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DOMINICAN REPUBLIC: Towards the MDGs - at a Snail's Pace

Diógenes Pina

EL SEIBO, Dominican Republic, Nov 20 (IPS) - His short arms and legs are the size of a 9-year-old's, although Antonio is actually 14. Malnutrition is common in El Seibo, the first Dominican Republic province selected for a national diagnosis of what is needed to meet the Millennium Development Goals (MDGs).

El Seibo (130 kilometres east of the capital, Santo Domingo), where 72 percent of the population live in poverty, was given the title of "Millennium Town" in 2005.

The "Millennium Towns" created by the Dominican government are pilot areas to carry out a survey of the needs of the community, with a view to fulfilling the MDGs. The study in El Seibo assessed basic needs and the cost of satisfying them, but only at the local level.

This is stated in the Evaluation of Needs and Analysis of Costs to Fulfil the Millennium Development Goals, a document to which IPS had access before it was released by the authorities.

The validity of this report is that it gives public policymakers a clear identification of where the problems and challenges lie in each of the areas studied, said the document, which was sponsored by the Presidential Commission on the Millennium Development Goals and Sustainable Development (COPDES), the United Nations Development Programme (UNDP) and the Office of the First Lady.

The MDGs, adopted at the U.N. Millennium Summit in 2000, enshrine the commitment to overcome basic obstacles to development, summarised in eight goals, ranging from environmental sustainability to the empowerment of women.

Halving the proportion of people suffering from extreme poverty and hunger, achieving universal primary education, reducing child mortality, improving maternal health, combating killer diseases like HIV/AIDS and malaria, and creating a global partnership for development are the other goals, all to be achieved by the target date of 2015.

The big challenge for the Dominican authorities is that if it takes six months to carry out evaluations of needs and costs for each of the 30 provinces and the Distrito Nacional (National District enclosing the capital city), the process will take 15 years for the whole country.

The source of this estimate was John Gagain Jr, executive director of COPDES, who said that with the resources at his disposal his office would be unable to compile the information in a shorter time.

"No one knows whether we are going to fulfil the MDGs or not; it's unlikely,

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not only for this country, but also for the rest of the world," Gagain told IPS.

While he compared the Dominican Republic's 2004 Report on the MDGs, prepared by the government and the UNDP, with the results of the evaluation of needs and costs, Gagain remarked that it was possible to halve the proportion of people living on less than a dollar a day, and achieve the goal of eliminating gender disparity in primary and secondary education by 2015.

But he was pessimistic about the goals of halving the proportion of people suffering from hunger and achieving universal primary education by that date.

People in El Seibo are sceptical about the results of the report, which took more than six months of meetings and assemblies among a wide range of social groups in this province of 89,261 people.

"The worst thing is that, as far as people are concerned, nothing tangible has been done," Dania Constanzo, a community worker who, together with a group of organisations, participated in gathering the information, told IPS. "El Seibo is not a Millennium Town, and won't be until it develops, which is still a long way off, although we would like to achieve the goals between now and 2015," she said.

In the meantime Antonio, already a teenager, has only made it to the fifth grade. He dropped out of school for a while because he didn't have a uniform or school equipment. He likes medicine, although he told IPS "I don't think I'll be able to study," his eyes dulling.

He belongs to the 52.6 percent of young people who are in primary school grades lower than those warranted by their age. Over half the pupils in fifth grade (66 percent) are older than the expected age for that level, the report said.

Antonio works with his father at farming, unaware that 91 percent of the land in El Seibo "is unfit for agriculture, and has low to medium productivity," according to the evaluation of needs and costs.

"We can earn money from tourism and ecotourism to reduce poverty," Reynaldo Valera, the mayor of El Seibo, the capital of the province of the same name, told IPS. "We have to work in that direction in order to develop." The province has beaches and natural resources.

In order for El Seibo to be able to halve the proportion of people living in extreme poverty, on less than one dollar a day, and those who suffer from hunger, as well as achieve universal primary school education, an investment of 230 million dollars is required, according to the report.

Of the Dominican Republic's population of 8.5 million, 42 percent are poor, according to the study Focalisation of Poverty in the Dominican Republic 2005, by the technical secretariat of the Presidency with support from the UNDP, released this year.

Meeting the MDG for poverty reduction "is only possible if we have economic growth at the same rate as in the 1990s, and if income distribution does not deteriorate in terms of equality," according to the Dominican Republic's MDG Report for 2004.

Central Bank figures indicate that in the 1990s the average annual growth rate of the Dominican Republic's gross domestic product was 6.5 percent, but it dropped in 2003 to -1.9 percent. In 2004 it rose to two percent, and in

2005 to 4.3 percent. The fall in the economic growth rate was largely due to high oil prices on the international market, and the devaluation of the local currency after the banking crisis that hit the country in 2003, when three of the main commercial banks collapsed, causing losses to the State of more than three billion dollars.

The Dominican authorities have just announced the second Millennium Town: it is Monte Plata, 76 kilometres north of Santo Domingo, where 73 percent of the households are below the poverty line. Of these, 23.4 percent are in extreme poverty, with incomes of less than a dollar a day.

The province of Monte Plata has a population of 180,376, and it was chosen because "it has great development potential," according to the institutions that have joined together in the Strategic Plan for Sustainable Territorial Development in Monte Plata 2016.

This province is the third largest in the country (2,632 square kilometres), and the second in terms of arable land. It also has the potential to produce biodiesel from African palm trees, and ethanol from sugarcane.

"The information gathered in the Millennium Towns is used to find out the specific problems in each province," Miguel Ceara Hatton, head of the UNDP's Human Development Office, told IPS.

In Ceara Hatton's opinion, "from now on the work in each province will go much faster, because of the experience we gained in El Seibo."

"We hope that they'll at least improve the health services and education in the next few years," Raquel Cuevas, an evangelical pastor who participated in the information gathering process in El Seibo, told IPS. "Some small things have been done, like opening a ward for HIV/AIDS patients and repairing the hospital." (END/2006)

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