Recommendation 1646 (2004)[1]

Improving the prospects of developing countries: a moral imperative for the world

Parliamentary Assembly

1. Despite solemn declarations at national and international levels in recent years on the need to eradicate poverty in developing countries, many promises unfortunately remain unfulfilled. Challenges are not only of an economic nature – such as the fact that over a billion people survive on less than a dollar a day – but also relate to still deplorable social, demographic, health and other conditions.

2. Moral leadership was seized by the United Nations in 2000 through its Millennium Development Goals, such as the eradication of extreme poverty and hunger, the reduction of child mortality, improved maternal health, the promotion of gender equality and universal primary education for all, combating HIV/Aids, malaria and other diseases, and ensuring environmental stability and building up a global partnership for development. It is a commitment that we cannot fail to keep, both for the reputation of the world's supreme body and for the fate of the world. The Millennium Development Goals reflect a shift in emphasis away from pure reliance on the supposedly miraculous effects of market forces on their own, toward a more integrative approach stressing social aspects and partnerships with groups representing local citizens' interests in developing countries.

3. Notwithstanding the major overall and historically unprecedented creation of global wealth over recent decades, conditions for the poorest segments of our society have in many respects worsened. The United Nations Human Development Report 2003 estimates that over fifty countries are now poorer than they were a decade ago. Globalisation and its uneven effects have become an intensely debated topic. They present the world's well-to-do countries with a moral imperative to work for a more equitable distribution of global wealth. For the international community to catch up with lost momentum and realise the Millennium Development Goals by the target year of 2015, resolute action is needed now.

4. Apart from the moral imperative for industrialised countries to counter global poverty, valid security reasons can also be given. Terrorism is less likely in a world working towards lower levels of social inequality and economic opportunities for all.

5. The nature and causes of underdevelopment differ across regions. Thus, while China, India and several other countries have achieved impressive growth in recent years and parts of Asia and Latin America have seen major changes for the better, much of sub-Saharan Africa remains mired in abject poverty. The causes are complex and varied but can broadly be broken down according to whether they have their origin in domestic or international conditions.

6. Domestic causes of underdevelopment in many countries include:

6.1. poor governance by corrupt elites and judiciaries, combined with a lack of democratic institutions, leading to economic instability;

6.2. population growth which is often explosive;

6.3. employment challenges such as large-scale unemployment, low employment levels and child labour;

1. Assembly debate on 29 January 2004 (7th Sitting) (see Doc.10013Doc.10013, report of the Committee on Economic Affairs and Development, rapporteur: Mr Jonas). Text adopted by the Assembly on 29 January 2004 (7th Sitting).

6.4. environmental destruction and rapid urbanisation as rural populations move to cities in search of work;

6.5. insufficient educational and public health care systems.

7. International causes of underdevelopment include:

7.1. a malfunctioning international trading system, through which many developing states are locked in excessive reliance on exports of raw materials in exchange for imported finished goods and services, while persistent export subsidies in industrialised countries, especially for agricultural commodities, undermine fair international competition;

7.2. crippling debt servicing which in some countries, especially in Africa, amount to many times the funds spent on health care and education;

7.3. insufficient and inadequately spent official development assistance (ODA) – with only a handful of developed countries meeting the United Nations' target of donating 0.7% of their gross domestic product in ODA and the remainder of richer countries donating far below that level – even though that commitment was entered into unanimously over three decades ago by all OECD member countries as a contribution to the United Nations' "Decade of Development";

7.4. a lack of foreign direct investment – and an inequitable distribution among countries thereof – whereby African countries receive only a small fraction of the total;

7.5. a still insufficient contribution by international financial institutions such as the World Bank and the International Monetary Fund (IMF). The Parliamentary Assembly in this context refers to its Resolution 1288 (2002) on the International Monetary Fund and the World Bank: challenges ahead, in which it stated its belief that these two institutions "still have essential functions to fill, provided they adapt their activities and pursue internal reform: the World Bank in particular in areas of longer-term social utility for the poor; and the IMF in preventive action to assist individual countries in exchange for commitments to undertaking domestic reform"; and that "voting rights [in these institutions] should mirror not only financial contributions but, increasingly, the needs and wishes of those with no say over the inequitable distribution of wealth that accompanies globalisation".

8. The solutions to these problems must thus come from both inside developing countries and the international community. The populations of developing countries must be encouraged to hold their governments accountable to promises made to work towards the achievement of the Millennium Development Goals. Industrialised countries must heed the sharp warning implicit in the breakdown of the World Trade Organization (WTO) Doha Development Round Ministerial Meeting in Cancún in 2003, where the message from developing countries to the world's richest nations was that the latter must adapt to a new "progressive globalisation" agenda in order to ensure the future smooth functioning of the world economy. This message echoes that of the United Nations Secretary General at the launching of the Millennium Development Goals in 2000: the central challenge we face today is to ensure that globalisation becomes a positive force for all of the world's people, instead of leaving billions of them behind in squalor.

9. Tough tasks lie ahead for all parties. Some believe it is not possible to achieve the Millennium Development Goals within the target time frame. However, progress has been made, with examples such as increased education levels and reduced HIV/Aids infection levels in certain countries, offering hope for all. The issue is one of political will, making the involvement of parliamentarians at both national and international levels vital.

10. In view of the above, in order to permit Council of Europe member states to realise their commitments to achieve the United Nations Millennium Goals, the Parliamentary Assembly addresses the following recommendations to the Committee of Ministers of the Council of Europe: As regards the domestic causes of underdevelopment, it suggests:

10.1. promoting, as an absolute priority, good governance, democracy, the rule of law, an independent judiciary and the rooting out of corruption, otherwise efforts in other domains to reach lasting development will prove futile;

10.2. encouraging policies to reduce population growth in developing countries, including general education, especially of young women, and the promotion of women's rights;

10.3. stimulating employment prospects via development co-operation policies in such areas as infrastructure development, training and the active promotion of peaceful settlement of conflicts, such as that recently undertaken by the European Union in certain African countries;

10.4. tackling the problem of excessive urbanisation, improving agricultural efficiency by introducing modern farming techniques and encouraging small-scale entrepreneurialism;

10.5. ensuring that developing countries devote a greater share of their budgets to:

a. education, especially primary education – via stricter legislation against child labour – and by providing special support in secondary and higher education to students from disadvantaged backgrounds; and

b. health care, including prevention of illnesses, via education, medical training for more doctors, programmes aimed at reducing infant mortality and access to cheaper drugs along the lines suggested in the current WTO Doha Development Agenda. As regards the international causes of underdevelopment, it suggests:

1. reducing barriers to trade between the industrialised world and developing countries, such as agricultural subsidies, and encouraging trade flows between developing countries;

2. introducing debt relief for the least developed countries, without prejudice to the realisation of the above-mentioned ODA goals;

3. increasing development funding so as to reach the United Nations Millennium Development Goals by 2015, if necessary by intermediary increments.