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New Zealand's Clark Pushes for World's Poor

It's hard enough finding the political will to help the world's poorest in good times, but throw in a global recession — not to mention climate change, energy strains, a possible flu pandemic, nuclear showdowns with North Korea and Iran and ongoing conflict in the Middle East and South Asia — and the poor only get pushed further down the totem pole.

Yet all of those international challenges are also why developed nations shouldn't abandon those less fortunate, both for moral and practical reasons, according to Helen Clark, head of the United Nations Development Program, who spoke at a luncheon on the impact of the economic downturn on developing nations. "In our interconnected world, the dividing line between 'their' problem and 'our' problem is increasingly thin, if not altogether absent," Clark said at the discussion hosted by the **Women's Foreign Policy Group** at the Ritz-Carlton in Washington on July 23.



"Providing development assistance, especially now, is surely a moral imperative. It should be of concern to all of us that those least responsible for the economic crisis stand to bear the brunt of its effects, and are the least able to respond," she said. "But it is also in the developed world's interests that developing countries are prosperous, have healthy populations, are enabled to support the fight against climate change, and are well governed and stable," she added, citing previously failed states such as Afghanistan.

To that end, Clark — New Zealand's former prime minister — urged developed nations to fulfill their pledges to the U.N. Millennium Development Goals aimed at reducing poverty by 2015. "Nine years ago leaders gathered in New York at the General Assembly of the United Nations and agreed on the Millennium Development Goals, with a target date for reaching them of 2015. I was one of the heads of government who signed off on that commitment," she said, stressing that the eight MDGs "were not meant to be merely aspirational — they were meant to be met, and it is in all of our interests that they are met."

Those eight MDGs target improvements in eradicating extreme poverty (living on less than \$1.25 a

day) and hunger, reducing child mortality, promoting gender equality and primary education, and combating diseases such as HIV/AIDS, among other indicators.

The good news? “The global target of reducing by half the proportion of people living in extreme poverty between 1990 and 2015 seems likely to be achieved,” Clark said, pointing out that universal primary education targets were also for the most part on track.

But elsewhere the picture looks bleak. “For example, as many as one billion people are likely to remain in extreme poverty by 2015,” Clark said, noting that no country in sub-Saharan Africa is set to achieve all the MDGs.



“And the goal toward which there has been least progress so far is that which seeks to improve maternal health,” Clark added. “This speaks volumes about the low status of women in far too many societies, and about the low priority given to meeting their needs.”

The topic of gender equality of course resonated with the audience. The Washington-based **Women’s Foreign Policy Group**, which promotes the participation of women in international affairs, hosted the luncheon — the inaugural event in its “Women in Power Series.” CBS news correspondent Kimberly Dozier moderated the discussion, which was attended by ambassadors African Union, Bahrain, Cape Verde, Croatia, Italy, Kyrgyzstan, Liechtenstein, Mali, Netherlands, New Zealand, Trinidad and Tobago, and Zambia.

Clark herself is the first female administrator of the U.N. Development Programme (UNDP) and one of the few women to ever serve as a head of state. As head of UNDP, she’s active working with some 100 countries to examine how the economic crisis has hurt their climb out of poverty.

Pointing out that much of the global recession “will hit girls and women the hardest,” Clark warned that recent gains made against poverty could easily be wiped out by the lingering recession, which hasn’t fully made its way to many developing countries.

“Worldwide, the number of people who will live in extreme poverty in 2009 is estimated to be 55 to 90 million higher than was forecast before the recession. In 2007, just before the global food crisis hit, the number of chronically hungry people in developing countries stood at around 850 million. FAO [Food and Agriculture Organization] believes that number will exceed one billion this year.”



And judging by the enormous stimulus packages being implemented across the world, Clark insists that coming up with money for far-less expensive development projects isn’t too much to ask — or at the least following through on past promises. On that front, Clark said she was looking forward to the upcoming G20 summit in Pittsburgh and was encouraged by the Obama administration’s development approach. But she also complained that countries have yet to fulfill commitments made in 2005 at the Gleneagles G8 summit — pointing out that the “G8 pledge to Africa remains about 90 percent short of delivery.”

“We cannot let the MDGs simply become another promise the international community has made but has not kept,” she warned. “What none of us want at this time is the global recession precipitating more conflicts in already fragile states, and winding back the clock on development in stable but still poor countries.”

For more information, read [“Developing Nations Plead for Help to Keep Poor from Getting Poorer”](#) in the August 2009 issue of The Washington Diplomat.

*Top photo, the keynote speaker at the “Women in Power Series” luncheon hosted by the **Women’s Foreign Policy Group (WFPG)** was former New Zealand Prime Minister and current United Nations Development Programme Administrator Helen Clark, center, standing with WFPG President Patricia Ellis to her left and WFPG Board Vice Chair Gail Leftwich Kitch and mistress of ceremonies Kimberly Dozier to her right, along with other WFPG board members.*

Middle photo from left, Paula Dobriansky of Harvard University, Ambassador of Mali Abdoulaye Diop, Dawn Ferguson and Ambassador of New Zealand Roy Ferguson, President of the Women’s Foreign Policy Group Patricia Ellis, and Gerald Anderson and Nerissa Cook of the State Department attend a discussion on “the development challenge in the middle of the global recession” at the Ritz-Carlton hotel.

Bottom photo, Ambassador of Bahrain Houda Nonoo, left, and U.N. Development Programme Administrator Helen Clark attend a luncheon hosted by the Washington-based Women’s Foreign Policy Group.