

THE MDG CAMPAIGN IN ASIA AND THE PACIFIC: THE PHILIPPINE EXPERIENCE*

**By: Prof. Leonor Magtolis Briones
Co-Coordinator Social Watch Asia
Co-Convenor, Social Watch Philippines**

Some words about Social Watch

Social Watch is a global network of NGOs who have been monitoring social development since 1996. It was organized soon after the 1995 Social Development Summit to monitor the implementation of commitments made by governments on social development, as well as earlier global summits on women and the environment.

Every year Social Watch produces a report on the status of these commitments. The report is submitted to the UN Commission on Social Development. These reports are circulated widely and used by different groups -- governments, NGOs, policy centers academic institutions, media and others.

The global campaign of Social Watch started with country networks which later coalesced themselves into regional networks like Social Watch Asia.

The MDGs are covered by the monitoring system of Social Watch since the goals originated from the social development summits.

Social Watch Philippines actively campaigns for the MDGs and links these to the various advocacies of the network members.

Observations on the development of campaigns

My personal impression is that the development of campaigns on the MDGs went on two tracks. One track was the campaign initiated by the United Nations. The other track included campaigns initiated independently by different stakeholders, notably civil society or organizations.

The global campaign organized by the United Nations had a slow start. This is not surprising because global dialogues and strategy sessions had to be conducted to map out the campaign strategy, identify and involve the stakeholders, set up the campaign organizations, and provide adequate resources.

The stakeholders themselves needed to be convinced that the MDGs could work where earlier U.N. campaigns on social development did not. For example, civil society reactions were mixed. Reaction ranged from suspicion, skepticism and distrust to critical support. Questions were raised about the target of halving poverty--why only 50%. Why 15 years?

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Can the poor wait that long? Questions were also raised about the framework. Can the goals be attained without asset reforms and social justice? Can the targets be reached without changing power relations?

The national campaigns organized by the UN also took time to start. As for the regional campaigns, these began only last year. The efforts to be inclusive and invite all stakeholders, ranging from governments to civil society and the private sector understandably required time.

Now that the campaign structures are in place globally, regionally and nationally, events are moving fast and accelerating rapidly.

The Philippine Social Watch Campaign

The Philippine Social Watch Campaign is perhaps an example of the second track where civil society organizations initiated their own campaigns. Eventually, this campaign was linked with the U.N. initiated campaign.

At first, there were many internal debates right in Social Watch at the global, regional and national levels. On the part of Social Watch Philippines, a decision was made to campaign for MDGs because the latter fitted very well with our ongoing campaign for social development. The MDGs gave us the opportunity to engage government directly since they committed to deliver these goals. However, we agreed that we would urge government to deliver beyond the MDGs since these were obviously "minimum" goals. We also recognized that the MDGs gave us the opportunity to broaden our reach to our different constituencies. Finally, the MDGs were linked to our urgent advocacies--women, children and the marginalized, health, environment, employment, trade and debt related issues.

Our first involvement with the MDGs started with the Financing for Development High Level Meeting. Social Watch engaged the entire process from the prep coms to the actual high level meeting in Mexico.

With the assistance of UNDP, Social Watch conducted a national consultation of civil society organizations on the five themes on financing for development. The results of the consultations were presented to other sectors--government, multilateral and private sector who had their own consultations --in a series of workshops organized by the UNDP. The resulting document became the official reference document of the Philippine delegation to the Financing for Development High Level Meeting in Mexico. Furthermore, the official Philippine delegation included two representatives from Social Watch who served as advisers.

It can therefore be said that right from the start, Philippine participation in the global MDG process involved civil society. This set the tone for the national campaign in the Philippines. Since the Mexico campaign, Social Watch has held annual national, regional and island consultations . It has conducted information campaigns, media

briefings and fora in different parts of the country. It also participates in the campaigns initiated by the United Nations, government and the private sector.

Tailoring the MDGs to the needs of country campaigns

Obviously, there can be no standard country campaign. In Asia and the Pacific region the contrasts are stark and the levels of development vary sharply. Three of the world's four most populous countries, 2 of the richest countries of the world, as well as 12 landlocked countries and 17 small island states are all in the region.

Some features of the Philippine Social Watch Campaign are:

1. the campaign to go beyond the "minimum" targets set forth in the MDGs. Like Thailand, the Philippine government believes it has a good chance of meeting the targets on time. The better challenge is to exceed them.
2. The campaign also urges MDG players to disaggregate national totals. Countries like the Philippines have wide disparities in poverty levels. For example, while the Philippines will likely meet the MDG targets on poverty at the national level, 39 of seventy provinces will not actually reach these targets. National figures are pulled up by the urban centers.
3. Social Watch has been doing its own monitoring of social development even before MDGs. It has issued alternative reports on the MDGs, thus enriching the campaign and the quality of the discourse.
4. In order for the people to identify themselves with the MDGs, Social Watch Philippines focuses on the goals which are linked with urgent problems in the country like poverty, population, and the debt problem.
5. The Philippine campaign is also linked to political exercises like the election. The recently concluded elections gave Social Watch the opportunity to present MDGs as an election issue. At least three of the five presidential candidates were given full briefings on MDGs, as well as a good number of candidates for local government positions.
6. Finally, even as there is a national campaign involving the United Nations, government, civil society and the private sector, each stakeholder carries on its individual campaign at its own pace. This allows those who have already advanced in their campaign to undertake initiatives on their own.

The Regional Social Watch Campaign

In the case of Asia and the Pacific, the regional campaign was organized only when the national campaigns were already in place. This was true for Social Watch Asia. The regional campaign was sparked by the country networks which had national campaigns already in place.

By the time the regional campaign of UN was organized, Social Watch had a regional campaign already in place. At present, Social Watch Asia is part of the UN regional campaign and coordinates closely with the campaign secretariat.

Status of MDGs in Asia

The status of MDGs in Asia is mixed, considering the wide disparities among countries in the region. Asia Pacific is a highly diverse region where three of the world's most populous countries are situated. It also includes some highly developed states, and some approaching middle-income status, but also has 13 least developed countries (LDCs), 12 landlocked developing countries (LLDCs) and 17 small island developing states (SIDS).

A few countries in Asia will meet all the goals and even surpass them. Some countries are in danger of meeting none of the MDGs while majority will be in-between.

Issues that have emerged from the perspectives of CSOs

- Ownership of MDGs and the issue of participation of all sector of society
- Problems of security within and among countries and the MDGs
- Alternative regional reports even as there are already alternative country reports
- Issues in Goal 8 – trade, debt, etc. – as challenges to MDGs

Recommendations and strategies

Based on the experiences of the Philippines Social Watch campaign, the following recommendations are suggested:

1. Enhance and accelerate national campaigns. The global and regional campaign can only be as successful as the national campaign.
2. Strengthen the role of the UNDP and other U.N. agencies in the national campaign. In many countries it might be difficult to get the government, multilaterals, civil society and the private sector to cooperate or even get together. UNDP is in the unique position to get the cooperation of important stakeholders and rally them to the MDGs.
3. Encourage and support civil society campaigns. Thus far, civil society Organizations have been aggressive and effective in calling attention to MDGs. They have been monitoring governments and pressuring them. Because of limited resources, they are very creative in developing effective campaign tactics. At the same time, they work very closely with MDG beneficiaries.

4. Utilize the important role of media
5. Link the campaign to urgent national issues and political exercises and national events