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Why the millennium goals won't work

By **Bunker Roy International Herald Tribune**

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TILONIA, India In 1978, when Robert McNamara, then president of the World Bank, and McGeorge Bundy, president of the Ford Foundation, spend a night at the Barefoot College here in Tilonia, McNamara asked a man whose family lived on much less than a dollar a day what he looked forward to in life. He smiled and said very quietly, "Two square meals a day."

I remember the stunned silence even today and think back to that meeting when I read the United Nations' report on its Millennium Development Goals (MDGs) for 2005. For all the high-powered officials who put it together and for all the 25 UN agencies and international donor groups it depends on, it reflects a naïve and gullible attitude about poverty.

The virtual reality in which its authors live, full of action plans, road maps and fact sheets, is frightening. They should listen to someone who has lived and worked for the last 34 years with the rural poor: Eradicating extreme poverty and hunger (MDG No. 1) does not need indicators and databases. Only intellectual activists who have no idea how to reach the very poor need that.

So long as governments in the South are powerless to break the hold of corrupt private contractors and larcenous village-level politicians, the poor will never be free from want or free from fear, whatever the UN report envisions. The possible solution? Get every government in the South to work toward a Right to Information Act like India's. Ensure transparency and accountability, with rural communities putting pressure on government from below to disclose how money has been spent. Ask Transparency International. They will help.

If we want to achieve universal primary education (MDG No. 2), Unesco's approach has not worked. With 60 percent of the poorest rural children not going to school in the morning because they have to help with domestic chores, far from a solution, the development report offers only a demonstration of an inability to think out of the box. But there's a common-sense people's solution - have school at night.

Few government teachers sleep in the villages. So train literate but unemployed rural youth as part-time "barefoot" teachers by the thousands, all over the world, to run the night schools.

Are the development report's authors aware that the tremendous work that community-based groups are doing in primary education is not reflected in the official statistics either of Unesco or of governments? This is because their work is still not valued or recognized and never will be, because they are a threat to village officials who represent government and who do not believe in changing the status quo.

There are many innovative ways of empowering women (MDG No. 3) used by community-based groups the world over. In my

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experience, to the disbelief of urban paper-qualified experts, semiliterate rural women have become solar and water engineers and have begun repairing hand pumps, building rainwater tanks in schools, solar-electrifying villages and feeding data into computers without any technical help from outside.

Speaking of rainwater, it falls on the roofs of schools everywhere. It should be collected, by the billions of gallons, for drinking and flushing toilets. Expensive centralized technology solutions with hand pumps or piping systems must be phased out. This simple solution to meet a basic minimum need will advance not only MDG No. 7, which specifically calls for greater access to safe drinking water, but almost every other MDG as well, either directly or indirectly.

We do not need the World Health Organization in the villages: It's so simple and inexpensive to upgrade the skills of traditional midwives, improve their confidence and build on their knowledge. Where these small community-managed steps have been taken to involve the traditional medicinal systems, child mortality has fallen sharply, maternal health has improved and waterborne diseases have been tackled more effectively (MDG Nos. 4 through 6).

If the primary focus is really ending poverty, the partnerships we need to strengthen are of a sort other than trade (MDG No. 8): partnerships between poor communities so that they learn from one another and share traditional, practical knowledge and skills. Importing expensive, unworkable ideas, equipment and consultants from the North simply destroys the capacity of communities to help themselves.

Any goal that is driven from the top by international donors and governments not accountable to the communities and without financial transparency is doomed to fail. That model encourages colossal falsification of figures, the excessive hiring of private consultants and contractors, conflicts of interest and a massive patronage system.

When poor communities think at the human level, all their goals are interconnected. But under the present top-down model, with the absence of a global grass-roots movement with the communities as equal partners, the goals have been broken up compartmentally into project mode, to suit donors and governments.

That's the ultimate recipe for disaster, and that's why the MDGs will be achieved only on paper.

(Bunker Roy is the founder of the Barefoot College and chairman of the Global Rain Water Harvesting Collective. A complete list of the Millennium Development Goals and the related UN report can be found at www.un.org/millenniumgoals.)

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