

Canada flunks in generosity

When it comes to giving to impoverished countries, Canada sorely lacks
Published May 7, 2009 by Anne Georg in [Viewpoint](#)



Genevieve Simms

I cried when I saw the African Children's Choir sing. Their exuberant innocence proved cathartic after sitting through challenging sessions of big ideas and sobering images at the third annual Montreal Millennium Summit. The topic of conversation during the two-day conference was the desperate need in many African countries. It attracted representatives from non-government organizations, the United Nations, international not-for-profits, as well as celebrities.

One presenter called the conference "sweet revenge" for holding almost 200 world leaders accountable for the easily made, but difficult-to-keep promises they signed at the UN Millennium Declaration in 2000.

The summit's stated purpose is to measure the progress made on eight millennium development goals within its declaration. It also serves to rally the troops. About 3,000 people attended the daylong public forum to hear speakers, including Mia Farrow and The Duchess of York, Sarah Ferguson, and to see well-known Quebecois entertainers.

Each development goal has set deadlines and outcomes to be met by 2015 (for example: cutting poverty and hunger by half; ensuring all children have primary education; eliminating gender disparity in secondary education; reducing child mortality by two-thirds; reversing the spread of HIV/AIDS, malaria and other diseases; improving maternal mortality; ensuring environmental sustainability; and agreeing to work together to achieve the goals).

With nine years into the global project— more than halfway – enormous work and ambitious goals remain. Speakers delivered passionate appeals and insightful comment on the diverse crises—economic, environmental and humanitarian. Overall, the messages were stark, offering only small slivers of hope. A well for a village here, a new clinic there — it's baby steps to eradicating poverty.

I was heartened that not all the news is grim. Some of the goals are being met. More kids are going to primary school. More people are drinking cleaner water. The poverty in some developing countries has decreased dramatically since the 1990s.

But not in sub-Saharan Africa. Many people there continue to live in dehumanizing poverty, and are victims of brutal war, corrupt governments and climate change.

Speaker after speaker, including influential economist Jeffery Sachs, took to the podium to reiterate that the world has the technology and the wealth to end extreme poverty — but not the will. Trillions of dollars were instantly available to bail out the banks, but no one can afford to save the poorest of the poor. That's enough to make me want to cry all over again.

Among the expectations of the global-partnership-for-development goal is that each country donates .07 per cent of its gross national product (GNP) for international development. That is not happening in most nations. And Canada is among the worst.

On a list of 22 countries, Canada ranks 16th in meeting its commitment. Our country contributes about .32 per cent of our GNP. If we care at all, Canadians seem to believe that our reputation of humanitarian largesse is our birthright. But the cat is out of the bag. Canada is slacker nation. We can't forever ride on the respected coattails of former prime minister Lester B. Pearson. He received a Nobel Peace Prize in 1957 for his efforts in international diplomacy; and in 1969 under his guidance the World Bank's Pearson Commission arrived at the .07-per-cent figure for development aid. Oh, Canada.

Summit speakers coached us to write to our MPs. But only 42 per cent of Canadians voted in the last federal election. How many people even know the name of their MP, let alone care to write them a letter? It seemed futile.

Then in my transcendent moment during the children's choir, I promised myself I'd write a letter to my MP. The biggest difference it will make may only be for myself. It's purposeful, it's active— the baby steps of engaged citizenship.

Who knows where I'll be in 2015.

To track the progress of the millennium development goals, go to mdgmonitor.org.

Anne Georg is a Calgary writer with an interest in international development and local social justice issues.