

## THE CORE CRISIS: STANDING WITH THE POOR

*The importance of the project to end global poverty is accentuated not diminished by the world's financial troubles, says Anita Sharma, north American coordinator for the United Nations Millennium Campaign.*

### FEATURED CAMPAIGN VOICES



→ ANITA SHARMA  
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The international effort to end world poverty may not at present be the highest-profile one on a global news agenda dominated by financial turmoil and worries over the coming recession. But the public engagement with the issue is real and sustained. This was reflected in an extraordinary global mobilisation on the weekend of 17-19 October 2008. "Stand Up and Take Action" was supported in 131 countries by nearly 117 million people, who

participated in diverse events - from marches to religious ceremonies - and were united by a shared demand that this generation of political leaders do their utmost in the anti-poverty endeavour.

True, the global financial crisis does threaten to erase gains made in the fight against poverty, and puts budgets and existing commitments in jeopardy. But this makes the "Stand Up..." initiative, and those like it, all the more urgent and appropriate. The implosion of key pillars of the world's credit system is the culmination of a debilitating year in which rising fuel and food prices have pushed more than a million more people into extreme poverty, and caused countless others to make life-or-death deliberations about how to spend their meagre resources. It is precisely now that the poorest people in the world need solidarity.

### A cause unwon

Indeed, 2008 was supposed to be the year when world leaders reaffirmed their pledges to improve the lives of the poor; for this is the halfway point of the timetable for the fulfilment of the Millennium Development Goals (MDGs). This global eight-point compact - agreed by 189 leaders at the United Nations Millennium Summit in 2000 - aims by 2015 to reduce poverty, improve health and education, and protect the environment through partnerships between developed and developing countries.

There have been important successes in the 2000-08 period - among them the reduction of deaths from HIV/Aids by a million, the increase of school-enrolment numbers by 40 million, and the access of some 1.6 billion people to safe drinking-water. Among the confluence of factors responsible for these achievements, external aid to the poorest countries and debt cancellation have played a crucial role. This provisional but real progress can continue if the MDGs are backed by good political leadership and adequate resources (see Andrew Shepherd, "The anti-poverty relay: a progress report", 24 September 2008).

At the same time, debilitating poverty persists: more than 1.4 billion people barely survive on \$1.25 a day, 50 million people die each day of preventable causes, and half the population of the developing world lacks access to decent sanitation. Even before the financial crisis hit, developed countries were cutting back on their foreign-aid commitments, with few on target to meet the agreed figure of 0.7% of gross national income.

The global financial downturn is certain to put even more strain on the poorer nations of the

globe. This places even more responsibility on the global north to maintain its support for the MDGs. The financial summit on 15 November 2008 in Washington, DC will begin the discussion of how to reform the governance of the international economy. It is vital that the voices of the people who have stood up against poverty will be heard as this project gets underway.

In the words of United Nations secretary-general Ban Ki-moon after a meeting with five eminent economists and the head of the United Nations Development Programme on 23 October:

"While recently we have heard much in [the United States] about how problems on Wall Street are affecting innocent people on Main Street, we need to think more about those people around the world with no streets. Wall Street, Main Street, no street - the solutions devised must be for all."

### **A breath of hope**

The performance of the United States is critical to the realisation of many of the world's anti-poverty aspirations. The George W Bush administration may be credited for increasing United States foreign assistance in 2001-08, but the US still spends less than 0.2% of its budget on development assistance. Moreover, it has been less than vocal in its support of the MDGs; and instead of coordinating efforts multilaterally, it has established parallel institutions such as the Millennium Challenge Corporation (MCC) and the President's Emergency Plan for AIDS Relief.

The next United States president will face a host of global challenges, including energy and food crises, climate change, and health emergencies. All of them will have to be addressed in the context of the unfolding financial crisis and the resulting economic slowdown, which will place even more pressure on funding resources (see Simon Maxwell, "Development in a downturn", 4 July 2008).

In these circumstances, the new administration must combine innovative and cost-effective solutions with a continued dedication to keep its own and its partners' promises to the world's poor. This in turn will require international-development cooperation, and here the MDGs - increasingly embraced by the private sector as well as civil society across the globe - provide an unmatched framework for action.

Both US presidential candidates have strongly indicated their support for fighting global poverty, with Barack Obama going so far as to say that if he is elected, the MDGs will become America's goals. In fact, it is a striking feature of an otherwise partisan political landscape that many leading political figures across boundaries of party recognise that it is in the US's moral, economic and security interests to encourage a world that is healthy, stable and prosperous.

These promises are being monitored in the United States by a growing global anti-poverty movement. In addition to the more than 50,000 people who participated in Stand Up events around the country on 17-19 October 2008, a survey by WorldPublicOpinion.org has found that 75% of Americans expressed willingness to pay the amount required (approximately \$56

per person, per year in the US) to meet the goals of cutting world hunger and global poverty in half. This survey was taken before the financial crisis hit, but it is evidence of a genuine ethical and humanitarian commitment that can increase as much as decrease when times are hard.

A number of organisations active in the field - among them the Modernizing Foreign Assistance Network, the Better World Campaign, Jubilee USA, ONE, and the US Global Leadership Council - have put forth proposals to channel and build on this concern. They include smarter US development assistance, fairer trade practices and further debt-cancellation for the poorest countries.

These policies would go very far to address the endemic social, economic and indeed governance and security problems that afflict many countries around the world. The fact that United States citizens, like their counterparts overseas, are prepared to contribute to such an effort is heartening. If this level of global public sentiment can continue to fuel the work of civil-society organisations and campaigners, the new generation of international political leaders will have a strong foundation to deliver effective change.