UN report says one billion suffer extreme poverty

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The United Nations Development Programme (UNDP) issued its annual Human Development Report for 2003 on July 8. The report documents the progress of 175 of the world's poorest countries in the implementation of eight Millennium Development Goals (MDGs) agreed to at the UN General Assembly summit in 2000.

The MDGs were ostensibly designed by the UN as a means of halving poverty, hunger and illness in poorer countries by 2015 and encouraging the so-called "mutual responsibilities of developing and rich countries." But seven of the eight Millennium Goals are directives aimed towards the economies of poorer countries, emphasising the fact that UN's thrust is in line with the International Monetary Fund (IMF) and World Bank. The MDGs place the main responsibility for poverty reduction on the governments of poorer nations and not on Western governments and institutions and the impact of structural adjustment programmes they have imposed.

The MDGs call on developing countries to "focus on improving governance, especially in mobilising resources, allocating them equitably and ensuring their effective use."

The UN report also makes the point that the MDGs can only be achieved "if poor countries pursue wide ranging reforms."

Only Goal 8, which calls for a strengthening of the partnership between rich and poor countries, places any responsibility on the activities of the more economically advanced countries.

An arrogant and shortsighted attitude runs right through the Human Development Report and sets the agenda. But despite this the report is forced to highlight a number of issues that reveal the devastating impact of global capitalism on the vast majority of the world's population.

The UNDP report notes that 54 nations are poorer now than they were in 1990. Twenty of these countries are in Sub-Saharan Africa, while 17 are in Eastern Europe and the Commonwealth of Independent States.

Life expectancy has fallen in 34 countries due primarily to HIV/AIDS. Of 59 priority nations 24 suffer from a high incidence of HIV/AIDS and 31 have "unusually high foreign debts."

The populations of 21 countries are hungrier today than in 1990. In 14 countries more children are dying before the age of five and primary school enrolment is declining in 12 nations.

According to the BBC the UNDP says of its own report that it documents "an unprecedented backslide... in some of the world's poorest nations" and, "More than one billion people still live in extreme poverty, and for many living standards are getting steadily worse."

A statement by Deputy Director for the UN Development Program Jean Fabre sheds some light on the massive redistribution of wealth from poorer nations to richer ones over the past decade. He told reporters, "Economic and political developments in past years have enabled considerable increases in the worlds wealth," but "at the same time, many countries have completely regressed in the past 10 years."

The report notes that in 31 of the poorest countries listed progress towards the MDGs has stalled or begun to reverse. On an assessment of current financial trends some countries would not overcome poverty until the year 2165 and it would take 20 Sub-Saharan African nations until 2147 to halve extreme poverty and until 2165 to cut child mortality rates by two-thirds.

According to the UN Human Development Index—which measures levels of life expectancy,

education, adult literacy and income in the poorest nations—twenty-one states have experienced a decline. These included 14 African countries as well as Russia and six former Soviet Republics.

Commenting on the situation in the former Soviet Union after capitalist restoration, Fabre stated, "We have catastrophic falls in several countries, which often are republics of the former Soviet Union, where poverty is actually increasing. In fact poverty has tripled in the whole region."

Per capita income in each of the 42 highly indebted countries in the report is less than $1,500 and between 1990 and 2001 these economies grew on average by only half a percent per year. Despite calls in the report for rich countries to provide debt relief to poorer nations the UN's own statements unwittingly highlight the intransigent and ruthless position of these wealthy countries in enforcing free market policies—and demonstrates that the demands made by the UN on donor countries are just empty phrases that fly in the face of global capitalist reality.

Fabre admits that "the richest countries have established various barriers to the entry of goods on their own territories. There are also important subsidies given to agriculture, artificially maintaining these rich countries agriculture (sectors) above world prices." He went on, "there is, even worse, a dumping of agricultural products from rich countries on countries having weaker economies."

The UN report states that current foreign aid is up from $52.3 billion in 2001 to $57 billion, but still falls well short of the $100 billion minimum needed annually to meet its declared goals.

But the UNDP's administrator, Mark Malloch Brown, told BBC News Online that he felt the situation concerning foreign aid was in fact getting worse and quite critical: "Italy, France, Germany, Japan—even the Netherlands, one of the most generous donors—are all making cuts in spending. You've got a real difficulty keeping people on track. Development assistance is the first to go when public spending faces cuts," he said.

The devastating impact of the "Washington consensus" of the World Bank and IMF—the insistence on budget discipline, deregulation and the liberalisation of trade and finance—means that the UNDP report was forced to distance itself from these policies and call for a broader view of development that looked at each country individually. But the report still insists, "Success—or failure—in economic growth is closely linked to how an economy is integrated with global markets."

In one section the UNDP looks at Mali and asks how can this small country become a "successful manufacturing exporter" like China. The report states, "investors consider the country's education and skills level too low to justify the costs imposed by landlockedness, poor health, low nutrition, a tiny domestic market and related barriers." In other words foreign investors will not see a return on their investment and so will not invest. The UNDP goes on to state, "in short Mali does not meet the thresholds required to attract many foreign and domestic investors."

This bizarre section continues by claiming, "Mali could become a successful garment exporter (like Bangladesh) tourist destination and processor of tropical agricultural products." But the country can only do this after, "Key thresholds in health, education, water, sanitation, roads, ports and power are reached."

The glaring contradiction of how an impoverished country is to achieve such a level of development on its own without huge international aid is not raised, or even thought about by the writers of the report.

The approach of rich nations to poorer countries should be to base their support more on "performance" rather than "entitlement", the report states. The countries with wealth should increase assistance to poor countries that "demonstrate good faith efforts to mobilise domestic resources, undertake policy reforms, strengthen institutions and tackle corruption and other aspects of weak governance." This statement reads just like any other issued by the World Bank and IMF.

What the Human Development report of the UNDP will not say—but is revealed by an honest and objective reading of its findings—is that the social and economic disaster destroying the lives of masses of people is the product of the very policies it espouses.