

**Commission for Social Development Meeting on 8 February 2006 to review the
First United Nations Decade for the Eradication of Poverty (1997-2006)**

Rt Hon Clare Short MP
8 February 2006

As we meet here at the United Nations in New York to review the implementation of the first United Nations Decade for the Eradication of Poverty (1997-2006), we are forced to conclude that the picture is mixed. There have been great achievements since the great UN conferences of the 1990s. And yet we are living in worrying times when there is an atmosphere of fear and uncertainty across the world. It is important that we should use this opportunity to consider what are the reasons for hope and what is the cause of growing fear and insecurity. History does not have an inevitable outcome. We are living at a time of rapid historical change. At such a time, ideas have great potential power. The ideas that capture people's minds, and help explain to them the changes that are taking place, can will either lead to hope and progress or division and conflict. I will in my remarks today try to outline the reasons we have to be hopeful and the dangers that may cause us to fail to capture the possibilities of these times.

Let me begin by taking us back a long time. In Europe between the year 500 and 1500, the growth rate of the GDP per capita was zero. For thousands of years, the standard of living was constant and did not differ markedly between countries. Real wages in England were roughly the same in 1800 as in 1300. Population growth was also zero. I quote these figures to remind us that the phenomenon of sustained growth in living standards is only a few centuries old. The force that changed all of this was the industrial revolution, which brought new technologies and new sources of power to produce a massive expansion in production and wealth. These changes were accompanied by great shifts of population, from a life of poverty on the land to a life of squalor and factory work in the cities. People suffered terrible living and working conditions, ill health and illiteracy, but out of the contrast between new riches and the poverty of the workers, new movements developed that at first demanded the right to organise into unions at work and then the right to vote so that the power of the state could be used to ensure that all had access to work, housing education and the other basic necessities of life.

These struggles brought full employment and the welfare state to the 20 per cent of humanity who live in the OECD countries. But these countries used their wealth and strength to plunder and dominate the rest of the world until the demand for equality, dignity and development became overwhelming and empires crumbled and the post colonial era was born. And it was at the United Nations that all the newly free nations of the world met as equals under the umbrella of international law, the inspiration of the Universal Declaration of Human Rights and a commitment to equality and a right to development for all people. Considerable progress was made in the post colonial period in increased life expectancy, reduced infant mortality, improved literacy and access to clean water. But development led to population growth just as it did in the OECD countries after industrialisation and therefore, despite the progress that was made, the number of people living in poverty grew.

But history was diverted from a commitment to development, as the world divided into two blocks, with the west concentrating on the civil and political or 'blue' rights of the Universal Declaration and the Soviet block concentrating on the 'red' rights of social and economic entitlement. And thus both sides distorted the Universal Declaration which makes clear that all people are entitled to all the rights and lays an obligation on every government and all people to try to secure all these rights for all people. Aid was misused and struggles for independence distorted by the tensions of the Cold War with the two sides lined up behind their surrogates, but large scale war was avoided by the terrible promise of Mutually Assured Destruction through an onslaught of nuclear weapons if either side was foolish enough to launch a war.

By the 1980s, the Soviet block was crumbling because of the failure of its economic model and its lack of freedom. And in 1989 when the Berlin wall came down and in 1990 when Nelson Mandela was released from prison, with the promise of the end of the monstrous system of Apartheid, a wave of hope spread across the world as we expected cuts in defence spending and a sharing of wealth and technology which could usher in a period of increased progress and hope. It was in this time that the great UN conferences of the 1990s were held – Jomtien on Education 1990, Rio on Environment June 1992, Cairo on Reproductive Health 1994, Beijing on Women in 1995 and Copenhagen on Poverty also in 1995. The declarations that were negotiated and agreed by all the nations in attendance were driven by the values of the Universal Declaration - that all should have access to education, that none should be abjectly poor, that all should be able to manage their own fertility, that women and girls should have equal chances and that we should care for the environmental resources of the world more carefully. But they were not simply aspirations. They drew on the experience of development in all these fields in the previous decades and called for greater progress by building more urgently on the best experience of the past.

The outcome of these conferences was then taken up by the Development Committee of the OECD which in its report "Shaping the Twenty First Century" published in May 1996, called on behalf of the donor countries for a partnership to halve the proportion of people living in poverty over the 20 years from 1995 to 2015, by implementing the declarations agreed at these conferences. The next major advance came at the General Assembly when it launched the Decade for the Eradication of Poverty in 1997 with the objective

"to achieve the goal of eradicating absolute poverty and reducing overall poverty substantially in the world, through decisive national and international co-operation in implementing fully and effectively all agreements, commitments and recommendations of major United Nations conferences and summits organised since 1990 as they relate to poverty eradication".

These objectives were reaffirmed at the UN summit called to mark the new millennium which was attended by more Prime Ministers and Presidents than any previous UN summit. In 2000 they committed the world to the Millennium Development Goals (MDGs) and made the elimination of abject poverty a central objective in the new century. This was indeed a period of idealism and hopefulness with agreement reached at a whole series of important international conference.

In 1997 at Kyoto through another UN process the governments of the world agreed to work together to tackle global warming with the OECD countries agreeing to move first and developing countries to join in later. Alongside this through the G7 meetings in Birmingham in 1998 and Cologne in 1999 and under pressure from a world wide campaign, the IMF and World Bank agreed a programme of greatly enhanced debt relief and committed to work in a new way with highly indebted poor countries to achieve the implementation of locally drafted Poverty Reduction Strategies aimed at meeting the Millennium Development Goals.

And after the disastrous meeting of the World Trade Organisation in Seattle in November 2001 after the attack on the Twin Towers, the World Trade Organisation Ministerial Meeting in Doha agreed that the next trade round must deliver fairer trade rules for developing countries. Following this, at the UN summit on Financing for Development held in Monterrey in 2002 the world reached a new consensus on the best balance between state and markets to promote development and the OECD countries pledged to increase their aid which had fallen considerably since the end of the Cold War. And finally in Johannesburg in September 2002 at a UN summit to check on progress since the UN conference on the environment ten years earlier in Rio it was agreed that the only way to sustain the world's environmental resources was to guarantee development for the poor and to share the world's environmental resources more fairly.

Then in March 2003 this period of advance and hope was interrupted as the world divided bitterly over the attack on Iraq. This inflamed the atmosphere in the Middle East which was already seething with anger over the failure to reach a just settlement between the Israeli and Palestinian people. The "war on terror" increasingly took centre stage but the invasion of Iraq and failure to bring progress and reconstruction to the people of Afghanistan and Iraq increased support for violent resistance.

The strains these divisions have imposed have weakened the United Nations and created a sense of bitter division in the world, but they have not completely derailed the commitments made at the Millennium summit. And thus at the G7 meeting in Gleneagles and in the run up to that meeting, a world wide campaign was launched to "Make Poverty History" and promises of increased debt relief and aid were made at the summit. And then at the UN summit in 2005 called to review progress on meeting the Millennium Development Goals, it was clear that the world was on track to halve the proportion of people living in poverty which means 1 billion people lifting themselves out of abject poverty, largely because of progress in India and Asia. And it was also clear that there had been progress on education and reducing infant mortality, but overall many parts of the world, especially Africa, will fail to meet the Goals without a much greater effort.

In addition to this, the world's climate scientists have become increasingly clear that human production of carbon dioxide emissions largely as a result of the burning of fossil fuels is causing climate change with potentially catastrophic consequences for millions of people as weather patterns become more turbulent, heat and drought damage agricultural production, and sea rise leads to massive refugee movements. The failure of the United States to ratify the Kyoto Protocol has caused growing fear that there will not be adequate action to prevent climate change. At the same time we continue to destroy fish stocks and forest cover and there is a very real danger that

humanity is destroying environmental resources at an unsustainable rate at the same time as world population is set to grow from 6-9 billion people by 2030-50. Many people are being driven to the conclusion that without a massive change in the priorities of the leaders of the world there will simply not be a sustainable future for human civilisation on the planet.

We are at a major turning point in human history. For the first time ever we are capable of removing abject poverty, illiteracy and the diseases of poverty from the human condition. 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. And thus we have seen massive economic growth and reduction of poverty in China and India over a very short period of time. In addition we have seen, as global communications improve, the growth of a global ethic which makes the beautiful thinking of the Universal Declaration of Human Rights become an emotional reality for people across the world. Thus when refugees flee from Kosovo, or a little girl is born in a tree in the floods in Mozambique or the tsunami strikes or the earthquake in Kashmir, people across the world dig into their pockets to try to help and demand that their government take action to help fellow human beings who are suffering.

But our experience of development in the two countries with over 1 billion people also demonstrates that our current way of life on the planet is completely unsustainable. These developments demonstrate – despite all their imperfections – how the forces of globalisation can be harnessed to the sharing of technology and the reduction of poverty. But they also show the limits to the economic growth, the planet can bear. According to Lester Brown of the Earth Policy Institute in Washington DC, who is one of the leading US environmental analysts, if growth in China continues at 8 per cent a year, by 2031 China's income per head for its 1.45 billion people will be equal to that of the US today. He said

“China's grain consumption will then be two thirds of the current grain consumption of the entire world. If it consumes oil at the same rate as the US today, the Chinese will be consuming 99 billion barrels a day – and the whole world is currently producing 84 billion barrels a day, and will probably not produce much more. If it consumes paper at the same rate that we do, it will consume twice as much paper as the world is now producing. There go the world's forests. If the Chinese then have three cars for every four people – as the US does today – they would have a fleet of 1.1 billion cars compared to the current world fleet of 800 million. They would have to pave over an area equivalent to the area they have planted with rice today, just to drive and park them.”

Mr Brown, who has been tracking and documenting the world's major environmental trends for 30 years concluded

“The point of these conclusions is simply to demonstrate that the western economic model is not going to work for China. All they're doing is what we've already done, so you can't criticise them for that. But what you can say is, it's not going to work. And if it does not work for China, by 2031 it won't work for India, which by then will have an even larger population, nor for the

other three billion people in the developing countries. And in some way it will not work for the industrialised countries either, because in the incredibly integrated world economy, we all depend on the same oil and the same grain.

The bottom line of this analysis is that we're going to have to develop a new economic model. Instead of fossil-fuel based, automobile centred, throwaway economy, we will have to have a renewable-energy based, diversified transport system, and comprehensive reuse and recycle economies. If we want civilisation to survive, we will have to do that. Otherwise civilisation will collapse."

Our conclusion has to be that if the OECD countries have their current way of life then the people of China and India as well as Africa and Latin America are entitled to the same and the future will be catastrophic. The planet simply cannot cope with all the people living in this consumerist and greedy way. But in addition, this way of life does not make people in the OECD countries happy. We have growing problems of obesity, drug and alcohol abuse, mental illness, family breakdown and a general sense of malaise following from a loss of a sense of meaning and purpose in life.

So my conclusion is, at the end of the UN decade dedicated to the eradication of poverty, that the old model that saw the developing world becoming like the OECD countries is neither desirable nor possible. And the inequality of the world with 20% of people living with material plenty in a world in which a billion people remain abjectly poor is also unsustainable. As the poor of the world urbanise and see very clearly how others live they will not be willing to tolerate the suffering and poverty they currently endure. And thus if we want our civilisation to survive we have to learn better to share our knowledge, technology and capital to make the world more equitable both between and within nations. All people have to have access to the basics that they need and to education and health care and the freedom to be themselves, express their ideas and be treated with respect. And within such a world order we have to evolve a new way of living that ceases to make economic growth the purpose of politics and instead looks for genuine sustainable development and find satisfaction in our lives without the expectation of increasing economic consumption. Within such a world order, we are more likely to be able to reach agreements on curbing carbon dioxide emissions so that over a number of years we converge on an equal entitlement per head to a share of what our planet can bear. We must do the same for our fishstocks and we must reward those who live in the forests for preserving the forests on our behalf.

It goes without saying that such a world cannot be built without a stronger, more representative and effective United Nations that can effectively end the terrible wars within states that are causing so much suffering in the post Cold War world and have cost 13 million lives over the last 10 years. And if we are to focus the world's attention on these matters we must reinstate respect for international law and reach a just settlement in the Middle East.

What this means is that within the next 30-100 years we must create a new civilisation. It will be a more moral and decent way to live. It is effectively what the Universal Declaration of Human Rights calls for and has been the dream of religious leaders and moral philosophers throughout the ages. The difference now is that it is

an imperative. Things will probably get worse before they get better but it is not until we accept that we have to share equitably and build a way of life that is sustainable that we will be able to secure our future on this planet.