

Informal Interactive Hearings of the General Assembly with Non-governmental organizations and Civil society for the MDG Summit

*Thematic Session 1, Building a better tomorrow: local actions, national strategies and global structures
(Monday 14 June, 10:30 a.m. to 1 p.m.)*

Statement by Ms. Charlotte Bunch, Women's Environment and Development Organization (WEDO) on behalf of the Gender Equality Architecture Reform (GEAR) Campaign
(Check Against Delivery)

I speak here today from the Women's Environment and Development Organization (WEDO) and the Center for Women's Global Leadership (CWGL) as co-facilitators for the past four years of the Gender Equality Architecture Reform (GEAR) Campaign, a network comprised of 310 civil society organizations worldwide seeing to strengthen the UN's work on gender equality and women's rights. We welcome this opportunity to address the linkages between, gender equality, human rights and the Millennium Declaration and Development Goals.

This historic 10th anniversary of the MDGs is also the 15th anniversary of the Beijing Declaration and Platform for Action and 35 years since the first World Conference on Women in 1975. Women's, human rights and social justice groups around the world urge Member States and the United Nations Secretariat to establish the proposed gender equality entity before the Millennium Summit. We see this as a critical component of realizing the MDGs and fulfilling the UN's mandate of working for gender equality, development, human rights, peace and security.

A stronger United Nations entity for women will enable the UN and Member States to better deliver on their numerous commitments to advance gender equality and women's empowerment including the Beijing Platform, the Convention on the Elimination of All Forms of Discrimination against Women, Security Council Resolutions 1325 and 1820 on Women Peace and Security, the Millennium Development Goals, and others.

At the Millennium Summit in 2000, when 189 governments adopted the Millennium Declaration and the MDGs, it was understood as the culmination of a remarkable decade of UN World Conferences that had set a far-reaching global policy agenda. These conferences brought about unprecedented interaction between governments and civil society in the context of the United Nations : The Earth Summit in Rio, the World Conference on Human Rights in Vienna, the International Conference on Population and Development in Cairo, the World Summit for Social Development in Copenhagen, the Fourth World Conference on Women in Beijing, The World Food Summit in Rome, etc.

For women – these events marked the emergence of strong women's NGO caucuses that linked gender equality and women's empowerment as central aspects of all these topics. The UN conferences were also a high point in cooperation between civil society and governments in

setting a global policy agenda. In the past decade, the role of civil society in the UN has not continued to move forward. But civil society was then, and still is, crucial to the achievement of the MDGs, and needs a greater voice in the UN if they are to be met.

The Millennium Declaration makes clear that the MDGs are to be understood in this broader wholistic context as inter-related and as specific actions aimed at fulfilling the visions and platforms not only of those UN conferences but also of the entire human rights and development regime of the UN. The MDGs cannot be fulfilled in isolation from the pursuit of human rights, development, peace, and security more generally.

Member states have committed themselves numerous times to fundamental human rights and freedoms, and an action plan to achieve the MDGs must include action to respect, protect and fulfill human rights. Ending poverty is a struggle for the basic social and economic right to food, shelter, education, health, etc. But human rights is not only part of the larger context of the MDGs, it is also a crucial aspect of the strategy for achieving them. Practical actions that protect the human rights of those living in poverty and enable wider participation in decision making will accelerate progress in meeting the MDG targets.

One of the core tenets of human rights is eliminating discrimination against women and ensuring gender equality. It has become conventional wisdom from the World Bank to national development plans to recognize that women are key to human development, poverty eradication, peace and security. Hence achieving gender equality is not simply a function of MDG 3, but an underlying aspect of all of the MDGs.

Since the MDGs were first formulated, advocates and researchers have analyzed and provided evidence showing why a gender lens is crucial to their implementation. Since women comprise two-thirds of the people living in extreme poverty, any attempt to alleviate poverty and achieve sustainability must examine and challenge the gender discrimination underlying this first MDG goal. Similarly women constitute higher percentages of workers in vulnerable employment, of children who die before their 5th birthday and who are out of school, etc.

In the areas of MDG 3 (Gender Equality) and MDG 5 (Maternal Health), inadequate commitment has been made to universal access to reproductive health. MDG 5, particularly 5b, is lagging behind most of the other targets, yet the critical importance of reproductive health to development has been widely acknowledged. Universal access to reproductive health is the key to reducing maternal mortality; preventing unwanted pregnancies; curbing the spread of STIs, including HIV/AIDS; empowering women and girls; and contributing to a more sustainable world for all people. Lack of access to sexual and reproductive health services and information is the leading cause of ill health and death for women of reproductive age. This stark reality and women's and girls' ill health substantially impedes achievement of the MDGs.

Equally critical to the advancement of gender equality and the achievement of the MDGs is the worldwide problem of violence against women. Clearly an issue of life and death for many, it has become even more critical in the context of armed conflict where in some places it is more dangerous to be female than to be a soldier, and in the HIV AIDS epidemic where gender based violence is both a cause and a consequence of infection. Such violence is also an impediment to women's participation in development and to their ability to exercise their human rights, as well as a clear violation of both human rights and human security. The MDG 3 Task Force and the World Health Organization made the case that gender based violence should be addressed in the MDGS early on, as did the Secretary General's in depth study in 2006. Yet it is still not a target and receives only passing mention in the Outcomes document.

Evidence of the importance of gender discrimination, reproductive health and violence against women to the achievement of the MDGs has been produced by many NGOs and UN agencies. Yet, the implementation of this policy agenda remains elusive without the commitment of high level political will and significant resources. Advocates for gender equality have suggested important additions to the outcome text and actions needed to accelerate progress, especially in the area of reproductive health. We commend those recommendations to you.

Nevertheless, the fundamental question of governmental resolve to address these issues remains. Without that commitment of will and resources, the achievement of the MDGs will also remain elusive.

NEXT STEPS

The critical gaps on the ground in implementation of the promises made to gender equality at the international level led many civil society organizations to advocate for a more powerful women's rights agency at the UN. The UN World Conferences on Women, the Convention on the Elimination of all forms of Discrimination Against Women (CEDAW) and other UN initiatives on women's empowerment had supported local and national efforts to advance women's human rights, but these were now stalled. While the UN helped to create global awareness of discrimination against women, the women's units at the UN have been under-resourced, fragmented, and lacking in high level authority to advance this agenda adequately.

The proposal for a consolidated gender equality entity before the GA at this time presents a unique opportunity for international leadership from the UN. If Heads of State and Senior UN leadership move the new women's agency forward this year with significant high level leadership and financial support, the gender equality agenda could be advanced at the local level over the next five years, which would significantly advance progress on the MDGs.

Within the Action Agenda for Achieving the MDGs of the Outcome Document for the Summit, governments should make clear their financial and political commitments to achieving gender equality and women's empowerment. Two aspects of such a move could be:

- Inclusion of civil society, and particularly women's organizations, in the design, monitoring, and implementation of MDG programs in all sectors

- Strengthening the United Nations Gender Equality architecture by creating an agency that will serve as a catalyst for accelerating action at country level to meet the MDGs through supporting countries to facilitate and implement programs that address, among others, violence against women, economic livelihoods, women and the environment, political participation, health, etc. and that strengthen partnerships between relevant stakeholders for achieving gender equality.

Specifically we propose adding to OP 33 :

We reaffirm that gender equality and women's empowerment is a key goal in itself and an essential to achieving all the MDGs, as well as fundamental for development, peace and security. *"In this regard, we support strengthening institutional arrangements of the United Nations for support of gender equality and the empowerment of women by consolidating the four existing offices into a composite entity led by an Under-Secretary-General" (OP 1 and OP2 of A/Res/63/311 and OP2 of E/CN.6/2010/L.7)*

And OP 44:

We commit to accelerate progress on gender equality and the empowerment of women by: *"(j) bis Consolidating the Office of the Special Adviser on Gender Issues and Advancement of Women, the Division for the Advancement of Women, the United Nations Development Fund for Women and the United Nations International Research and Training Institute for the Advancement of Women, into a composite entity, to be led by an Under-Secretary-General and taking into account existing mandates, (OP1 and OP2 of A/Res/63/311)" and ensure that is is operational by 1 January 2011.*

A strong invigorated women's agency at the UN could be the champion for gender equality at the highest levels in order to ensure that this agenda moves forward on the ground. All bodies in the UN system are responsible for gender aspects of their mandates, but the entity would collaborate with them and with governments to create accountability for implementation of commitments made to women's rights, including within the context of the MDGs. Working closely with civil society, the entity should have national representatives in UN country teams and on MDG task forces who advocate for women's rights in every area and who can help to realize women's rights locally – where they thrive or die.

To close the gap in realizing women's rights, the UN has recognized the need for a strong, well resourced coordinated body to be a driver for these goals at the highest levels of leadership, both at Headquarters and in the field. On September 14, 2009, the General Assembly adopted a historic resolution (A/RES/63/311) supporting the consolidation of the existing four UN gender equality entities into a composite women's entity, to be headed by an Under Secretary-general. The GEAR Campaign welcomed this resolution and looks to governments to adopt a final resolution to move this forward during this 64th GA session. This is a crucial mechanism to achieve the MDGs. If the resolution is adopted soon, it can be launched at the MDG summit in September. The time to take action to advance these goals is now.