

Leave no country behind

A regional look at performance on selected MDGs and SDGs

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Key messages

- In Asia-Pacific, Africa and Latin America, countries that have been reported as off-track in meeting the Millennium Development Goals (MDGs) have in fact done better than expected given their starting points. Across all regions countries have particularly performed well on indicators that include reduction of maternal mortality, increases in secondary enrolment and access to cooking fuel and electricity.
- However under-performance on indicators varies depending on the regional context. While Asia-Pacific has under-performed expectations on the use of modern energy services; for Latin America and the Caribbean, particular deficits are undernutrition and electricity; and for Africa they are sanitation and the maternal mortality ratio.
- Knowing which regions and countries are lagging according to which indicators is invaluable to better targeting by governments and development partners. Recognition of how starting points matter is crucial for policy to focus on implementing the SDG call for country specificity alongside its embrace of the leave no one behind agenda.

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Introduction

Identifying inequalities across groups *within* countries is important for reaching marginalised people, but the leave no one behind agenda must not forget inequalities *across* countries (Bhattacharya, 2015; Samman, 2015). In other words, the Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs) should ensure not only that no person is left behind but also that no country is left behind. Examining progress towards the Millennium Development Goals (MDGs) using a regional lens is useful in highlighting trends that global aggregates and national-level analysis may hide.

Progress trajectories across countries on many MDG indicators are often non-linear, occurring at different rates for countries with different starting positions (Rodriguez Takeuchi and Samman, 2015). And yet, although the MDG targets were designed as global ambitions, they were typically adopted as national targets. This assumed that either it was feasible for all countries to achieve equal amounts of progress or, relatedly, and that countries that lagged behind could bridge the gap.

However, many studies have shown that having a target that specifies the same rate of change or a universal outcome could unduly penalise many countries while overstating the accomplishments of others (see, e.g., Easterly, 2009; Klasen and Lange, 2012; Rodriguez Takeuchi and Samman, 2015). For example, in the mid-1990s, it was widely reported that Sub-Saharan Africa was the only region to be ‘off-track’ in relation to meeting any of the goals (Easterly, 2009). And yet the final assessment

of MDG progress (UN 2015) highlighted the great progress countries in the region had made.

As a consequence, for the purposes of assessment and communication, it was recommended that the SDG targets be specified nationally or for groups of countries, as well as universally (see Klasen and Lange, 2012; Melamed and Samman, 2014, Rodriguez Takeuchi and Samman, 2015). Indeed, this recommendation was reflected in the emphasis of the SDG outcome document on countries setting targets based on their own ‘national circumstances’.

The leave no one behind agenda emphasised in the SDG agenda makes a strong argument in favour of an inclusive agenda – in asserting that gains from development must extend to the most marginalised and disadvantaged countries and individuals. If we couple this with the argument that starting points matter, and that development policy needs to be sensitive to the uneven reality, then attaining the goals in an equitable way could require giving special support to those regions and countries within regions that face particular challenges.

To this end, we ask: how did countries in the Asia-Pacific, Latin America and Caribbean and Africa¹ perform across the MDGs when measured against more realistic expectations that take starting points into account? This analysis uses the methodology described in Rodriguez Takeuchi and Samman (2015) but updates their analysis with the most recent data available for each of the indicators and adds four additional indicators that are SDG targets (see Appendix 2 for a list of indicators).

1 See Appendix 1 for a description of these regions.

Methods and data²

To take starting points into account, we evaluate the performance of developing countries in different regions (relative to the developing country average) controlling for initial conditions and allowing for non-linear pathways. In this way, the method overcomes the shortcomings of the ‘relative’ and ‘shortfall’ measures specified by MDG targets: it is not, by construction, biased towards or against any group of countries (Gidwitz et al., 2010). On the basis of a regression model, the ‘deviation from fit’ for each country is computed as the difference between each country’s actual performance and its ‘expected’ performance (following [Gidwitz et al., 2010](#); [UNDP, 2010](#)). A key aim of the method is to compare the traditional on-track/off-track results with how a country performed relative to what might reasonably have been expected based on prior performance and that of its regional A lack of coincidence between the two approaches reflects targets that were either unfeasibly high, or conversely, too low.

The starting point of the analysis is 1990. We compute what we expected countries to achieve for each indicator by 2010 given their initial levels. We believe 1990 provides a useful starting point for two reasons – first, this is the benchmark date of the MDGs, although the goals adopted at the Millennium Summit in 2000, and second, data are more widely available for a wide range of indicators for the 1990s and 2000s than they were for previous periods.

The estimation takes place in three steps. For each indicator, we:

1. estimate the path of progress on the basis of a fractional polynomial regression. In other words, we predict the expected final levels of a given indicator for all countries, taking into account initial levels
2. calculate the deviation from fit for each country – that is, the difference between the actual and the expected change
3. calculate the change each country has experienced using either the relative or the shortfall method according to the corresponding MDG target. We then assess whether or not each country is on-track or off-track for that indicator

When we interpret the results, we compare whether a country is on- or off-track alongside whether or not it performed better or worse than expected – that is, the extent to which the two methods coincide. False negatives occur when countries perform better than predicted, even when they are not on-track to meet their target. Similarly, false positives occur where countries perform below expectation yet are on-track to meet the targets, perhaps because the targets did not require them to make a large amount of effort.

2. This section draws directly on [Rodriguez Takeuchi and Samman \(2015\)](#).

Results

Our analysis shows that, overall (relative to all developing countries), progress in all countries in Asia-Pacific has exceeded expectations based on starting points. Over half of the countries show better than expected progress on all but two of the indicators – that is, SDG7a and SDG7b (access to clean cooking fuel and access to electricity, respectively). Better-than-expected progress was notable in the region on MDG6 (HIV/AIDS and malaria) and MDG2 (primary education). In terms of poverty reduction, China and Vietnam in particular were among the region's – and indeed the world's – best performers, but Thailand, Cambodia, Pakistan and Indonesia also made great strides.

The two methods of assessing progress – the traditional on-track/off-track and the deviation-from-fit method – coincided for between 27% and 80% of cases for countries in Asia-Pacific, depending on the indicator (Table 1). As mentioned earlier, lack of coincidence can occur when targets are either unfeasibly high or too low. In this case, it is primarily the former. Lack of coincidence was highest for SDG4 on net secondary school enrolment – this target was especially unattainable in the region.

A high degree of false negatives in Asia-Pacific occurs for SDG7a (clean cooking fuel), MDG5 (maternal mortality) and SDG4 (secondary education enrolment): 38%, 74% and 73% of countries, respectively, realised great progress despite not meeting official global targets for these goals.

Oman and Indonesia, for example, would not meet a global goal on universal secondary enrolment, but they have nonetheless showed impressive progress since the 1990s. Oman's net secondary enrolment rate rose from 49% in 1993 to 83% in 2012 and Indonesia's from 42% in 1995 to 76% in 2012.

The converse also applies (meeting the target despite 'worse-than-expected' performance) but this scenario is much less frequent – the maximum level was 43% (for MDG3's target on achieving gender parity in education). There were very few false positives in Asia-Pacific for most of the other targets.

Our analysis shows that, overall, progress in the region has exceeded expectations based on starting points. Over half of the countries show better than expected progress on all the MDG and SDG targets, with the exception of SDG2 (undernutrition) and SDG7 (access to electricity). Mexico, Peru, Chile and Honduras are among the region's best performers once we take starting points into account.

The two methods of assessing progress – the traditional on-track/off-track and the deviation-from-fit methods – coincided in between 44% and 90% of cases for countries in the region, depending on the indicator (Table 2). The

highest degree of false negatives in Latin America and the Caribbean occurs for SDG7a and MDG5 (access to clean cooking fuel and maternal mortality): 56% and 50% of countries, respectively, realised great progress despite not meeting official global targets.

Brazil, Costa Rica and Jamaica, for example, performed better than expected on the goal on cooking with clean fuels – reducing the shortfall by 3.5%, 3.8% and 3.6% per year, respectively – but were off-track. Costa Rica performed better than expected on clean cooking fuel, with the share of people using non-clean fuel declining from 23% to 6% between 1990 and 2010. In Jamaica, the share fell from 37% to 10% in the same years. Some countries that could have done better are Panama, Paraguay and Guatemala – these had a high starting position yet remained off-track and performed worse than expected.

The converse also applies (meeting the target despite 'worse-than-expected' performance) but this scenario is much less frequent – the maximum level was 43% (for MDG3 on achieving gender parity in education), but there were very few false positives in Latin America and the Caribbean for most of the other targets.

Our analysis shows that overall, progress in the region has slightly under-performed expectations based on starting points. Over half of the countries show better than expected progress on MDG2 (primary education) and MDG6 (HIV/AIDS and malaria), as well as on SDG2 (undernutrition) and SDG4 (secondary education). Egypt, Senegal and Cape Verde in particular are among the region's best performers on these revised measures based on starting points.

The two methods of assessing progress – the traditional on-track/off-track and the deviation-from-fit method – coincided in between 50% and 81% of cases for countries in the region, depending on the indicator (Table 3).

Many poor countries registered better-than-expected progress on some MDG targets, even though they were not on-track to meet them. The highest degree of false negatives in Africa occurs on MDG6a (HIV/AIDS) and SDG4 (secondary education): 45% and 50% of countries, respectively, realised great progress despite being off-track. Egypt and Guinea, for example, showed impressive increases in secondary enrolment – reducing the shortfall annually by 3.0% and 1.2%, respectively – but they would not meet a global universal secondary enrolment target. Egypt's net secondary enrolment rose from 65% to 82% between 1994 and 2012 and Guinea's from 6% to 30% between 1990 and 2011.

The converse also applies (meeting the target despite ‘worse-than-expected’ performance) but this scenario is much less frequent – the maximum level was 23% (for MDG target 1.1 on halving extreme poverty). In fact, there were no false positives in Africa for most of the targets.

Table 1a: Countries over-performing and under-performing expectations in Asia-Pacific on the MDGs

% of countries	MDG1	MDG2	MDG3	MDG4	MDG5	MDG6A	MDG6C	MDG7
Total better than expected	80	85	64	57	74	78	87	71
Total on-track	100	38	57	37	26	43	83	44
... and better than expected	80	38	57	37	26	43	73	41
... but not better than expected	20	0	7	0	0	0	10	2
Total not on-track	0	62	43	63	74	56	17	56
... but better than expected	0	46	14	20	49	35	13	29
... and not better than expected	0	15	29	22	26	22	3	27
Total coincidence	80	54	79	59	51	65	77	68
Number of countries (in Asia-Pacific)	16	17	7	32	29	21	21	31
Total number of countries	61	67	58	152	146	106	89	137

Note: False negatives are highlighted in green and false positives in blue.

Table 1b: Countries over-performing and under-performing expectations in Asia-Pacific on the SDGs

% of countries	SDG2	SDG4	SDG7a	SDG7b
Total better than expected	60	73	38	34
Total on-track	40	0	0	2
... and better than expected	35	0	0	0
... but not better than expected	5	0	0	2
Total not on-track	60	100	100	93
... but better than expected	25	73	38	34
... and not better than expected	35	27	62	63
Total coincidence ^{3<?>}	70	27	62	63
Number of countries (in Asia-Pacific)	10	8	32	29
Total number of countries	59	34	150	130

Note: False negatives are highlighted in green and false positives in blue.

Table 2a: Countries over-performing and under-performing expectations in Latin America and the Caribbean on the MDGs

% of countries	MDG1	MDG2	MDG3	MDG4	MDG5	MDG6A	MDG6C	MDG7
Total better than expected	50	59	57	56	52	71	95	52
Total on-track	75	12	100	31	0	17	86	45
... and better than expected	50	12	57	31	0	17	86	39
... but not better than expected	25	0	43	0	0	0	0	6
Total not on-track	25	88	0	69	100	83	14	55
... but better than expected	0	47	0	25	52	54	10	13
... and not better than expected	25	41	0	44	48	29	5	42
Total coincidence	75	53	57	75	48	17	90	81
Number of countries (in Latin America and Caribbean)	16	17	7	32	29	24	21	31
Total number of countries	61	67	58	152	146	106	89	137

Note: False negatives are highlighted in green and false positives in blue.

Table 2b: Countries over-performing and under-performing expectations in Latin America and the Caribbean on the SDGs

% of countries	SDG2	SDG4	SDG7a	SDG7b
Total better than expected	40	50	56	34
Total on-track	20	0	0	0
... and better than expected	10	0	0	0
... but not better than expected	10	0	0	0
Total not on-track	80	100	100	100
... but better than expected	30	50	56	34
... and not better than expected	50	50	44	66
Total coincidence	60	50	44	66
Number of countries (in Latin America and Caribbean)	10	8	32	29
Total number of countries	59	34	150	130

Note: False negatives are highlighted in green and false positives in blue.

Table 3a: Countries over-performing and under-performing expectations in Africa on the MDGs

% of countries	MDG1	MDG2	MDG3	MDG4	MDG5	MDG6A	MDG6C	MDG7
Total better than expected	41	50	43	44	36	67	54	31
Total on-track	64	25	26	26	9	27	34	12
... and better than expected	41	25	22	26	9	22	26	12
... but not better than expected	23	0	4	0	0	4	9	0
Total not on-track	36	75	74	74	91	73	66	88
... but better than expected	0	25	22	19	26	45	29	20
... and not better than expected	36	50	52	56	64	29	37	69
Total coincidence	77	75	74	81	74	51	63	80
Number of countries (in Africa)	22	28	23	54	53	49	35	51
Total number of countries	61	67	58	152	146	106	89	137

Note: False negatives are highlighted in green and false positives in blue.

Table 3b: Countries over-performing and under-performing expectations in Africa on the SDGs

% of countries	SDG2	SDG4	SDG7a	SDG7b
Total better than expected	57	50	41	37
Total on-track	4	0	0	0
... and better than expected	4	0	0	0
... but not better than expected	0	0	0	0
Total not on-track	96	100	102	100
... but better than expected	39	50	41	37
... and not better than expected	57	50	61	63
Total coincidence	61	50	61	63
Number of countries (in Africa)	28	10	51	51
Total number of countries	59	34	150	130

Note: False negatives are highlighted in green and false positives in blue.

Conclusion

This paper has contrasted the on-track/off-track methodology on selected MDG targets with a ‘deviation-from-fit’ method that takes into account the initial level of deprivation for each country. Regional analysis shows that, overall, progress has been notable in Asia-Pacific – where 66% of countries have exceeded expectations – followed by Latin America and the Caribbean, where 56% of countries have exceeded expectations. In Africa, the share is a more modest 45%. Nonetheless, in all three regions most countries were not on track to meet a given indicator – the share ranged from 60% of countries in Asia-Pacific to 68% in Latin America and the Caribbean to 81% in Africa.

Across all regions discussed in this paper, countries that have been reported as off-track are in fact doing better than expected given their starting points on indicators that include reduction of maternal mortality, increases

in secondary enrolment and access to cooking fuel and electricity. However, it is notable that under-performance varies depending on the regional context. In particular, Asia-Pacific is under-performing expectations on the use of modern energy services – cook stoves and electricity; for Latin America and the Caribbean particular deficits are undernutrition and electricity; and for Africa they are sanitation and the maternal mortality ratio. Knowing which regions and countries are lagging according to which indicators is an indispensable precursor to better targeting by governments and development partners. Moreover, recognition of how starting points matter is crucial for policy to focus on implementing the SDG call for country specificity alongside its embrace of the leave no one behind agenda.

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Appendix 1: Description of regions

Asia-Pacific	LAC	Africa
Afghanistan	Antigua and Barbuda	Algeria
American Samoa	Argentina	Angola
Bahrain	Barbados	Benin
Bangladesh	Belize	Botswana
Bhutan	Bolivia	Burkina Faso
Cambodia	Brazil	Burundi
China	Chile	Cameroon
Korea (Dem Rep)	Colombia	Cape Verde
Fiji	Costa Rica	Central African Republic
India	Cuba	Chad
Indonesia	Dominica	Comoros
Iran (Islamic Republic of)	Dominican Republic	Congo
Iraq	Ecuador	Congo (DR)
Jordan	El Salvador	Côte d'Ivoire
Kazakhstan	Grenada	Djibouti
Kiribati	Guatemala	Egypt
Korea (Republic of)	Guyana	Equatorial Guinea
Kyrgyzstan	Haiti	Eritrea
Lao People's Democratic Republic	Honduras	Ethiopia
Lebanon	Jamaica	Gabon
Malaysia	Mexico	Gambia
Maldives	Nicaragua	Ghana
Marshall Islands	Panama	Guinea
Micronesia (Federated States of)	Paraguay	Guinea-Bissau
Mongolia	Peru	Kenya
Myanmar	Saint Kitts and Nevis	Lesotho
Nepal	Saint Lucia	Liberia
Occupied Palestinian Territories	Saint Vincent and the Grenadines	Libya
Oman	Suriname	Madagascar
Pakistan	Trinidad and Tobago	Malawi
Palau	Uruguay	Mali
Papua New Guinea	Venezuela	Mauritania
Philippines		Mauritius
Samoa		Morocco
Saudi Arabia		Mozambique
Solomon Islands		Namibia
Sri Lanka		Niger
Syrian Arab Republic		Nigeria
Tajikistan		Rwanda
Thailand		Sao Tome and Principe
Timor-Leste		Senegal
Tonga		Seychelles

(continued)

Asia-Pacific	LAC	Africa
Turkmenistan		Sierra Leone
Tuvalu		Somalia
Uzbekistan		South Africa
Vanuatu		South Sudan
Viet Nam		Sudan
Yemen		Swaziland
		Tanzania
		Togo
		Tunisia
		Uganda
		Zambia
		Zimbabwe

Note: Not all data available for each country for each indicator. Regional aggregates were computed for indicators where 66% of population or 50% of countries were included.

Appendix 2: Table of indicators

MDG/SDG*	Target	Indicator
MDG1.A	Halve, between 1990 and 2015, the proportion of people whose income is less than one dollar a day	\$1.25 poverty headcount (%)
MDG2.A	Ensure that, by 2015, children everywhere, boys and girls alike, will be able to complete a full course of primary schooling	Net enrolment in primary (% of primary school age children)
MDG3.A	Eliminate gender disparity in primary and secondary education, preferably by 2005, and in all levels of education no later than 2015	School life expectancy, primary to tertiary, gender parity index
MDG4.A	Reduce by two-thirds, between 1990 and 2015, the under-five mortality rate	Under- five mortality rate (per 1,000 live births)
MDG5.A	Reduce by three-quarters, between 1990 and 2015, the maternal mortality ratio	Maternal mortality ratio (per 100,000 births) – modelled estimate
MDG6.A	Have halted by 2015 and begun to reverse the spread of HIV/AIDS	Prevalence of HIV, total (% of population 15–49)
MDG6.C	Have halted by 2015 and begun to reverse the incidence of malaria and other major diseases	Deaths owing to malaria (per 100,000 people)
MDG7.C	Halve, by 2015, the proportion of people without sustainable access to safe drinking water and basic sanitation	Population without improved sanitation (%)
SDG2.2	By 2030, end all forms of malnutrition, including achieving by 2025, the internationally agreed targets on stunting and wasting in children under 5 years of age, and address the nutritional needs of adolescent girls, pregnant and lactating women and older persons	Stunting rate, height for age (% children under five)
SDG4.1	By 2030, ensure that all girls and boys complete free, equitable and quality primary and secondary education leading to relevant and effective learning outcomes	Net enrolment in secondary (% of secondary school-age children)
SDG7.1 (a)	By 2030, ensure universal access to affordable, reliable and modern energy services	Population without clean cooking fuel (non-solid fuel) (%)
SDG7.1 (b)	By 2030, ensure universal access to affordable, reliable and modern energy services	Population without access to electricity (%)

Note: * SDG Zero Draft (June 2015) <https://sustainabledevelopment.un.org/content/documents/7261Post-2015%20Summit%20-%20202%20June%202015.pdf>



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