



Zero point seven

By Michael Gottsegen

Some numbers become symbols pregnant with meaning: 613 – the number of the commandments in the Torah, 9/11 – a day that will also live in infamy. *Zero point seven*. If the significance of this number is not plain, then you are not alone, and you probably have never heard about the United Nations Millennium Development Goals (MDGs), a program to reduce extreme poverty and improve the lives of those living in the poorest countries by 2015 that was adopted by the nations of the world in September 2000 at the Millennium Summit. More specifically, the nations of the world pledged themselves to achieve eight goals that together reflect a commitment to creating a global order that honors the infinite value of every person and the image of God in which, the Bible declares, we are each created. These eight goals include eradicating extreme poverty and hunger; achieving universal access to primary education; promoting gender equality and empowering women; reducing child mortality; improving maternal health; combating HIV/AIDS; and ensuring environmental sustainability.

This might seem ambitious or even utopian, but in fact the actionable elements of the program are more concrete and more modest. For instance, under the heading of eradicating extreme poverty and hunger, the operational goal is to halve the proportion of people (currently more than a billion persons) living on less than a dollar a day, while with respect to reducing child mortality, the goal is to reduce by two-thirds the mortality rate among children under five (currently at 11 million children a year). Of course, even these modest goals will not come cheaply and cannot be realized within a global order that continues to be structured along grossly inequitable lines which continuously benefit the richer countries while the poorer countries sink further and further into the black hole of poverty, ill health and despair.

Zero point seven. Of the eight millennium goals, the first seven directly pertain to the conditions in the less and least developed countries that are to be improved by 2015, while the eighth alone spells out the actions that must be taken by the most developed countries, including the United States and the members of the European Union, actions that will ultimately determine whether there is any meaningful chance of realizing the Millennium Goals by 2015. According to the language of goal eight, the governments of the most developed countries have pledged themselves to a major increase in the aid that they give to the poorest countries, aid that is the sine qua non for the attainment of the other seven millennial goals. Specifically, the governments of the most developed countries have pledged to dedicate the equivalent of zero point seven percent of their

countries' GDP every year to development assistance and have pledged to create an open trading system without the protective tariffs and agricultural subsidies that effectively bar imports from the poorest countries and condemn these countries to continued poverty and under-development.

We are nearing the five-year review of the world's record so far in moving toward the achievement of the MDGs. Sadly, the world does not seem to be on the way to meeting the millennium goals. While there is blame enough to go around, the most glaring failure has been on the part of the most developed countries, most of which have failed to pony up with anything approaching the level of international development assistance that they had pledged. Nor is the record much better when it comes to removing barriers to free trade. The United States' record in providing the development assistance that it promised is a most embarrassing 0.13% of GDP, which is about one-fifth of the 0.7% it pledged. This is not only lower than the 0.23% aid average contributed by the world's other developed economies, but this pathetic performance by the world's richest country sets a terrible example of non-performance and, if unchanged, will be significant enough by itself to doom the millennium goals to the dustbin of failure and the world to the ominous consequences that are sure to follow if these goals are not met. Only in the first instance shall such consequences affect the poor, for they are certain to affect us in turn, as 9/11 should have taught us.

The world's leaders who gathered for the Millennium Summit chose to describe the purpose of the covenant into which the nations entered on that day in September 2000 as a set of "goals." But "goal" is really too weak a term to capture the full weight and seriousness of the commitment that the leaders entered into that day. Far more fitting would it have been if the summit had issued not a statement of millennium goals but a "covenant of millennium commitments," or a statement of millennial *mitzvot* (commandments) or of millennial obligations. For where the protection of human dignity or the achievement of basic justice is concerned, such remedial action is indeed commanded and not as a nice gesture that the nations – and especially the richest nations -- might choose just as readily to leave undone. Perhaps, if the global community lacked the power to rectify the relations between the global haves and global have-nots, or if the global community lacked the wealth and technological capacity to create an equitable social and economic order, then it could be argued that no one is obligated to undertake the impossible. But since we can create a decent and just world order, it seems that we are obligated to do so, and woe unto us if we do not. Indeed, amid the material and moral ruins that we will have brought upon ourselves if we fail to create an equitable order, there will be little solace to be found in our Yom Kippur acknowledgment of our collective, national sins of omission and commission.

Notwithstanding these dark forebodings, it is not yet too late to get the millennium development campaign back on track. But this will not come about if we wait for our governments to do the right thing because it is the right thing. The leaders of

our political parties know that foreign aid is perennially unpopular and neither side seems willing to offend these constituencies or those that oppose the reduction of trade barriers and agricultural subsidies. Given this political reality, there is a need to open a national dialogue (in the United States but not only in the United States) on these important issues in order to create a countervailing political movement – if not a popular consensus -- on behalf of the Millennium Goals.

There is reason to be hopeful about the outcome of such a dialogue, especially in the United States. Americans are an especially charitable people and after 9/11 are perhaps more disposed to grasp that the inequities in the global socio-economic and political order are a dangerous recipe for American insecurity not only in the long run (indeed, we now understand that even in the short run we could all be dead). Americans are also a religious people and espouse values that should be the proper touchstone in any discussion of America's obligations to the people living in the other countries of the world. Jews, Christians and Muslims pay lip service, at least, to the belief that we are each created in the image of God and deserving of care and consideration. The wisest counsel of every faith reminds us that the neighbor whom we are urged to love is not limited to our kin but properly includes the stranger, both the near one and the far. Inspired by this counsel, we who are moved to action by its call have no choice but to initiate this national dialogue lest America err, and draw down wrath upon itself, and upon the global community, because it shirked and refused its hour. Moreover, if we do our best to ensure that these fundamental ethical principles are heard in this national dialogue, I am confident that Americans and the American government will, in the end, do the right thing. And if America takes the moral lead on this issue, it becomes much more likely that the other developed countries will follow suit. The fate of the Millennium Development Goals is a religious issue, a moral issue and a matter of prudence. May we awaken before it is too late.

For more information about the United Nations' Millennium Development Goals go to <http://www.un.org/millenniumgoals/>.