

UNITED NATIONS CONFERENCE ON GLOBAL HEALTH MELBOURNE 2010

Twelve Australians, an Irishwoman with many years of experience in Eastern Africa and a Kenyan represented Loreto at the United Nations Conference on *Global Health and the Millennium Development Goals (MDGS)*, held in Melbourne, Australia, from 30 Aug to 1 Sept 2010. Delegates included Loreto sisters (7) and colleagues (7) with experience in human rights, bioethics, indigenous health, HIV/AIDS, advocacy, clinical health, public policy, community development and poverty reduction.



Delegates Danielle Forbes, Anne Kelly ibvm, Elissa Barry and Caitlin Leahy enjoying a healthy lunch

MDGS

Internationally accepted as the *road map to development*, the MDGS provide a framework for assessing improvement in the living standards of one third of the world's population who struggle to have their basic human rights met. Three of the MDGs specifically target health:

Goal 4 Reduce by two thirds the mortality rate among children under five.

Goal 5 Reduce by three quarters the maternal mortality ratio; achieve universal access to reproductive health.

Goal 6 Halt and begin to reverse the spread of HIV/AIDS; achieve by 2010, the universal access to treatment for HIV/AIDS for all those who need it; halt and begin to reverse the incidence of malaria and other major diseases.

Alarming Goal 5 is far from being achieved with one woman dying in childbirth every 90 minutes. In many parts of the world, including Timor Leste where I spent the past four years, the most dangerous thing a young woman can do, in terms of her health, is to fall pregnant.

Conference Structure

The conference consisted of opening and closing ceremonies (both with a vibrant, colourful and moving Australian flavour), four roundtable discussions, workshops, exhibits and opportunities to network. One theme to emerge was the realisation that young women are the key to achieving global wellbeing in the 21st century. Focussing on the health of teenage girls is not only cost effective in economic terms, but triggers a wealth of additional benefits, not only for the young women themselves but for their children and extended families. Research from a variety of perspectives is reaching congruence on this point.

Workshops

One informative workshop that I attended was on forming transnational civil society

alliances. Chris Roche from Oxfam used the *Jubilee Debt Campaign* as an example of good practice. This campaign reframed the argument for debt relief for heavily indebted countries in moral terms, capturing people's imagination and generating empathetic responses. He noted that change is our only constant in this world and that the challenge for advocates for social justice is to focus on future issues not the past, to maintain resilience, face their vulnerabilities, and to develop broad-based participation and inclusion in their campaigns.

Above all he advised us to avoid being adversarial but rather to come up with positive proposals, while building cultural change from below. In a world of sound bites and instant news, he conceded that it has become increasingly difficult to communicate complex issues in simple, engaging terms, but says that this is central to our task.

The workshop presented by **Mary Owens ibvm** and her colleague **Protus Limuti** on the *Nyumbani Centre Kenya*, which cares for over 4,000 HIV infected and affected children and adults, was one of the conference highlights. Twenty years of passionate and committed leadership has made this multi-faceted project a shining example of sustainable and effective development.

Follow this link to learn more about their inspirational work.

www.nyumbani.org/village_need.htm



Protus Limuti and Mary Owens ibvm

Statistics

Workshops and presentations were peppered with sobering statistics; too many to summarise here but there is one I feel compelled to note. World military spending in 2008 was **\$US1,464,000,000,000** which translates to \$US4,000,000,000 per day! These figures are too astronomical for me to comprehend in any real way. Just think how all that wealth could be spent to improve the lives of the 1.6 billion people who are chronically hungry every day, without access to clean water or sanitation, let alone education and basic health.

Insights

The debriefing session conducted by the Loreto delegates on the morning following the conference generated lively discussion on a number of points. For instance we agreed that we needed:

- To view issues and projects from a sharper human rights lens than we do at present;
- To keep ourselves better informed about current global realities;

- To work for change by capturing the good will of people we are connected with and taking steps, however small;
- To develop activist mindsets among ourselves and our colleagues;
- To lobby for the inclusion in medical training of civic responsibility and global awareness;
- To harness the energy and idealism of youth;
- To develop other models to bring about systemic change (NGOs move too slowly);
- To hold our leaders accountable both nationally and globally;
- To promote understanding of the MDGs within our local groups.

Conference Declaration

As is customary during major UN conferences, a formal declaration of key recommendations to be presented to the UN Secretary General was formally ratified. (See www.un-ngls.org/spip.php?article2857 for the full text of this declaration and a brief summary of the main conference themes.) The document concludes with a call to action.

It is unacceptable that so many children and adults in low income countries continue to suffer preventable illness, disability and premature deaths each year. The world knows how to prevent and treat most of the causes and has shown that well-focussed efforts can significantly reduce levels of illness and deaths. The MDGS can be, indeed must be, achieved by 2015.

Anne Kelly ibvm UN representative
2 November 2010