

Background note on roundtable 4:

Dialogue on building state capacity to meet the MDGs: human rights, governance, institutions and human resources

Organizers: DESA/Division for Public Administration and Management and the Office of the High Commissioner for Human Rights

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One of the most critical issues emerging from each of the major international conferences and summits including follow-up meetings and consultations on topics of global concern including those of the Millennium Summit has been the central role of state capacities, governance systems and institutions in promoting economic and social development; increasing the access of services to the vast majority of the poor; promoting and enforcing human rights legislation; enhancing the participation of women in the development process; and protecting the quality of the environment.

There is now an increasing convergence of views on the importance of governance and institutions and human rights in the wider sense, and of public sector management processes, in particular, that have the potential to contribute to public policies, in particular, in implementing the Millennium Development Goals. This consensus is systematically underlined in the Annual Reports of the UN Secretary General on the progress of MDGs, and in the work of the UN Millennium Project especially in their analysis of country needs assessment.

This consensus was reinforced during the March 16-17 March Preparatory Meeting, which reviewed a cluster of common themes from the outcomes of conferences and summits, including the Millennium Summit. One of the consistent observations made during all the roundtables was that improving access to basic services and its quality, prospects for scaling up, sustainability and accountability require good governance at the national, regional and international levels. Governance includes the issues of state capacity; the institutions and the institutional processes that contribute to decisions; the human resources and indeed, the human rights environment that underpins the citizens' entitlements to life and livelihood. While many of these issues are intrinsic to state capacities and therefore, demand actions at national and even regional levels (the NEPAD Peer Review Mechanism being utilized by members of the African Union is a good example), the issues of international governance relating to trade, aid, equity in the decision-making process etc. are also of no less importance as these elements more often than not influence, one way or another, the actions of the nation-states.

These points were further elaborated upon during the roundtable on *Building State Capacity to Meet the MDGs*, organized on 5 April 2005, by the Division for Public Administration and Development Management of UNDESA for the ECOSOC 2005 High Level Segment. The Roundtable took the advantage of the presence of the Committee of Experts on Public Administration which was holding its Fourth Session in New York.

Sustainable achievement of the MDGs will also require support to government policy-makers and public administration officials in fulfilling their human rights obligations, as recognized in the Secretary-General's report 'In Larger Freedom'. Non-discrimination, meaningful participation and monitoring and accountability are basic components of a rights-based approach to the MDGs.

States need to enhance their statistical and other capacities to enable monitoring the impact of MDG strategies in different segments of their populations, in particular, for the vulnerable, excluded and marginalized groups. Free information, association and expression as well as citizen-government dialoguing are fundamental to pro-poor policies and policy-making processes. State capacity to achieve the MDGs and its performance to this end must therefore be strongly underpinned by citizen participation in decision-making for better accountability and transparency. Clear definition of government officials' and other stakeholders' obligations and the monitoring of their performance within a legal framework that is pro-poor and conducive to human rights will strengthen both national level governance and human rights.

The importance of the institutional framework, and of its enabling environment, has also been highlighted by the International Conference on Financing Development. The Bretton Woods institutions, especially the World Bank, have pointed out that the underestimation of governance and institutions has brought additional challenges in market-led reforms of the previous two decades and thus stifled full potential of market-led growth to some extent. Indeed, in a seminal paper on the funding of the Official Development Assistance, the World Bank clearly suggested that without commensurate attention to the institutional aspects and to governance, the earlier challenges and problems with ODA and development advice may resurface. The work of UN bodies has also led it to similar conclusions in that institutional arrangements, especially those that relate to public policies and programmes, have significant impacts on achieving the MDGs, particularly that of poverty reduction. Similar views have also been echoed at the 6th Global Forum on Reinventing Government held in Seoul, Republic of Korea during May 24-27, 2005. The Forum jointly organized by the Government of Korean Republic and the United Nations stressed that in a globalizing and democratic world, participatory and transparent governance is vital to achieving economic growth, social justice and equity.

A close examination of the MDGs will reveal that out of eight goals, seven are social and or poverty related. This underscores that all institutions and institutional processes, the strategy of development etc. should be oriented as well as adjusted such that it puts the poor in the centre of all decision-making. The report of the Millennium Project¹ makes a strong case for investment in improving governance. The report advises targeting the following areas:

- *Promoting the rule of law.* Legal and administrative systems require a properly resourced and adequately staff legislature, judiciary and executive branch of government.
- *Promoting human rights.* The goals reflect human rights assessments that checks MDG-based strategies for their national commitment to human rights.
- *Promoting accountable and efficient public administration.* Better governance depends on the systems of political and bureaucratic accountability, transparency and participation, especially by poor people.
- *Promoting sound economic policies.* Government actions – such as macroeconomic management, proper investments in infrastructure, and corruption-free delivery of public

¹ Available at www.unmillenniumproject.org.

services – are keys to private sector development, as outlined in the report of the Commission on Private Sector Development and World Development Report 2005.

- *Supporting civil society.* Governments have a special responsibility to provide civil society with political freedom to express its views, a policy voice to participate in the planning and review and of MDG-based strategies, and institutional space to support the implementation of public investment strategies.

One of the key challenges to meeting the MDGs is the ability of the countries to scale up many results-bearing interventions simultaneously. Beyond political commitment, scaling up requires building national and local capacity in development management, human resources and institutional integrity. The Millennium Project report suggests upfront investments in strengthening public sector management (such as training, information technology, and improved incentives for civil service workers), building and renovating infrastructure (roads, clinics, schools) and critically, training and retaining adequate numbers of workers (community health workers, teachers) to deliver services on the ground. Decentralized training efforts based on open distance learning, radio, and computer-assisted education are key to a massive build-up of human resource capacity at the local level.

The efforts outlined above must rest on a broader effort to strengthen scientific and technological capacity. The Millennium Project report points to the need to build up indigenous institutions and skills to advance science, technology and innovation. Practical measures could include creating science advisory bodies to the national government, expanding science and engineering faculties in universities and polytechnics, strengthening the development and entrepreneurial focus in science and technology curricula, promoting business opportunities in science and technology, and promoting infrastructure development as a technology learning process.

Achievements at the national and regional levels shape the implementation of international commitments such as those performances by national governments and by regional initiatives upon which depend the progress in meeting the Millennium Development Goals. In this context, it is important to stress the need for developing countries to be given a more active and visible role in the decision-making process of many key international organizations – not only the United Nations but also the World Bank, the International Monetary Fund and the World Trade Organization (WTO). As the report of the Secretary General on Implementation of the United Nations Millennium Declaration of 2003 (A/58/323) noted, “unless developing countries enjoy – and are seen by the global public to enjoy – greater access to, and a voice in, institutions whose policies have a profound impact on the lives of their citizens, the public hostility to globalization...will continue to grow.”