



This Briefing Note is part of a series addressing issues surrounding poverty and poverty reduction. They have been produced for SDC, its partners and interested development practitioners and offer an overview of the current debates. An introduction to the full series can be found here (www.poverty-wellbeing.net).

Brief No 8 – Millennium Development Goals (MDGs)

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1. What are the MDGs

'The Millennium Development Goals can be met by 2015, but only if all involved break with business as usual and dramatically accelerate and scale up action now.'

(Kofi Annan, 2005)

This Briefing Note discusses the foundations of the Millennium Development Goals (MDGs), presents the Goals, and discusses the pros and cons of these time-bound and specific goals and targets.

The 2000 UN Millennium Declaration (Box 1), building on earlier international commitments, laid the foundation for a set of nationally-measured, but globally supported development goals. The MDGs were formulated during various UN meetings and stakeholder consultations during the early 1990s, approved by the General Assembly of the United Nations in 2000 and signed by 189 heads of state.

Box 1: The Millennium Declaration

In 2000, 189 member states of the UN General Assembly have adopted the UN Millennium Declaration, which defines the principles for global cooperation in the 21st century. The declaration elaborates these principles in eight chapters:

1. Values and principles
2. Peace, security and disarmament
3. Development and poverty eradication
4. Protecting our common environment
5. Human rights, democracy and good governance
6. Protecting the vulnerable
7. Meeting the special needs of Africa
8. Strengthening the United Nations

(Source: UN, 2000)

Remarkably, seven of the eight chapters of the Millennium Declaration start with "We will spare no efforts...", implying that these are top priorities for every nation of the world. Compared to the MDGs, the Millennium Declaration addresses a much broader range of what is needed to achieve human dignity, equality and equity at the global level, including a clear reference to just and lasting peace, respect for territorial integrity and

political independence of states, resolution of disputes by peaceful means and in conformity with the principles of justice and international law, the right to self-determination, respect for human rights and fundamental freedoms, and respect for equal rights of all without distinction as to race, sex, language or religion (UN, 2000). Through the declaration, the UN Member states also pledge to ensure greater coherence in policies across the international system.

Figure 1: The Millennium Development Goals



(Source: UN)

MDGs are unique as they provide a shared set of goals and a common platform which enables public and political attention to focus on poverty in a sustained way. At the international level, the Goals helped shift the development policy world away from the 'Washington Consensus' towards a human development agenda. They can also be seen as an attempt to create a mechanism that helps to implement the various commitments made at UN conferences (Braunholz-Speight, 2007). The mainly socio-economic goals seek to harmonise the development agendas of all actors, national governments, the civil society and the development community.

The MDGs cover a range of universally applicable development goals. They were defined as global targets and it was clear that not all nations would meet them because of country-specific circumstances that differ significantly from global trends. The spirit of the UN Millennium Declaration is not to impose a uniform set of targets on each and every country, but the MDG targets must be tailored and customised to reflect national circumstances and priorities. Setting country-specific targets does not mean that the global targets will be abandoned or watered down. But global targets abstract away a country's history, social settings, environmental conditions and other specific challenges such as being a landlocked country (Vandemoortele and Rathin, 2004).

One of the key strengths of the Millennium Declaration and the MDGs is that governments around the world have signed up to them. Combating poverty is the primary goal of the MDGs and the achievement of other goals will also contribute to achieve this goal. The challenge to combat poverty is expressed in Goal 1, Target 1 as a commitment to 'halve, between 1990 and 2015, the proportion of people whose income is less than \$1 a day.'

Current best practices suggest that goals are most beneficial when they are specific, measurable, achievable, realistic/relevant, and time-bound. Therefore, each goal, with the exception of a few targets that either extend to 2020 or are not time bound, expires in 2015. Each goal is supported by 1 to 5 specific targets and 2 to 12 measurable indicators. With donor support, states are responsible for monitoring and presenting progress for each indicator in a form that is realistic, relevant and specific to the local context.

Achieving the MDGs is expensive and costs cannot be borne by developing countries alone. A number of costing exercises were conducted (e.g. by the Zedillo commission, the UN Millennium Project, etc.) and estimates of global costs to reach the MDGs range from an extra US\$ 50 billion per year (Zedillo Commission) to US\$ 135 billion in 2006 rising to US\$ 195 billion in 2015 (UNMP, 2005).

Of recent concern is whether the large scaling-up of aid volumes, as agreed at the G8 Meeting in Gleneagles in 2005, should be combined with a refined approach that specifically addresses allocations. Particularly, discussions remain unanswered as to whether aid should be based on need (i.e. higher poverty rates); or if

it should be based on the poverty-efficiency principle. The latter suggests that aid should reward those nations that demonstrate progress. This approach, however, raises issues of fairness, neglect and political bias (Anderson, 2007).

Other aspects of the debate on large increases of aid to reach the MDGs relate to aid effectiveness, absorptive capacity and the perceived lack of progress on the governance agenda. Relating to aid effectiveness, there are numerous claims that aid can do more harm than good. The impact of aid on development and growth depends on the strength of institutions and the quality of policies and also on an 'aid saturation point', which is anywhere between 15% and 45% of GDP, beyond which the marginal benefits of additional aid inflows become negative (de Renzio, 2005). Absorptive capacity relates to the macro and micro constraints that recipient countries face in using aid effectively. And lastly, governance trends in Africa have also failed to reassure donors that aid will not fuel patronage, corruption and conflict. Focusing on short-term development impact, dictated by the MDGs, needs to be carefully balanced with long-term institution building and economic growth needed to ensure that development impact is sustainable (e.g. Collier and Dollar, 2001; de Renzio, 2007; Easterly, 2007).

Although the MDGs were originally presented as global goals, countries have been asked to 'localise' the goals (UNMP, 2005) by incorporating them into Poverty Reduction Strategy Papers (PRSPs) and national budgets. However, tension commonly exists between home-grown priorities and the priorities set by the MDGs. One of the key challenges is that the MDGs are rarely integrated into PRSPs and countries see the MDGs as a competing and donor-driven agenda.

Some Civil Society Organisations (CSOs) have played an active role in lobbying national government and the international community on poverty reduction. A number of larger civil society organisations in the South have found the MDGs a useful advocacy tool, helping create space for dialogue with government on pro-poor or human development policy (Braunholtz-Speight, 2007). However, few national level CSOs know very much about the MDGs and many see them as a donor-driven agenda (Kyegombe and Bird, 2005), which might also interfere with domestic processes of accountability and policymaking.

Box 2: MDGs' relation to SDC's thematic priorities

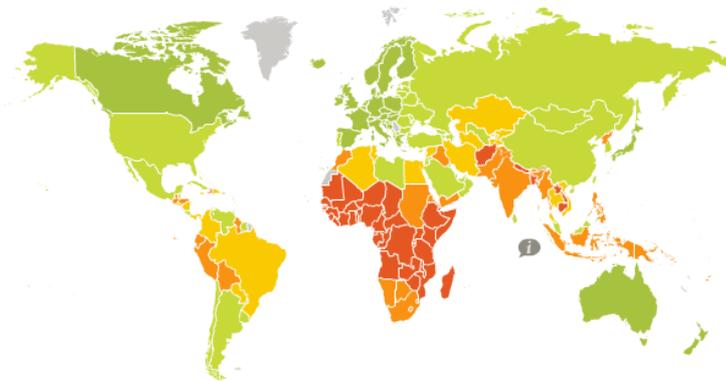
In accordance with principles enshrined in the Swiss Constitution - contribution to poverty alleviation and reduced suffering, respecting and promoting human rights, promoting democracy and peaceful co-existence between people, and contributing to the protection of the natural basis for life - Switzerland has declared its support for the MDGs and has committed itself to work towards the achievement of the goals. The thematic focus of SDC - like the MDGs - is centred on poverty reduction. Thematic priorities such as health, education, water, environment, gender, and regional and global economic integration show obvious parallels to the specific MDGs.

Figure 2: Global overview of selected MDGs

Maternal mortality

Reduce by three-quarters, between 1990 and 2015, the maternal mortality ratio
 Ninety-nine percent of maternal deaths occur in developing countries, with more than half occurring in Africa. In many poor African countries, one mother dies for every 100 children born.

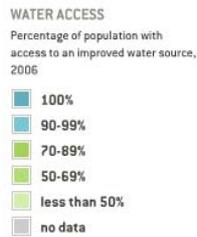
▶	Maternal mortality
▶	Care for pregnant women



Percentage of the population with access to improved water sources

Halve, by 2015, the proportion of people without sustainable access to safe drinking water and basic sanitation
 Access to an improved water source and improved sanitation facilities has increased, but in 2006 884 million people still lacked access to a reliable source of water that was reasonably protected from contamination, and 2.5 billion people were still in need of improved sanitation services.

▶	Water and sanitation
▶	Carbon dioxide



(Source: The World Bank Online Atlas of the Millennium Development Goals: devdata.worldbank.org/atlas-mdg/)

2. Achievements

Primarily, the MDGs have proven successful at mobilising international support for poverty reduction, providing a clear results-based framework, and advancing development debates and innovations. The Goals have presented an understandable, well-recognised framework that can be easily interpreted and supported by different stakeholders, including non-development oriented citizens. Support for the Declaration, success of the Make Poverty History Campaign and MDG-integrated strategy papers by government, donor, civil society, and now Transnational Corporations (TNCs), demonstrate wide-scale – albeit not full – buy-in.

Although originally presented by the UN as global goals, the MDGs have become increasingly instrumental to shape national policy. The Goals combine previous global agreements, draw on extensive literature,

emphasise the multi-dimensional nature of poverty, value growth and redistribution, and are shaped by numerous stakeholders.

The UN considers the MDGs to have been a success story so far. They have provided a paradigm for global economic development. Major progress has been made in much of the developing world as a result of the adoption of the targets, especially in South and East Asia. Although no country in Sub-Saharan Africa is on track to meet all MDG goals yet, there are numerous examples of positive progress in several African countries that cannot be overlooked. Examples are free secondary education in Tanzania and Ghana, progress in combating malaria in Niger, or doubling of agricultural production and remarkable reduction in child mortality rate in Malawi. The MDG Africa Steering Group is confident that the Goals can be widely met if the global partnership agreed to at the 2002 Monterrey Conference on Financing for Development is implemented (UN, 2008).

Box 3: Monitoring MDG Indicators

The UN established the Inter-Agency and Expert Group (IAEG) to monitor MDG indicators. IAEG includes various Departments within the UN Secretariat, a number of UN agencies, government agencies and national statisticians, and donors. IAEG is responsible for the preparation of data and analysis to monitor progress towards the MDGs. The Group also reviews and defines methodologies and technical issues in relation to the indicators, produces guidelines, and helps define priorities and strategies to support countries in data collection, analysis and reporting on MDGs.

IAEG publishes MDG indicators on an interactive mapping tool to visualise progress on different indicators across countries and over time:

mdgs.un.org/unsd/mdg/Trendalyzer/index.html

UNDP provides similar information on:

www.mdgmonitor.org/

Meeting the MDGs effectively will require African Governments to mobilise domestic resources effectively and to attract private capital. African governments have done a great deal already to increase the efficiency of their tax system and to boost government revenues. They have also committed to minimum public expenditure targets in key sectors: 10% of national budgets should go to agriculture (2003 Maputo Declaration), 15% to health (2000 Abuja Declaration) and 20% to education (2002 Dar-es-Salam) (UN, 2008).

Goal 8, which seeks to build reciprocal partnerships between developed and developing countries is the most difficult to measure. The goal is based on shared ideals, trust, transparency, dialogue, and frequent review. Debates focus on achieving mutual accountability, and on the extent to which partnership arrangements should be contractual (Maxwell, 2003, Eyben, 2008).

Despite a number of critical remarks, there is progress towards improving aid quality in alignment with countries' priorities, as agreed in the Paris Declaration on Aid Effectiveness. The MDG Africa Steering Group recommends that further progress is made towards full alignment of development partner's assistance to country systems through multi-year compacts, increased predictability of aid, improved division of labour among donors, and an accelerated shift away from project-based financing towards budget support (UN, 2008).

In specific sectors, for example health and agriculture, dedicated partnerships among developing countries and between developing and developed nations have been established. In health, the International Health Partnership (HIP), bringing together governments, international agencies and bilateral donors, is a country-led, country-driven movement that calls for all signatories to accelerate action in order to scale-up coverage and use of health services and to deliver improved outcomes against the health-related MDGs. The HIP and related initiatives have created a

coordination process and common work plans in an effort to pool expertise and resource. Development partners subscribe to "Country compacts" in which partners commit to provide sustained and predictable funding and increase harmonisation and alignment in support of results oriented national plans and strategies that tackle health system constraints (HIP, 2008). In agriculture, collaboration between the Global Donor Platform for Rural Development and regional initiatives, especially NEPAD's Comprehensive Africa Agriculture Development Program (CAADP) is based on a "Code of Conduct" which obliges donors supporting agriculture and rural development programmes to ensure improved coordination and more effective outputs. It also defined a set of minimum standards on how to plan and execute ARD programmes under the aid effectiveness principles as laid out in the OECD-DAC framework around the Paris Declaration on Aid Effectiveness (GDPRD, 2007).

3. Critical debates around the MDGs

The UN remains optimistic that the goals are attainable, despite uneven progress. Data from 2007 (UN, 2007) has shown significant success in poverty reduction and education. The proportion of people living in extreme poverty dropped from nearly one third in 1990 to less than one fifth in 2005. Primary education enrolment grew from 80% in 1991 to 88% in 1999. Progress on AIDS, hunger, sanitation, employment and climate change are less pleasing. For example, prevention measures are not keeping pace with the increased number of people dying from AIDS, and over half the population of the developing world lack basic sanitation.

This lagging and uneven progress has charged a debate related to the achievability of targets, especially in fragile states and Sub-Saharan Africa – the only region that is not on track to reach any of their Goals (Easterly, 2007). Part of the blame for the poor performance of some countries and regions is linked to the thematic basis and structure of the MDGs, poor alignment and rigid indicators, and implementation and costing models, according to development practitioners critical of the MDGs.

Firstly, the MDGs thematic structure has various oversights. They have been judged incomplete for under representing non-material aspects of deprivation (Maxwell, 2003). The goals are weak in addressing difficult environments such as fragile states. In addition, they have limited inclusion of themes such as trade, agriculture and productive sectors, demography, reproductive health, human rights, gender equality, institutions, good governance, and environment sustainability; and avoid others, such as economic growth, general employment, the private sector, livelihoods, and social differentiation and discrimination, thus allowing governments and donors to focus on the 'easy to reach' rather than on the poorest and most remote and most deprived.

Secondly, Vandemoortele (2007) argues that the MDGs are structurally flawed. Targets are based on historical

trends at the global level. This global target cannot be realistically disaggregated to the national level. Problems are too local and situation specific to be globally generalizable. For example, instead of using national poverty lines, the US\$1 per day poverty measure is used (see Poverty Brief No 1 for a discussion on different poverty measures). Thus, good intentions resulted in a vague set of objectives.

Thirdly, the MDGs targets have been designed in a way that, some critics claim, devalues progress in Africa. Measurement choices – such as absolute versus percentage changes, positive versus negative indicators, timelines and benchmark years, linear versus non-linear relationships with time or per capita income and change targets versus level targets – create biases that produce relatively poor results for Africa (Easterly, 2007). It is unclear, for example, why the benchmark year has been chosen to be 1990, whereas the MDG campaign started in 2000. As in most African economies growth in the 1990s was very poor, Africa is penalised for its current performance by something that lays well ahead of the start of the MDG campaign. Also, the goal of a proportional reduction in poverty (cutting poverty in half) does not recognise that the percentage reduction of poverty is a highly non-linear function of per capita income. A country starting with a low per capita income needs more growth to achieve the same percentage poverty reduction compared to a country with a higher per capita income. Hence, Africa needs higher economic growth to attain MDG 1 than other countries. Africa would have to achieve a growth rate of more than 7% over the next decade to attain MDG 1.

Fourthly, others blame weak implementation and poor local conditions. Sachs (2005) gives four overarching reasons for underachievement: poor governance, falling victim to the poverty trap (being too poor to make minimal investments), uneven development (targeting certain geographical areas and excluding others) and neglect of specific anti-development policies.

Finally, the models for estimating the costing tools for MDG policies are not entirely accurate (i.e. Reddy and Heuty, 2005; Vandemoortele and Rathin, 2004) and the framework permits cheating through the use of shortcuts and loopholes. For example, target 11 calls for assistance to '100 million slum dwellers'. Because of the vagueness of this target, it presents an incentive to cut costs by targeting those that are easiest to assist. Worse yet, many administrations have engaged in mass slum evictions, 'effectively' reducing the number of slum dwellers (UN Habitat, 2006).

MDGs encourage a focus on measurables against a universal benchmark. The risks of producing solid quantitative figures are that they undervalue the quality of the services delivered (e.g. achieving universal education versus the quality of the education), provide oversimplified targets (Maxwell, 2003) and exclude large populations by a perverse incentive to assist those who are easiest to reach. In Uganda, for example, the goal of achieving universal primary school enrolment is with 90% almost reached, but only 20% complete primary

education. Completion would thus be a better indicator (Margaret Kakande, personal communication, July 2008).

A clear example of exclusion is presented by the use of an absolute poverty line. This extreme, definitive categorisation of the poor and non-poor creates a perverse incentive to target those just below the poverty line. There is a danger that milestone targets could encourage a focus on 'easy to reach' groups, and a further marginalisation of the most exploited or stigmatised people. This not only excludes the poorest and most vulnerable, but places the marginally poor at high risk should the economy falter. For example, in Uganda, just under 20% of the population are thought to suffer chronic poverty. However, the MDG 2015 target adopted by Uganda is to reduce the poverty rate to 28%: this target could encourage some to believe that the chronically poor could be ignored in the short term (Braunholtz-Speight, 2007).

4. Conclusions

Despite some criticism surrounding the MDGs, they are the most determined and unique effort in history to galvanise international action around one set of development targets. There has been progress, particularly in countries where commitment from the top is backed by strong policies and public expenditures. Progress is also reported to be enhanced when efforts are made across a number of mutually reinforcing goals (Shepherd, 2008). The magnitude of support, clarity of goals and targets and universal appeal are undeniable. The MDGs have encouraged a global focus on human development and poverty reduction issues which is extremely valuable. However, if the Goals are to provide anything more than a wish list, they must recognise multidimensional contexts, offer viable options for progress and recognise local solutions and foster inclusive environments. The stated challenges with structure, implementation and monitoring clarifies Kofi Annan's call for improved and accelerated action on the MDGs.

Statements of ambition like the MDGs should be seen as tools, which need to be used to leverage as much action as possible from the powerful. They are not perfect nor do they guarantee action. But without them the task may be even harder (Braunholtz-Speight, 2007).

Just seven years from the 2015 MDG deadline, there are calls to start looking beyond 2015. Reviving the southern debate may require shifting away from global targets towards local indicators which are much closer to reality on the ground. Looking at underlying issues – for example why maternal mortality has hardly declined in many countries – might require a much stronger focus on addressing gender discrimination than the MDG would tell us (Shepherd, 2008).

SDC has an opportunity to build on its experience with specific MDG-related areas and accelerate the donor debate on complimentary investments in economic growth, employment or reducing livelihood vulnerability. More specifically, SDC can support MDG progress by:

- recognising and supporting good government leadership on the MDGs;
- working to understand underlying political and social determinants and adapt the goals appropriately;

- encouraging participation and wide-ranging accountability at global and national levels;
- including depth and severity in poverty measures;
- strengthening institutions;
- strengthening harmonisation efforts; and
- recognising and working with the private sector and civil society, as a growth supporter and development stakeholder.

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