

## ISSUE 9

## Are the Millennium Development Goals Achievable?

- ✓ **YES**  
 SAKIKO FUKUDA-PARR, "Millennium Development Goals: Why They Matter," *Global Governance*, 10 (2004): 395–402
- X **NO**  
 MICHAEL CLEMENS AND TODD MOSS, "What's Wrong with the Millennium Development Goals?" *Centre for Global Development*, 2004

In 2000, the members of the United Nations adopted a set of goals intended to cut poverty around the world by half by the year 2015. Since then, these goals, commonly referred to as the Millennium Development Goals (MDGs), have been a dominant focus for discussions regarding development assistance strategies and global awareness campaigns, such as "Make Poverty History".

The end of setting global development goals is not new. Rather the adoption of the MDGs is really the end product of a number of UN development initiatives dating back to the 1960s. The United Nations sponsored three consecutive UN Development Decades in the 1960s, '70s, and '80s, each of which focused on achieving economic growth.

In the 1990s, the attention on development shifted to issues relating to "getting policies right". As result, issues of macroeconomic adjustments, establishing good governance policies, and institutional reforms became the central theme. At the same time, the growing international human rights movement focused increased attention on social and economic rights, including the right to food, health care, education, and a decent standard of living.

As the decade of the 1990s drew to a close and a new millennium was about to begin, many members of the United Nations began to call for both a renewal of political will to tackle the challenges of development and poverty and a broader, more comprehensive approach than had been taken in previous decades. In 1998, the United Nation's General Assembly voted to create a Millennium Summit of the UN. This summit was held in September 6–8, 2000. Based on the deliberations of this gathering, the 189 members of the UN General Assembly subsequently voted unanimously to adopt the Millennium Declaration. As a follow-up to this, the Secretary-General, all UN specialized agencies, and other institutions such as the International Monetary Fund (IMF), the World Bank, and the Organization of Economic Cooperation and Development (OECD) were asked to develop a plan for achieving the objectives of the Millennium Declaration. The result was the

establishment of 8 goals, 18 specific targets, and a total of 48 indicators. Collectively these became known as the Millennium Development Goals (MDGs). The aim of this process was to establish goals that would be both measurable and time bound—that is, they would have a specific target date for their achievement.

The overall aim of the MDGs is to reduce global poverty by half by the year 2015. Achievement of the goals assumed a global collective effort by both rich and poor nations, as well as a coordinated endeavour by all the major economic and social development agencies. The eight principal MDGs are: (i) the eradication of extreme poverty and hunger; (ii) the achievement of universal primary education; (iii) the promotion of gender equality and empowerment of women; (iv) the reduction of child mortality; (v) the improvement of maternal health; (vi) the combating of HIV/AIDS, malaria, and other debilitating diseases; (vii) the establishment of environmental sustainability; and (viii) the development of a global partnership for development (see table on page 218).

Each of the first seven goals is intended to be measurable and they are mutually reinforcing in their collectively tackling various dimensions of the global problem of poverty. The United Nations has set specific targets for each of these goals as well as established indicators by which progress toward their achievement can be measured. Goal 8 is more of an aspirational goal needed to achieve the other seven goals.

What is unique about the development of the MDGs, in contrast to previous UN development targets, is that they are specifically expressed in human rights language. The MDGs are premised on six fundamental values that find expression in the Universal Declaration of Human Rights (articles 22, 24, 25, and 26): freedom, equality, solidarity, respect for nature, and shared responsibility. The purpose of this was to emphasize the point that these goals were not just vague economic aspirations which nations could ignore, but rather fundamental obligations for which all nations and leaders should be held accountable.

In order to ensure that the MDGs were not just an exercise in idealistic dreaming, the UN called on each development agency and every member country to adopt the MDGs and carefully review their policies to ensure that their programs incorporate these goals. Clearly, success in achieving these goals was dependent on a mutual, self-reinforcing progress in each of the goals. No single one can be focused on alone. In addition, the achievement of goals 1–7 will depend heavily on the success of goal 8. In particular, the richer countries must be willing to adapt their development assistance policies, debt relief programs, and trade and technology transfers in ways that facilitate achievement of the goals. To encourage this, subsequent UN meetings such as the Monterrey International Conference on Financing for Development in March 2002, the Johannesburg World Summit on Sustainable Development in September 2002, the G8 Summit in Gleneagles, Scotland, and the 2005 World Summit in New York have provided opportunities to both measure the progress being made and to

renew commitments. In addition, the UN publishes an annual Millennium Development Goals Report to chart the progress made to date in achieving the goals, and to keep up the pressure to work harder for their achievement.

But how useful are such efforts at setting global development targets? Is this an effective means of collectively rallying global cooperation and ensuring progress? Or, is this a futile public relations exercise by the United Nations likely to breed further aid fatigue and cynicism by setting unrealistic goals that UN decision-makers know from the outset are unachievable? In the first reading, Sakiko Fukuda-Parr discusses why the focus on the MDGs is an important exercise. In response, Michael Clemens and Todd Moss explain some of the weaknesses and failings of the MDG campaign.

✓ **YES**  
**Millennium Development Goals:  
Why They Matter**

SAKIKO FUKUDA-PARR

Many development goals have been set by the United Nations since the first "development decade" of the 1960s. What is new about the Millennium Development Goals (MDGs)? First, an unprecedented assembly of the world's heads of state generated them when they met in September 2000. Second, the goals put human development—poverty and people and their lives—at the center of the global development agenda for the new millennium, a shift away from growth as the central objective of development. Third, MDGs are not just aspirations but provide a framework for accountability; they do not simply state ideals but go on to define concrete goals that can be monitored. Fourth, they address not only development outcomes but also inputs from rich countries, thus forming a compact that holds both rich and poor governments accountable for opening markets, giving more aid and debt relief, and transferring technology.

**MDGs ARE A HUMAN DEVELOPMENT AGENDA**

The eight MDGs—poverty, education, gender equality, child mortality, maternal health, HIV/AIDS and other diseases, environment, and global partnership—have been areas of concern for some time, but they have not been at the center of the UN's development agenda. The first, second, and third UN development decades (1960s, 1970s, and 1980s) were more involved in economic transformation and growth, especially industrialization. The adoption of the MDGs reflects an important endorsement of the central objectives of poverty and human well-being. The MDGs speak directly to improving human lives.

In the development debates of the past four decades, the debate has shifted among economists and policymakers about how much attention should be paid to economic growth, to people, and to poverty. Although almost everyone would agree that all three objectives are important, some assume that economic growth is primary. Human needs are often overshadowed by the preoccupation with the growth of the gross domestic product (GDP). Economic expansion is critical to human flourishing, but it is a means, not an end in itself. Economic development can be ruthless, by benefiting some at the expense of others; voiceless, by excluding the voice of people; jobless, by creating wealth but not jobs; futureless, by exhausting the next generation's resources; and rootless, by destroying cultural traditions and identities.

Many economists have developed alternative frameworks or approaches. In the 1970s, the International Labour Organization (ILO) and economists such as Hans Singer and Richard Jolly argued for the importance of employment. In the 1980s, Paul Streeten, Frances Stewart, and others argued that the priority of development

was to meet basic needs. Starting in the 1980s, Amartya Sen began to define development as expanding people's capabilities to lead lives that they value. Building on these ideas, Mahbub ul Haq launched the concept of human development, which defines development as a process of creating an environment in which all people can lead full, creative lives. He launched the annual *Human Development Reports* in 1990 to track the progress of countries according to measures of human well-being rather than economic growth. The Human Development Index (HDI) was introduced to reflect capabilities in three critical areas: to survive, to be knowledgeable, and to enjoy a decent standard of living. These reports have applied this conceptual framework to explore different capabilities, such as being educated and healthy, but they also investigate areas such as political freedoms and cultural liberties and suggest policy tools to promote expansion of these capabilities. Over the years, a human development approach or paradigm has evolved.<sup>1</sup>

The Millennium Declaration and human development share a common vision, guided by the values of freedom, dignity, solidarity, tolerance, and equity among people and nations. These principles are also fundamental human rights, and the MDGs set standards for the "progressive realization" of economic and social rights. They are part of a multidimensional vision that integrates political factors such as civil rights and democratic representation, social factors such as education and health, and economic factors such as growth and employment. This vision considers people not only as the beneficiaries of progress but also as the key agents of change. The MDGs address some of the most critical areas of human development, although they do not deal with participation, democracy, and human rights.<sup>2</sup> MDGs are not in themselves a paradigm, but they are benchmark indicators of how we are progressing in human development and social and economic rights.

### MDGs AS A FRAMEWORK OF ACCOUNTABILITY

The MDGs are not a new strategy but a new instrument for mobilizing action. The MDGs are not a technocratically defined set of goals that emerged from an analysis of development constraints accompanied by a finely tuned set of policy prescriptions. Rather, the MDGs are a global commitment and a framework of accountability.

The MDGs' newness is not attributable to their content but to how they have mustered political consensus on common objectives. They also explicitly commit world leaders to a collective responsibility for all people irrespective of national borders. The MDGs were not formulated overnight. They build on a global consensus reached in the 1990s among governments—a dialogue to which many civil society groups actively contributed.<sup>3</sup> All but two of the eight MDGs are outlined in the agendas negotiated and adopted at various UN conferences during the 1990s. The MDGs also draw on goals proposed by rich countries; the Organization for Economic Cooperation and Development (OECD) had earlier drawn up its own development goals.<sup>4</sup>

The MDGs are more powerful tools than mere UN declarations because time limits and quantifiable outcomes, by which progress can be objectively measured and monitored, are specified. They provide a framework for accountability at local, national, and international levels.

The most divisive element in negotiating the MDGs has been the eighth goal—global partnership—which includes trade, debt, aid, and technology transfer. This goal is important for the developing countries, but it is weak on accountability; it is the only MDG without quantified and time-bound indicators. Developing countries are not interested in opening themselves up to global scrutiny unless there is a real commitment to joint accountability.

An accountability framework is useful only if it is based on evidence. The UN system is mounting a systematic procedure for global monitoring and support. MDGs are monitored by specialized agencies that report annually to the UN General Assembly. The Statistical Division of the UN Department of Social and Economic Affairs consolidates information into an integrated data system. At the country level, the UN Development Programme (UNDP) is helping countries develop progress reports based on national data.

Many UN resolutions have been passed, only to be left with no follow-up. Other proposals succeeded in mobilizing massive action and effectively realized their objectives, such as achieving universal coverage in child immunization. The leadership role of the UN Children's Fund (UNICEF) in advocating and monitoring progress was key to the success of those important goals.<sup>5</sup>

The UN secretary-general's personal leadership has helped energize and activate the entire UN system, including the World Bank and the International Monetary Fund (IMF). The UN has established a special project with three components: support for countries in defining national strategies and monitoring progress; a campaign to advocate for MDG priorities and for the mobilization of all stakeholders; and a research program to identify an agenda for action.

Unlike other UN goals that have been inconsistent with one another or ignored by the Bretton Woods institutions, international cooperation is gradually being aligned with MDG priorities. Although still not implemented fully, the Washington-based financial institutions are committed to including the MDGs in their Poverty Reduction Strategy Papers (PRSPs). These are national policy frameworks being prepared in the world's poorest aid-dependent countries; they define poverty-reducing targets, priorities, and measures on which donors can agree. As shown in the *Human Development Report 2003*, development should accelerate dramatically to achieve the MDGs in most of the world's poorest countries. The PRSPs then should be first to reflect such ambitious goals and targets. But much more needs to be done.<sup>6</sup>

### MDGs AS A COMPACT

The MDGs differ from previous international goals in another politically significant way. For the first time, rich countries' inputs are considered alongside the objectives of poor countries. Of the eight MDGs, the eighth—global partnership—is

the most significant departure. It commits rich countries to do more in the areas of access to trade, aid, debt relief, and technology transfer. If this goal had not been included, developing countries would not have agreed to the MDG package.

The MDGs have been followed by the Monterrey Consensus, adopted at the International Conference on Financing for Development held in March 2002.<sup>7</sup> Again, responsibility and accountability are shared. Recipient countries should do more to improve the effective use of resources by employing measures such as combating corruption and strengthening institutions, and donor countries should provide greater support in return.

However, like other international compacts, the MDGs suffer two related weaknesses: asymmetry and noncompliance. Accountability of developed country performance is weak because goal eight has neither timetable nor quantified targets. Moreover, there is little pressure to even report efforts. Sweden has taken the lead in presenting a self-assessment to the Economic and Social Council, but this is not required. Attempts to make reporting a requirement in the UN have failed.

### THE IMPORTANCE OF NATIONAL OWNERSHIP

The MDGs are not without critics and skeptics. Some academics, social activists, and government officials have argued that the MDGs create false incentives and distortions. The most incisive voices have suggested the following:<sup>8</sup>

- They leave out many objectives such as employment, reproductive health, human rights, and many other issues that developing countries and civil society groups have been advocating.
- They do not go far enough on global partnership: they leave targets vague and neglect institutional reform. Issues such as the decision-making processes of the World Trade Organization (WTO), the governance of multi-lateral institutions, and the restructuring of the global financial architecture are excluded.
- They impose a large data collection and reporting burden on underresourced government offices.
- They could lead to top-down planning and implementation, thereby promoting a donor-led agenda at the expense of a participatory approach in which communities and countries set their own priorities.
- They could distort priorities by focusing on issues that appear arbitrary. For example, certain diseases are singled out (e.g., malaria, HIV/AIDS, and other communicable diseases), but other emerging issues (e.g., tobacco) are ignored.
- They could weaken the bargaining position of developing countries because the MDGs can be hijacked by the World Bank to create opportunities for further conditionality.

- They could lead to a preoccupation with quantitative rather than qualitative achievement, such as the number of children enrolled in schools rather than the quality of the education.
- They could encourage excessive optimism and lead to discouragement and cynicism if the goals are not achieved.

Although these legitimate concerns do not challenge the fundamental usefulness of the MDGs, they do indicate the need for critical choices. MDGs can be meaningful only if they are "nationally owned." Governments and communities bear responsibility for achieving the MDGs, and civil society has an essential watchdog role at both the national and the global level. As the guardian of collective responsibility, the UN must use its leadership to maintain and mobilize global political commitment. Donor support and inputs need to be aligned with national priorities, not vice versa. Integrating the MDGs in the PRSP process, for example, is therefore essential.<sup>9</sup>

The MDGs should not be interpreted mechanistically. The success and failure of a goal should not be judged simply by the achievement of a numerical target, but by whether it has galvanized political will to shift priorities and to accelerate progress. As critical benchmarks of progress, the MDGs make sense only when they are properly embedded in national strategies for development. Each country has specific challenges and shortcomings; adaptability to national priorities is of the essence. For example, for many countries, the threshold of U.S. \$1 of earnings per day is not meaningful; a \$2 per day threshold may be more helpful for identifying people living in poverty.

### CONCLUSION

The MDGs show promise as an effective framework for holding key actors accountable for their commitment to eradicating global poverty in the twenty-first century. If we fast-forwarded to 2015, what would we see?

Only two targets would be met: access to clean water and the reduction of income poverty rates by half—mostly due to China's economic prosperity. In Africa, Latin America, and the Arab world, although the proportion of the poor would barely decline, the absolute numbers of those living in poverty would increase. The 1990s was a decade of dramatic growth in countries such as China and Vietnam. But it was also a decade when development stagnated or even declined in many countries. The *Human Development Report 2003* revealed a decline in the HDI for twenty-one countries; such a decline is unprecedented. Other indicators also show reversals. Primary school enrollment declined in twelve countries. Hunger rates increased in twenty-one countries. Child mortality rates worsened in fourteen countries. Per capita income was lower in 2000 than in 1990 in fifty-four countries. In thirty-seven out of sixty-seven countries with trend data, the proportion of people living on less than \$1 a day declined in thirty-seven countries. At the current rate, it would take until nearly the twenty-second century to achieve

primary education for all children. For lagging countries and regions, improvement would take even longer—for example, it would take Africa until 2169 to reduce child mortality rates by two-thirds.<sup>10</sup>

The MDGs are thus a clarion call to tackle the enduring failures of human development. Has it been heard? Too many people around the world still cannot meet their most basic survival needs, let alone lead free and creative lives. Every year some 10 million children die of preventable causes, 15 percent of the world's people are hungry, and about a quarter of primary school age children are not in school. Some 1.2 billion people, about a fifth of the world's population, live on less than \$1 a day. The gap between those for whom opportunities for a creative life are ever expanding and those for whom even the basic options are denied is becoming wider and starker.

Should world leaders who sought to establish lasting peace and uphold the principles of human dignity, equality, and equity be taken seriously? Is the ambition to rid the world of poverty in the new century realistic? The answer is yes. The achievements of the twentieth century demonstrate that leaps are feasible in just one generation. Sri Lanka raised life expectancy at birth by twelve years in just seven years following its independence in 1946. From 1994 to 2001, South Africa cut in half the numbers who lived without access to clean water. China cut the percentage of its people living in extreme income poverty in the 1990s from 33 to 18 percent. In Botswana, primary school enrollment nearly doubled after independence in 1970, from 46 to 89 percent in just fifteen years. Actions during the last half of the twentieth century did more to reduce poverty than actions in the previous 500 years, all but eliminating extreme poverty in Europe, North America, Japan, Australia, and New Zealand. In the developing world, life expectancy has increased by twenty years, about as much as was achieved in previous human history. Illiteracy has been cut nearly in half, from 47 percent to 25 percent over the past thirty years. And in East Asia in the past decade, the number of people living on less than \$1 a day was halved. In the state of Kerala, India, universal schooling has been achieved. In a generation, Singapore transformed itself from a disease ridden, ethnically divided, and uneducated society to one that has achieved levels of education and life expectancy that rival those of Western Europe.

The MDGs are realistic targets that call on both rich and poor governments, on civil society and international organizations, and on ordinary people to ask: What needs to be done to achieve the goals by 2015? At this moment, the goal that is farthest from being met is the one calling for a global partnership—rich countries simply must do more to facilitate trade, aid, access to technology, and debt relief.

## NOTES

1. See Sakiko Fukuda-Parr and A. K. Shiva Kumar, eds., *Readings in Human Development: Concepts, Measures, and Policies for a Development Paradigm* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2003).
2. Millennium Declaration, United Nations, September 2000, UN Doc. A/RES/55/2.

3. See Louis Emmerij, Richard Jolly, and Thomas G. Weiss, *Ahead of the Curve? UN Ideas and Challenges* (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 2001), chap. 4.
4. *Shaping the 21st Century: The Contribution of Development Cooperation* (Paris: OECD, 1996).
5. Richard Jolly, "Do UN Goals Make a Difference?" Background paper for *Human Development Report 2003*. See also Richard Jolly, Louis Emmerij, Dharam Ghai, and Frédéric Lapeyre, *UN Contributions to Development Thinking and Practice* (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 2004), chap. 10.
6. Makiko Harrison, Jeni Klugman, and Eric Swanson, "Are Poverty Reduction Strategy Papers Undercutting the Millennium Development Goals?" Draft mimeograph, 17 September 2003.
7. The consensus can be found on the UN Economic and Social Development website at [www.un.org/esa/ffd/aconf198-11.pdf](http://www.un.org/esa/ffd/aconf198-11.pdf).
8. See John Foster, *The Millennium Declaration: Engaging Civil Society Organisations* (New York: World Federation of United Nations Associations, 2002), available online at [www.wfuna.org](http://www.wfuna.org); Roberto Bissio, *Civil Society and the MDGs* (Montevideo: Instituto del Tercer Mundo, 2003); Howard White and Richard Black, eds., *Targeting Development: Critical Perspectives on Millennium Development Goals and International Development Targets* (London: Routledge, 2002).
9. David Booth and Henry Lucas, "Monitoring Progress Towards the Millennium Development Goals at the Country Level," in White and Black, *Targeting Development*.
10. UNDP, *Human Development Report 2003: A Compact Among Nations to End Human Poverty* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2003).



**X NO**  
**What's Wrong with the Millennium Development Goals?**  
 MICHAEL CLEMENS AND TODD MOSS

In mid-September international leaders will gather for a Summit at the United Nations to consider how well the world has kept its promises made five years earlier. In September 2000 at the UN, the largest ever gathering of heads-of-state unanimously adopted the Millennium Declaration, committing to reach eight goals by 2015. Known as the MDGs (Table 9.1), these are the yardstick by which current international development efforts are to be judged. A flurry of studies also estimated that, if the MDGs were to be reached, global aid levels would have to rise by \$50 billion per year.

The first message from the Summit will no doubt be grim. Despite gains by many countries (especially India and China), much of the world is off track and will not reach the MDGs. Sub-Saharan Africa will probably miss them by a wide margin. Indeed, if things do not change radically, the number of Africans living in poverty may actually increase, while more than two dozen African countries may not even reach 50% primary school completion in time.

**TABLE 9.1**  
**THE MILLENNIUM DEVELOPMENT GOALS**

Goal	Targets for 2015 (from 1990 level)
1 Poverty	Halve the fraction of those with income <\$1/day Halve fraction of people who suffer from hunger
2 Education	Universal primary schooling completion
3 Gender equality	Eliminate gender disparity in schooling (preferably by 2005)
4 Child mortality	Reduce the under-five mortality rate by 2/3
5 Maternal health	Reduce the maternal mortality rate by 3/4
6 Disease	Halt and begin to reverse spread of HIV/AIDS, malaria and other major diseases
7 Environment	Halve the ratio of people without access to safe drinking water and basic sanitation
8 Global partnership	7 targets related to: trade, debt, youth, technology, drugs affordability, and special needs

This apparently bleak state of affairs will lead to the second message from the Summit: that more aid is needed. Even though global aid rose from \$53 billion in 2000 to \$79 billion in 2004, the increases have been slow in coming and less than the hoped-for doubling. In fact, the lack of progress in meeting the MDGs will be used to demand more aid sooner and possibly to justify implementing proposals to tax international airline tickets or to borrow from private capital markets. But are the goals really achievable? Are the expectations of what more aid can do realistic? If not, is the aid community setting up Africa, and themselves, for failure?

**ARE THE MDGs PRACTICAL TARGETS?**

The MDGs are laudable and undoubtedly well-intentioned. But that does not mean they are realistic for all countries. Based on the actual rates of progress for both rich and poor countries in the past, the MDGs are now asking many countries to perform at the top end of historical experience. Indeed, in a few cases the bar for the world's poorest countries is now set well above any historical experience. To take just a few examples:

**Goal 1:** Halving poverty. African economies must grow at about 7% per year over 2000–2015 in order to halve the number of people living below the poverty line. Just seven out of 153 countries for which we have data accomplished this feat in the preceding 15 years (Figure 9.1). Of those seven, only two were African: Botswana and Equatorial Guinea, neither of which are easily replicable.

**Goal 2:** Universal primary school completion. Many countries are starting from such a low level that they must now attain in about a decade what rich countries took nearly a century to complete. At least 20 African countries have primary school enrollment of 70% or less, but to reach 100% by 2015 is enormously ambitious if history is any guide (Figure 9.2).

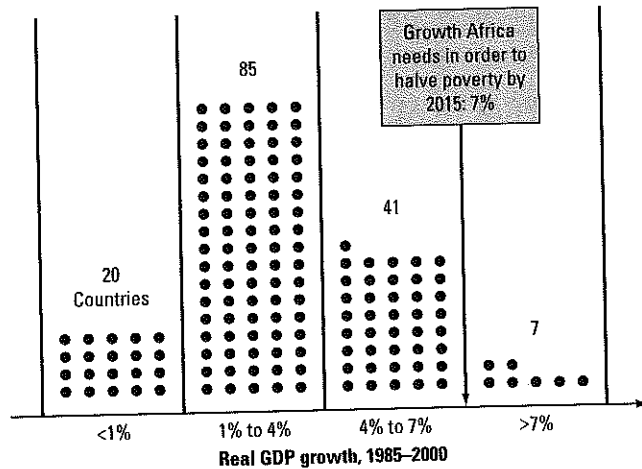
**Goal 4:** Decrease child mortality by two thirds. If the same goal had been set in 1975, only one poor country in the world (Indonesia) would have met the goal (Figure 9.3).

**CAN MORE AID ACHIEVE THEM?**

The studies suggesting \$50 billion more is needed each year are frequently misinterpreted and contribute to an excessive—and unhelpful—focus on aid. All of the studies have significant problems with the methods used to arrive at the bottom line. The more careful ones come with caveats, but these tend to get lost once advocates or the media get hold of them. More importantly, by putting a price tag on outcomes, cost estimates inadvertently create an illusion that any goal can be met, if only the right amount of money can be mobilized. Among development experts, however, it is widely accepted that resources are not the sole—and perhaps not even the most important—constraint to meeting the MDGs.

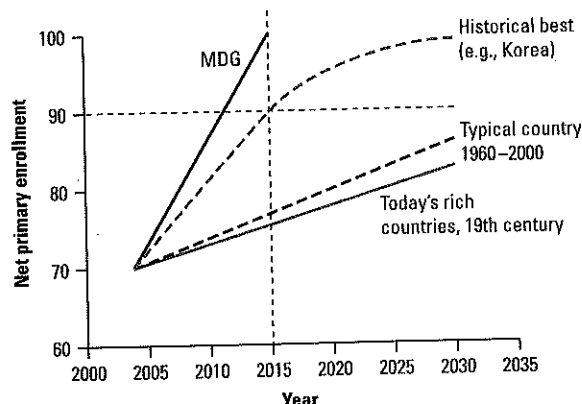
**FIGURE 9.1**  
**GROWTH GOAL VS. PERFORMANCE**

Each dot represents one country. Only a handful of countries on Earth, in the best of circumstances, grew recently at the rate all of Sub-Saharan Africa would need to grow in order to halve poverty by 2015.

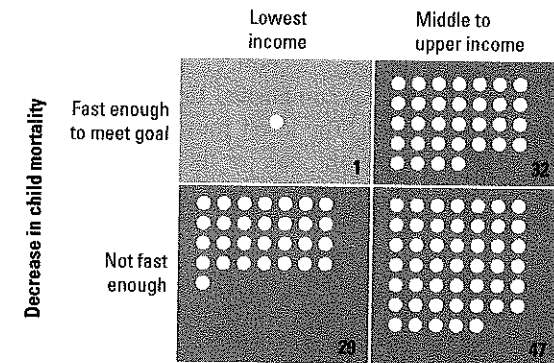


Includes all 153 countries for which the World Bank's World Development Indicators 2005 lists constant-price GDP.

**FIGURE 9.2**  
**EDUCATION GOAL VS. PERFORMANCE**



**FIGURE 9.3**  
**CHILD MORTALITY GOAL VS. 1975-2000 PERFORMANCE**



No amount of aid will make Africa grow at 7%. A huge literature looks at the link between aid and economic growth, and the results are not overly promising. Even those studies that do show aid can cause growth (for example, certain kinds of aid or that given to countries with good policies), also show very steep diminishing returns to additional aid. That is, even if aid boosts growth a little, more aid cannot make Africa grow like China.

In the social sectors it is also already well known that more money often does not translate into results; more health spending does not necessarily mean better health. This is because of deep structural problems in local health and education systems that aid projects have a poor record of rapidly removing. The effectiveness of aid is at times also undermined by the way donors operate.

Most importantly, the weak link between spending and services exists also because health and education do not occur in a vacuum, but rather in a broader economic environment. It may be an uncomfortable truth, but even something as basic as primary education still has a demand side. The desire of parents to keep their children in school is affected not only by the availability and quality of schools, but also by a range of incentives linked to cultural preferences, family circumstances, and wider changes in the economy. Knowing the cost of putting several million children through school may be useful, but it is not the same as knowing how to actually get them in school.

**WHAT MIGHT BE THE DOWNSIDE?**

A literal interpretation of the MDGs accepts the goals as real targets. A more nuanced view might see the MDGs as a symbol of the kinds of outcomes toward which the world should strive. This view takes the MDGs as a tool, not a practical target. Goals generate discussion, focus attention, and help assign accountability. The MDGs have doubtlessly served these purposes to some degree.

But there is a long history of setting international development goals. In the 1960s the UN set its sights on universal primary education by 1980, and in 1980 it committed to 6.5% economic growth throughout the developing world by 1990—among many, many others. Through the 1980s and 1990s there was growth, poverty reduction, improved schooling, and much else to celebrate throughout the large majority of the developing world, but did anyone notice? These impossible goals focused attention far away from what was accomplished through sound domestic policies, aid, and other forms of cooperation. The latest round of unattainable goals will do so again. That's bad for poor people and bad for the development community.

Indeed, there is a real risk that the MDGs, as currently conceived and promoted, could turn real development successes into imaginary failures. Creating targets such as the MDGs may help to rejuvenate the aid debate and energize the development community. But there is also a danger that the MDGs, by creating utopian expectations of what can be achieved quickly, will create unnecessary impressions of failure.

Burkina Faso, for instance, has net primary school enrollment of around 40 to 45%. Should it be termed success or failure if wise governance, aid, and other types of engagement allow the country to reach only 60% enrollment by 2015? Such a feat would be extraordinary by historical standards, but a patent failure according to the MDGs. It took the United States over a century to make the transition from Burkina Faso's current enrollment rate to universal primary schooling. Would it not energize the development community more to celebrate Burkina Faso's performance than to condemn it as disaster?

The excessive focus on aid is also potentially risky. Aid can and will play a role in improving the lives of the world's poor. But another \$50 billion or even \$100 billion more, cannot achieve the MDGs. If lots more money does appear, unrealistic promises will undercut much of the rationale for aid and bolster those who claim aid is a waste. If huge increases in aid do not materialize, then poor countries will complain that rich countries have not lived up to their end of the MDG bargain.

## WHAT NOW?

The MDGs, despite these risks, are not going away. The UN, its members governments, and the donor community should:

- Accept that it is not feasible for most countries to reach most of the MDGs, especially in Africa;
- Stop misusing costing studies as evidence that we can purchase outcomes with more aid (the studies themselves explicitly make no such claim);
- Consider new ways of recognizing real success at the country level rather than in global targets;
- Avoid these problems with the next round of goals—yes, there will be more—by basing them on where countries are and on reasonable expectations of performance.

## CONCLUSION

The vast majority of developing countries will miss most of the MDG targets in 2015. Nearly all African countries will miss most of them. But this will not be a sign that poor countries have failed, or that aid has been a waste. Nor will it primarily be because donors did not spend the right amount of money.

At the same time, many of the world's poorest countries will in all likelihood make great progress in improving the quality of life of their people—and aid will almost certainly have played a crucial part. It would be a shame if the MDGs, in trying to make the case that the world can and should help the world's poor, wound up undermining the cause by over-reaching on the targets and overselling the efficacy of aid.

What poor countries need from rich ones is broad-based, sustained, moderate engagement—not emotional, moralistic, centralized big bangs. Aid can work, but it must be dramatically improved. Innovations like the Global Health Fund or the Millennium Challenge Account are a great start, but we need much more such experimentation and evaluation before “scaling up” makes any sense. And we need to go far beyond aid, investing in key technologies (such as vaccines), opening our markets, finding creative arrangements for win-win labor mobility, and many other avenues to support ongoing efforts by poor countries themselves.

But development is a marathon, not a sprint. In a democratic society, the only way to build support for the long haul is to nurture a constituency by showing the public that good things happen in Africa and other very poor places. The MDGs simply will not do this. They were designed, in fact, to do the opposite.



## POSTSCRIPT

The UN's Millennium project has been taken seriously by the international development community. The major UN multilateral agencies, donor governments, and developing countries have all drawn up plans to achieve the MDGs. Certainly it has been a valuable means of focusing the world's attention on the progress being made in development and mobilizing support for development efforts.

At the time of the adoption of the MDGs, critics pointed out that the plan did not include specific commitments by donor countries for the provision of adequate resources to meet these targets. Although some progress has been made, many now suggest that only a massive infusion of new aid funding will ensure that the goals are met. But is an infusion of more money all that is needed to meet the MDGs?

While it is possible that many, or even most, of the goals may be met at the global level, few would suggest that each country will achieve this at the national level. In fact, a large number of developing countries will fail in meeting the majority of their national targets. Some analysts suggest that goals have been unrealistic at the national level since meeting them would require rates of improvement in economic growth and development that are at the outer edges of historical precedent. Thus, the simple infusion of more funds will be insufficient in itself. What then is the value of the MDGs? Is there a danger that, if not fully met, they will simply foster greater cynicism about target setting and future aid-giving? Or will they serve as a symbol of hoping for mobilizing an even greater global collective effort?

### Suggested Additional Readings

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- Bosman, M. Martin, and M. Mark Amen. "Recasting Neo-liberalism in the Americas: A Critique of the Preliminary Needs Assessment of the Millennium Development Goals in the Dominican Republic," *Globalizations*, 3, no. 2 (2006): 227-236.
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- Grown, Caren. "Answering the Skeptics: Achieving Gender Equality and the Millennium Development Goals," *Development*, 48, no. 3 (2005): 82-86.
- Mestrum, Francine. "Global Poverty Reduction: A New Social Paradigm?" *Development*, 49, no. 2 (2006): 62-66.
- Mistry, Percy S. "Reasons for Sub-Saharan Africa's Development Deficit that the Commission for Africa Did Not Consider," *African Affairs*, 104, no. 417 (2005): 665-678.
- "The Millennium Development Goals: How Are We Doing?" *Scientific American*, 293, no. 3 (2005): 62-63.
- Soederberg, Susanne. "Recasting Neoliberal Dominance in the Global South? A Critique of the Monterrey Consensus," *Alternatives: Global, Local, Political*, 30, no. 3 (2005): 325-364.
- Taylor, Ian. "The Millennium Development Goals and Africa: Challenges Facing the Commonwealth," *Round Table*, 95, no. 385 (2006): 365-382.

### InfoTrac® College Edition

Search for the following articles in the InfoTrac® database:

- "Aid Must Be Better Targeted for MDGs," *Finance & Development*, 43, no. 2 (June 2006): 2.
- Sachs, Jeffrey. "A Practical Plan to Achieve the MDGs," *UN Chronicle*, 42, no. 2 (June-August 2005): 5-6.
- Wai-Poi, Matthew. "Financing the Millennium Development Goals," *Journal of International Affairs*, 58, 2 (Spring 2005): 285-290.

For more articles, enter:

"millennium development goals" and "MDGs" in the keyword search.

### Web Resources

#### UN MILLENNIUM DEVELOPMENT GOALS

[www.un.org/millenniumgoals/](http://www.un.org/millenniumgoals/)

This official site of the UN's campaign to support achievement of the Millennium Development Goals contains the annual report of the Secretary-General on the global progress in meeting the goals. It also contains a number of other UN documents relating to the MDGs.

#### WORLD BANK & MILLENNIUM DEVELOPMENT GOALS

[ddp-ext.worldbank.org/ext/GMIS/home.do?siteId=2](http://ddp-ext.worldbank.org/ext/GMIS/home.do?siteId=2)

This is the World Bank's official page for tracking progress in achieving the MDGs. It contains a number of maps, charts, and tables reporting on the achievement of these goals in various parts of the world.

Are the Millennium Development Goals Achievable?

#### UNDP MILLENNIUM DEVELOPMENT GOALS

[www.undp.org/mdg/](http://www.undp.org/mdg/)

This United Nations Development Programme provides a number of resources for tracking the achievement of the goals and discussions of the strategies being employed.

#### MILLENNIUM CAMPAIGN

[www.millenniumcampaign.org](http://www.millenniumcampaign.org)

This is the site of the UN-supported Millennium Campaign. You will find a number of reports of the activities of NGOs and other civil society groups supporting the MDGs.

#### MAKE POVERTY HISTORY

[www.makepovertyhistory.org](http://www.makepovertyhistory.org)

One of the larger transnational advocacy efforts that has promoted the achievement of the MDGs, along with other goals, is the Make Poverty History campaign. This site has a number of resources available as well as links to other campaigns.

## Issue 10

### Has the Adoption of a Rights-based Approach to Development Failed?

✓ YES

PETER UVIN, "On High Moral Ground: The Incorporation of Human Rights by the Development Enterprise," *Praxis: The Fletcher Journal of Development Studies*, XVII (2002)

✗ NO

HUGO SLIM, "Making Moral Low Ground: Rights as the Struggle for Justice and the Abolition of Development," *Praxis: The Fletcher Journal of Development Studies*, XVII (2002)

Following the Second World War, the discourses on human rights and development emerged simultaneously but largely independent of each other. Development discourse focused on the notion of development as a problem of promoting economic growth. Whether this meant increases in the Gross National Product, meeting "basic needs," or promoting "structural adjustment policies," human rights were largely absent from the equation.

Within the human rights field, debates focused on the appropriate balance between traditional civil and political rights and the more collectivist-oriented economic, social, and cultural rights. The dichotomy between these two sets of rights was formally institutionalized by the adoption in 1966 of two separate international agreements—the International Covenant on Civil and Political Rights and the International Covenant on Economic, Social, and Cultural Rights.

During the Cold War, debates on the appropriate balance between these two sets of rights were largely shaped by the ideological divisions of the Cold War. Western nations, led by the United States, argued that civil and political rights should always be given priority and that true development could be achieved only when civil and political rights are first recognized. Many developing states, led by China, argued that social, economic, and cultural rights needed to take precedence. If someone is starving, what good does a guarantee of freedom of speech do? Some pointed to the so-called Asian Tigers—South Korea, Taiwan, Malaysia, and Singapore—as examples where authoritarian governments were successful in promoting development. Human rights might have to take a secondary place until economic development and growth is achieved.

The artificial distinction between these two sets of rights came under increased challenge in the 1980s. The first significant step in this process was the 1986 adoption by the United Nations General Assembly of the Declaration of the Right to