

GLOBAL INSIGHTS

Millennium Development Goals:
Why They Matter



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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.¹

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.² 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.³ 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.⁴

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.⁵

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.⁶

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 2002.⁷ 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:⁸

- 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 multilateral 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.⁹

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.¹⁰

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

Sakiko Fukuda-Parr is director and lead author of the *Human Development Report 2003: A Compact Among Nations to End Human Poverty*. The views expressed here are the author's personal views and do not reflect policy positions of the UNDP.

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.

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; 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).

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