

Remarks by Helen Clark, Administrator of the United Nations Development Programme
on “Moving the Development Agenda Forward in Today’s World”

at the Lowy Institute for International Policy’s Distinguished Speaker Series

Friday 12 February, 2010

Sydney, Australia

Thank you for inviting me to address you this afternoon as part of the Distinguished Speaker series.

Although it is not quite yet seven years old, I know that the Lowy Institute for International Policy has already established a name as one of the leading Australian forums on foreign policy.

Throughout my years in public life I have always appreciated the role of organizations like this in encouraging educated debate and promoting an understanding of the global issues which affect us all.

Tackling the multiple challenges our world faces today requires strong action not only on the part of actors like governments, the UN, civil society, and the private sector. It also requires the active engagement of all citizens – and they need information to be able to engage effectively.

While I have been to Australia many times before, this is my first visit since becoming the Administrator of the United Nations Development Programme about ten months ago.

Australia’s partnership with UNDP is essential to our organisation, and one which I look forward to strengthening further during my time as Administrator.

I believe this is a mutually beneficial collaboration. UNDP is a key development partner in many countries where Australia is also dedicated to making an improvement in people’s lives.

Like New Zealanders, I know Australians tend to be acutely aware of their status as a developed country in a region overwhelmingly comprised of developing countries.

How to move the development agenda forward in the challenging times in which we live is the subject of my remarks today, and a subject which greatly preoccupies me and the UN development system.

In just the past two years alone, there have been major food and fuel crises, a global recession, and climatic disasters. There have also been other natural catastrophes, like the earthquake in Haiti which wrought so much pain and destruction.

While humanitarian and development agencies work full steam in Haiti to provide relief to stricken families and communities and support the country's recovery, we also need to remind ourselves of the importance of helping developing countries to build greater resilience to withstand a range of shocks. If the early years of this century are any guide, shocks are likely to keep coming.

As Australians appreciate, the developed world cannot afford to wall itself off from the problems besetting its neighbours. They are global problems too, and our prosperity and stability is affected by what happens beyond our borders.

It is in the mutual interests of developed and developing countries that internationally agreed development goals are achieved. I want to focus now on four ways in which we can help make that happen.

First, there needs to be a renewed focus on meeting the Millennium Development Goals by their target date of 2015.

These eight goals, enshrined in the Millennium Declaration from 2000, seek to reduce poverty and hunger, empower women, increase access to essential services like education, healthcare, clean water and sanitation, and forge strong global partnerships for development.

UNDP's partnership framework with AusAID is explicitly based on our shared ambition to help achieve these goals.

At the global level significant progress has been made towards these goals. The world is edging closer to providing universal primary education, although too slowly to meet the 2015 target.

And the deaths of children under five have declined steadily worldwide — to fewer than 9 million in 2008, down from 12.5 million in 1990, although the rate of decline is still insufficient to reach the MDG on time.

At the same time, so much remains to be done. For instance, an additional 1.4 billion people still require access to improved sanitation if the 2015 MDG target is to be met. The challenges are especially large in sub-Saharan Africa and in least developed countries generally.

The economic crisis has aggravated existing challenges to development, and risks reversing some of the progress which has been made. While developed countries have also been impacted, some very severely, the developing world is bearing the brunt of the crisis.

Two days ago I was in Vanuatu for the “Pacific Conference on the Human Face of the Global Economic Crisis”. It was convened to look at the impact of the crisis on the Pacific, and on how best to respond.

Five Pacific Island countries are estimated to have contracted in 2009, mostly because the global economic slump has eroded income from exports, tourism and remittances. Across the Pacific Islands, countless thousands of people and their families are estimated to have fallen into poverty.

National governments in the Pacific, as elsewhere, need to be driving responses to the crises.

But, in many cases their room for maneuver is limited. They lack the resources and tools to blunt the immediate impacts of the recession on their people.

Poor and vulnerable countries need concerted assistance from the international community. Used well, such support allows governments to maintain their budgets for basic services; boosts momentum towards the MDGs; and builds and strengthens the capacities and institutions which make sustainable development possible.

On paper, the pledges have been made to provide more support for development. But their translation into actual resources for development trails far behind. I commend Australia for

having increased its aid levels gradually in recent years, and for staying on course with its budgetary plans to provide 0.5 per cent of gross national income to ODA by 2015-16.

More effective disbursement of ODA is also important for reaching the MDGs, in line with the Paris Declaration on Aid Effectiveness.

There are simply too many basic needs still to be met for any development effort to be duplicated. That is why, for instance, UNDP has initiated aid co-ordination projects in the Pacific, beginning with Nauru and Tuvalu.

This September at the UN there will be a special MDG Summit in New York. This is a major opportunity to generate renewed commitment to reach the goals, mobilize support for scaling up MDG successes, and identify remaining gaps in MDG achievement and how best to fill them.

Since taking up my present position, I have been clear that the whole UN Development Group, which I chair, must strengthen its efforts in support of the MDGs. Where initiatives are proven to have worked, they should be replicated. Where bottlenecks exist, we need to help countries pinpoint the problems and take measures to overcome them. Where the old ways are not working, we have to innovate.

The empowerment of women requires special focus. Where we see progress towards the MDGs lacking the most is where the needs of women and girls are not given enough attention or prioritisation. Achieving gender equality is a prerequisite for meeting the MDGs.

A strong focus on combating the spread of HIV/AIDS will also reinforce progress on other MDGs. Prevention is vital for ensuring a reversal of the spread of the disease.

Second, it is critical that climate change considerations are brought into the very centre of development thinking and strategies, with attention also being paid to the particular needs of vulnerable groups such as women and indigenous peoples.

Climate change has been given too little consideration in development thinking in the past. Yet our world will not sustainably reduce poverty and reach the MDGs and other development goals if we destroy the ecosystem on which life on this planet depends.

For a number of Pacific Island nations and communities, climate change is not only an environmental or an economic issue – it is about their very survival as sea levels rise and weather patterns become more erratic.

While the climate agreement negotiation process goes on, UNDP has practical work to do.

Together with our partner agencies, we are supporting programme countries to pursue low carbon growth and access to energy strategies.

We help countries adapt to those high priority climate change impacts which are already inevitable. Australia has been a very generous funder of this work in vulnerable countries in the Pacific in particular.

We also help countries develop strategies to reduce emissions from deforestation. In these strategies, we support the full participation of indigenous peoples and other communities who depend directly on forests for their livelihoods. I understand that in Indonesia the UN-REDD Programme and the Indonesia-Australia Forest Carbon Partnership are working well together.

For developing countries, the provision of adequate funding to support climate change adaptation and mitigation is critical.

The risks of social and political instability will increase in coming decades if climate change causes large population transfers and growing tensions over the allocation of essential natural resources like water.

This brings me to my third message : that countries need to be supported to recover from crisis and disaster, and to improve governance. These are pre-conditions for sustainable development.

Countries trying to recover from crisis far too often see relapses into conflict when a peace dividend is lacking. A transition from crisis to early recovery which lays the foundations for sustained development is critical.

UNDP works in all crisis and post-crisis countries around the world, from Liberia to Somalia, Iraq, and Afghanistan, to Georgia, Sudan, Timor-Leste, and many more.

We work to strengthen governance and institutions and the rule of law, and to increase access to justice; we disarm, demobilize, rehabilitate, and reintegrate former combatants (DDRR); and we work with other agencies to combat sexual and gender-based violence.

We champion legal empowerment of the poor and the rule of law; work to combat corruption; support national human rights and electoral institutions; help make decentralized governance effective; and support parliaments to play their role of scrutiny well. All these efforts help sustain development progress.

In some forty countries we help eliminate the threat of landmines and explosive remnants of war, to make the environment safer for reconstruction and development. Australia supports our work in this area in Iraq and Sri Lanka.

We have especially large programmes in Afghanistan. I am well aware that this is a country followed closely by many of you, as Australia has a military and ODA presence there.

Our work in Afghanistan is on strengthening national, provincial, and local government and public administration; the aforementioned work on DDRR; and livelihood programmes, including working through communities and employing local labour to develop infrastructure such as schools and clinics.

Australia has assisted UNDP's work in Afghanistan in critical areas of governance – especially in supporting electoral processes and promoting law and order. We have also collaborated in developing the Afghan civil service development, and in resettling returning refugees.

In the near future, our team in Kabul looks forward to a close partnership with Australia in Oruzgan province – where I understand that Australian troops are primarily stationed, and where UNDP is set to open a regional office.

Haiti has been very much in the headlines recently following the tragic earthquake of mid-January. That disaster came on top of a devastating hurricane two years ago and decades of poor governance and civil strife.

There is a long journey ahead for Haiti. For the past few weeks the urgent task has been humanitarian relief, but UNDP has been able to initiate early recovery work in the very difficult local circumstances. Already more than 35,000 Haitians have been involved in our cash-for-work programme. Our aim is to create 220,000 temporary jobs over the next few months, indirectly benefiting around 1 million Haitians.

Job creation aimed at rebuilding infrastructure is critical in the short term to help get families and communities back on their feet, and to revitalize the local economies. It also helps to reduce social tension in distressed communities.

A high level ministerial preparatory conference on Haiti was held in Montreal on 25 January where donors pledged their long term commitment to the rebuilding of Haiti. Donors will reconvene within the next few weeks to decide on an action plan to guide reconstruction and development.

There is an opportunity in Haiti to draw on lessons learned from disaster recovery elsewhere, including the recovery after the Indian Ocean tsunami in 2004. Fundamental to a sustained recovery is a determination to build back better to save lives and build greater resilience to future shocks.

In general, disaster and climate risk reduction needs to be given very high priority in national development plans. I commend Australia for prioritizing support for disaster risk reduction in its aid programme.

This is highly relevant in the Pacific, where over the last 12 months alone many nations have been badly affected by natural disasters. There have been floods and cyclones in Fiji; the devastating tsunami which hit Samoa and Tonga; and the volcanic eruptions in Vanuatu.

Disaster risk reduction is part of UNDP's mandate, and we work to strengthen national capacities to prepare for, manage, and recover from disasters.

My fourth and final message on moving the global development agenda forward is that it requires strong and innovative partnerships.

Development co-operation these days is multi-faceted, incorporating not only North-South flows of ODA, but also South-South co-operation and the role of very large scale philanthropic initiatives, vigorous civil society involvement, and the role of the private sector.

The South-South flows of finance, technology, and know-how are now very substantial. Developing countries have so many lessons learned and useful technologies available to assist others in the South to meet their development challenges.

UNDP sees facilitating South-South exchanges of experience and knowledge as absolutely central to what we do.

We are establishing more strategic relationships with those who contribute to South-South co-operation. They will take a number of forms, including supporting those countries which request our assistance to establish and sustain their own development co-operation programmes.

As well, we see the private sector's initiative, innovation, technology, and resources as able to make a vital contribution to achieving the MDGs and tackling climate change.

UNDP has a "growing inclusive markets" initiative. It promotes business models in which the pursuit of wealth creation, human progress, and environmental sustainability are seen as entirely compatible.

Australia, along with the UK and UNDP, actively support the “business call to action”, designed to enlist the private sector as an active partner in achieving the MDGs. Prime Minister Kevin Rudd has been very supportive of this work.

Strong partnerships are also needed within the UN development system itself. We are striving to work ever more collaboratively.

One way or another, the mandates of all UN development agencies relate to the MDGs. More development gains will be made if the UN funds, programmes and specialized agencies themselves are better co-ordinated in their partnerships with programme countries and other development stakeholders.

Moving an ambitious development agenda forward is not made easy during a time of multiple crises.

But if pledges of support are now backed up with resources and strong partnerships, and that is backed by vision, commitment, and action in developing countries, it will be possible to bring about better development results where they matter most.

I hope that all of you today can be mobilized in support of sustainable development and the MDGs at this critical time.
