The Lost Decade
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UNITED NATIONS, Feb 13 (IPS) - Ten years after the United Nations launched the “Decade for the Eradication of Poverty”, more than one billion people still live without access to safe drinking water, health care, adequate housing and other essentials of daily life, development experts and independent observers here say.

"Poverty is like a communicable disease that is continuously spreading throughout the world," Jesusa Gamboa told participants at a U.N. meeting called to assess the decade-long progress on poverty reduction.

Representing a civil society group from the Philippines, the 17-year-old delegate said that neither she nor her family and friends were initially aware of the campaign.

"We did not see any impact of this work. Instead, the situation is becoming worse," Gamboa told IPS in an interview. "It's we -- the children and the youth -- whom poverty strikes the hardest."

The meeting to review the first U.N. Decade for the Eradication of Poverty (1997-2006) is being convened by the Commission on Social Development, and runs until Feb. 17.

The U.N. anti-poverty campaign was initiated following decisions made at the World Summit on Social Development held in Copenhagen, Denmark in 1995, where world leaders agreed to lay out national action plans in cooperation with the international community to fight poverty, unemployment and social exclusion.

But as the Decade is coming to an end, U.N. stakeholders, analysts, and representatives of civil society and non-governmental organisations (NGOs) see the outcome as inadequate.

"Despite considerable progress, the Commission is still far short of the goal to eradicate poverty," said José Antonio Ocampo, under-secretary-general for Economic and Social Affairs, at the session’s opening last week.

Noting that much of the global reduction in poverty has occurred in East and South Asia and the Pacific regions, Ocampo said all other regions have experienced setbacks since 1990. "The scourge of extreme poverty is still entrenched in many individual countries, especially in sub-Saharan Africa," he said.

On average, the proportion of poor people living on less than one dollar a day in developing countries declined from nearly 27 percent to about 21 percent between 1990 and 2000 -- meaning that 130 million people saw some improvement in their lives.

But at the regional level -- and at the other end of the spectrum -- Sub-Saharan Africa had almost 100 million more people living on less than a dollar a day in 2001 than in 1990, according to the U.N. Development Programme’s (UNDP) Human Development Report 2005.

After a decade of anti-poverty measures, more than 40 percent of the world’s population is still faced daily with the direct reality or the impending threat of poverty, the report says.

"The past decade can be measured in promises broken and hopes deferred. In fact, it has been a decade of poverty, and the international community can no longer tolerate a world in which the majority of people are forced to endure abject poverty," said Sister Burke, chairperson of the NGO Committee on Social Development, speaking on behalf of civil society members.
She called on the Commission to renew its commitment and develop effective strategies to move forward in the new decade.

Sanjay Reddy, an assistant professor of economics at Barnard College, Columbia University, stressed the urgent need for the U.N. to create a “credible statistical system” to monitor the progress on poverty reduction.

"The dollar-a-day measure, most used in the U.N., is riddled with methodological problems which make judgments about poverty increase or decrease quite unreliable," he said at a panel discussion.

In the past 10 years, the commitments to eradicate poverty have been strongly reaffirmed by U.N. member states, particularly through the Millennium Development Goals (MDGs) outlined at the U.N. Millennium Summit in 2000.

The eight MDGs include a 50 percent reduction in poverty and hunger; universal primary education; reduction of child mortality by two-thirds; cutbacks in maternal mortality by three-quarters; the promotion of gender equality; environmental sustainability; reversal of the spread of HIV/AIDS, malaria and other diseases; and a global partnership for development between the rich and poor – all by 2015.

Experts note that the implementation of most of these goals has depended primarily on increased development aid by Western donors.

"For the first time ever we are capable of removing abject poverty, illiteracy and the disease of poverty from the human condition," Clare Short, a former Cabinet member and lawmaker from Britain, told the Commission. "The current intensification of global economic integration has demonstrated that there is enough knowledge, technology and capital to bring development to all the people of the world."

Yet despite the world's capacity and commitment to halve the proportion of people living in extreme poverty by 2015, Reddy said the MDGs are not likely to be met in many countries and regions.

Roberto Bissio, executive director of the non-profit organisation the Third World Institute, explained why.

"The rich countries are not meeting their part of commitments because they reason that the cost for this is too high, without realising that the cost of not eradicating poverty is much higher," he said in an interview with IPS. "To this end, the developing countries have been imposed an economic model, which does not fit their own needs."

"Looking at the direct outcome of the last year's efforts, the decade is a failure," Bissio continued. "But in regards to the increased awareness of poverty and the attention brought upon these issues, the Decade has been a success. Poverty is still possible to eradicate, it's just a matter of walking the whole way of commitments."