

Where Now with the MDGs?

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In September 2010 world leaders will meet in New York to discuss progress in meeting the UN Millennium Development Goals (MDGs). With only five years remaining until the MDGs expire in 2015, now is the time to evaluate their impact and achievements, and to discuss what, if anything, should succeed them.

Progress towards meeting the MDGs has been mixed. The target to halve the proportion of people living in extreme poverty is likely to be met. Primary school enrolments have risen to 88 per cent. However, most of the goals will not be achieved, and those that will be achieved depend heavily on rapid growth and associated poverty reduction in China and India. Other nations, particularly in sub-Saharan Africa, have shown considerably less improvement.

Several factors explain the variable progress towards the MDGs. The twin shocks of the global economic downturn and the food crisis have stalled or even reversed advancement towards some of the targets. The overall contribution of rich countries towards the goals – in increased aid budgets, lowering trade barriers and tackling climate change – has also been weak.

But the absence of a broad based social movement behind the MDGs within rich countries is key. The narrow self-interest that dominates international relations can only be overcome if there is a sufficient groundswell of support for a particular cause, as with the Jubilee 2000 campaign. The MDGs have neither tacked onto, nor created, a similar movement pushing for their implementation. Campaign groups have selectively used the MDGs that relate to their particular interests to grab media attention and generate support for their campaigning niche; but a substantial social movement concerned with ending poverty more generally has not emerged.

MDG	Status in 2007–2008
1. Halve extreme poverty	Globally on track because of China but highly unlikely to be met in sub-Saharan Africa.
2. Universal primary education	Significant improvement made but will probably not be achieved in sub-Saharan Africa. Gender inequalities remain.
3. Gender equality	Improvement made in school enrolment but other targets are lagging.
4. Reduce child mortality by three-quarters	Significant reductions in all regions but 62 countries "off target".
5. Reduce maternal mortality by two-thirds	Showing least progress of all the MDGs with 500,000 pregnancy-related deaths per annum.
6. Combat HIV/AIDS, malaria and other diseases	New HIV infections and AIDS deaths have peaked but remain a particular problem in sub-Saharan Africa.
7. Environmental sustainability	Access to water target likely to be met but sanitation is lagging. Limited progress with CO ₂ emissions and deforestation.
8. Develop a global partnership	No evidence of a step change in relationships either in aid or trade. Limited progress with climate change.

Source: www.un.org/millenniumgoals/

For some the outcomes of the MDGs have been disappointing, but the outlook for the future should not be viewed too negatively. The MDGs, though flawed, can be seen as a significant step in the development of a global social norm making extreme poverty morally unacceptable in an affluent world. International social norms take shape gradually, but at some point in the process they ensure that what had been socially acceptable – slavery, apartheid, torturing prisoners of war – becomes wholly unacceptable.

Viewed in this way, the MDGs are not simply about checklists for achieving poverty reduction. They are milestones in a longer term shift in how global poverty is viewed by the public and treated by the international community. Though still a long way from an effective international norm, the MDGs have generated unprecedented global convergence around the eradication of extreme poverty. In the long term, this could well be their most important contribution.

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Policy Points

- Ensure that any future MDG-type commitments are set at the national rather than global level, ideally as part of a democratic process.
- Reform the link between goals and national development strategies. The MDG mechanism of linking global goals to national policies through Poverty Reduction Strategy Papers controlled by the World Bank and the IMF must be replaced by nationally-owned targets and plans.
- Invest in effective leadership committed to achieving global poverty reduction. Progress towards the MDGs or their successors would benefit from the involvement of a charismatic global leader.

References:

- David Hulme and James Scott, (2010), "The Political Economy of the MDGs: Retrospect and Prospect", BWPI Working Paper, 110/2010, available from www.bwpi.manchester.ac.uk.
- David Hulme, (forthcoming May 2010), *Global Poverty*, London: Routledge.