



## Religious Leaders Call to Eliminate Poverty through the MDGs

*September 24, 2008*

We, leaders of the world's religions, meeting in New York during the United Nations High Level Event on the Millennium Development Goals (MDGs), call on all governments to meet their promises to eliminate poverty. We recall the pledge that the international community made in 2000 to "spare no efforts to free our fellow men, women and children from the abject and dehumanizing conditions of extreme poverty." We urge that that pledge be turned into effective action.

The massive scale of poverty and related suffering can be changed. Because we have the capacity to make this change, we have the moral obligation to do so. Each of our faith traditions requires us to stand with those who live in abject poverty and destitution and speak out and take action on their behalf. We are united in our call to world leaders, governments, civil society, religious communities and the private sector to take bold action to accelerate the implementation of the MDGs as a major step towards alleviating suffering.

Even as we do so, we are compelled to point out that these goals are not adequate. More must be done. We cannot abandon the 50% of those living in poverty who will not be reached by the MDG targets. They, too, call us to advance an effective partnership to break the cruel bondage of extreme poverty.

We urge governments to take more seriously their commitment made in MDG 8 to forge a new partnership for human development. This partnership must ensure a multi-stakeholder approach that engages governments, religious communities, civil society, the private sector and in the final analysis ordinary men and women around the world to ensure that we meet the MDG targets by 2015. It must also ensure a renewed commitment beyond that date to eradicate extreme poverty.

**Poverty and Hunger:** The current economic slowdown and food security crisis is having a disproportional impact on the poor. Higher food prices have resulted in 1 billion people going hungry, 2 billion suffering from malnutrition and pushing 100 million people into absolute poverty. Escalating food prices are also contributing to barriers to essential goods and services, such as health care and education. Therefore, we call upon world leaders to tackle the food crisis in a comprehensive manner and enhance food security by assisting developing countries to improve their agricultural output and by reducing tariffs and non-tariff barriers on their agricultural products.

**Health and Education:** Access to education as well as to basic health care poses great challenges. Aid for basic education in low-income countries is still nowhere near the \$11 billion needed annually to achieve the goal of universal primary education by 2015. Regarding health, there are more than 30

million people living with HIV and AIDS and far larger numbers impacted by malaria and other infectious diseases. Governments must meet their pledges of increasing resources to strengthen educational systems and scale up the responses to HIV and AIDS, malaria, and other infectious diseases. A long-term, multi-stakeholder and multi-sectoral approach must be taken to scale up prevention, treatment and care programs related to these health threats.

**Environmental Sustainability:** More than 450 million people in 29 countries are currently challenged by severe water shortages. The increase in population and global warming may result in two-thirds of the world's population facing water insecurity by 2025. We urge that natural resources be used appropriately, while simultaneously encouraging responsible and sustainable consumption.

**Transferring Assets to Fight Poverty:** We must also draw attention to the link between poverty and war. In addition to killing people and disrupting the lives of entire societies, war thwarts development and destroys the ecosystem. Massive defense expenditures, a global total of US\$ 1.34 Trillion in 2007 according to the Stockholm International Peace Research Institute, squanders monies that are urgently needed to be directed to sustainable development. Therefore, we urge the world leaders to commit to a reduction of total national defense and military expenditures and utilize the saved funds to advance development, including the protection of the environment.

**Gender Equality:** It is essential to promote gender equality and the empowerment of women to fully combat poverty, hunger and diseases as well to promote sustainable development. We, therefore, urge the world leaders to mainstream gender perspectives in all sectors and to take steps to ensure the representation of women in political and other decision making processes.

**Global Partnership for Development:** In 2007, aid resources fell to 0.28 percent of the gross national income (GNI) of the Development Assistance Committee (DAC) members, far from the commitments of 0.7 percent reaffirmed by donors in 2002 and 2005. Efforts must be made to step up Official Development Assistance (ODA) and ensure its quality and predictability. We urge world leaders to take stronger action to relieve the debt burden of countries and ensure access to affordable essential drugs and transfer of technology for development.

**Human Capacity:** A key condition for moving out of poverty and suffering is to help increase the capacity of the individuals and communities to take charge of their own future. Hence, government policy must focus on the empowerment of individual and communities.

**Conclusion:** While political leaders and governments have a principle responsibility to fulfill the MDGs, we pledge the commitment of our religious communities as key partners. We will not be satisfied until the full human dignity of every one of our brothers and sisters who live today in poverty and destitution is honored. Finally, while we labor to meet the challenges of poverty today, we are deeply mindful of how our religions have taught – each in their own way – the importance of compassion, solidarity and community. These are building blocks of genuine peace.