

**Speech by Dr. Lenora Suki, Focal Point for the
U.N. Millennium Project in the Dominican Republic
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Good morning.

My name is Lenora Suki and I am the UN Millennium Project Dominican Republic pilot country project coordinator. As many of you know this is an important day in the history and evolution of the Millennium Development Goals as the report of the UN Millennium Project, entitled Investing in Development: A Practical Plan to Achieve the Millennium Development Goals, will be presented to the Secretary General in an hour or so.

As such, it is a great honor for me to be speaking to you all today. Indeed, it is a similarly overwhelming privilege to be assisting the administration of President Leonel Fernandez and the esteemed members of his government in their efforts to make the MDGs a centerpiece of this administration and the core of an ambitious strategy to launch yet another decade of strong and sustainable growth.

The formation of the Presidential Commission on the MDGs, under the leadership of my friend Mr. John Gagain, is a potent illustration of President Fernandez's seriousness to achieve the MDGs. He has created a visible public authority charged with determining how to reach the MDGs and, thereby, a pact with the Dominican people to plan for achieving the goals, a commitment designed to outlast both election politics and short-term crises such as those experienced in recent years. The Presidential Commission embodies the acknowledgement that despite great successes, there is much work to be done to ensure that the Dominican Republic can return to a predominant position as a major engine of growth in the Caribbean and Latin America and, furthermore, to empower all Dominicans to participate actively in a modern, global economy.

Beyond the Presidential Commission, many other serious and motivated efforts within the government and in the supporting UN agencies are following the lead of the President and the Presidential Commission to map out a plan to achieve the MDGs in the Dominican Republic. Those of us at the UN Millennium Project who have been fortunate to help move this initiative forward through its early stages very much appreciate the efforts of the participating ministries, who are determining how to mainstream the MDGs into their own long-term strategies and decision-making processes. In particular, their commitment is impressive for addressing these challenges in the aftermath of the recent political, economic and financial crises. I would like to commend the members of government involved in the MDG project for their energy and dedication in this pursuit and to reiterate the support and good will of the UN Millennium Project and our desire to contribute to the government's efforts in every possible way. The UN Country Team in the Dominican Republic headed by Mr. Niky Fabiancic is also a worthwhile ally and friend to the government and the UN Millennium Project. In addition, we look forward to collaborating with the World Bank and the Inter American Development Bank. These organizations' long engagement in the Dominican Republic, their expertise and experience across central MDG sectors in the Dominican Republic, such as health, education and the environment, will be an indispensable source of support.

As I mentioned, in mere minutes, the launch of the UN Millennium Project's report to the Secretary General will direct our hearts and minds to addressing the needs of the world's poor – to think clearly about the vulnerabilities and obstacles created by severe poverty and about the various dimensions of poverty – hunger, lack of access to education, high maternal and infant mortality, the curse of disease, gender disparities, inadequate shelter, unsafe water and environmental degradation among other themes addressed in the MDGs. In global context, today's events are particularly significant in light of the horrors being faced in those countries struck by the tsunami. The scope of this immense tragedy truly highlights the increased urgency to address the needs of the world's poor – those who have no means to respond to this disaster.

Indeed, although not on the horrific scale of the recent tsunami's massive destruction, the Dominican Republic and its neighbor Haiti are well acquainted with climate related hazards and disasters and the disproportionate effect on the poor in both their countries, with family members unaccounted for, sources of income swept away, homes destroyed and opportunities to move ahead pushed back by months, years and sometimes decades. In fact, the death toll on the island of Hispanola from floods and hurricanes in the past year alone number in the thousands. The areas hardest hit by these calamities are still struggling to recover from the long-lasting effects of homelessness, deteriorated infrastructure, lack of safe water, dearth of economic opportunity and environmental degradation underline the importance of a long term commitment to improving the lives of these people living at the dangerous margins of our societies today. These disasters, well known to the Dominican people, show once again the value of empowering these people and communities before disaster strikes.

Although I don't wish to front run the launch of the UN Millennium Project's report in this venue, a few words of introduction and explanation are appropriate to the context. The UN Millennium Project's objective is ambitious given the scale of the demands it aims to address. But its structure very much reflects its mission. As an independent body, the Millennium Project, directed by Professor Jeffrey Sachs and reporting to the Secretary General, has built upon the contributions of the most eminent thinkers of the day on development – 10 task forces and over 250 experts that include scholars, practitioners, government officials, civil society leaders and UN agencies, with the collaboration of the World Bank and the IMF.

With the full independence of the experts involved in this effort, the UN Millennium Project task forces have spent the past three years diagnosing the roots of poverty – the themes represented by the MDGs – and have produced the most comprehensive effort to date to outline recommendations to meet the challenges of the MDGs to address extreme poverty, hunger, disease, illiteracy, gender disparity, environmental degradation, lack of access to safe water and sanitation, slums and science and technology for development. Following this morning's launch of the report, you will be able to find the reports of these task forces at www.unmillenniumproject.org. The recommendations of the task forces will be a key input into the Secretary General's preparation for the five year progress report on the Millennium Declaration due in March 2005.

Our goal in the pilot country project is to support the government of the Dominican Republic in its effort to map a strategy for meeting the MDGs. First, this entails conducting a needs assessment, and secondly, a long term poverty reduction strategy based on the MDGs with the support of the UN agencies, the international donors, civil society and the private sector. We are currently at the beginning phases of the needs assessment and look forward to President Fernandez sharing the results of both efforts at the General Assembly in September.

To say a few words about our expectations of the Dominican Republic as a pilot country, it is unusual amongst the pilot countries selected by the UN Millennium Project as the only pilot country in Latin America. The Dominican Republic is in many ways in a privileged position relative to many of the countries now working towards strategies for achieving the MDGs. A middle income country with close proximity to major markets like the United States, the country boasts transportation infrastructure for international trade, a world class tourism sector and a successful free trade zone export sector. There are dynamic and vibrant Dominican communities abroad, the largest of which is here in New York City, but also elsewhere in the United States and increasingly in Europe, giving the community an increasing political representation.

In the context of the MDGs, great strides in poverty reduction were made in the 1990s courtesy of the most rapid economic growth in Latin America and indeed the Dominican Republic was among the fastest growing countries in the world. Nonetheless, the recent crises – political, economic and financial – have highlighted that such gains based on rapid growth but with inadequate investment in areas such as health and education can undermine those gains, making them appear fragile and detracting from the confidence of the population in the necessity of those very investments. And so, Dominican youth too often decide before finishing primary school that their lives and families would be better served by working than studying. As a result, the Dominican Republic suffers one of the lowest completion rates for primary education in Latin America and the Caribbean.

This underlines the challenge in the Dominican Republic to take action in the areas where public investment has fallen short the most. It is astonishing that a country of the Dominican Republic's resources and potential would not achieve the education goal of ensuring that every child completes a full course of primary education without additional policy effort. The fact that we are talking about primary education rather than secondary or tertiary education always resonates in my mind. For a country like the Dominican Republic working to maintain its global competitiveness, the centrality of this goal – indeed ideally exceeding it – cannot be understated.

Another grave challenge in the Dominican Republic is that of public health - to bring down unacceptably high rates of maternal and infant mortality – among the highest in Latin America – and to arrest and reverse the spread of HIV/AIDS and tuberculosis. Our early work suggests that there is not only a need to address shortfalls in investment in rural areas, but also that our needs assessment must consider the cost of revamping the management and administration of health care in the Dominican Republic. Poor access to safe water and sanitation – among the worst levels for access in the region –highlight not only shortcomings in public infrastructure but also such health threats as water borne disease and respiratory ailments. These questions form the core of the work that will be done not only the health sectors, but also in infrastructure and the environment working groups, in carrying out the MDG needs assessment.

Environmental degradation – related to inefficient agriculture, deforestation, poor management of protected areas and, ironically, a thriving tourism sector – must also be addressed within the context of the MDGs. Here again, so much of the country's economic wherewithal relies on the protection of the country's vibrant and unique biodiversity. The interrelated nature of the MDGs and competitiveness in the Dominican Republic demands a comprehensive and integrated development strategy rather than one that focuses on certain issues to the detriment of the others.

Indeed, the Dominican Republic's web of connections between health, education, gender, the environment, infrastructure, food and agriculture and science and technology have clear and distinct implications for the ability to compete in an ever-more heated struggle for capital whether it be for foreign investment, for foreign tourism dollars, for domestic investors' confidence or for

export performance. The synergies between the goals, as well as their connection with global competitiveness, are lessons we expect to draw and see repeated in the Dominican Republic. Taking account of these synergies is one of the main objectives of the MDG needs assessment.

The Dominican Republic may also be an example of a country where we focus on scaling up investments and existing policies. The rural/urban divide in the Dominican Republic is also prominent, and in many sectors we will have to address decentralization, capacity building for effective public management, human resources and infrastructure. A long term strategy that has the MDGs at its heart will also require a road map to building the necessary institutions and delivery mechanisms.

Another interesting chapter in the Dominican Republic relative to certain of the other pilot countries is its vibrant private sector. While the philosophy of the MDGs focuses very much on public investments, the need for policies to foster private sector growth is key in the Dominican Republic. Indeed, the private sector will be an important partner in achieving the goals in the Dominican Republic. There are already many examples of private sector contributions to the goals, especially in infrastructure in tourism and goods transportation.

In the Dominican Republic, the face of the recommendations will be somewhat different from the other countries. The financing strategy is likely to rely more on domestic resource mobilization and private capital flows. In addition, the Dominican Republic has received relatively little overseas development assistance in the past decade, but the country's engagement with its international donors and partners has increased substantially in the past two years.

In closing, let me say again what an honor it is for the UN Millennium Project and for me personally to be participating in this process with the government. We commend the government for its brave commitment to this process and wish a great deal of luck to John Gagain at the helm of these efforts. We look forward to several interesting and exciting months of work to produce a needs assessment and an MDG based poverty reduction strategy, and we stand ready to support these efforts as often and as firmly as possible.

Many thanks for your time.