



The visit of Pope Benedict XVI to the UK and the challenge of global poverty - a Progressio briefing note

“Love – caritas – is an extraordinary force which leads people to opt for courageous and generous engagement in the field of justice and peace.”

Caritas in Veritate, Pope Benedict XVI, 2009, paragraph 1

Progressio is an international development agency with Catholic roots, although independent of church structures. We have 70 years experience of development and work to help people in developing countries gain power over their lives and overcome barriers that keep them poor. We work for justice, development and poverty eradication through a combination of skill-sharing, technical assistance, partnership and advocacy.

In anticipation of the state visit of Pope Benedict XVI in September 2010, we have put together this briefing note to highlight some key issues which are anticipated to be on the agenda for the visit, and to provide some background on the previous messages from the Vatican on these issues.

We see the high profile visit of such a prominent religious leader as a rare and timely opportunity to go beyond day-to-day issues and reflect on the underlying values that inform our actions and behaviour. Religious leaders such as Pope Benedict XVI can speak with senior politicians and governments at the level of values and principles in the tradition of the social teaching of the church.

Progressio expects that the Pope will take this opportunity to reinforce actions in support of the vulnerable of our world, and challenge behaviour or policy that is self-interested and harmful to the common good. Pope Benedict himself is a strong supporter of the Millennium Development Goals (MDGs), and tackling global poverty is a key issue on the agenda for the visit. In the run up to the MDG review summit in New York this September, we also see the Pope’s visit as an opportunity to inspire the UK and its senior politicians to reinvigorate action and commitment to the MDGs. We hope that others will also see this visit as an important opportunity to make progress on these pressing issues.

“Achieving the goal of eradicating extreme poverty by the year 2015 is one of the most important tasks in today’s world ... such an objective is indissolubly linked to world peace and security.”

Pope Benedict XVI

We particularly want to highlight four issues:

- **Global interdependence – and its importance for the poor**
- **Raising the game on the Millennium Development Goals**
- **Raising the game on Climate Change**
- **Giving the poorest a greater voice in decision making**

1. Global Interdependence – and its importance for the poor

We are all interconnected. We have the opportunity, and responsibility to use this interdependence for the global common good.

Decisions taken in the UK affect poor people thousands of miles away – for good or ill. Every policy decision must be tested against the question: “what will this do for – or to – the poorest people in our shared world”.

Too often the situation of the poor and of the natural environment is at best a footnote to the outcome of international summits or government policies. Our faith says it should be the first consideration against which decisions are taken.

The poor are not to be considered a burden, but a resource... It is nevertheless erroneous to hold that the market economy has an inbuilt need for a quota of poverty and underdevelopment in order to function at its best.”

Caritas in Veritate, Pope Benedict XVI, 2009, paragraph 36

The UK has a strong track record in leading global discussions on issues such as tackling global poverty and reducing debt. The government’s continued commitment to international development is strongly welcomed and it should be encouraged to continue on this track.

But influence over the lives of poor people reaches far beyond the walls of the obvious government departments such as DFID and the Foreign Office. Decisions made in areas such as trade, on finance, in the financial markets, on food and agriculture policy and on the environment have far reaching consequences on poor people.

“The market is not, and must not become, the place where the strong subdue the weak in commercial relationships the principle of ... gift as an expression of fraternity can and must find their place within normal economic activity”

Caritas in Veritate, Pope Benedict XVI, 2009, paragraph 36

“Every economic decision has a moral consequence ... economic life needs just laws and forms of redistribution”

Caritas in Veritate, Pope Benedict XVI, 2009, paragraph 37

The UK is an influential member of key global institutions such as the IMF (where the Treasury takes the lead) the World Bank (where DFID is the lead ministry) and therefore has an opportunity to influence those bodies to work for the global common good.

The UK is also an influential member of the United Nations, the European Union, the G8, and the G20 and frequently acts as part of the European Union, for example on trade or climate change.

The environment is a shared resource that underpins human existence and must be a central consideration in tackling global poverty. Unsustainable patterns of global production and consumption, especially in the global North, are creating a perfect storm of climate change, environmental degradation and resource scarcity for many poor and marginalised communities. Ensuring sustainable use of the environment by all nations is essential to reduce the detrimental effects of environmental degradation and climate change on the poor, both now and for future generations. Failure to do so will undermine and reverse progress made so far. Environmental sustainability is imperative to ensure that all people can have access to essential natural resources they need to survive. This cannot be achieved without united global commitment to address environmental sustainability.

The Christian faith is clear that the poor and vulnerable must be prioritised by the powerful in their decisions. The powerful must always act with fairness and justice. Failure to address the situation of someone in poverty or suffering over whom you have power, even though they may be on the other side of the world, is a failure to respect a fellow human being, created by God, and carrying God's image.

Key facts about poverty

- 1.2 billion people lack access to basic sanitation. The vast majority of them live in rural areas.
- Aid to the poorest countries falls far short of the 2010 target.
- 1.2 billion people across the world are hungry. Seven out of ten of them are women and girls.
- Millions of children start school but eventually drop out — too many of them leave school without having acquired the most basic literacy and numeracy skills.
- Women hold 18 percent of seats in parliament.
- Every year, 536,000 women and girls die as a result of complications during pregnancy, childbirth or the six weeks following delivery. 99 percent of them occur in developing countries.
- Two thirds of those living with HIV are in sub-Saharan Africa. Most of them are women.

Source: United Nations Development Programme Online 2010
<http://www.undp.org/publications/fast-facts/FF-mdg.pdf>

2. Raise the game on the Millennium Development Goals.

Addressing the MDGs is an urgent moral responsibility for the UK and other countries with the ability to make a difference.

Immediately following the Papal visit, the MDG summit in New York has the opportunity to reinvigorate concerted global action to end poverty. The UK government must play its part, and follow through on its early statements of intent to meet its responsibilities to tackle global poverty.

Deputy Prime Minister Nick Clegg MP and Secretary of State for DFID Andrew Mitchell MP will be attending the MDG summit.

The MDGs represent the most significant effort ever made by the international community to fight global poverty. Action to address the Millennium Development Goals is symbolic of the level of commitment to the worlds poor. If we fail as a global community to meet them, by the target date of 2015, it would demonstrate a scandalous failure of compassion and political will. The task is urgent.

Progress has been made: intensive efforts have lifted hundreds of millions of people around the world out of poverty since the millennium. But this progress has stalled, and in some areas there has been little progress, or even decline. The UN estimates that the recent financial crisis pushed 90 million more people into extreme poverty, reversing gains built up over many years. In sub-Saharan Africa, high levels of maternal mortality (goal 5) have not dropped. Environmental degradation and climate change are further threatening any progress made.

The coalition government is to be congratulated for maintaining commitments to overseas aid, including the pledge to meet and sustain to 0.7% of GNI on aid by 2013. It is also demonstrating a strong political will in its first weeks in office by arguing that other countries in Europe and at the international level should uphold commitments in support of the MDGs.

“In the search for solution to the current economic crisis, development aid for poor countries must be considered a valid means of creating wealth for all.”
Caritas in Veritate, Pope Benedict XVI, 2009, paragraph 60

“We mustn’t balance the books on the backs of the world’s poorest and break this vital promise – doing so will mean more people will die from famine or lack of clean water. We have a moral duty to continue this work despite our own financial problems.”
Secretary of State for International Development Andrew Mitchell MP

However considering the international community as a whole, political will seems lacking. For example, the June G8/G20 summit saw the quiet dropping of references to the Gleneagles pledges in the G8 communique. This is disturbing - does this signal a lower prioritisation of possibly the most significant political consensus in favour of development in decades?

The joint EU position ahead of the MDG summit appears weak. Although the EU is calling on others to set targets for meeting their commitments, it has refrained from asking for this of its self, and aid commitments are off track.

Speaking in advance of his first visit to the EU Foreign Affairs Council, Secretary of State for International Development Andrew Mitchell MP said:

“EU countries are important partners in the fight against poverty and need to show global leadership by meeting this pledge.”

“Five years ago EU nations made a promise to the world’s poor to work towards spending 0.7% of our income to help ensure people have access to the basics they need to survive such as water, health services and food.”

The EU is in danger of missing its collective aid targets. In 2009, the EU spent only 0.42% of GNI on aid and will almost certainly miss its intermediate target of 0.56% in 2010.

“More economically developed nations should do all they can to allocate larger portions of their gross domestic product to development aid, thus respecting the obligations that the international community has undertaken in this regard”

Caritas in Veritate, Pope Benedict XVI, 2009, paragraph 60

It is important to remember that achieving the MDGs will not mean that our work is over. If we are successful in achieving the target of halving extreme poverty by comparison with 2005, that would still leave 700 million people attempting to cope with the worst kind of destitution. The MDGs are a desperately needed stepping stone, but the challenge exceeds them.

MDGs have raised the level of ambition to tackle poverty. However they were not developed from human rights, gender equality or sustainable development perspectives. These essential interlinkages between the MDGs must be addressed – progress in one goal supports progress in others and conversely failures in one area will undermine progress made in others. Therefore it is important to recognise these fundamental synergies and to invest across all MDGs.

It is particularly important to recognise that investing in opportunities for women and girls has strong multiplier effects across all MDGs. In Timor-Leste recent reductions in infant and under-five mortality rates have been spectacular. Infant mortality rates have dropped from 60 to 44 deaths per 1,000 births, while the under-five rate fell from 83 to 64 deaths per 1,000 births since 2003. These improvements have been attributed to better educated women, more women in the workforce and increased availability of health services. Progress is possible where commitment is also there.

Greater attention and commitment must also be given to environmental sustainability as progress in this area is desperately off track. The environment is vital to human sustenance, wellbeing and development and underpins all MDGs.

Failure to properly account for this has had major implications for the other MDGs that rely on the natural environment including hunger, education, gender, child mortality, health, disease. 'We are heading into an 'ecological credit crunch' and are now beginning to see the implications of failing to safeguard our natural resource base'¹. Therefore the key role of the environment in development needs to be embedded in the MDG review and summit, with actions to ensure effective environmental mainstreaming across all MDGs.

“Without a sustainable environmental base, we will have little hope of attaining our objectives for reducing poverty and hunger and improving health and human well-being.”
Ban Ki-moon, UN Secretary-General

More focus must also be given to structural and systematic injustices that contribute to the underlying causes of poverty. Failure to prioritise action in policy to address issues around global trade, financial structures and energy undermines positive action and the possibility of achieving the MDGs.

Therefore the UN summit must not be a moment for warm words, smoke and mirrors. It must lead to genuine recommitment to the task, verifiable commitments and plans. The UN must make concrete commitments which are action oriented and have monitoring mechanisms in place.

3. Raise the game on Climate Change

“The environment is God’s gift to everyone, and in our use of it we have a responsibility towards the poor, towards future generations and towards humanity as a whole.”
Caritas in Veritate, Pope Benedict XVI, 2009, paragraph 48

Climate change is the defining human development challenge of the 21st century (UNDP). Failure to respond to it will stall and then reverse international efforts to reduce poverty. The impacts of climate change are seriously undermining progress on the MDGs and are causing more people to slide into poverty. The 2009 Human Impact Report claims that 300,000 people a year are already dying from climate change impacts and a further four billion are vulnerable².

We are stewards of the natural environment, and action on climate change is therefore part of our duty of care to those who are poor and marginalised. This responsibility extends to future generations, so the shared resource of the natural environment must also be respected, and not over-exploited, to the detriment of the poor and vulnerable.

“The natural environment is more than raw material to be manipulated at our pleasure; it is a wondrous work of the Creator containing a ‘grammar’ which sets forth ends and criteria for its wise use, not it’s reckless exploitation.”

¹ Fuller, R and Phillips, J. 'The networker' BOND news letter, July 2010

² Global Humanitarian Forum (2009) Human Impact Report Climate Change: The Anatomy of a Silent crisis www.ghf-geneva.org/Portals/0/pdfs/2009forumreport.pdf

From a Christian perspective, respect for the natural environment is fundamental. Failure to respect it is a failure to respect God's creation – it is deeply harmful to ourselves, and to others. If we fail to control greenhouse gas emissions, a global temperature rise of just two degrees would see widespread impacts – for example on the Andean glaciers that would cause water stress to hundreds of thousands of people who depend upon natural water supplies and rainfall, on the viability of small island states. Failure to tackle carbon emissions would also (according to the Stern Review) cause a long-term economic depression, hitting GDP by 5% year on year, indefinitely.

The failure to reach agreement on a fair, ambitious, and binding climate change deal at COP15 in Copenhagen is a serious and dangerous setback, and world leaders have a responsibility to act now and act fast to agree emissions cuts and financing and support for by poorer countries.

The “Copenhagen accord”, while it sets some important principles in place (such as the need to keep temperature rises to 2 degrees) is limited in scope. Emissions cut pledges under the accord show a significant “Gigatonne Gap” – the pledged reductions to date will not keep emissions under 2 degrees. The UNFCCC process must be supported to get back on track at Cancun in December 2010. From a practical perspective, investment in renewable energy and environmentally sustainable economies can be seen as a clear contribution to the common good.

There is a clear responsibility on richer countries to help poorer countries to adapt their economies for a low carbon and sustainable future. Richer countries have higher levels of carbon emissions historically and today and a moral obligation to bear the bigger load in mitigation and adaptation funding.

The level of impact of climate change on those who are poor and marginalised is too often missing from the debate. Climate change is not simply an environmental issue but an issue of social justice. Behind the technical discussions the reality of life for those who are poor is one of struggle for survival. Whether it be small-scale farmers and subsistence communities who struggle to provide food for themselves and their families or those who are adversely affected by extreme weather the poor pay a disproportionate price in vulnerability to climate change and its effects, while least responsible for its causes.

Climate change exacerbates existing gender inequalities as women have reduced mobility in times of environmental crises. Women also play a fundamental role in subsistence agriculture, water collection and obtaining household fuel. Water scarcity, food insecurity, reduced agricultural productivity, floods, the loss of low-lying lands and islands, desertification and spread of vector-borne diseases are all expected impacts of climate change which will put further stress on those people already living in the most vulnerable situations particularly women.

The position at present regarding financing for adaptation to climate change in UK policy is unclear. NGOs have argued that adaptation funding should be additional to ODA, but climate change “fast start” funding is being counted towards the UK’s 0.7% commitment (this was also true under the previous government). Mechanisms for innovative financing (such as a financial transactions tax, or “Robin Hood” tax, could help avoid the full burden of responsibility falling to ODA, but are not in place.

The voices of the poor and those who are most vulnerable to climate variations are rarely heard in the global debates. Listening to these voices, and responding with generosity of spirit, is essential to a living out of the global common good.

4. Give the poorest a greater voice in decision making

In our interdependent world the role of international institutions and nature of global collaboration are of ever-greater importance. However many of these institutions provide limited means for the voices and concerns of the poor to be heard.

Whether at local, national or international levels, the voices of those who are poor and marginalised should be able to inform and influence the political process and the choices made. At a national level, good governance and the participation of those who are poor and excluded are central to the functioning of an effective state. Poor and marginalised people are least likely to participate in decision-making structures, reducing accountability and keeping them locked in poverty.

“The voice of the people’s affected must be heard and their situation must be taken into consideration, if their expectations are to be correctly interpreted” Caritas in Veritate, Pope Benedict XVI, 2009, paragraph 72

Women in particular are seriously under-represented in decision-making processes that shape their societies and their own lives at all levels. Placing women, who make up the majority of people in poverty, at the heart of strategies is essential to support them to demand and defend their rights. This has been shown to have a strong multiplier effect for the development of societies as a whole. Increasing the representation of women in decision-making bodies, particularly at the national and international levels is one of the most effective ways of ensuring that key development priorities are met.

Working together with civil society to ensure the views of poor and marginalised people are represented in decision-making processes is essential. Strategies such as strengthening local authorities, strengthening civil society and lobbying for democratic improvements are all examples of how we can turn this goal into reality.

“Aid programmes must increasingly acquire the characteristics of participation and completion from the grass roots. Indeed, the most valuable resource in countries receiving development aid are human

resources: herein lies the real capital that needs to accumulate in order to guarantee a truly autonomous future for the poorest countries.”

Caritas in Veritate, Pope Benedict XVI, 2009, paragraph 58

“Development programmes, if they are to be adapted to individual situations, need to be flexible; and the people who benefit from them ought to be directly involved in their planning and implementation.”

Caritas in Veritate, Pope Benedict XVI, 2009, Paragraph 46

International aid and development programmes should ensure that they support mechanisms where participation and accountability, especially to those who are poor, are meaningful and effective.

This principle of accountability and participation also apply at an international level. The poorest countries cannot attend important fora such as the G8 and G20 unless specially invited. The African Union has recently called for African representation at the G20 to be determined by African countries themselves. Similarly, the IMF and World Bank, despite some recent reforms, are still controlled by larger economies.

At the same time, inclusive structures such as the United Nations are criticised for inertia and are at risk of marginalisation. Global decision-making is then largely controlled by powerful economies, while the poorest countries – frequently those affected most by global decisions – struggle to be heard.

“To manage the global economy; to revive economies hit by the crisis ... to bring about integral and timely disarmament, food security and peace; to guarantee the protection of the environment and to regulate migration: for all this, there is urgent need of a true world political authority.”

Caritas in Veritate, Pope Benedict XVI, 2009, paragraph 67

Currently international agreements and regulations in relation to our shared environment in particular are alarmingly weak, highlighted by the failure of the international community to reach a satisfactory agreement on climate change at COP15 in Copenhagen.

The need for fairer, more inclusive, and more effective global governance is clearly urgent. It is essential that poorer nations are able to have a stronger and more effective voice.

Conclusion

Although strategies to address these deeply challenging issues may vary, as a society we should be united in agreement that we cannot accept the existence of poverty, or ongoing damage to the natural environment, and must work to address it. We all seek a world where each person is free from poverty, where the voices of the poorest are heard and acted upon, and where our natural environment is managed responsibly and sustainably, in the interests of all.

We hope and pray that the visit of Pope Benedict XVI is a moment when we can remind ourselves of these shared concerns, and commit ourselves to working together to address them.

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