



The Rough Guide to the Millennium Development Goals

A CAFOD briefing

“We must make haste. Too many people are suffering. While some make progress, others stand still or move backwards; and the gap between them is widening.”
(Populorum Progressio, Pope Paul VI)

Introduction

The Millennium Development Goals (MDGs) are a break from the past because for the first time they establish time-bound, global public objectives for development policy. All policies – trade, finance, environment as well as development policy – can be scrutinised to see whether they help or hinder the achievement of the MDGs. In agreeing to the MDGs, all governments in the world, from the richest to the poorest nations, has made public commitments and themselves accountable for the implementation of these commitments to their own citizens and to the global community of civil society organisations, faith groups, movements, parliamentarians and ordinary people.

Background

The Millennium Development Goals (MDGs) took shape in a series of UN conferences in the 1990s, especially at the World Summit for Social Development held in Copenhagen in 1995. That summit vowed, among other things, “to eradicate absolute poverty by a target date set by each country” and “to attain universal and equitable access to education and primary health care.”

These broad targets were worked on by the Development Assistance Committee (DAC) of the Organisation for Economic Cooperation and Development (OECD), the Paris-based “club of rich nations”. In 1996 the DAC published its International Development Goals (IDTs) which became the template for UK development policies after the election of the Labour government in May 1997. The IDTs were at the centre of the development White Paper, “Eliminating World Poverty: a Challenge for the 21st Century” published in November 1997 by DFID under the leadership of Clare Short.

Although the IDTs were a summary of the conclusions of UN conferences, and therefore agreed in principle by all countries in the world, they were seen as top down targets in which developing country governments had had little say or participation. The inclusion of a target dealing with reproductive health care – “Access through the primary health care system to reproductive health services for all individuals of appropriate ages as soon as possible and no later than 2015” was particularly controversial.

The IDTs were subsequently processed by the United Nations, with UNDP (UN Development Programme) taking lead role, and were transformed into the MDGs as the centrepiece of the UN Millennium Declaration in September 2000 when 171 world leaders met in New York to usher in the new millennium on a tide of optimism and hope.

MILLENNIUM DEVELOPMENT GOALS

1. Eradicate extreme poverty - **2015: Halve the proportion of people living on less than a dollar a day and those who suffer from hunger**
2. Achieve universal primary education - **2015: Ensure that all boys and girls complete primary school.**
3. Promote gender equality & empower women - **Targets for 2005 and 2015: Eliminate gender disparities in primary and secondary education preferably by 2005, and at all levels by 2015.**
4. Reduce child mortality - **2015: Reduce by two thirds the mortality rate among children under five**
5. Improve maternal health - **2015: Reduce by three-quarters the ratio of women dying in childbirth.**
6. Combat HIV/AIDS, malaria and other diseases - **2015: Halt and begin to reverse the spread of HIV/AIDS and the incidence of malaria and other major diseases.**
7. Ensure environmental sustainability - **Integrate the principles of sustainable development into country policies and programmes and reverse the loss of environmental resources.**
8. Develop a global partnership for development

The MDGs in 2005

The MDGs are carefully drawn up to be ambitious but achievable steps in the right direction. Many campaigners would have preferred a commitment to eliminate extreme poverty, defined as living on less than a dollar a day, by 2015 – but it is only to be halved. 70% of the world's poorest people still live in Asia, mainly in India and China. Rapid economic growth in both countries means that, if the achievement of the MDGs depended on a global average, the target of reducing extreme poverty by half will be achieved without difficulty. The global average approach, however, has rightly been dismissed as meaningless. To accept that the MDGs cannot be achieved in all or most developing countries would be to accept that they should be the outcome of the interplay of market forces and economic globalisation and that some countries – and their people – are destined to be left behind.

Sub-Saharan Africa, therefore, will be the acid test of the MDGs and of the commitment of donor nations. Now, five years after they were launched, and ten years away from the target date, we should be seeing definite indicators of progress but in sub-Saharan Africa, the picture is bleak. To date progress in the continent, blighted by conflict, stricken with HIV/AIDS and marginalised from world trade, has been very disappointing. The proportion of the population in sub-Saharan Africa living on less than a dollar a day increased from 47% to 49%. In 2004 the UN began to say that Africa would never achieve the poverty goal. On current trends Africa is the only region of the world where the number of poor people in Africa will be higher in 2015 than in 1990. And at present rates of progress Africa will not halve hunger until 2165, 100 years after the deadline. Only seven countries in Africa are on track to meet the target of universal primary education and overall sub-Saharan Africa will not achieve this goal until 2130. The goals of halving poverty and eliminating needless infant deaths will not be achieved until 2150 and 2165.

These depressing predictions, however, are no more than extrapolations of existing trends. There is nothing necessary about them. Provided that Africans themselves can bring an end to conflict – and that is a big “if” – and provided that rich nations can supply the resources and that African governments, civil society and donors can work together to put those resources to work, then there is every reason to hope that in the ten years remaining before 2015 the MDGs can be achieved.

The MDGs and resources

For the first time ever the world has an agreed set of development targets. In the UK, in the 1980s and 1990s, campaigning on aid had been largely devoted to a dispiriting struggle to maintain aid levels as, under successive governments, they declined from the high water mark of 0.51% of gross national income (GNI) that they had reached in 1979. In 1999, two years after the election of a Labour government, as a consequence of Gordon Brown's pledge to keep within the previous government's spending commitments, the aid budget touched bottom at 0.24% of GNI. In the context of a declining aid budget, understandably, the emphasis of campaigners was always on the quantity rather than the quality of aid.

Almost five years after the Millennium Declaration, however, the debate is still about the resources needed to achieve the MDGs. NGOs are still saying to donor governments that, having willed the ends, in the form of the MDGs, they must will the means. In 2002 the UN Conference on Financing for Development called for a doubling of aid from \$50 billion to \$100 billion a year. The response of the most powerful donor nations at that conference was a pledge for an additional \$12 billion a year by 2006 - \$7 billion from EU countries and \$5 billion from the US.

In the face of the refusal of most donor countries to progress quickly towards the 35 year old target of allocating 0.7% of their national income to development assistance, Gordon Brown has been making a huge effort to persuade them to support the International Finance Facility, a scheme to borrow the money needed to double aid: donor countries would sell bonds to investors which would largely be redeemed after 2015. The catch is that the money to redeem the bonds would come from development budgets. If these do not increase significantly between now and 2015 the outflow of funds to the IFF would leave them depleted in the face of the development challenges that will inevitably be a feature of our post-2015 world. After all, the first MDG is to lift only half the world's population out of extreme poverty – and those who are left will inevitably include the chronically poor who by definition find it harder to rise above the one-dollar-a-day threshold that currently defines extreme poverty. If the G7 donor nations¹ were all achieving the 0.7% target today, there would be no need of these exhortations and schemes because in 2003 alone they would have contributed \$168 billion to development.

The MDGs and the War on Terror

The world has changed in other ways since the Millennium Declaration. 11 September, the wars in Afghanistan and Iraq, their aftermath and the "war on terror" led by the United States, have shattered the optimism that greeted the new millennium and created new demands on budgets. The allocations made by the US for the invasion of Iraq and its occupation – over \$128 billion² with a further \$100 billion to come in 2005 – dwarf development spending. US spending in and on Iraq is more than six times its yearly development spending. The £5 billion spent so far by the UK³ would more than double DFID's current annual budget. Governments – especially the US – have shifted priorities to put security at the top of their agenda.

The security agenda is now at the centre of a struggle between the different priorities of development and security. They are not exact opposites but they influence the rationale for poverty reduction and development and could yet change the countries to which aid is directed and the purposes for which it is given. Those who put poverty and development first have argued that poverty, inequality and disease are chief causes of violent conflict, civil war, and states that manifestly fail to protect their citizens or crumble into anarchy; and that political instability in turn is the breeding ground for international criminality, drug trafficking, illegal migration, mass population displacements, and terrorism.

¹ Canada, France, Germany, Italy, Japan, United Kingdom, United States

² Congressional appropriations – see <http://www.truthandpolitics.org/cost-iraq-war.php>

³ Daily Telegraph, 2 December 2004

Tony Blair: “The rest of the world cannot stand by – because we cannot afford to, because what happens in Africa affects and will affect the rest of the world. Poverty and instability lead to weak states which can become havens for terrorists and other criminals.” (7 October 2004)

Jacques Chirac: “The world economy as a whole is held back when the lack of development condemns entire regions to poverty and a seeming lack of prospects. It is also a political necessity because the security and stability of the world are under threat from the reactions of populations that are deprived of their basic rights.” (26 May 2004)

President Benjamin Mkapa, Tanzania: “We should address the situations and factors that have the potential to sow terrorism, namely, poverty, denial, deprivation, oppression and injustice.” (11 January 2003)

Different world leaders have lined up to connect development and poverty eradication with security. But there are crucial differences in emphasis. For some development and poverty eradication are important mainly because they are seen as a key ingredient in security – often with the stress on security for the few: in October 2003, for instance, the Development Assistance Committee (DAC) of the OECD released a policy statement, endorsed at the highest level by OECD aid ministers, on development cooperation and the prevention of terrorism. This policy asserts that ‘development cooperation ... [has] an important role to play in helping to deprive terrorists of popular support and addressing the conditions that terrorist leaders feed on and exploit’. The lens through which donors wish to assess their priorities appears to be their own security interests and the “war on terrorism”.

This is a continuing struggle in which civil society and development agencies need to make their voice heard. Those who want to make security the over-riding rationale for development are pushing for changes that could see military assistance routinely counted as development assistance, but they are opposed by a strong group of countries, including the UK, which, for the time being at least, see development as a moral imperative. The British government is keen to demonstrate its commitment to development and in the wake of the devastating Indian Ocean tsunami has reiterated its commitment towards Africa. Development – alongside climate change – will still be at the centre of the G8 to be held this year in Gleneagles under the presidency of the UK.

Who is in charge of the MDGs?

Evelyn Herfkens, a former development minister of the Netherlands and executive director of the World Bank, is directly responsible to the UN Secretary General, Kofi Annan. Her job is to enthuse governments round the world, not only in the north, about the need to commit themselves to the MDGs and to come up with the resources. Herfkens works closely with UNDP (United Nations Development Programme) which is responsible for integrating all the UN’s work at country level around the MDGs. The UNDP is also responsible for monitoring progress towards the MDGs, not an easy task since many countries’ statistical information is very poor. Its website – www.undp.org/mdg - is one of the main sources of information on the MDGs and progress towards them.

The MDGs are not only about aid

The MDGs are not only about aid and aid policies. Debt and trade policies are vital keys to the achievement of the MDGs. And ultimately it will be the ability of countries to put themselves on the path to sustainable development that will determine whether they meet the MDGs and the poverty targets that lie beyond them. The crucial policies on debt and trade are decided by donor government and multilateral decision making bodies but there is much that developing countries can do for themselves: they alone are responsible for the political will that is the first essential step towards good governance; for a commitment to poverty eradication on the part of the government; for the structures and processes that stimulate and encourage participation by the poor and their organisations.

Debt: the countries that will struggle most to achieve the MDGs are also burdened by debt. Despite the fanfare with which the World Bank and creditor countries greeted the Heavily Indebted Poor Country (HIPC) initiative, it has failed to provide the robust exit from debt that was needed. Debt service payments still routinely outstrip health and education budgets. But what the HIPC initiative has shown is that, for those countries which have received significant debt reduction, it has provided resources that are enabling them to make progress towards the MDGs.

- In Benin 43% of HIPC debt relief went to Education in 2002, allowing the recruitment of teachers for empty posts in rural areas. 54% went to health, of which a fifth was used to recruit health staff for rural clinics, and the remainder was allocated to implementing HIV/AIDS and anti-malarial programmes, improving access to safe water and increasing immunisation.
- In Mali, HIPC debt relief is used to provide a monthly stipend of 25,000 francs to over 5000 community teachers.
- In Niger a special programme that focuses on rural education, health, food security and water systems has been fully financed through HIPC. This has mainly been used so far in building classrooms and rural clinics.
- In Malawi, HIPC resources have been used among other things to train 3600 new teachers a year.
- In Burkina Faso, HIPC relief has been spent on education (39%), health (33%) and rural roads (28%).

The British Treasury now acknowledges that the HIPC initiative has not lived up to its own rhetoric by promising to pay 10% of the debt service owed by heavily indebted poor countries to the World Bank. In his February 2005 visit to Tanzania, Gordon Brown was told that debt cancellation would enable the Tanzanian government to remove user fees for secondary education.

Trade: debt cancellation and aid are important because they can kickstart the process of development in Africa, but trade, the means by which countries can earn foreign exchange without being beholden to rich donor countries, will enable them to become independent and responsible for their own development. Trade reform, therefore, is a crucial component of plans to achieve the MDGs.

Sub-Saharan Africa has seen its share of world trade halved to less than 2 per cent in the last 20 years. If sub Saharan Africa could claw back just 1 per cent of its share of global trade, it would earn £36bn more in exports – nearly five times what the region receives in foreign aid and debt relief.

Most African countries are members of the ACP (Africa Caribbean Pacific) group of countries which, as former colonies of the European powers, enjoy special trade privileges with the EU. Part of the reason for Africa's lack of progress is that many African countries have been stuck in their historical role as providers of commodities and raw materials for the consumers and industries of the north. The EU, through trade treaties that have opened the doors of Europe to tea, coffee and cocoa from Africa, has encouraged African countries to specialise in rather than diversify away from this role. At the same time the EU imposed higher tariffs on imports from other developing countries giving ACP countries an advantage over producers in Asia and Latin America.

As barriers to producers outside the ACP countries have come down and as other countries have tried to carve out a share of this apparently lucrative trade, the value of Africa's traditional exports have plummeted. Vietnam, 12 years ago an insignificant coffee exporter, is now the world's second producer after Brazil, exporting almost 15 million 60 kilo bags in 2004. Many economists argue that the privileges extended to the ACP countries have encouraged them to stick with low value exports when they should have been diversifying into higher value manufactures.

At the same time the support to agriculture provided to farmers and food exporters in OECD countries – \$312 billion in 2003, with the EU and the US being the main culprits – undermines agriculture in developing countries because it dumps subsidised products on world markets at prices that are below the cost of production of even the most efficient producers. The elimination of these subsidies could provide billions of dollars in additional income to farmers in developing countries by doing away with unfair competition in their own countries and raising world market prices. The EU's support for sugar, designed to enable our own sugar beet farmers to compete with sugar cane producers in tropical countries, and the US's support for its 25,000 cotton producers are the most blatant examples of policies that favour their producers and exporters at the expense of millions of farmers in developing countries. Raising the income of the rural poor – up to 70% of the population in some African countries – will be a key to achieving the MDGs.

There is an additional problem for African countries, however. They have benefited from the intricate system of the EU agricultural support because they have been awarded quotas which have enabled them to sell a certain proportion of their produce, especially sugar and bananas, at artificially high EU prices. They will not be able to compete in an open market with the highly efficient industrialised sugar producers of Brazil and Australia. Without obvious substitutes for their traditional exports the imminent disappearance of these preferences is a threat to development and the MDGs.

The EU must make a commitment to long-term and substantial aid programmes that will increase the capacity of ACP countries to identify, invest in and export alternative products. In its current trade negotiations with the ACP countries the EU should not demand that they open their borders to goods and services from the EU in return for duty-free access to the EU. ACP countries – and Africa in particular – must be given the time and space to decide what development strategies are appropriate for them without being constrained by externally driven timetables.

Make Poverty History and the MDGs

The Make Poverty History campaign in the UK and the accompanying international campaign – The Global Call to Action – are aimed at the G8 meeting in July 2005. The campaigns stress the need for coherent approach that includes trade reform and debt as well as aid. The G8 meeting will be followed in September by a summit at the UN to review progress towards the MDGs and in December by a ministerial meeting of the World Trade Organisation in Hong Kong. These three meetings will be crucial for the MDGs. They could approve agreements on aid, debt and trade which will give the MDGs all the support they need in terms of resources – or they could make the half-hearted promises that are a permanent feature of international conferences on development.

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