

The Southern African Regional Poverty Network (SARPN), The Center for Conflict Resolution (CCR) and The United Nations Development Programme (UNDP) Seminar:

“THE UN REFORM - WHAT’S IN IT FOR AFRICA?”

Chair: Mrs. Sue Mbaya, Director, Southern African Regional Poverty Network (SARPN), Pretoria

Speakers:

Ms. Scholastica Kimaryo, UNDP Resident Representative and
UN Resident Coordinator, South Africa

Dr. Adekeye Adebajo, Director, Center for Conflict Resolution, Cape Town

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Mrs. Sue Mbaya opened the seminar, identifying the current challenges that face many countries in the region as well as the international environment, all of which could be linked to the MDGs. She noted that the year 2005 has been dubbed the Year of Africa, with proposed focus on Africa’s development through the Commission for Africa, the G8 Gleneagles meeting and the UN Summit. The outcomes of the upcoming WTO discussions would also be critical for Africa’s development. These forums all contribute to the discussion and debates on UN Reform.

Ms Scholastica Kimaryo, UNDP Resident Representative and UN Resident Coordinator, South Africa

Ms. Kimaryo reflected on the 60th anniversary of the UN, which has provided the world with an opportunity to interrogate the UN Charter and review the structure of the organisation in light of current needs. Ms. Kimaryo made a clear distinction between reform and transformation, and acknowledged the reality that the UN is based on state consensus and minimum agreement of what states are willing to agree to. The UN had always been under reform as it is inherently an institution based on norms and standards, and on the agreements of governments to adhere to those norms and standards.

Proposals to reform the UN all share a desire for system-wide change, and include the following areas: increased transparency of UN management; a more independent oversight mechanism; streamlining of the General Assembly agenda and committee structures; increased support for human rights instruments to ensure responsibility - proposed Human Rights Council; and the need for a peace building commission and support for post conflict countries, as well as the need for stricter standards of conduct within peacekeeping itself.

The UN recognises that the world is under more threat now than after the Second World War. Governments are increasingly focusing on the threat of terrorism and weapons of mass destruction, at the cost of tackling HIV/AIDS and poverty. This has prompted the discussion on reform to focus on the Security Council rather than development issues. In poor countries, the greater threats relate to poverty, disease, environmental degradation, corruption and civil conflict. Ms. Kimaryo reiterated the need to address and recognize the interconnectedness of these threats. Further, this view was recognised in the Secretary General’s report ‘In larger freedom’, which identifies both actions and resources to address such threats.

Ms. Kimaryo noted that, following Hurricane Katrina, the world has learned about the challenges it faces in responding to disasters. The experience of Katrina also taught us something about the MDGs and vulnerable communities, suggesting that these goals are not only for developing countries. Developed countries are also challenged with effectively assisting their own poor communities. At this same time, Ms. Kimaryo recognized that Africa

stands to gain the most if there is reform within the UN system - and without reform it will lose not only livelihoods but lives.

The UNDP Human Development Report recognized the importance of trade and aid in facilitating development. According to the UNDP there is not one African country that will meet the MDGs and, specifically, with regard to those goals relating to HIV/AIDS in which Africa is home to two-thirds of the world's total number of infected persons. Out of the ten most seriously affected countries, nine of them are in SADC. Ms. Kimaryo asserted that HIV/AIDS is not simply an issue of sexual behaviour - rather, it is one within the greater development context. No reform would mean more lives lost in the region.

Dr. Adekeye Adebajo, Director, Center for Conflict Resolution

Dr. Adebajo stated his belief that the opportunity for UN reform has been lost. Accordingly, it must be determined who undermined such efforts and why. In particular, Dr. Adebajo noted the reaffirmation of sovereignty by the US with the unyielding stance of John Bolton; the lack of coordination by the African states in advocating for reform of the Security Council; and the varying other state interests impeding reform.

The issues challenging Africa's development are marginalized as a result of the West's ability to set the international agenda. No clearer was this than in the case of the unsanctioned invasion of Iraq by the US. Africa, then, must be given a voice, permitting it to be involved in setting the international agenda. This may be achievable through UN reform and, more importantly, about meeting the MDGs and making development a priority. Dr. Adebajo reflected on CCR's seminar on the UN Reform report, and was confident that Africa could contribute to the discussion around the reform of the UN.

The UN has been encouraged by the development of mechanisms within Africa promoting development - namely, the AU and regional organisations. At the same time, African leadership and the media have not engaged effectively in the UN reform process. This has undermined the support needed by African delegates at the UN.

Dr. Adebajo touched on the challenges that terrorism, debt and trade pose to Africa. He reiterated the need for the UN to recognize and support regional initiatives (e.g. peacekeeping) addressing these concerns.

What is called for is a boosting of the development agenda, with a focus on fair trade and debt cancellation. Further, issues of trade subsidies skew the international financial system and undermine the growth of markets in the developing world. On analysis, the G8's promises to support development lack substance. Dr. Adebajo concluded by advocating for market reform, and lamenting the perceived demise of Kofi Annan following the oil-for-food scandal in Iraq, as this will only further impede the UN reform process.

Discussion

The discussion largely centered around trade and aid. It was noted that that fair trade would be more sustainable than aid. Concerning the prevailing views that economic growth results in development, it was noted that there is a need to re-look at this conceptual model in respect to current development in Africa. The need for a more holistic approach to growth and development was noted. Further comments were made on the need for African led development and increased capacity in the region to deal with the issues.

War-torn countries such as Liberia and Congo were also discussed and the cyclical nature of conflict especially where growth and development is not being achieved was recognised. The view was also expressed that media has played an unbalanced role in presenting the

debates regarding UN reform. The continued focus on the Security Council has given a distorted image of the UN reform process. The need for development focused media that reported on progress was highlighted.

Although it was recognized that the lack of reform was a huge loss to Africa, Dr. Adebajo asserted that the discussions around reform will continue in other fora. The reason for emphasis that reform occurred in the UN was due to the relative equitable forum that it gave to African states.

The discussion moved towards that of trade subsidies and the role of the EU. Sentiments included a report in the UNDP Human Development Report 2005 which noted that the loss of trade due to subsidies outweighed the benefits of aid and debt relief in Africa. Participants warned of creating a distorted picture of agricultural subsidies and noted that a debate on subsidies was currently happening in Geneva. It was also acknowledged that developing countries needed their own subsidies to protect certain sectors, therefore a balanced view of trade needs to be investigated which includes exchange rates and banking practices. The upcoming WTO meeting in Hong Kong was recognized as a forum for this discussion, but participants also recognized that the decisions made at the WTO are already decided pre-meeting. A concluding sentiment on the WTO was the entrenched interests that were reflected in the Doha Round which would prevail in Hong Kong undermining much of the development focus.

The discussion also touched on the potential reform of the Bretton Woods Institutions of the World Bank and IMF. These institutions were thought to differ from the UN in that they worked for the interests of their members and therefore would only change at the request of those members. It was unlikely that these institutions would be reformed.