



## **BRAHMA KUMARIS WORLD SPIRITUAL UNIVERSITY**

### **Millennium Development Goals: Civil Society Takes Action**

Statement for the

#### **United Nations 57th Annual DPI/NGO Conference**

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I have been invited to write this paper with the purpose of addressing the Millennium Development Goals (MDGs) and how they might be best advanced by spiritual civil society organizations. For many years I was part of the leadership of a developing country – one that could greatly benefit by the successful accomplishment of the MDGs. Since the early 1970s, I have been a thought leader in the Brahma Kumaris World Spiritual University, a spiritual organization that has served in the United Nations non-governmental organization (NGO) community since the early 1980s. The ideas expressed here reflect my experiences in these two domains for over four decades.

Today the world appears to be under siege, and fear, insecurity, and hopelessness seem to be the predominant mindset everywhere. Nations, people, and the media are more focused on wars; terrorism; internal strife; natural and man-made disasters; power struggle; and economic, intellectual, and military domination. Such issues have been pushing the United Nations MDGs onto the back burner. Thus, political will, resource mobilization, and overall commitment to make the MDGs vibrant components of national and international priorities have suffered as a consequence. Taking one of the MDGs into consideration as an example, to ensure environmental sustainability, the present trend of inflicting more damage to the natural environment and to the lives of people needs to cease. If this downward spiral continues it will only make the task of achieving the MDGs more complicated and difficult.

#### **A Higher Level Goal**

I believe that the MDGs would benefit from a higher level of success if the eight goals (see page 4) can be overlaid with a higher level goal on the overall commitment. The eight United Nations Millennium Development Goals (MDGs) are:

1. Eradicate extreme poverty and hunger.
2. Achieve universal primary education.
3. Promote gender equality and empower women.
4. Reduce child mortality.
5. Improve maternal health.
6. Combat HIV/AIDS, malaria and other diseases.
7. Ensure environmental sustainability.
8. Develop a global partnership for development.

This higher level goal lies in understanding the spiritual concept of core universal values. Applying this concept to the MDGs, for example, would result in peace without physical conflicts, preventative healthcare, and spiritual and values-based education. This understanding would not only prepare individuals to cope more effectively with material problems but would also create environments of self-empowerment, which would help re-establish a positive pattern of thinking, feeling, and acting by using the power of the mind. The seed of action is thought.

As such:

- When you change your thinking, you change your beliefs.
- When you change your beliefs, you change your expectations.
- When you change your expectations, you change your attitudes.
- When you change your attitudes, you change your behavior.
- When you change your behavior, you change your performance.
- When you change your performance, you change your life.

A spiritual education teaches individuals to be fearless and free from greed and hate, to be broad-minded and courageous enough to accept and work within the challenges of life. The donors of resources and opportunities provided by the MDGs -- and the recipients of such aid -- would do well to share equally a common goal of making the world a better place where all people can enjoy better health, security, and freedom to use the resources available to them, including their own minds and bodies. A spiritual education infuses the individual with a strong desire and capacity to contribute to society. In spiritual terms, and even in worldly terms, we might call this empowerment.

### **Empowerment**

An empowered individual has a strong mind and attitude towards life. He or she is self-confident and understands the importance of human values, rights, and privileges in creating a dignified and satisfactory way of living. Self-empowerment motivates one to continuous learning, which, in turn, expands one's resources. It provides greater autonomy in decision-making and the ability to overcome constraints and obstacles imposed by customs, beliefs, and practices. Empowerment should be practiced from childhood to all ages and no one should be left behind.

When a child is empowered by the parents at various phases of growth, he or she grows into a responsible adult without any form of gender discrimination. When teachers are empowered with values-based knowledge and experience, their students develop good values and aspire to excellence. When individuals or a team are empowered with progressive knowledge in the fields of science and technology, they have higher potential for achievement and development. When a chief executive officer or manager of any corporation or institution empower their employees, they strengthen management and create new executives. When women are empowered, they herald gender equality and sustain society with stability, care, and hope. When governments empower the communities of their states, they build stronger nations and give birth to new leaders, who can change the future direction of countries and people in a positive way.

### **A Blueprint to Galvanize Collective Will and Commitment**

The empowerment of individuals in a society contributes to collective will and commitment. However, my experience in national leadership tells me that for the greatest

impact, collective will and commitment of the people must be grounded in a plan or blueprint. The values of will and commitment flourish when they are connected to a blueprint created by the leadership with collective input of the people.

Development assistance -- whether bilateral, multilateral, or private -- should be directed towards particular sectors of the blueprint with periodic checks on expenditures and results. The blueprint should reflect the needs, goals, and priorities of the communities; and their customs, culture, and language should be respected. The people should have the sense that this is their development and not something imposed by some process of bargaining. This people-centered approach should contribute to a change in the consciousness of the people at a rate that they can absorb. Individuals from private organizations who would be accountable to their employers could best manage the various aspects of such a project.

### **The Significant Role of Spiritual Civil Society Organizations**

Civil society organizations can play a major role in partnership with other organizations in the fulfillment of the MDGs. These organizations can supply volunteers and specialists on a nonprofit basis to act as educators, doctors, dieticians, counselors, motivators, organizers, managers, coordinators, mobilizers, experts, and practitioners in various fields, whereby the goals can be accomplished and sustained, step by step, through understanding, collective wisdom, and new opportunities.

All major projects can be assigned appropriate civil society partners who at the very least can be a liaison between the community and the leadership team providing development assistance. They would serve to smooth out differences; help remove obstacles; keep in focus the benefits of the project; and instill in the community a sense of ownership, i.e., responsibility for caring, preserving and improving the quality of life. Spiritual civil society organizations may go even a step further to advise on such areas as:

- the removal of destructive habits, behaviors, and attitudes;
- how to manage one's life with self respect, dignity, and respect for others and the natural environment;
- a positive attitude toward health, family, and community;
- household planning; and
- priority use of resources.

As a service to the community, the Brahma Kumaris World Spiritual University – through its network of 5,400 centers in 83 countries -- has been undertaking various programs and projects. The University covers such subjects as moral values; values education; values in health care; positive thinking; meditation; stress-free living; food for healthy living; self-esteem; self-managing leadership; and capacity-building, empowerment, and leadership for women. Workshops and activities on these topics continue to benefit individuals and communities throughout the world.

Worth noting is that women hold the key executive positions in the Brahma Kumaris. However, there is no gender disparity in the organization. Males and females play complementary roles according to their expertise, specialties, talents, and skills.

### **A Consideration for Developing Countries**

During my tenure in the leadership of Guyana, I witnessed the societal impact of the Brahma Kumaris and other civil society organizations through programs like those referenced above. For the MDGs to be achievable -- particularly in developing countries --

measures should be taken to educate and train spiritual civil society organization volunteers in accordance with the country's needs and with the aim that the benefits accrue to the country. Presently many developed countries depend on immigration from developing countries to make up for the shortfall in specific areas of their workforce. This policy puts a strain on developing countries, which train people for their own needs only to lose them by migration. This seriously affects their capabilities to meet the MDGs and other goals set for themselves. It makes little sense to receive external aid to build schools only to lose the teachers to the countries that have given the aid to build them in the first place! This same situation applies to health care. The solutions to such problems may not be easy, since movement of people is generated by factors other than just better opportunities. Nevertheless, a rationalization of immigration towards a global partnership for world development rather than individual self-interest may be well worth considering.

What I have attempted to do in this paper is to speak to the moral and spiritual values that must form the foundation for real progress toward the MDGs. Real progress cannot be achieved if:

- politics lacks principles and understanding
- business lacks ethics and benevolence
- education lacks values and vision, and
- the media lacks morality to guard the consciousness of the nation it serves and its moral moorings.

I have observed that all countries can greatly benefit by partnering with civil society organizations that bring the spiritual dimension into implementation of the MDGs, assuring success through values-based, people-centered development in all the various fields of activities. This will move the world in the direction of peace and universal harmony.

*The author of this statement is Steve Naraine, former Vice President of Guyana, and Guyana High Commissioner to India, Sri Lanka, and Bangladesh, and a member of the Brahma Kumaris World Spiritual University. 9/7/04*

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## **Brahma Kumaris World Spiritual University**

The BKWSU is a non-governmental organization in general consultative status with the United Nations Economic and Social Council (ECOSOC) and in consultative status with UNICEF.

The University was founded in India in 1937 and has branches in over 100 countries worldwide.

It has been affiliated to the United Nations Department of Public Information since 1980.

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