

25 September 2008

**Statement of Mr. Miguel d'Escoto Brockmann,
President of the 63rd Session of the General Assembly,
at the opening of the High-level Event on the Millennium Development Goals**

Distinguished Heads of State and Government,
Excellencies,
Mr. Secretary-General,
Brothers and Sisters,

I would like to extend a warm welcome to this high-level event which the Secretary-General and I have convened. This event represents a very important opportunity for us to focus our collective efforts, in a spirit of unity and fraternal solidarity, on addressing one of the biggest and most crucial challenges of our time: the eradication of poverty and hunger.

In 1995, meeting in Copenhagen at the World Summit for Social Development, Heads of State and Government from all over the world solemnly undertook to end poverty and hunger in the world. They stated very clearly that for the first time in human history this goal had become possible, thanks to the resources, knowledge and technology available in the modern age. The Copenhagen commitments also viewed poverty eradication as a political necessity as well as an ethical and moral imperative, since a global system based upon enormous inequalities was unsustainable.

In September 2000, the then 189 States Members of the United Nations, meeting in the United Nations General Assembly, adopted the Millennium Declaration, in which they pledged to "free our fellow men, women and children from the abject and dehumanizing conditions of extreme poverty" by 2015. To that end, the eight Millennium Development Goals were subsequently formulated.

The Millennium Declaration calls for a coordinated, time bound strategy that tackles many problems simultaneously on various fronts. Among other commitments, we agreed to halve, by 2015, the proportion of people living in extreme poverty; but also to solve the problems of hunger, malnutrition and disease, promote gender equality and empower women, and guarantee basic education for all. The Declaration also proposes that wealthier countries should provide direct support to developing countries in the form of aid, trade, debt relief and investment.

A significant increase in international assistance for the world's poorest countries is essential for global development. While all donor countries undertook in Monterrey to allocate 0.7 per cent of their gross domestic product to development cooperation, very few have lived up to this commitment. For every dollar that the developed countries spend on international assistance, they invest \$10 in military budgets.

It is calculated that the amount spent so far on the Iraq war could have paid for a full course of primary schooling for all of the world's children and youth who are not in school. The price of a single missile is enough to build about 100 schools in any country in Africa, Asia or Latin America.

Furthermore, unfair trade practices also delay development, as poor countries are shut out of markets and deprived of trade opportunities. The high tariffs that rich countries impose on poor countries' products amount to a "perverse tax" that deprives developing countries of funds for health care and education.

Thus far, the progress made towards the Millennium Development Goals has, with few exceptions, been limited. Many countries have fallen behind and are unlikely to achieve the Goals by the target date. It is therefore worthwhile for us to learn from those that have made significant progress and to help each other so that all of us can move forward.

It is clear that the world food crisis is increasing social tensions and bringing about a significant rise in extreme poverty. World hunger has its roots in the inequitable distribution of purchasing power both between and within countries. Thus, our efforts should focus primarily on reducing inequities in our global system of food production.

My brothers and sisters,

We have the technical and productive capacity to do this. It is incumbent on this Assembly to garner the strong sense of solidarity that will awaken the necessary political will to turn this crisis into an opportunity to transform a world system that denies the poor a right as basic as the right to food.

The World Bank has concluded that 75 per cent of the increase in food prices stems from the production of biofuels and factors related to rapidly growing demand for biofuels.

The developed countries' lavish agricultural subsidies have weakened agriculture in developing countries. At the same time, only a fraction of international aid is earmarked for improving agricultural productivity. Aid for agriculture has shrunk from 17 per cent of total development assistance, the high point reached in 1996, to 3 per cent today. Now some international donors are demanding an end to fertilizer subsidies. Faced with today's world food crisis we must speak out on behalf of our brothers and sisters and say "This is not right". It is not just to keep in place agricultural and energy policies that give rise to these kinds of distortions. Now is the time to help the poorest countries to boost their food production capacity.

Food shortages are a consequence of these misguided policies, which have forced poor countries to import agricultural products at the prices imposed on them and have undermined their ability to compete by heavily subsidizing the production and export of these products. Together these factors have shaped a food production system that puts private economic interests ahead of people's basic dietary needs.

The essential purpose of food, which is to nourish people, has been subordinated to the economic aims of a handful of multinational corporations that monopolize all aspects of food production, from seeds to major distribution chains, and they have been the prime beneficiaries of the world crisis. A look at the figures for 2007, when the world food crisis began, shows that corporations such as Monsanto and Cargill, which control the cereals market, saw their profits increase by 45 and 60 per cent, respectively; the leading chemical fertilizer companies such as Mosaic Corporation, a subsidiary of Cargill, doubled their profits in a single year.

At the same time, in response to the financial crisis, major hedge funds have shifted millions of dollars into agricultural products. These funds control 60 per cent of the supply of wheat and other basic grains. Most of these crops are purchased as “futures”. In other words, speculators have been increasingly active in food-related financial markets.

Friends,

Eight years after we adopted the Millennium Declaration, global inequality remains exactly the same or has even deteriorated since 2000, and the planet is at serious risk of not meeting the basic needs of the poorest of the poor. If current trends continue, it will be difficult even to prevent a further widening of the gap between the MDG targets and the results achieved; between the have's and the have not's of our world.

Today, 3 billion 140 million people live on less than \$2.50 a day. Of these, about 44 per cent survive on less than \$1.25 a day, according to a new World Bank report issued on 2 September 2008. Every day, more than 30,000 people die of malnutrition, avoidable diseases and hunger. Some 85 per cent of them are children under the age of 5.

The top 10 per cent of the world's people possess 84 per cent of the world's wealth, while the rest are left with the remaining 16 per cent. Yet we have the technical and productive capacity to adequately feed the whole planet. It is a matter of reorienting our priorities. We must now muster the resolve to feed the world's hungry.

Neoliberal economic restructuring worldwide has affected the supply and access to three of life's basic necessities: food, water and fuel. In recent years, the prices of these three variables have risen at the global level, with devastating economic and social consequences. Today these three basic necessities are controlled by a small group of global corporations and financial institutions.

All of these processes put at risk are ability to reach our development targets related to health. The poor performance in reducing maternal mortality is a telling sign of the magnitude of the problem. The current rate of more than 500,000 pregnancy- and childbirth-related maternal deaths each year constitutes a disgrace for humanity. The Secretary-General and I will therefore join forces to strengthen global health through increased support for initiatives in this area.

Today the developed countries are feeling the effects of an acute credit crisis. However, the failures or, more accurately, the lack of a viable international economic system has plunged the developed countries of the West, and the world economy as a whole, into a severe crisis.

We must all ensure that the current crisis, which was caused in large part by a preference for protectionist policies or special interests at the expense of the common good, is not used as a pretext for failing to honour the commitments undertaken.

If we are to achieve the Millennium Goals, which remain modest, we must demonstrate the resolve and take the necessary steps to incorporate fully into this international endeavor our indigenous brothers and sisters as a yardstick for monitoring progress on the Millennium Goals. Their effective inclusion will require a redefinition of development goals to reflect the particular worldviews, perspectives and concepts of development of indigenous peoples. Each and all of us together have much to learn from our indigenous brothers and sisters about respect for and the care of our Mother Earth, water and nature, which are the source and the sustenance of life for all species.

Dear brothers and sisters,

This snapshot of the world that I have presented today has a direct impact on the achievement of the Millennium Development Goals. Only through deep reflection and clear, courageous political decisions will we be able to address the structural causes and achieve the Goals that we agreed upon in 2000. I invite you in the dialogues at each of the round tables today to share successful experiences so that all of us will be able to generate effective, sustainable changes that benefit the poorest of the poor.

There can be no denying of the fact that these global upheavals have increased the burden of the most vulnerable among us, those brothers and sisters who already bear the yoke of extreme poverty, the uncertainty and uprootedness caused by climate change, and who are the victims of the direct and collateral damage inflicted by wars of aggression or greed.

May it be most of all for the benefit of these brothers and sisters that we dedicate our best efforts today.

Thank you.