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Five years after

WHERE STANDS THE GOAL OF ACHIEVING SOCIAL development for all five years after Copenhagen? A fair way to put it is, it's a mix of progress in some and stagnation or even reversal in others. In any case most assessments, especially by NGOs and social movements, incline on the negative.

The global picture is described by Social Watch this way: "Many of the world's poorest countries have made extraordinary progress in their social development indicators in recent years, but the world is still far from the goals agreed by the international community. Progress in the middle-income countries is insufficient and the richer nations have not met their commitments to contribute to less developed countries. Further, the global economy has not been made friendlier to people living in poverty, and their efforts to overcome misery have not found an enabling environment" (Bissio, Social Watch #4 2000).

This description applies to our region.

By 2000 almost a billion absolute poor are still to be found here, with South Asia accounting for more than half a billion, China some 150 million, and the rest spread across Central and Southeast Asia and the Pacific island-nations. These numbers are only from the dollar-a-day norm. Which means that poverty, assessed from its manifold dimensions, is a much more shocking phenomenon in our region.

As in the global scale, the rich-poor divide between and within countries in our region tends to be widening rather than closing. There is a long list of indicators which we need not belabor here. Enough to say for now that this problem underlies most of the outstanding concerns and action proposals for reaffirmation of commitments and strengthening of capacity to deliver on them through further initiatives. As well, progress on consensus around the documents to be passed to Geneva will depend on how far negotiations can reach settlement on each and every expression of this equity issue.

It appears that progress cannot be seen in the outcomes. That would be idle exercise at this point. Rather, we can only assess the actions taken so far.

Most official assessments speak of progress in terms of putting the so-called fundamentals in place—meaning, policies and institutions. Commitments to social development have been seriously considered in national planning, legislation and institutional arrangements even as governments endlessly complain about lack of resources. More, multilateral institutions like OECD, the World Bank Group, the Asian Development Bank and others have all taken up the Copenhagen commitments in their policy formulation and operations. The IMF, believe it or not, has considered poverty in its mandate. In other words, the rhetoric is there but delivering the intended outcomes is yet to be.

Justified or not, ESCAP governments attribute their less than satisfactory progress to two major factors—the 1997 Asian crisis and the downsides of globalization. This is a running theme in most official documents supported by copious literature.

The current picture is graphically described in President Castro's speech during the South Summit of the Group of 77 last April in Havana: "Globalization is an objective reality, that we are all passengers on the same ship, this planet, but the passengers travel under very different



conditions. A small minority is in deluxe cabins with Internet access, enjoying abundant diets and medical care. The majority travel in conditions resembling the slave trade from Africa to America in our colonial past....That is, 85% are crowded in its dirty hold suffering in hunger and despair. This ship is carrying too much injustice to remain afloat and is on such an irrational route it cannot reach a safe port. The ship seems fated to clash with an iceberg and we may all sink with it."

Geneva and beyond

The state of the documents after the April PrepCom in New York suggest how far we are from reaching a new level of consensus on what needs to be done and how. Forget the review and appraisal (Part 2) since this one will probably pass without much hassle. The two others—Political Declaration (Part 1) and Further Actions and Initiatives (Part 3)—are what would lock up negotiating parties to a point where nothing new is agreed on in Geneva.

However the Social Watch network and its partners choose to influence the outcomes of the Geneva Summit and succeeding UN deliberations, it is important to keep in mind the Havana message and what concerns and action proposals have already been forwarded.

Social Watch (Bissio Social Watch #4 2000) has outlined ten issues identified by NGOS from around the world as the key aspects to be addressed to make up the backlog on commitments in the first years of the 21st Century: [1] facing the financial crisis while protecting social development; [2] participatory evaluation of the social impact of adjustment policies; [3] commitment to eradicate poverty; [4] gender equality and equity; [5] equity and universal access to basic health care and education; [6] promoting the development of Africa and least developed countries; [7] increase of resources for development; [8] full employment and sustainable livelihoods; [9] precise targets and timely reviews; and [10] enabling international environment on trade and investments. A new Social Summit in 2005 is also being proposed to review progress and renew commitment.

The proposed plan and priorities for action advanced by International Council on Social Welfare (ICSW) resonate the concerns and proposals of Social Watch. Its Three-Point Plan for Geneva 2000 relate to: [1] adoption of an International Anti-Poverty Pact; [2] establishment of International Standards for Social Development; and [3] development of the ECOSOC system. The eight priorities for action are: [1] strengthening of the ECOSOC system; [2] reform of international financial systems; [3] global anti-poverty project; [4] official



development assistance; [5] basic income support; [6] taxation; [7] fair trade and investment; and [8] economic, social and cultural rights.

As most concerns and proposals coming from non-state sectors have reached a fairly high level of commonality, the challenge will be in finding modalities for working together to further raise the profile and leverage the citizen voice in and out of the halls of the United Nations. This gathering of Social Watch -Asia and its regional partners should be able to come up to the challenge.

Finally, the universal concern for eradicating poverty, for achieving full employment and for creating participatory and inclusive societies by all means has to find its match in action. The goals are feasible and the world, but especially the ESCAP region, has the means though not the desired political will as yet to realize them.

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About the author

Isagani R. Serrano is Senior Vice President and Board Member of the Philippine Rural Reconstruction Movement (PRRM). He's written for CIVICUS the following: *Civil Society in the Asia-Pacific*, 1994; *Humanity In Trouble But Hopeful* in CITIZENS, 1995; *Profile: Philippines* for CIVIC INDEX, 1997; *Coming Apart, Coming Together* in Civil Society at the Turn of the Millennium, 1999; *A Global Citizens' Commitment*, 1999. A community organizer, educator, writer, guitarist, 'farmer', and political prisoner for seven years during martial law in the Philippines. Trained in education and literature, community organization and development management. Holds a Master of Science in Environment & Development Education (MSc in EE/DE) from the South Bank University-London.

