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The Slum Target is not In Line With Housing Rights

Reviewing the Millennium Development Goals through a human rights prism, one is forced to ponder whether these Goals were designed to supplant, integrate or ignore human rights concerns of the world's poor. All fair-minded people, of course, would hope for the second of this trilogy of options. Unfortunately, looking closely at the Goals, particularly Goal 7, target 11 on improving the lives of slum dwellers, it appears the Goals' flaws, as far as housing rights are concerned, far out-number their benefits.

Three shortcomings stand out as particularly worrying. First, the objective of improving the lives of at least 100 million slum dwellers by 2020 is almost obscene in its conscious exclusion of a huge majority of the world's urban and rural poor. In a world of almost one billion slum dwellers, to speak of improving the lives of less than 10 per cent of the world's poorest citizens and rights-holders underscores just how far the Goals stray from the language, sentiments and vision of human rights. Which 100 million slum dwellers are we actually talking about? Who will choose those whose lives will be improved? What say will they have in the matter? Which 900 million or more slum dwellers and homeless citizens will fall through the cracks? Who will inform them of their plight of having been so deliberately barred from the Millennium Development Goals? And what of the additional 400 million slum dwellers that UN-HABITAT projects will be in need of improved housing by 2030? Does the world truly accept that perhaps some 1.3 billion people will call slums home some fifteen years from now, and that this is somehow an acceptable future for the planet's urban poor?

Second, the Millennium Development Goals fail to address some of the most pressing housing rights concerns affecting the world's slum dwellers, as if these, too, were somehow not part of the poverty trap facing growing numbers of people. The global forced evictions epidemic, decimated budgets and reductions in public expenditure on housing for the poor, spiraling house, land and property prices reaching bubble like proportions in many countries, illegal land grabs, entrenched discrimination against women, the disabled and the elderly, ethnic cleansing, the demolition of homes during war and so many other core housing rights themes are all remarkably absent from the Goals. Not only would addressing these poverty-expanding processes have been logical given their impact on hundreds of millions of dwellers throughout the world, but by focusing on and forcefully discouraging these practices, the Goals would have improved the lives of many more millions of slum dwellers than will possibly see improvements based on Goal 7, target 11.

Third, the Goals – as with so many of the agreements emerging from the various global summits during the past decade, whether by decision or by default – all too often end up taking the wind from the sails of the human rights movement, slowing human rights progress and shifting burdens of proof from national governments to the international community, which can never alone transform the human rights dreams of the poor into reality.

The Millennium Development Goals are formulated as if to tease those who – in precisely the same manner as international human rights law – treat issues of poverty not only as development questions, but as rights. By labeling what are, in fact, core human rights principles merely as “goals”, these internationally-agreed targets are effectively supporting a creed which sees only half of the human rights equation as actual human rights, somehow relegating the other half to “goals”, “aspirations” or “needs” – not

enforceable rights held and rightfully expected by all, especially those currently without the protection these rights are meant to provide.

As far as housing rights are concerned, it would be difficult not to conclude that the Millennium Development Goals let governments off the hook; they almost insinuate that a staggeringly large portion of humanity is condemned by circumstance to live in life- and health-threatening conditions, without security, as if to say, “Yes, we care, but as far as slums dwellers go, we know and accept that our care will only reach a few of you.” Good luck to the 900 or so million slum dwellers that the Millennium Development Goals forgot about. They will need it. In the coming years, these neglected millions will, as always, gain ground, organize, and support them. Whatever rights slum dwellers accrue, or security they can claim, will come from their own energies and sadly, not from a global accord agreed to by governments.

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