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THE STORY UNDERNEATH

Wednesday, October 24, 2007 17:51 GMT

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"There can be no sustainable development without women's empowerment," said June Zeitlin, executive director of the Women's Environment and Development Organisation (WEDO) on the eve of the high-level talks.

Zeitlin and other civil society leaders who work closely with the U.N. in setting the direction of its global agenda on development say they are increasingly disappointed with the implementation of the U.N. agenda.

"There is a lot rhetoric on development, but no money to address the question of gender inequality," Zeitlin told reporters in urging that the U.N.-sponsored dialogue on financing for development must reflect women's concerns about poverty, disease and illiteracy.

The two-day meeting is being convened by the 192-member U.N. General Assembly as part of the ongoing international efforts to generate financial resources required to meet the Millennium Development Goals (MDGs) in the next seven years.

The MDGs include a 50 percent reduction in extreme poverty and hunger; universal primary education; reduction of child mortality by two-thirds; cutbacks in maternal mortality by three-quarters; the promotion of gender equality; and the reversal of the spread of HIV/AIDS, malaria and other deadly diseases.

Studies suggest that most governments have failed to take initiatives on gender seriously despite committing to do so in the Monterrey Consensus, the agreement adopted at the 2002 international conference on financing for development.

Civil society groups contend that the progress on the MDGs demands a human rights-centred policy framework, not the market-driven approach, which is failing to produce meaningful results.

"The development approach based on the neo-liberal economic model is creating a huge gap in policy and implementation," said Norea Craviotto of Women in Development Europe (WIDE), a continental lobbying group. "This approach leads to growth, but not fair distribution of wealth."

U.N. researchers agree that, worldwide, women are suffering from poverty, illiteracy and deadly diseases more than men because they face discrimination in obtaining jobs, education and healthcare.

When world leaders attended a summit in New York in September 2000, they agreed that the MDGs must be achieved by 2015. That commitment included policy initiatives to reduce maternal mortality by 75 percent.

Many experts believe that in the past seven years, nothing much has changed for the millions of poor women with regard to their economic well-being and access to health care.

As reported by the British medical journal the Lancet this week, at the current pace, there is almost no hope that the world will be able to achieve the 75 percent target.

Annually, about 20 million women are forced to undergo unsafe abortions, which, according to the journal, are a major factor in maternal deaths and illness. In some parts of Africa, more than one in every 15 women dies of

pregnancy-related causes.

Public health activists say that governments must take drastic steps to reverse the situation if they are serious about meeting the MDGs on reducing maternal mortality rates in the next seven years.

"We still have the situation we had 20 years ago," said Ann Starrs of the independent group Family Care International in a statement. "Half a million women die every year from the complications of childbirth."

A recent study by Harvard University found that between 1990 and 2005, maternal deaths did fall, but by less than one percent a year. It estimates that at least 10 to 20 million women suffer injuries from the complications of childbirth every year.

This kind of suffering could be easily avoided if international donors contributed just 6.1 billion dollars over the next seven years, according to experts who see many of the wealthiest nations continuing to shy away from fulfilling their commitments.

Women's groups, such as WEDO and WIDE, note that even when the promised money is delivered, it doesn't get spent on development projects to address gender inequality.

Craviotto and Zeitlin said development policies must reflect a "firm" commitment on economic and social rights and demanded "a formal process" for civil society's participation to prepare the Monterrey Consensus review.

"Financing for development must include substantial funding," Zeitlin said. "The MDGs cannot be achieved without gender equality. We have the commitment. We have the rhetoric. Now we need the money."

According to Zeitlin, currently only 0.1 percent of the total official development assistance is being spent on gender equality.

Activists said they want the U.N. Economic and Social Council to ensure the effectiveness of the development process and reiterated calls for the creation of a high-level U.N. entity to assess policy implementations on gender equality.

In addition to individual governments, women leaders also criticised the world body for its failure to demonstrate gender equality in its own rank and file and continued lack of gender balance

"Look at UNIFEM," said Zeitlin, referring to the U.N. women's agency. "Last year, its funding was only 57 million dollars. By contrast, the U.N. Fund for Population received about 565 million dollars."

Amid calls for continued involvement of all relevant stakeholders, on Monday, U.N. General Assembly President Srgjan Kerim convened a series of informal "interactive hearings" with the representatives of civil society groups on financing for development.

"It is imperative that the views of civil society be fully understood and duly taken into account," said Kerim in his opening remarks, hoping that their participation in discussions would provide useful input to the high-level dialogue.

The two-day U.N. talks are aimed at shaping the agenda of the next U.N. conference on funding for development due to be held in Doha, Qatar in the second half of 2008. The conference will assess the implementation of decisions made at Monterrey.

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