

Elaben's address to UN General Assembly



Speech of Ela Bhatt at the High-level Event on the Millennium Development Goals at UN General Assembly in New York on 25 September 2008.

By making the Millennium Development Goals tangible and time-bound, we have shown our collective will and declared our earnestness. Today we have reached the half way mark in time; but we still have far to go to create "a more peaceful, prosperous and just world."

Our desire to cut poverty in half by 2015 has met with marginal success because the poor are still not our priority. The working poor are the backbone of every nation, and yet they go hungry. Where do we go wrong?

We can blame today's economic environment. It is indeed out of touch and out of balance. It does not address simple human needs like food, and water and shelter for all. We assume technology will solve our problems. We are proud of our modern cities, our high-tech hospitals, our shining universities, and the bright minds who go on to earn millions; but we are not ashamed of our dying villages and urban slums where populations go hungry, illiteracy is rampant and curable diseases weaken the people.

In a world where food distribution is uneven, where healthcare is based on one's capacity to pay rather than need, where women are vulnerable to HIV/AIDS because they are compelled to provide sexual favors to multiple partners to earn income to feed the family, there is neither peace nor justice.

If profit is our only measure of success, we will be quick to turn a blind eye to the exploitation of our own people and our natural environment. We cannot treat our land, our water, our trees, and our animals as money; instead, let us see them as our wealth. We are ruthless in this race to grab the dwindling natural resources of the world. We refuse to share; we would rather go to war. We spend billions on arms, but who-or should I say-what exactly are we protecting? Certainly not our people! Yet the real wealth of any nation is its people.

Let us remind ourselves that in committing to the Millennium Development Goals, we are in fact pledging to become partners with the poor. It is time for the state to get in partnership with its

own people. Let us place the development goals squarely in the center of our National Plans and the National Budget. If a large number of a nation's population is below the poverty line, shouldn't a large percent of the National Income be spent on them? Let us guarantee a living income, provide social protection, ensure decent work and most important, build communities.

A word that is largely absent from the Development Goals is Work. In my experience, the link between poverty and growth is decent work. Decent work means full employment at the household level; it builds the local economy and strengthens a community. Employers are constantly searching the globe for cheap labor; but the jobs they create abroad cannot build a society, or even a sustainable economy. Special economic zones are nothing but glorified labor-camps; they force migration and the break down of families and society. That is not nation building. Why not provide the same subsidies and incentives to local businesses, to training centers, to micro-lending, and to peoples' initiatives? These are better and more holistic uses of government resources.

Poverty is powerlessness. Poverty cannot be removed unless the poor have power to make decisions that affect their lives. So yes, poverty is a political issue. Sharing power with the people does not threaten nor diminish the role of the government; in fact it enhances it. Government support is crucial for the poor to help themselves.

The active engagement of a community and its organizations in the planning, implementation, and monitoring of the Millennium Development Goals is crucial. The poor are fully capable of evaluating the state of their own poverty. So the voice of the people must carry the same weight as national and international evaluations of the Development Goals. Let such monitoring mechanisms be independent, autonomous, and open to public scrutiny.

And I urge the donor community to spend your good money in building local capacities and the local economy; support the efforts of the poor to build their own organizations so they can decide and manage their own destinies.

Let us pledge once again to embark on a partnership with the poor to bring peace, prosperity and justice to all. If not we will be left with hunger and violence.

Thank you.