

OBJECTIVES OF THE MILLENNIUM (I)

Poverty – Africa

“Let’s all join hands / to build this wall. /
The blacks with their black hands, / the whites with their white hands”.
Nicolas Guillen

The moment is coming when all of us together will be able to build the bastions of peace – as the constitution of the UNESCO commends us to do– based on justice, on the equal dignity of all human beings, on freedom of expression, “on the capacity of each individual to direct his own life”, as Francisco Giner de los Rios so beautifully expressed it. The people at last? Having exhausted all hope and endless waiting for the world’s leaders to fulfill their repeatedly-broken promises, will it finally be the outcry of the people that will achieve compliance with the Millennium Objectives, solemnly proclaimed in the United Nations Assembly in 2000 by “We, the Heads of State and Governments of nations”... and later, once again dragged down by the death rattle of a system that has replaced universal values with those of the market and has increased rather than decreased social and economic inequality?

The citizens of the world, progressively united through the communications media, will be able to demand that leaders do what they have not been able to do, or have not wanted to do, until now. The number of citizens resigned to their fate will gradually decrease, while there will be an increase in citizens capable of participating, of expressing and of progressively conferring greater authenticity to democracy. A few weeks after the G-8 Meeting in Gleneagles we realized that despite the comforting

announcements and good intentions which it appears some of the participants shared, the results have once again been disappointing. I sincerely hope and desire that some countries do at least understand that things are changing and that the people are beginning peacefully and with moderation to play a progressively relevant role on the international scene. I hope that is the case, although for the moment the news we receive daily indicates that nothing has changed: people who die from hunger in Niger and other African countries, forest fires and natural disasters for which we are totally unprepared, while we continue to invest incredible amounts of money on conventional war machinery; the increase in drug trafficking and the number of addicts... After declaring five years ago that no expense would be spared to implement the Millennium Objectives, everything now indicates that, with few exceptions, the dominant system worldwide continues to say one thing and do another.

On the occasion of the G-8 Summit there were huge Live 8 concerts and demonstrations in support of Africa and to fight hunger. We must pay homage to people such as Bob Geldorf and Bono, who have placed there indisputable capacity to attract large audiences at the service of this urgent world objective. At these concerts the G-8 were urged to provide debt relief and focus on climate change and its causes... Once again, good intentions. Once again, before the meeting it was announced that the great challenges represented by poverty and social and economic inequality were going to be addressed. Afterwards, several decisions were announced, to be put into practice over various years without having, for example, taken corrective measures with respect to the present operations of the World Bank and International Monetary Fund. And the gap will continue to increase, while someone “in passing” will make reference to corruption in Africa. And it isn't that corruption doesn't exist –those who are corrupt know this better

than anyone— but let's not lose sight of those who are the protagonists and beneficiaries, who are destitute and live in humiliating conditions. Let us remember them and expose those who, while keeping a low profile, cling to their privileges and advantages, unaware –or I'd like to think so– of the effects of their attitude: promoting social conflict, radicalization, aggressiveness; increasing the breeding grounds for hostility and resentment; darkening the horizons of our descendents... .

The new president of the World Bank, Paul Wolfowitz recently declared (July 7, 2005) that aid to Africa “will only be effective if there is transparency...” Transparency on the part of whom? Transparency on the part of all, ending financial and technological colonialism and “going it together.”

The difference between evolution and revolution is the “r” of responsibility. For refusing to evolve and to serenely rise to the occasion at each moment in history, we are condemned to revolution and a painful break with the past. There is no justification for the use of violence. But we must explore its origins. To attempt to explain it. To prevent it, if at all possible.

The material poverty of so many human beings is, to a great extent, the consequence of the spiritual poverty of the most prosperous. “There can be no excuse, no defense, no justification for the plight of millions of our fellow beings in Africa today There should be nothing that stands in the way of our changing it”, proclaimed Prime Minister Tony Blair early this year. This would certainly include increasing direct aid for endogenous development (in October, 1974 the rich countries decided to invest 0.7% of their GDP for that purpose). The leading country, the United States,

currently contributes to Africa 0.16% of its GDP, one of the smallest international contributions. But this isn't the full picture: it is most important to adopt a series of measures –reducing agricultural subsidies, reinforcing the United Nations' authority to prevent the total impunity with which the large international corporations operate, eliminating tax havens, curbing the profits obtained by financial institutions, including those created at Bretton Woods...– in summary, facilitating transparency instead of continuing to promote obscurity and confusion. In its editorial of July 4, 2005 the International Herald Tribune recommended that we contribute to preventing corruption by urging companies to be more transparent with respect to the funds they pay African governments for oil, diamonds and other goods, and asking banks to do likewise by reporting deposits and transfers from suspect sources. And it added that more political coherence is required, since while declaring a willingness to help countries in need, the financial institutions largely controlled by those same countries are pressuring them to reduce their payrolls, including educators and medical personnel.

“The world demands justice for Africa: more than 200,000 people attended the macro-concert in London featuring U2, McCartney and Elton John”, announced the press on July 2. Once again, hope was rekindled. Three days later: “The world's economy displaces Africa at the G-8 meetings”... Even if the decisions announced at the end of the meeting are implemented, Nigeria must continue to pay 1,700 million dollars annually in debt service alone. In 2004 Nigeria paid five times more in debt service than it invested in education and thirteen times more than it spent on healthcare. **[A similar situation can be found in the Latin American countries that are a part of the beneficiaries (a group of 18 countries) whose debt has been partially cancelled: they must pay 14,000 million dollars in interest**

over the next five years. Haiti is not among the “chosen” countries in Latin America!] *May be deleted.*

“In helping Africa, we are helping ourselves” read the front page headlines of a large-circulation international weekly. Exactly 30 years ago (!) the conclusion was reached at the United Nations that development should in principal facilitate the training of citizens through education. However, soon thereafter aid was replaced by loans granted in conditions that guaranteed profits for the lenders but only occasional benefits for the borrowers who, moreover, watched on the sideline as their natural resources were being depleted and their foreign debt increased. Now, to relieve the situation of debt and dependence that this policy has caused, we are returning to the initial unfulfilled solution for “making poverty history:” “aid to Africa will be doubled,” said the G-8 members. But, careful! The significance of “double” depends on the amount to be doubled. Doubling an insignificant amount and continuing with the same policies will not change anything. The two means for providing aid and the institutions that implement them –the World Bank, regional banks and the IMF– must be urgently reformed, as I indicated above, so that they can correct many past mistakes. They are the international consortia that exploit the oilfields, agricultural wealth, fishing grounds, mines ... of Africa, and who must submit to “global” regulation to prevent the present standstill at the international level. It is the transgressors who must be identified and taken before the competent international courts. And, for all of this, the world must not be led by a group of rich countries (“We, the powerful...”) but rather, as President Roosevelt defended, by all countries together in the United Nations (“We, the People”...).

We must respond to the question that I posed years ago during a high-level meeting on development in Africa, which has been reframed on various occasions since then: To whom does Africa belong? And, once we recognize the reality, we will be able to transform it. **[And in a few years we will not have to remember with sadness and shame as we do now, the well-intentioned songs sung in the fight against poverty when we hear the stimulating chords of “We are the world”..., “We are the world”, “so start giving”... We were not the world. We did not give. Will we be the world this time? Will we give this time?]** *May be deleted if necessary.*

We now have communications media that we previously did not have. Media which, if civil society organizes itself well, could be very effective in ensuring that the voices of the people are heard. At present we can send millions of messages to members of parliament, government leaders, members of the opposition, via mobile phones, to express our assent or dissent, our observations and proposals. Above all, we can stage an immense demonstration without even being present, a great popular outcry. At the local and global level, millions of voices, peacefully, assuming the role they should play, acting responsibly for the future, without resignation, without giving in to the argument that “there’s no solution,” refusing to allow abuses of excessive power, whether it be economic, political, cultural, environmental or of the media..., concentrated in so few hands. The people at last at the forefront! And the transition from the age-old culture of force and imposition to a culture of conciliation, dialogue and peace.

When, at the end of the Cold War we most desired a world based on common values for an equally-shared destiny, the politicians renounced

their ideologies –for which they had in many cases obtained their offices as political leaders or representatives of the people– and embraced the laws of the market. The results are clearly visible. The “Cold War” has been followed by this “Cold Peace” which we now endure. We owe so much to Africa! **[As President Mandela proclaimed: “We cannot forget, but we can forgive.” Africa has forgiven the immense humiliation to which it was subjected. And in exchange for the knowledge that we occasionally provide her, Africa offers us her formidable wisdom. This is not only a matter of development aid so that we can continue to profit from Africa’s resources. It is a matter of our duty to remember, and to walk from this moment onward hand in hand.]** *May be deleted if necessary.* In 1989 on Goreé Island, at the end of a poem I wrote: “They were sold by the pound. / We must pay the debt.”

Federico Mayor Zaragoza

August, 2005