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PARLIAMENTARY DEBATES



HOUSE OF REPRESENTATIVES
PRIVATE MEMBERS' BUSINESS
Millennium Development Goals
SPEECH

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Questioner
Speaker Billson, Bruce, MP

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Mr BILLSON (Dunkley) (9.20 pm)—I commend the member for Parramatta's motion. I also acknowledge our guests who have been in Canberra in recent days for the Micah Challenge. I was invited to participate in the TEAR advocacy panel at their workshop in early October with Kelvin Thomson. I also acknowledge the VGen activity that Vision has been running in Melbourne and the young people's commitment to highlighting the need for the MDGs and also their work to achieve them.

The motion before us today recognises some of the challenges, but a cartoon that was shown at the TEAR advocacy conference at Phillip Island captured it well. It shows a young person from the developing world standing on a globe out in space. There is a soccer goal and the young person has to kick the ball through space to that goal. It captured what the MDGs are—clear goals to focus our efforts but not a prescription for how to get there. As a nation and a donor community, we need to turn our minds to what the pathway is to achieve these goals. While we see some encouraging signs and spotty progress against a number of the targets, we also see some worrying signs about what is happening where growth is impacting in a very vicious way on the opportunities for developing countries and concern about the ongoing support of ODA from developed countries.

So I would be saying to those who are really committed to the MDGs: let's not fall into the habit that some in the corporate world fell into. In this place we have debated about people running finance companies, banks and investment institutions who target their efforts specifically to meet KPIs but ignore the long-term health, durability and sustainability of the organisations that they are overseeing. We have highlighted how that can diminish the effort and devalue the organisation.

We need to be mindful of that risk with the MDGs. We can transfer wealth from developed countries to developing countries, specifically aimed at targeting the MDGs, and we can be comforted that progress is being made, but are we actually enhancing the opportunity for those developing countries to support and sustain their own living standards, to determine their own directions as a nation and to be free of the ailments, the pain, the suffering and the mortality of poverty that are captured in the MDGs? That is a more difficult question but one we need to turn to.

We also need to make sure we are mindful of what we are doing. Too often these campaigns are run out of offices in Europe and the United Kingdom and sometimes the United States. They can be very Africa focused. I am not here to say that Africa does not face its challenges, but two-thirds of the world's poor live in our neighbourhood. Half a billion people have been lifted out of poverty in our region during my adult life. Seven-hundred million people are still living in poverty in our region, yet so much of the focus is on Africa. We need to be very mindful that in our own backyard are the biggest challenges of poverty alleviation and not see our efforts diluted. It worries some, me included, that the Rudd government's efforts to secure a temporary UN Security Council seat may see money that many argue, me included, should be increased, in terms of our funding for overseas development assistance, being even further diluted as we try and put resources into regions of the world that the Europeans, the Americans and others see as their priority, leaving our own neighbourhood, where two-thirds of the world's poor live, disadvantaged as that aid money is spread too thin.

Let me give you some examples. About 37 per cent of the population of least developed countries live in our region, the Asia-Pacific, yet least developed countries in our area receive 20 per cent of overseas development assistance. Let me put it more simply: two in five people living in least developed countries live in the Asia-Pacific region, yet one in five of the dollars available for overseas development assistance is put into that effort. In terms of debt relief, we have seen the Asia-Pacific least developed countries miss out again. So we need to be absolutely focused on our region because there is much work to be done.

It also provides us with a template for how to achieve poverty alleviation. There is only one proven, durable formula, and that is economic growth. There is no example in human history where poverty has been alleviated on a sustainable basis by simply transferring wealth from one country to another. The only remedy is economic growth. In our region we see example after example where countries have had national strategies and have taken

on board the challenges of poverty within their countries, embracing aid, support, technical assistance, know-how and the goodwill of hundreds of Australians who share their expertise and have mapped a way out. They are to be congratulated for it. So in our region we have a huge challenge, but we have wonderful experience to draw from. I urge people, when they are considering MDGs, to think about MDGs in the Asia-Pacific region first.