

XI. MISSING LINKS: GENDER EQUALITY, THE MDGS, AND THE INTERNATIONAL CONFERENCE ON POPULATION AND DEVELOPMENT

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A. INTRODUCTION

The Millennium Development Goals (MDGs) have been a frequently debated, much lauded, and often criticized feature of the international landscape since they were established in 2000. While the MDGs, by setting specific targets and indicators, have concretized international development objectives in a way that no other international agreement has; a number of crucial development and human rights issues are notably absent from the goals.

Whatever the specific assets or flaws of the Millennium Development Goals, they have unarguably become a powerful tool for generating consensus on international development and the promotion of human rights; garnering levels of political and financial support unseen in previous years—despite the existence of a vast body of international conventions, declarations and agreements that address a wide range of human rights and development issues. The MDGs have indeed provided specific targets for countries to work towards, and as a result have generated increased ent

The Cairo Programme of Action, though established before the MDGs, is much broader in its understanding of gender equality and women's empowerment, and further reaching in its objectives and recommended actions. It is entirely possible therefore that the eight MDGs will actually be achieved before the Cairo Programme of Action, and indeed many other international commitments, are fully implemented. However, many of the recommended actions of the Cairo Programme of Action are necessary to the achievement of the MDGs, which reinforces the importance of viewing the MDGs not as one isolated agreement among many, but as an intrinsic part of a broader human rights framework. The targets established through the MDGs can be seen as the first in a series of benchmarks for the full implementation of the Cairo Programme of Action, and in turn the Cairo Programme of Action provides some useful recommendations and actions for international and national work towards the achievement of the MDGs.

Aside from a holistic understanding of gender equality and the empowerment of women, the Cairo Programme of Action provides other inputs that are essential to the equitable achievement of the MDGs, including a focus on specific populations and a focus on reproductive health.

1. Holistic definition of gender equality

A comprehensive vision of gender equality includes every aspect of personal and social development that arises from, and affects, the social norms, attitudes and behaviours that determine women's and men's distinct social roles and status. The Cairo Programme of Action affirms that: "the power relations that impede women's attainment of healthy and fulfilling lives operate at many levels of society, from the most personal to the highly public...Experience shows that population and development programmes are most effective when steps have been taken to improve the status of women" (para. 4.1). A holistic definition of gender equality encompasses such issues as human sexuality (para. 7.34), male responsibilities and participation (para. 4.24), access to information (para. 11.11) and violence against women (para. 7.35), among others.

2. Focus on specific populations

It is possible to achieve all 8 of the MDGs at the national level while still leaving behind significant sections of the population, and indeed this is exactly what has happened in several regions. The MDGs lack a diversity perspective that focuses specifically on the needs of certain populations such as indigenous peoples, children, adolescents, people with disabilities, and older persons, which are addressed in the Cairo Programme of Action (paras. 6.21, 6.6, 7.41, 6.28, and 6.16, respectively). Achieving MDG 3, for example, without a specific focus on indigenous peoples means that though gender parity in education may become a reality, indigenous peoples' overall access to education may not have changed.

3. Focus on reproductive health

Often to its detriment, reproductive health has become a feminist and gender issue, both because it is championed mainly by those who are also working towards gender equality and the empowerment of women, and because the attainment of full reproductive health implies fundamental changes in gender roles, attitudes and behaviour. Thus the achievement of gender equality is inextricably linked to the attainment of reproductive health, and vice-versa. Cited as the major gap in the MDGs (Center for Human Rights and Global Justice, 2003), reproductive health, particularly certain "feminist issues" such as access to contraception and family planning services, access to condoms, and access to pre- and neo-natal health services, is essential to the achievement of the MDGs, including MDG 5 "Improve maternal health"

6. *Maternal mortality*

Maternal mortality remains one of the most significant causes of death for women of reproductive

pursuit of gender equality. Moreover, achieving gender parity in education does not guarantee the achievement of gender equality in education, as women and men's participation and success in school are influenced by more factors than mere enrolment.

The example of the MDGs could be reproduced and applied to existing agreements such as the Cairo Programme of Action in order to generate a renewed sense of commitment to the actions prescribed by the Programme of Action, and a set of practical targets and indicators for measuring their implementation. Some efforts to attach concrete indicators to the Cairo Programme of Action are already underway, such as the Latin American and Caribbean Women's Health Network's Atenea Database of reproductive and sexual health indicators (Red de Salud de Mujeres Latinoamericanas y del Caribe, 2004). These efforts require commitment at the global and governmental levels, along the lines of the MDGs, to be effectively implemented. The Cairo Programme of Action was developed during a time of "important new opportunities for addressing population and development issues. Among the most significant are the major shifts in attitude among the world's people and their leaders in regard to reproductive health, family planning and population growth..." (para. 1.8). The global climate surrounding the issues of gender equality, reproductive health and family planning has again undergone a

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