

Interreligious dialogue: The missing item in the millennium development goals agenda

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Abstract

More than a decade ago, the world - under the umbrella of the United Nations – unanimously agreed to promote measures to ensure the development of the human race. Eight solid goals were enlisted in the programme of action made available to the world in New York in September 2000. Fifteen years were ear-marked for the attainment of those noble goals to the applause of so many countries, about 189 of them officially represented. An item was taken for granted – religious dialogue – and how to incorporate it into the developmental goals of the United Nations. In fact, no one suspected that interreligious discourse was going to become a major point of reference in world history for so many years to come. This reality was made very clear through the surprising package delivered one year after the declaration – the *Al Qaeda* attack on the Twin Towers of New York on September 11, 2001. This paper wishes to state that the incident changed the Millennium Development Goals so drastically that the events of the ensuing years have challenged us to examine the reason for the seeming neglect accorded interreligious dialogue at that crucial declaration, while recommendations are made in order to highlight the importance of such a dialogue in world history, especially in the 21st Century.

Keywords: millennium development, agenda

1. Introduction

Development is an essential aspect of human existence (cf. *Human Development Report 2003:99*). It encompasses the material and the spiritual realms of our existential reality. Since it is holistic, it has to be given the attention required to attain a substantial result. However, a close look at the events taking place in the world a few decades before that declaration of September 2000 in New York would show that material and mundane development took a centre stage in the developmental agenda of the world. For instance, frantic efforts – sometimes to a frenzy – were made to enhance economic, political, and even astral development. Nuclear armaments were seriously acquired and developed even after global agreements made to reduce such acquisitions immediately after the Second World War (1939-1945). Underneath these deceptions were a climate of relative peace and progress all over the world. Thus, the ‘seeming’ peace enjoyed in the world until the declaration of the Millennium Development Goals (MDGs) in 2000 by the United Nations Organization (UNO) made a few suspect that religion was going to prove the bottleneck in the world agenda for the greater part of the 21st Century. Indeed, the assumption, or even, the presumption that religion was not a problem at that point in time made the principal actors who drafted the MDGs neglect the possible danger posed by religious bigots, fanatics, and fundamentalists.

Today, a huge part of the resources that should have been expended on the attainment of the eight Millennium Development Goals have been channeled towards building up choking security network around the world in a bid to forestall terrorist and similar attacks on human life and property. The battle seems far from being won. Religious misunderstanding – momentarily championed by self-styled Islamic Jihadists – has put the world powers into a dilemma of no mean reputation and distress. Presently, world economy is so

endangered that no particular country is very sure of itself.

This paper wishes to present the eight Millennium Development Goals and ask why interreligious dialogue was completely overlooked, though, through the backdoor, has attracted more attention since 2001 than any of the enlisted development goals. It is also the intention of the paper to pose the missing item as a challenge to intellectuals, to brainstorm and provide an objective solution to the possible dangers such a neglect could subject world peace, development, and its sustainability to in future.

2. The Millennium Development Goals (MDGs) and Implementation

It was with optimism that leaders of 189 countries met in New York in September 2000 to discuss how to improve the situation of the universe. In the Millennium Declaration endorsed by the leaders of the participating countries, there was an accepted commitment to work together to build a safer, more prosperous and equitable world. The road-map, which had 2015 as target include:

1. Eradication of extreme poverty and hunger;
2. Achievement of universal primary education;
3. Promotion of gender equality and empowerment of women;
4. Reduction of Child mortality;
5. Improvement of maternal health;
6. Combating HIV/AIDS, Malaria and other diseases;
7. Ensuring environmental sustainability; and
8. Developing a global partnership for development (*see www.un.org/millenniumgoals*).

The MDGs specifically targeted the backward situation of the third world or developing countries, especially Africa (*Sen, Amartya 2001:162*)^[12]. But the reality is that the turn of events since September 11, 2001 has helped to worsen the lot of these countries because of ‘enforced’ security measures and

hardships aimed at fighting terrorism and religious insurgency. It is like a case of transferred anger and aggression. For instance, far from reducing by half the proportion of people whose income is less than \$1 a day, the proportion has doubled in many countries, particularly in the sub-Saharan Africa (*Ernest Harsch 2003:10*)^[4]. Delivering a lecture recently in Lagos on the agenda for women empowerment, Yemisi Dooshima Suswan said, “it is a known fact that many Nigerians are today living below one dollar per day due to poverty and unavailability of basic social amenities” (*The NEWS, December 13, 2010:15*)

The implication is that ten years after the declaration of the world to eradicate extreme poverty and hunger as their it's number goal in the MDGs by the year 2015, the signs are indicating the contrary. This is why Suswan is urging the “government to tackle poverty at all levels and in all ramifications beyond lip service” (*The NEWS, vol. 35, no.23, 2010:15*). Since the primary goal of the programme – the eradication of poverty and hunger – has not really taken off, at least in Nigeria, other goals are also adversely affected. For instance, the prevalence of poverty and hunger in Nigeria affects the empowerment of the majority of women to have access to good health care and qualitative education. Ultimately, their participation in the economic and political activities of the nation is also hampered. It is also a known fact that lack of access to good education impacts negatively on a people's ability to exercise their civil liberties and contribute effectively to good governance and policy issues. Going beyond the sub-Saharan region, one notes that unemployment and hunger have become a global menace. In the United States of America, the rate of unemployment is 9.8%. Across the countries of Europe, there have been strikes of various sorts, even by airport workers, protesting degenerating economic conditions. Using the United States as an example again, one observes that unemployment and hunger have increased because the government is spending a lot of the tax-payers' money to fight terrorism internally and externally.

Educationally, there is a great downward trend in most countries in the sub-Sahara, especially Nigeria – though with its peculiar problem of *corruption* and *mal-administration*. Ghana is presently, on the contrary, a positive indicator to the intended improvement in the educational sector. But what is Ghana alone as a success in relation to the MDGs when compared to the majority of the strutting governments in Africa and elsewhere.

I would also use Nigeria as a good example of the negative realization of the MDGs from the point of view of health. The rate of infant and maternal mortalities experienced in the country overwhelms the projected goal of the health for all by the year 2015. Many young mothers die during pregnancy, and not a few at childbirth. Worse still, I know not less than ten young women who have died during their first pregnancy. I can imagine other cases not known or related to me directly.

All is not very negative. Thus, ironically, people are becoming very conscious and cautious of the HIV/AIDS menace (*Nwagbo, F. 2004:5*)^[4, 10]. They are even enforcing self-imposed measures to avoid early graves. In this instance, one has to acknowledge the improved and aggressive campaign of the Media to conscientise the populace. More work than has been done needs to be carried out, especially encouraging people to live continent and abstinent lives.

But Malaria has remained a major scourge, though under

considerable control. On the other hand, ‘stroke’ (paralysis – partial or full) and cancer are killing people in their dozens all over the world. An intensified research into possible cures can be a very liberating measure for the human race, though a lighter and easier option to curtail paralysis and cardiac attacks could be an improved life situation for the majority of the world population living in hardship and tension.

3. The Global Community as Its Own Obstacle to the Implementation of the Millennium Development Goals?

The question sounds ironical and skeptical at the same time. Yes, and more to it. For me, the world as a community seems to be its own obstacle because of apparent insincerity to the enumerated goals and objectives agreed by its leaders to implement. It is its own obstacle because of its total lack of commitment to the integration of principles of sustainable development through covert and overt collaborations in shielding corruption and corrupt leaders – some of whom signed the declaration with the rest of the world in 2000. I like to use Nigeria as a first example because it is my country and it is where corruption is impeding most of the MDGs, though with excessive external collaboration. There would be no sustainable development in it, for instance, if the developed countries of Europe and America continue to protect the stolen wealth of Nigerian politicians and ex-military dictators. No amount of rhetorics can convince the rest of us of the sincerity of these leading world economic and political players if they do not return the loot to their home countries. Such acts of accomplice and compromise will only help to make a mockery of the stated MDGs. In other words, there can be no genuine global partnership (*Magbadelo, O.J., 2003:74*)^[7] for development if the western countries continue to protect corrupt Nigerian and African leaders against the poor majority, and yet speak of eradication of ‘extreme poverty and hunger’ by the year 2015.

Currently, the worst harm is the perpetration of impoverishment within the third world countries by the so-called multi-national companies and industries who siphon money through exaggerated contracts, poor execution of such contracts, and other fraudulent business agreements with almost all the third world governments. The major and non-acceptable reason given by the global leaders for non-interference in halting this transparent looting of an already exhausted people through slavery and colonialism, is sometimes hinged on private entrepreneurship and freedom business of interaction. How can a private company in the Niger Delta declare an annual profit of over a \$100 billion while the foreign reserve accruing to that country within the same year is just \$5 billion. It is a rape.

No one is ignorant of the environmental hazards perpetrated in the Niger Delta area of Nigeria by the Multi-national oil companies who carry out their business enterprises with utter recklessness and immoral principles. The national and international provocations in the Niger Delta, especially since the killing of Saro Wiwa in 1995 have raised the question of social justice in human life. Many Non-Governmental Organisations (NGOs) have engaged themselves with the task of bringing the inhuman situation in this region to limelight. Currently, the SAVE NIGERIA GROUP (SNG) led by Pastor (Barrister) Tunde Bakare works tirelessly to call the attention of the Federal to the need for a practical and effective action towards the improvement of life standard in the area. In fact,

the SNG wants the government to enter “into immediate negotiation with Niger Delta communities to find permanent solutions to the crisis of social justice in revenue allocation and the provision of the executive and legislative leadership for the convocation of a national conference to draft a constitution for approval by a majority of Nigerians in a referendum” (*Newswatch, January 3, 2011:12*).

Another important question should be raised in relation to another issue that strongly affects the MDGs project. Do the International Media houses who cry at the damage inflicted by the *Al-Qaeda* in the developed nations of the world not have the moral courage to call the dehumanizing business practices, as related to environmental and social injustice, to order? I am not supporting the mission of Osama Bin Laden and his Cohorts. But, I think that both are terrorisms of a sort, and should equally be fought against, otherwise the MDGs would be a farce. The “environmental sustainability” of the UNO, which is number seven in its MDGs Agenda cannot be realized in this state of global collaboration with immoral business transaction.

Having seen the MDGs and their possible pros and cons, especially in the developing countries of Africa, let us consider the missing item in the MDGs agenda – interreligious dialogue as a principal avenue for ensuring peace and development.

4. The Challenges of Interreligious Dialogue and the MDGs Agenda

It was Albert Camus who argued that peace is the only battle worth waging. Probably, the current battle for peace all over the world was necessitated by its obvious neglect in the MDGs programme. It is my contention that in a pluri-religious and multi-cultural world, one of the major steps to such an abiding peace is the enforcement of interreligious dialogue. This is why I term it a challenge and a missing link in the MDGs initiative bearing in mind the fact that the basic goal of world religions should be peace (*Amaladoss, M. 2003:32*)^[1].

Peace becomes a *sine qua non* because human beings have an inert craving to understand themselves and their situation despite their diversities – politically, economically, culturally, and religiously. The last item mentioned – that is, religion – challenges Jews, Christians, Muslims, as well as Hinduists, Sikhists, and Buddhists to strive for a harmonious co-existence. This is necessary otherwise the genuine goals of Globalization would be defeated *ab ovo*.

This means that the challenge of interreligious dialogue in world development is a moral demand as well because moral values form the basis for human rights, which almost every religious group claims to uphold. These values also underlie their history and historical development, obliging various peoples to live together in safety, freedom and well-being. Such authentic universal values further enable human beings to cherish the common values of love, respect and affection. In the long run, if properly nurtured, people of various cultures and religions are able to enjoy development and sustainability at all levels. Perhaps, it is the negligence of this foundational and fundamental requirement for a stable society that challenges the success of the MDGs all over the world today. The world is gradually, but consistently, dividing itself into a Muslim and non-Muslim world, ravaged by terrorism and uncertainty with hunger and hardships of various sorts as the necessary consequence.

In the past, lack of interreligious dialogue and understanding have had their toll on many cultures and societies. For instance, it is a historical fact that some decades ago, it was unimaginable for Hindu priests and Imams to exchange visits in India. The unique act of Pope John Paul II in 1986 in Assisi, Italy, helped tremendously to remove bias and prejudice by bringing peoples of different religions to pray together for peace. They did so without being converted or forced to be converted to each other’s religious belief. In other words, interreligious dialogue enhances world peace. Without peace, the world would continue to suffer as a result of violence and armed conflicts (*Benedict XVI, 2006:3*)^[3], a situation which made Pope Benedict XV condemn the First World War as a “useless slaughter” (*Benedict XV, 1917:423*)^[2]. There is no better qualification for the event of September 11, 2001 in New York than to use a similar description for that incident, and subsequent traumas unleashed on innocent peoples all over the world in the name of religious belief.

It has become pertinent for all well-meaning peoples to acknowledge hatred and violence in the name of religion as inhibiting cultural and religious development. In fact, religious rivalry ignite hatred and deprivation of basic human rights. Despite the desperate effort of some ill-minded religious extremists to disorganize world peace, it should not be forgotten that the world as a whole has always tried to promote peace and dialogue. In 1893, the World Parliament of Religions was the first attempt to create a global dialogue of faiths. Last year, in 2009 in Melbourne, Australia hosted Parliament of the world’s religions with over 6000 dignitaries in attendance. For me, these efforts should be continued irrespective of provocations and distractions.

Again, in 2005, the Catholic Church celebrated in collaboration with various religious traditions the institution of “*Nostra Aetate*”, its official Vatican II Document on Interreligious Dialogue between Catholics and other religious bodies. *Nostra Aetate*, no.3 is particularly devoted to dialogue with Muslims. In addition to it, the Catholic set up a Pontifical Council for Interreligious Dialogue, its official mouth-piece for dialogue with various religions of the world.

5. Islam Supports Mutual Dialogue and Human Rights

The Holy Qur’an, which some disgruntled religious extremists – whom I am reluctant to refer to as real Muslims – also speak of human rights and mutual interaction in Islam? Human rights are always related to interreligious dialogue in Islam for possible skeptics. It is also God who has granted these rights. The following verses of the Holy Book are good reference points: Surah 5:32 which talks about right to life; the right to the safety of life (5:32); respect for the chastity of women (17:32); the individual’s right to freedom and the right to justice (5:8); equality of human beings (49:13); the right to cooperate and not to cooperate (5:2), etc. These rights have their challenges on all of us, and the determination to overcome their misuse becomes a duty as well.

The relevance of these verses of the Islamic Holy Book becomes much more *ad rem* to world peace when we read them in relation to the Millennium Development Goals of 2000. Islam, like any other religion is challenged to foster dialogue, understanding, and mutual co-existence in all spheres of interaction. In other words, all the acts of terrorism and violence perpetrated in the name of Islam on humanity at the moment is an aberration of true Islam.

Constitutionally, many countries conform – at least on paper - to the United Nation’s universal declaration on human rights in 1948. In Nigeria, Chapter IV of its Constitution (1999 Constitution) is devoted entirely to the issue of fundamental rights, thus: section 33 right t life; 34 right to dignity of human person; 35 right to personal liberty; 36 right to fair hearing; 37 right to private and family life; 38 right to freedom of thought, conscience and religion; 39 right to freedom of expression and the press; 40 right to freedom of assembly and association; 41 right to freedom of movement; 42 right to freedom from discrimination; etc. All these rights point to the need to promote the agenda of the UNO in relation to the Millennium Development Goals irrespective of one’s religious or cultural ideology and affiliation.

The Holy Bible, which every sincere Christian uses as spiritual and moral guide, also emphasizes strongly the need to accept and love the other – the neighbor. Love enhances the fundamental rights of the other person. It sets no bounds. In fact, Jesus Christ obliged all thus, “You must therefore set no bounds to your love, just as your heavenly Father sets none to his” (Matt. 5:48).

6. Recommendations

The United Nations Organization really meant well for humanity in its eight point agenda for human development and progress. But the absence of dialogue, and particularly interreligious dialogue as a point in the agenda calls for reflections and concrete re-adjustment of future world developmental programme. On this note,

1. it has become imperative for the Global community to accept the challenge posed by inadequate attention given to interreligious dialogue before the United Nations Declaration and commitment to the eight MDGs in September 2000 in New York;
2. the world must recognize and admit that diversity enhances the dignity of communities of faith and religious traditions, thus, the need for engaging in dialogue;
3. promote the recognition and need to respect the human rights of everyone, irrespective of religious or cultural differences;
4. promote mutual encouragement against the opposition of extremists who would like to disorganize world peace and harmony through the erroneous use of religion;
5. promote the faith and rituals of varying communities through dialogue and mutual discourse with the aim of enhancing sense of universal brotherhood and mutual co-existence;
6. promote the fear of God and God-consciousness amidst growing atheism and irreligiosity;
7. promote the sense of deepening one’s own religion as a *conditio sine qua non* for knowing other people’s religions and engaging in mature dialogue;
8. Universal cooperation with genuine law enforcement agencies as a way of curbing religious terrorism and other acts inhibiting world peace and progress. The clearest indication of this lacuna is the inability to track down Osama Bin Laden almost a decade after the heinous crime against humanity in New York on September 11, 2001;
9. need to re-visit Pope Paul VI’s encyclical, “*Populorum Progressio*” of 1967 where he argued that for genuine development in the world, equality of opportunity should

be recognized and promoted, especially in international trade;

10. need to address the ever-increasing unemployment situation in the world, especially in Africa where there are no social securities and unemployment benefits in order to reduce the danger of turning the youths to agents of terrorist recruitment (cf. Nangulu, A. 2004:228-239; Nwaigbo, F., 2004:260-271) ^[4, 10].

7. Conclusion

It is no doubt that the universal community has come a long way in its effort to ensure development, progress, peace, and sustainable growth. However, there are signs that such efforts are still incomplete because they lack total commitment, trust and honesty on the part of all the key players. Intellectuals have not emphasized enough on the area of applying reason and conscience as moral guides in the execution of global plans for development and sustainability. This is, perhaps, why such fundamental areas like genuine dialogue – especially interreligious dialogue, justice, equality, and human rights have not achieved much growth.

Indeed, the world and its leaders should endeavour to convince everyone beyond reasonable doubts that the Millennium Development Goals Project is not just an agenda of the rich (countries and individuals alike) for the poor whereby the former merely give from their surplus as a charitable privilege. The MDGs should, on the contrary, be as Pope John Paul II rightly pointed out in his encyclical, *Centesimus Annus*, almost a decade before the UN declaration as a project of really “helping entire people which are presently excluded or marginalized to enter into the sphere of economic and human development” (1991:AAS 83:793-867) ^[6].

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