing countries**

In the logic of the partnership which is at the heart of the UN Millennium Declaration, most donor countries have made the commitment to increase their aid volume to 0.7% of their gross national income (GNI). As a result of the current financial and economic crisis, several developed countries obviously have difficulties in reaching that aid level. At the same time, the poorest part of the world population is the hardest hit by the food...
crisis, climate change and the financial and economic crisis itself, which precisely adds to their need for support.

We want to focus on this issue as a matter of priority and urge fellow donors to increase their aid level as well as the quality of their aid, the crisis notwithstanding. Belgium will do that from a strong position, the position of a country that takes its responsibility. Indeed, in 2010 our aid will reach 0.7% of our GNI. And our efforts are not only about quantity. In terms of aid-effectiveness we have also made substantial efforts; and we will continue to do so.

But we wish to make clear that we see our aid achievements as part of a “pact” between donors and partner countries. As said before, we expect our partners to make efforts as well, by effectively integrating the MDGs into their policies and by speeding up progress towards good governance.

The MDGs, an integrate whole of objectives

In our understanding of the MDGs – instrument for awareness-raising, advocacy tool, political lever and “pact” in favour of human development – the 8 goals, the 21 targets and the 60 or so indicators are an integrate whole. In this view it would be completely wrong to separate the “global partnership” (MDG 8) from the other goals, both from a conceptual and an operational viewpoint. Partnership is indeed the political essence of the UN Millennium Declaration and the precondition for achieving the goals.

Neither do we want to insist at the global level on more or less focus on particular goals or targets. In the logic of our conviction that the MDGs are first of all a matter of policy and governance at country level, we believe that each developing country must make its own decisions as to which goals should be given priority. Donors should comply with it.

Progress towards the MDGs can hide unacceptable inequalities

The MDG goals, targets and indicators have been designed for measuring progress by means of averages. This can result in the paradoxical situation where a country globally makes progress while some population groups – the underprivileged, women, rural populations – are worse off in relative and even in absolute terms. There is evidence of this in several countries. Anyway, it is a fact that inequality has increased worldwide. And the food crisis, the financial and economic crisis and climate change to all probability will further accentuate these inequalities.

Therefore, inequality and the fate of the poorest deserve the priority attention of the international community. As a first step we want to argue in favour of MDG-related data that make a distinction between relevant population groups. Statistics disaggregated by income group and by gender will be much more efficient, both for political leverage and as a basis for pro-poor development policy. We also want to examine aid modalities that are specifically focused on poverty eradication.

The MDGs in fragile states, the highest needs but also the biggest challenge

Progress towards the MDGs is absolutely worrying in the so-called “fragile states”. These are countries where the government lacks the political will and/or the capabilities to pursue human development. A disproportionate share of the poorest populations is living in such countries. It is here that we find the highest needs but also the most
difficult conditions for effective aid. The September Summit must not elude the debate on this issue. On the contrary, it must examine how, despite the political and operational difficulties, the international community can contribute to human development in post-conflict countries and fragile states.

**A new “MDG”-framework beyond 2015? Cautiousness recommended**

As the September Summit is drawing near, an increasing number of people and institutions are raising the question whether we need a new “MDG-like” framework for the post-2015 era, and if so, what it should look like.

It certainly is not Belgium’s intention to elude this debate, but we want to address it with caution. In the first place, we do not want to lose the focus on the main goal of the September Summit. That is: during the 5 remaining years, take concrete steps in order to achieve the MDGs. We absolutely want to avoid that a “post-2015” debate diverts the attention from the core issue. We are also fully aware that setting up a new “MDG-like” framework is conceptually complicated and politically sensitive. We therefore advocate that at the September Summit this debate be limited to a discussion on the process which could, if necessary, result into a new framework, without in any way anticipating the outcome of such a process.

**The Belgian vision on the MDGs, in short:**

- **The MDGs, aiming at human development and poverty eradication, remain a central benchmark of the Belgian development cooperation.**
- **Progress towards the MDGs is too slow. The September Summit therefore must concentrate on how to promote concrete achievements in the field.**
- **The MDGs are a collective responsibility, i.e. a matter of effective development policy and good governance in each country, supported by development aid.**
- **The September Summit must pay special attention to the increasing inequality as well as to the situation in fragile states.**