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Enough of summits and empty promises

While the G8 Muskoka Initiative on maternal health and child mortality has been declared a success, on the contrary, it echoes the complete abandonment of past declarations, write **LEAH McMILLAN** and **HANY BESADA**

CANADIAN Prime Minister and 2010 G8 president Stephen Harper summarised the 'Muskoka Initiative: Maternal, Newborn and Under-Five Child Health' by exclaiming: "We have been successful."

While the media has focused on this "success", with the main debate criticising the exclusion of abortion from the maternal health dialogue following Harper's refusal to fund safer abortions in developing countries, a critical issue has yet to be questioned: why are we praising a declaration that is nothing more than a regurgitation of the very same commitments made 20 years ago?

While millions of global citizens, particularly in industrialised countries, have been following the merits and failures of this so-called new initiative, most working in the area of international development are experiencing an odd form of déjà vu — have these promises to maternal health and under-5 child mortality not been promised, and confirmed, and reaffirmed, and yet again declared time and again, since the Millennium Declaration first surfaced in 1990?

Undoubtedly, the need for focusing on maternal health and the incidence of deaths among children is unarguable. The World Bank indicates that women in Africa run a one in 22 chance of dying from pregnancy, in comparison with one in 6,700 chances for women in the high-income countries.

Around 200 million women suffer from birth-related complications each year, 99 per cent of whom live in sub-Saharan Africa and Asia, while another 10 million children under 5 die every year.

Shocked? Let's take a gan-

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On Sept 8, 1990, the United Nations General Assembly drafted the "Millennium Declaration", that development assistance must be targeted towards helping the lesser-developed states arise from the grips of poverty. In particular, there must be a commitment towards the determent of preventable diseases, including pregnancy-related death. Out

of the Millennium Declaration came the "Millennium Development Goals" — eight goals that would be achieved by 2015.

Goal No. 4, to reduce child mortality, seeks to "reduce by two-thirds, between 1990 and 2015, the under-five mortality ratio". Goal No. 5, to improve maternal health, aims to "reduce by three-quarters, between 1990 and 2015, the maternal mortality ratio" and to "achieve, by 2015, universal access to reproductive health".

This is strikingly familiar to commitments made recently. Some 23 international organisations and 192 states were signatories to the declaration,

including all members of the G8. While the Muskoka Declaration committed the G8 to "undertake to mobilise as of today US\$5 billion (about

RM18 billion) of additional funding for disbursement over the next five years", those of us remembering the Millennium Declaration are shaking our heads, knowing that the objectives set out in 1990 are less than five years away. Success? Or too little, too late?

Yet, while the Millennium Development Goals (MDGs) were the first objectives in the post-Cold War era to recognise the need for a focus on maternal health, this is not the only display of the commitments. At the 2002 G7 Kananaskis summit in Canada, the African Action Plan was launched, as a partnership between G7 countries and Africa.

In particular, they set out to ensure that no African country would fail to meet the MDGs owing to lack of resources. Canada was to double its financial assistance to Africa between 2003 and 2004, and

2008 and last year to help achieve all MDGs, including maternal health.

At the 2005 G8 Gleneagles Summit, there was a "renewed commitment to Africa". At Gleneagles, G8 leaders endorsed a plan to double their aid to Africa to US\$50 billion annually by this year, for poverty alleviation and for the prevention and treatment of contagious diseases. The plan called for debt cancellation of at least US\$40 billion, owed by 18 of the world's poorest states, of which the majority are African.

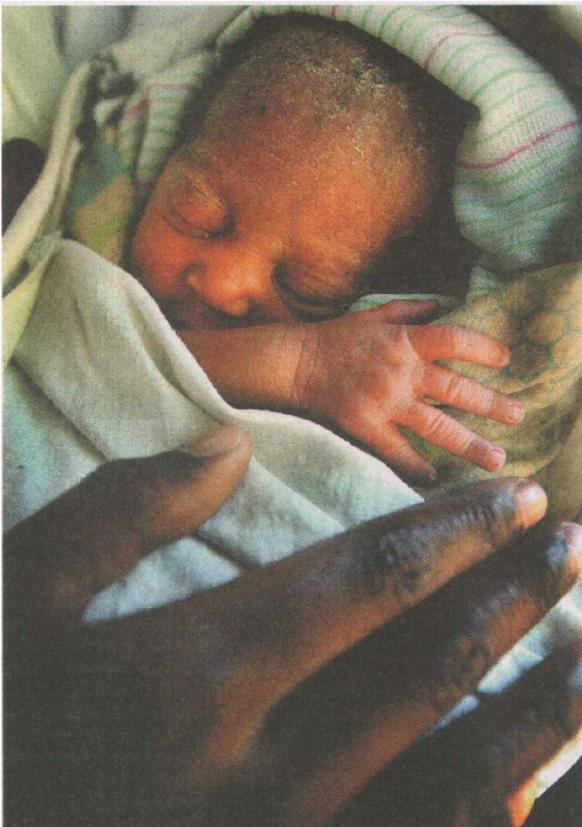
In 2007, at the Heiligendamm G8 Summit in Germany, member states agreed to allocate US\$60 billion, of which US\$30 billion would come from the United States, to fight tuberculosis, HIV/AIDS and malaria in Africa. African and Western aid organisations and non-governmental organisations came out in droves to protest against what they called a futile attempt to repackage the old and broken promises made to the beleaguered continent.

Indeed, many promises made to Africa have been broken over the years. The 2009 Organisation for Economic Co-operation and Development monitoring report confirms that "overall aid to Africa has not kept pace with the ambitious Gleneagles pledge".

While Harper might declare the Muskoka Declaration a "success", on the contrary, it highlights the complete abandonment of past promises. For every minute you took reading this article, one child died of malnutrition. The clock is ticking. We don't need more declarations, summits and empty promises.

While the Muskoka Declaration isn't actually anything different, let's hope the path now followed by G8 member states — an actual commitment to the declaration — is.

■ Leah McMillan is a Balsillie Fellow at the Centre for International Governance Innovation, where Mary Besada is a senior researcher



The need to focus on maternal health and the incidence of deaths among children is unarguable as 10 million children under 5 die every year of malnutrition. — Reuters picture