

Kevin Rudd's speech at the Summit on the MDG September 2010

As nations we have a responsibility to do that which we say we will do. A responsibility to keep our promises to fellow Member States. A responsibility to turn the commitments solemnly given in this great chamber into concrete actions that change the lives of the poorest of the poor across the world. A decade ago, we, the nations of the world, assembled here to offer the world's poor a fairer share in the world's future. A decade later we gather once again to take stock. To celebrate what has been done. But also honestly to admit where we have failed.

I want to begin with a story of two children. The first is a young girl I met on Monday, here in New York. Her name is Nthabiseng. She was born in Soweto. Nthabiseng is a beautiful little girl with the brightest of smiles. She is 12 years old. But when she was seven, her mother died. Normally, this would have consigned her to a life in poverty. But Nthabiseng was determined to get an education. She said, "when children are stopped from going to school, they are losing their future and their tomorrow." Now she is doing well in school and has a very bright future. Children like Nthabiseng will benefit from the UN's One Goal program that seeks to make education a reality for all the children in the world, not just some.

The second story is of a young boy who has never been to New York. He too lost his mother – she died giving birth to him. His family ekes out a living in the slums of one of the world's developing mega cities, not far from the skyscrapers of its booming financial district. This little boy's days are spent, not in school, but in the traffic of the city, begging for spare change at car windows when cars stop at the lights. We have all seen him in our travels. I haven't given him a name. He has thousands of names. And right now, he is without hope.

Why do I tell these stories? Because they are the human faces of what happens when the world acts with compassion, and when it does not. The first story inspires us to further action. The second should make us determined to act for all. At the turn of the millennium we, the member states of the United Nations, made a compact with one another. We said we would put our shoulders to the wheel to lift a billion people out of poverty. And we said we would be measured by these Millennium Development Goals in 2015.

To halve poverty and hunger.

To give every girl and boy the chance of a good education.

To make big cuts in the number of women dying in childbirth and children dying from easily preventable diseases.

To promote gender equality and empower women.

To combat HIV / AIDS.

To ensure global sustainability.

And to develop a global partnership for development.

Ten years on, it is time to reflect on the report card of our progress. The truth is we are not yet on track to register even the barest of pass marks. Successes in some areas – poverty reduction and school enrolment, must be weighed against failures in others – including maternal health and child nutrition. Our failures have attracted vocal critics; those who say that international aid doesn't work; that it is wasted; that it is poorly managed; that there is just no point.

This is not Australia's view. Our view is that the richest among us have a profound responsibility to help the poorest members of the human family out of poverty. Poverty is degrading. Poverty is de-humanising. Poverty destroys human dignity.

As the Secretary-General reminded us in his report "Keeping the Promise", the MDGs are an expression of basic human rights, the rights of everyone to good health, education and shelter. I believe these truths are self evident. But to those who doubt there is any self-evident truth alive in the concept of social justice we should consider this. Eliminating extreme poverty boosts global growth for all. It grows the global cake. It grows trade and investment. It grows jobs. It acts against political and religious radicalisation. It builds peace. It enhances stability. And it reduces dangerous, irregular people movements around the world. In other words, eliminating extreme poverty is good for the entire human family. And it is good for all nations.

As members of the family of nations, we cannot stand idly by while 70 million children are unable to attend school. We cannot stand idly when hundreds of thousands of women die through childbirth – an estimated 358,000 in the year before last. Nor can we stand idly by while infectious diseases cut a swathe of devastation through the communities of the poor. And the chilling fact is that more than half of the 800 million people in the least-developed countries of the world are still living in extreme poverty.

Let us be honest. Donor countries have made commitments that they have not honoured. For example, less than half of the funding pledged to Africa five years ago in the Gleneagles declaration of the G8 has been delivered. The answer is not to push our commitments even further into the future, nor is the answer simply to sweep it all quietly under the international carpet. The answer is to do that which we say we will do; to honour our commitments, even when the global economic environment is hard because for the poorest of the poor, it is even harder. This is what Australia seeks to do. Several years ago, halfway to the 2015 deadline, we saw that our efforts were not sufficient. We realised that we had to do much more. Today, Australia's aid budget is double what it was in 2005– including a 200 per cent increase in our aid to Africa alone. By 2015, on current projections, our aid budget will double again. This will make Australia the fastest-growing donor country in the OECD. And we have maintained our commitment despite the impacts of the financial crisis. The Gillard Government puts the MDGs at the heart of our aid program. We have established Partnerships for Development with eleven Pacific Island countries. At the regional level, the Cairns Compact on Strengthening Development Cooperation, agreed in 2009, is ensuring all development partners act in concert to help achieve the MDGs with our Pacific Island neighbours.

Yesterday, I attended the special session of this Summit on the least-developed countries. There I talked about the particular needs of the 49 least-developed countries – fifteen of which are in our own region and 33 of which lie in Africa. Our first priority must be with these people – the poorest of the poor. As Australia's aid program doubles over the next five years, we will increase our support to those least-developed countries. Today I am committing Australia to working towards providing 0.15 per cent of our Gross National Income in aid to the least-developed countries, in line with international targets. Across our entire overseas development assistance program, Australia expects between now and 2015 to allocate A\$5 billion to education. A\$1.6 billion to women's and children's health. A\$1.8 billion to food security. And A\$1.2 billion for action on climate change adaptation and mitigation in developing countries, including the 39 small island developing states who are the most exposed to, but least responsible for, this great threat to our planet.

Australia will also work to open world markets to least-developed countries to enable private commerce, trade and investment to help lift these countries out of poverty. All of which is made possible by necessary governance measures that provide transparency and accountability. These are the necessary stepping stones to development.

I began with a story of two children, one with opportunities, and one without.

The Australian people by instinct want to see all the little ones of the world given a fair go. Through their generous private donations and through the official aid program they fund with their taxes, Australians want to provide opportunities for all the people of the world to live decent lives. Australian NGOs are active across the world – NGOs including World Vision, Oxfam, Caritas, ChildFund, Plan International, the Red Cross and Oaktree Foundation.

Let me conclude by quoting a third child – this time a young Australian. She is a young girl, aged 10. She wrote to me the following: "I think kids in other countries have the same rights as kids here - yes, that's right. Kids everywhere should have the same things we have - like good teachers, doctors, houses and clean water."

The governments of the world cannot disappoint the children of the world. The need is clear. The goals are clear. The policies are clear. And the timetable is clear. All that remains unclear is whether the governments of the world actually mean what we say. One billion of the world's poor have no option but to hope that we do. If we want to reform this great institution – these United Nations – this parliament of human kind – we should not begin with another grand plan. We should simply begin by doing that which we say. We in Australia want to do just that. To play our part in bringing these Millennium Development Goals into reality. To make a real difference for the world's poor.