

**57<sup>th</sup> Annual Non-Governmental Organization Conference  
United Nations Department of Public Information  
Millennium Development Goals: Civil Society Takes Action**

**Comments for the session “Overcoming Communication Barriers to  
Promoting and Achieving the Millennium Development Goals”  
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by

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In September 2000, the leaders of 189 member-states of the United Nations held a Millennium Summit in New York, at which they agreed to commit themselves to the fulfillment of eight Millennium Development Goals (MDGs) by the year 2015. The Millennium Declaration that came out of the summit conference described these eight goals as follows:

1. Eradicate extreme poverty and hunger
2. Achieve universal primary education
3. Promote gender equality and empower women
4. Reduce child mortality
5. Improve maternal health
6. Combat HIV/AIDS, malaria and other diseases
7. Ensure environmental sustainability
8. Develop a global partnership for development.

These goals are not empty commitments: targets have been set for each goal allowing for measurement of progress along the way, and it is the firm intention of the United Nations to give public expression to these targets and to indicate how much progress each state is making in this effort.

The Universal Esperanto Association has joined in this session with the Baha’i International Community and the Word Federation of United Nations Associations because we wish to highlight the linguistic dimension of the eight goals and to focus particularly on the eight goal – the achievement of a partnership for development. Our Association is interested not only in the promotion of Esperanto as an international language designed to create egalitarian solutions to problems of language inequality, but also in language problems and their solution wherever they occur.

One place where language problems occur is in the realization of the Millennium Development Goals, all of which require multilingual cooperation. We do not always realize how pervasive such problems are. Perhaps I can provide a few examples from this conference. Yesterday, several problems of language arose right in our midst. No interpretation was available in the morning because of needs elsewhere in the building: all proceedings had to be conducted in English. And then in the afternoon one of our speakers wanted to give her address in Spanish, but interpretation arrived too late for her to do so. She made a gallant and commendably successful effort to use English, with much encouragement from her audience. But I think we would all recognize that the situation in which she found herself was basically discriminatory. Inevitably it detracted from the important message she wished to deliver.

These little problems (little to those of us who speak English, but not to those who don't) are multiplied many times over in the development process itself, not just in our conferences. Sometimes they are not even recognized as problems.

One of yesterday's speakers, Barbara Kalima, suggested that the eighth goal, on partnership, may be the most difficult. Speaking at the Civil Society Forum in São Paulo, Brazil, on June 13, 2004, Secretary-General Annan expressed a similar sentiment when he addressed the participants in the following terms: "You have been making valuable contributions, by linking your existing campaigns to the first seven goals ... But prospects for achieving these goals depend crucially on how we do on the eighth – forging a global partnership for development." In part, such a partnership depends on removing barriers, addressing needs, managing debt, and other procedures. But, more fundamentally, partnership depends on the inclusion of all parties, so that a dialogue can be created that is based on consideration not just of what governments are prepared to give, or how NGOs or the private sector are going to be involved, but how communities and individuals who are themselves the objects of the development effort are going to make their voices heard. Yesterday, Miklos Marschall, of Transparency International, told a story about how the wrong kinds of tractors were bought for a development project. The project benefited those in the middle who were open to bribes and kickbacks, but bankrupted the small farmers who took out loans to buy the tractors. We can be sure that the farmers were not consulted, or not consulted in the right way, before the tractors were purchased.

The eighth MDG, like the other seven, tends to focus on the importance of partnership among those who are providing aid – and indeed reducing the pyramidal structure of development efforts and turning them into shared enterprises with shared accountability makes sense. But a complete partnership and complete realization of this goal will include those who are going to receive the aid – down to the poorest of the poor, the illiterate, women who are victims of discrimination or lack medical attention, AIDS victims, and those living with environmental degradation. These are people who can barely make their voices heard. We must listen to those voices and hear their messages.

But these partners do not speak our language – both literally and figuratively. Nor, given their disadvantages, are they ever likely to do so. It is we, the privileged, who must adapt,

by learning their languages, or using reliable personnel who do, and by recording their needs and concerns. Most international development efforts involve multiple languages. A project may be conceived through the medium of English, overseen by Spanish-speaking or French-speaking NGOs, carried out by personnel speaking regional languages, and directed at people speaking a purely local language. At each step something is lost. When the English speakers raise a question, what are the chances that the question will carry down through the linguistic chain and a response make its way back to the top? Communities at the end of this attenuated communication chain are often neither asked for their opinions nor able to deliver them.

They are unable to deliver them because no one speaks their language – both in a literal linguistic sense and also in the sense that their cultural values, belief systems and sense of self do not necessarily coincide with those of the aid providers – and those at the top of the decision tree are several languages and several cultures removed from those they are serving.

The term “partnership,” the notion of a “global partnership” contained in the eight MDG, is a good term because it implies an egalitarian, non-hierarchical relationship. One of the places where such equality must begin is with language. Are we hearing the voices we need to hear? Is true dialogue taking place? Are we willing to accommodate the needs of particular communities? Development, if it is to be bottom-up as well as top-down, must be a dialogue – and dialogue implies the search for a common language, or at least an awareness of difference in world view and a willingness to accommodate it. We can start in simple ways by doing a language audit of our organization or of an individual project to be sure that voices are heard and messages received – and that true partnership is achieved.

My colleague and fellow-panelist Tim Reagan, who is a specialist in language in education and has experience in language and development, points out that finding ways of overcoming language differences is necessary but hardly sufficient in this process. Indeed, it may give the illusion of communication; but the very terms themselves, and the perceptions of those responsible for mediating between languages, carry with them cultural assumptions that must also be given consideration. So our problem is certainly cross-linguistic, but it is also cross-cultural. Any project design that does not take such concerns into consideration is bound to be defective, and any project design that does will require an audit not just of language but of cultural assumptions as well.