

Achieving the MDGs: The fundamentals

Success or failure will be determined by underlying issues

The Millennium Development Goals (MDGs) represent the most determined effort in history to galvanise international action around a common set of development targets (Box 1). Their success or failure will have immense consequences, not only for the world's poor, but also for the credibility of collective action by the international community. The MDGs are about basic economic and social rights for all, with clear targets to be reached by the year 2015. They may, however, seem presumptuous to those working in development, appearing disconnected from real life and riding roughshod over context. The challenge is to inspire public and professionals alike by linking the MDGs to leading global development debates.

One of these debates concerns the balance between social and economic development, and between public services and economic growth. Many developing countries see economic growth as the main way to reduce poverty, following strong role models in East and Southeast Asia. The shift of control of the development agenda from donors to the governments of poor countries through the alignment and harmonisation of aid (Booth, 2008) and the development of policy processes such as Poverty Reduction Strategy Papers (PRSPs), should, in theory, facilitate greater southern influence over such debates.

It is clear that performance on the MDGs is mixed – with some countries doing very well, others less so, and a few doing badly. In general, sub-Saharan Africa is lagging behind on all the goals, and South Asia on those relating to human development. However, seeing the lack of progress as a particularly 'African' problem is misleading. Most of the poor live in South Asia (CPRC, 2008) and many are in large middle-income countries. Then there are specific MDG targets that are proving hard to reach in many developing countries.



Despite the feminisation of poverty, most of the MDGs are 'gender blind'

Hard to reach targets

Targets that will be missed include those for sanitation, which lags behind water in both funding and attention. MDG7 includes the target of halving the proportion of people without proper sanitation by 2015. Between 1990 and 2006, the proportion of people worldwide without improved sanitation decreased by only 8 percentage points. At this rate, the world will miss the target by over 700 million people. The lowest coverage is in sub-Saharan Africa, where only one-third of the population uses improved sanitation (WHO/UNICEF, 2008). The technology on sanitation is in place; it is the supporting political energy that is in deficit.

When it comes to MDG5 – improving maternal health – the track record is dismal. The target is to reduce maternal deaths by two-thirds by 2015. Yet, more than half a million women still die every year as a result of complications during pregnancy and childbirth. In parts of sub-Saharan Africa, more than 900 women die for every 100,000 live births, compared to just 8 per 100,000 in the industrialised world (UNICEF, 2007). The world's greatest health disparity could be linked to the fact that around

Key points

- There are concerns that the MDGs are failing to protect the most vulnerable. A new MDG on social protection may be needed
- Fundamental issues will determine whether or not the MDGs are achieved, including gender, the divide between the humanitarian and development agendas, and economic growth
- It is essential to work with, rather than against, the southern political and social 'grain'

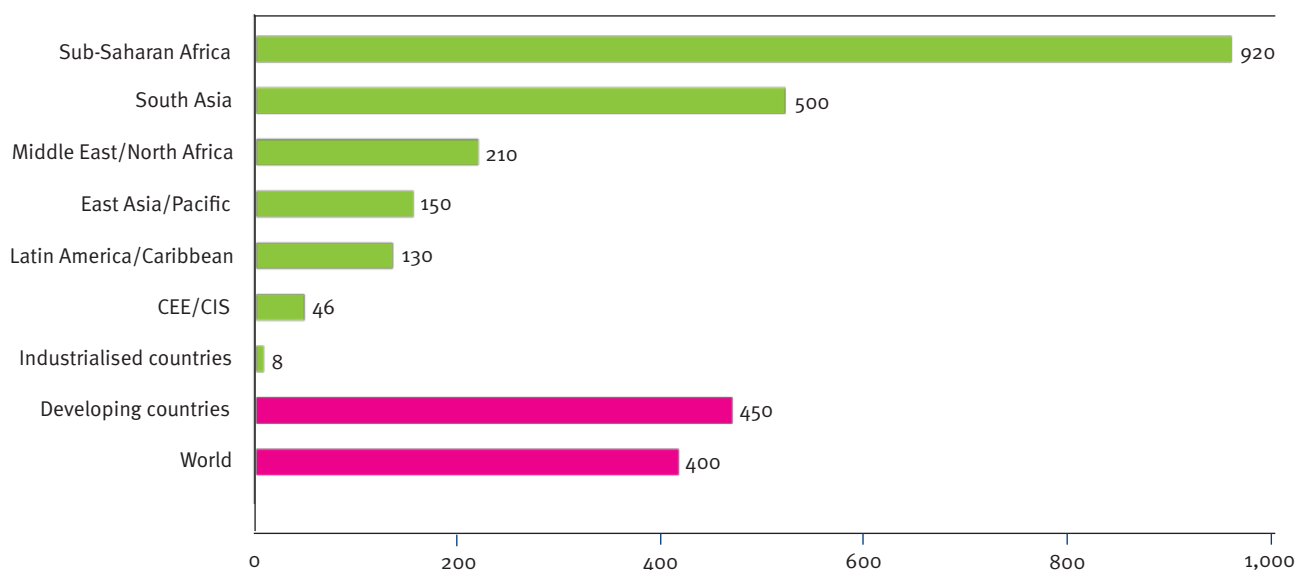
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Figure 1: Maternal mortality ratios per 100,000 live births, by region (2005)



Source: Adapted from UNICEF (2007).

200 million women are unreached by sexual and reproductive health services (United Nations, 2007). The new target for universal access to reproductive health services is very welcome: but it will be a challenge to implement it in many countries – there will be opposition, and weak political support. International agencies will need to provide particularly strong support to redress the balance.

The excluded

Many people have been excluded from the MDGs, or included on very bad terms. The 2008 Chronic Poverty Report estimates that there are up to 443 million chronically poor people across the world, many of whom have little chance of benefiting from current national and international efforts to reduce poverty. For them, there is an urgent need to adjust the model, and the report argues for a social protection MDG or, at the very least, the inclusion of a social protection target within an existing goal.

Social protection is the foundation for the participation of the poorest in economic life on more favourable terms; and for their access to the health, education and other services that are critical for national economic, as well as social, development. This is a critical issue given the vulnerability of poor people, especially the bottom 20%, in the face of global market shocks and climate change. The MDGs need to recognise the impact of social protection on such vulnerability.

It is important to ensure access to basic social services for those who are hardest to reach – the extremely poor, those living in remote areas, and those who miss out because of their gender or ethnic group. But there is a need to look beyond the services that have been emphasised by the international community, such as primary education and

basic healthcare. Universal post-primary education, especially (but not only) for girls, is also critical to poverty reduction. While a number of governments are bolstering secondary education, the importance of a complete education has not yet been recognised internationally. The Chronic Poverty Report also calls for a new secondary education target.

Fragile and chronically deprived states

It is not only individual people who have been excluded from progress, but also those countries known as ‘Bottom Billion’ countries (Collier, 2007), and even sizeable parts of other countries, such as the poorly performing states of India. The ‘fragile states’ discourse has not yet delivered for these countries and regions, perhaps because it is tied to distracting global security concerns. For the most part, these chronically deprived parts of the world have been deprived across a whole range of indicators, often for decades (CPRC, 2008). What is needed is nothing short of a new social compact that will bind a state to its citizens. Social protection again has a role to play in ensuring that the performance of these states reduces vulnerability and exclusion.

Greater protection, and the related public services, need to be financed from growth. However, sustaining that growth is a major challenge, as is ensuring that all citizens share in the benefits. It requires the development of an effective taxation and public expenditure system to support public investment and services, as well as the specific policy initiatives on growth or human development that will generate the necessary social compact.

None of this is easy. External actors can play a valuable role – recognising and supporting the steps taken by a government towards a new social compact, helping with system development, and providing long-

term and stable aid resources. This is a challenge to donors, with their electoral cycles and limited funding horizons, but it can be done, as a small but growing number of donors have demonstrated.

The increased aid promised, but not yet delivered, for the MDGs, will have to be absorbed in a useful way. A commitment by donors to provide aid on a longer term and more predictable basis would be helpful for social protection. In the absence of reliable financing, governments are reluctant to take on major new spending commitments for fear that the resources needed to sustain them may not arrive – as is often the case. It is crucial to strengthen country systems (e.g. for social assistance), to ensure that additional aid can be absorbed and used.

Focusing on the fundamentals

Focusing on goals and targets is good, but an equal focus on the fundamentals that will determine whether or not those goals and targets are achieved is vital. These could make or break the MDGs, and include gender equality, peace and political stability, sustained economic growth, and the use of its proceeds to build a social compact. ODI research suggests that efforts around the MDGs should focus on these fundamentals as much, or even more, as on the individual MDG targets.

Gender equality: It is clear that progress towards many of the MDGs – particularly the linked targets for nutrition, health, education and the environment – is being determined, to some extent, by gender issues (Jones et al., 2008). Yet despite the growing feminisation of poverty, MDG1, which focuses on poverty eradication, is ‘gender blind’, as are most of the other MDGs). ODI research suggests the value of a strong focus at national level on indicators of change in gender equality.

Bridging the humanitarian–development divide: Peace and security are fundamental for development. There is a movement to develop Millennium Security Goals, and a case has been made by Picciotto (Picciotto, 2006). The argument is for a set of goals that complement the MDGs, reflecting the Millennium Declaration commitments on action against international terrorism, organised crime and traffic in small arms and light weapons. A 2005 UN summit made several relevant commitments, including: the establishment of a peace-building commission as an inter-governmental body to help meet the needs of post-conflict countries; and a commitment to collective action to protect populations from genocide, war crimes, ethnic cleansing, and crimes against humanity. These can be defined as ‘works in progress’.

States or regions in conflict, or recovering from conflict, challenge the conventional splits in external relations between political, humanitarian and development work. What is required is a new bridge between humanitarian and development actors. This the MDGs can provide. Most humanitarian work is in situations requiring support over long

Box 1: Building consensus on gender

It would be useful to develop a broad consensus on the power of gender equity to achieve several of the existing goals and develop a set of UN-blessed good practices in monitoring progress, leading to a set of potential interventions. Countries could then decide for themselves how they monitor this issue in relation to the MDGs. A ‘Rolls Royce’ approach would be a gendered poverty index, combining time use (labour inputs versus leisure/rest time), the value of labour inputs in paid and unpaid economies, and sex-differentiated expenditure and consumption patterns.

periods of time, rather than short emergencies. This could be recognised explicitly, and medium term humanitarian-and-development plans are needed in a growing number of developing countries. The move to a three-year recovery plan in Sudan is one current example.

Humanitarian work aims to save lives – as do many of the MDGs. Framing humanitarian work within the MDGs would lead to a stronger focus on education – emphasised by few agencies at present – and its medium-term potential for empowerment, health, economic productivity and positive institutional development. In practical terms, there are some clear starting points: different UN agencies have responsibility for each MDG. Some humanitarian ‘clusters’ (the approach used, increasingly, to determine the division of labour among UN agencies in emergencies) overlap with these, in particular the responsibility of WHO for health. UNICEF, for example, could take on responsibility for education and gender, and link with UNDP on poverty and nutrition in emergencies, to cover a number of MDGs in a more systematic way.

Economic growth: The MDGs cannot be achieved without economic growth. They depend on growing tax revenues and public expenditure, even more than on increased aid – valuable though this is. A number of countries have shifted their poverty reduction strategies to focus explicitly on growth as a principal means of reducing poverty, and southern élites are typically more motivated by growth than by poverty reduction itself. While economic growth is not explicitly addressed by the MDGs, it is sustained economic growth that has led to the major reductions in income poverty seen in recent years. However, the new growth in many developing countries, responding to demand from the east, may be unable to reduce poverty to the same extent as in the past as some of it is focused on commodities produced in enclaves, with profits that would have to be taxed and redistributed to have much impact on poverty. The benefits of wider growth for some producers (e.g. in agricultural commodities) will be balanced by the effects of food and energy inflation for others.

Employment is clearly critical for development, and the new youth employment target in MDG8 is a step in the right direction, in that it recognises that not all work is decent, and that it is decent work that is needed to reduce poverty in the long term. The question remains – should the MDGs explicitly recognise the role of growth, and if so how? And

should it be any growth, or pro-poor growth? Or is there already enough emphasis on growth elsewhere in national and international policies, leaving the MDGs free to focus on human development and extreme poverty? The suggestion here is that this is a key fundamental that should continue to be monitored at national level, but linked strongly to the national MDG discourse.

Working with, not against, the southern 'grain'

There is a widespread perception of the MDGs as a northern project – despite their adoption by the UN member states. While the current emphasis on social development in MDG debates is valid, given the nature of the goals themselves, these debates need to reflect the equally valid southern preoccupation with economic growth to overcome the view that social development and economic growth are mutually exclusive.

MDG7 on environmental sustainability is one example. Mired in controversy as a result of contested definitions, ill defined targets and indicators that are based on northern concerns, such as rainforests, MDG7 has not resulted in strong environmental strategies in the developing world. It is an example of trying to work 'against the grain' of southern realities. It is important to understand the southern perspective on environmental sustainability, which is often that this sustainability is only achievable at the expense of economic development. As a result, institutions designed to ensure environmental protection are often unfit for the purpose. The overwhelmingly project-based approach to the environment does little to help (Bird, 2008).

Other examples of working 'against the grain' include attempts by the international governance agenda to introduce western forms of governance to developing countries where they may sit uncomfortably. English common law courts, for example, have never been popular in Anglophone Africa. The 'winner takes all' nature of judgements is alien to traditions that favour more inquisitive, mediatory and restorative approaches to problems. One starting point is to look closely at institutions that have been

successful in providing public goods and solving collective problems. It may be wise to examine so-called 'hybrid' institutional forms that have roots in western tradition but are also sensitive to other culture (Kelsall, 2008). The economic successes seen in East and Southeast Asia show how it is possible to work 'with the grain' of national and local politics to achieve lasting results that benefit nations, corporations and individuals.

The perception that the MDGs are rooted in a northern agenda feeds a further perception: 'if they [the north] want them, let them pay for them' – a perception that the MDGs are to be achieved through aid alone. In fact, the necessary public expenditures will only be made consistently over long periods of time if they are underpinned by a social compact between state and citizen, in which tax revenues are used to achieve public policy objectives. This social compact can be supported by international aid if that aid supports southern-owned policies and goes 'with the grain' of national politics, de-emphasising political conditions in favour of stable, predictable, aligned aid. Working with the grain does not necessarily mean harking back to tradition – change and modernisation are forever altering the grain of societies themselves. There will always be difficult issues, both at international level – getting a trade deal, debt negotiation, and producing additional aid flows in a recession – and at national level where the MDG fundamentals will play out. Going with the grain should not mean the perpetuation of fundamental issues that threaten progress towards the MDGs, such as gender inequity and social exclusion. It is important to be aware of, and support, southern efforts to address these issues, while leaving the leadership in southern hands. If countries get the fundamentals right, the MDGs will follow. If the international community gets the fundamentals right, the MDG environment will improve. With seven years to the deadline, now is the time to ensure that the fundamentals are central to the MDGs.

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