

UNITED NATIONS HIGH COMMISSIONER FOR HUMAN RIGHTS



REMARKS AT PANEL DISCUSSION
“Can the MDGs do without human rights?”
A dialogue with special procedures of the Human Rights Council”

New York, 22 October 2010

Excellencies,
Ladies and Gentlemen,
Dear friends and colleagues that are here with me,

Let me join Assistant Secretary-General Simonovic in welcoming you all to this panel discussion.

Ten years ago, in 2000, world leaders adopted the Millennium Declaration, making historic commitments to tackle wide-ranging issues from the persistence of hunger to threats to health and the environment, which were encapsulated in the eight Millennium Development Goals (MDGs). While these were welcomed by the international development community, they were met with skepticism and sometimes antipathy by many human rights advocates.

Over the last ten years the MDGs have proven instrumental in shaping national development agendas and in re-orienting aid and public policies towards the often neglected social sectors. Nevertheless, from the beginning, many human rights advocates perceived inconsistencies between the MDGs and human rights, and warned of the risks of pursuing the MDGs in isolation from broader human rights commitments and obligations.

Many questioned the wisdom of framing issues which had been codified as legal obligations under international human rights law as political commitments. They were also concerned that the MDGs (unlike the Millennium Declaration) contained no explicit reference to human rights, the right to development or human rights-based approaches. Moreover, the MDGs were an incomplete list – and did not reflect all human rights. Their objectives were limited: they did not seek to eradicate all poverty or hunger or illiteracy; nor all maternal mortality.

These concerns have persisted, but human rights defenders, including the special procedures of the Human Rights Council, have come to recognize the potential value of the MDGs, in particular, if they could be more explicitly linked to the international human rights framework. Accordingly, special procedures have individually and collectively examined the relationship between respect for human rights and the realization of the MDGs. Importantly also, the analysis of several rapporteurs has advocated the view that a more explicitly human

rights-based approach to implementation of the MDGs would facilitate achieving their targets, while at the same time making gains towards this achievement more sustainable.

Ten years after the adoption of the Millennium Declaration, it is clear that human rights are core to the realization of the MDGs. The Outcome Document of the High-Level Meeting on the Millennium Development Goals Summit recognized this, underscoring that “the respect for and promotion and protection of human rights is an integral part of effective work towards achieving the Millennium Development Goals.”

The Outcome Document presents an integral vision of human rights and development. For example, the Document recognizes that we need to address structural inequalities, social exclusion and discriminatory barriers, if the goal of universal access to the basic social services is to be achieved. Economic growth is not an end in and of itself: rather, growth should be “sustainable, inclusive and equitable.” Taken together with international human rights treaties to which all States have to varying degrees committed themselves, the Outcome Document will assist States in advancing a human rights approach to the MDGs.

Encouraged by the increasing number of developing and donor States that are integrating human rights in their development policies, I took the opportunity at the High Level Plenary Meeting to offer support of my Office to those States willing to undertake such efforts. The findings and lessons from these country experiences could be then brought to the attention of the 2013 “Special Event” on the MDGs, proposed in the Outcome Document.

Human rights mechanisms and Special Procedure-mandate holders in particular can play a critical role in monitoring the implementation of MDG policy efforts of both developed and developing States, guided by the human rights commitments in the Outcome Document. The information gathered could help States generate the incentives needed for accelerated MDG progress and any necessary remedial actions. In the longer term, this additional evidence may help the human rights community to make a stronger case for the explicit inclusion of human rights within a post-2015 global compact for development.

This panel is one event in a series of discussions within the United Nations family and the wider international community which reflects on ways to accelerate progress towards the MDGs. This discussion is distinct, however, because it provides a context in which two special procedures, independent experts whose mandates were created by the Human Rights Council, can help us to reflect on whether the MDGs can do the job without human rights. I encourage all to participate actively in the discussion.

I wish you a fruitful, frank and dynamic exchange.

Thank you very much.