Document 1

Report of a speech by Hilary Benn, Minister for Overseas Development, at Newcastle University in February 2007, on the challenge of world poverty

Benn recalled visiting a refugee camp at Wajid in Somalia. '11,000 people fled the countryside when the drought killed their animals and shrivelled their crops are now live in huts made of twigs covered in pitiful scraps of cloth, surviving on water and food provided by the international community, including Britain, as we always do. There were also three large, proper tents which housed a school run by UNICEF. Rows of children – keen and enthusiastic as any, enjoying – for the first time – the chance to go to school.

'Experiences like these that have taught me – taught us all– both why development – people being able by their own efforts to change their lives for the better – is so important, and why unless we tackle poverty, injustice and inequality we will never have a safe world .'

'The truth is this. At the beginning of this century in the developing world, pregnancy and childbirth claim the life of a woman every minute – women who die alone and afraid on the floor of a darkened hut with no midwife or doctor to help. 6,000 children will die today from a lack of clean water to drink. Each year malaria kills one million people, tuberculosis 2 million, AIDS 3 million – every-one a human life extinguished: potential unrealised.'

'Because we see these things. We cannot claim any more that we did not know what was happening. And we have a choice. Either, 'I am sorry about the condition of humankind, but we can't do anything and I am going to go home, shut the door, close the curtains, and hope the rest of the world goes away.' Or 'What can we do and how can we do it?'

'Look at our history. Remember how we changed things! Go back 200 years to a time of great change in our society...the great social reformers changed things....The father of public health, John Snow, who demonstrated that cholera was spread through contaminated wells or those who said that every child in Britain should go to school.'

'Campaigns like Make Poverty History are the global equivalent of those 19th century reformers. We have made progress. In the past 40 years, life expectancy in the developing world increased by a quarter. In the past 30 years, illiteracy has fallen by half. In the past 20 years, 400 million lifted out of absolute poverty. Smallpox, and we are nearly there with polio. Yet there is so much yet to do... we must keep the promises made in 2005 at Gleneagles.'

'Lastly, we need hope and encouragement because the thing I fear most is not doubt or criticism or despair but cynicism. Trying to give people the chance to transform their own lives is about putting our better impulses at the service of humankind.

Document 2

Global poverty

Are we nearly there yet?

Adapted from The Economist, print edition, 5 July 2007

Mid-way through the UN's drive against poverty remains half crusade and half charade.

Make poverty history is a compelling slogan. Halve it by 2015, in contrast, is a measurable commitment. That is the logic behind the Millennium Development Goals (MDGs), targets in the struggle against global deprivation, disease and illiteracy, set by leaders at the United Nations in 2000.

The goals claim to convert slogans into bankable pledges, complete with number and date. The world has resolved to cut deaths from childbirth by three-quarters from 1990 to 2015. The percentage of people without safe water will fall by half; infant mortality by a third.

The 2000 summit was unprecedented in its pulling power. But many targets were recycled for the second or third time. The 1980s were supposed to bring water and sanitation to the great unwashed; the 1990s were supposed to provide 'education for all'. Surely, then, no one would take the MDGs seriously? Surely, they would quietly fade away like so many other turn-of-the-millennium fantasies?

But they have remained surprisingly prominent, becoming a kind of gospel for aid organisations. The UN cherishes them. But the goals also converted the UN's rivals in the aid business (the World Bank, the World Trade Organisation, and the International Monetary Fund).

As a result, the MDGs can justly claim to generate a buzz about duties governments might otherwise neglect. After all ministers in poor countries have many other concerns and saving mothers in childbirth or children from diarrhoea does not always command full attention. The goals ensure some international recognition for politicians who can make progress on such things.

Sadly, they cannot do what they claim, which is to provide credible benchmarks against which to judge governments. Set for the world, the targets do not fit any particular country. China had almost met the target of halving poverty from its 1990 level by the time it was set. Sub-Saharan Africa will fall short of all the goals, despite its economy growing quicker than it has for a generation and is putting children in school faster than any region. Some goals cannot be met, others cannot be measured. Poor countries collect no reliable numbers on deaths from malaria or childbirth. The goals are supposed to be everyone's responsibility, which means they are no one's.

Some MDG zealots think the responsibility for achieving them is more clear-cut. They work out what needs to be done to meet the goals; add up the costs, then demand rich government's foot the bill. Only a lack of generosity separates poor countries from the 2015 targets, they argue.

[Turn over

But foreign cash does not always produce results. Some results do not require much money. Brazil is four times richer than Sri Lanka, but its children are twice as likely to die before their fifth birthday. Improving sanitation is about breaking habits not just building toilets. The social progress set out requires the kind of pushing that only an elected domestic government, not a distant donor, can sustain. Impoverished countries have to start from where they are, not where the summit might wish them to be. Aid cannot bridge that gap, neither should lack of foreign cash stop countries inching out of poverty by their own efforts – which is the only way nations have ever done it. To make poverty history, you have to understand how history is made.