

Millennium Development Goals

A world without poverty, hunger, pandemics and anguish, a world offering basic education for every child, equality, freedom and brother- and sisterhood; it is a world we might dream of. And also one far removed from reality. Perhaps the United Nations (UN) had such a dream when it came together for the fifty-fifth time, from 6th to 8th September 2000, "at the dawn of a new millennium". All 189 Member States, 147 directly represented by their head of state or government, embraced the Millennium Declaration and Millennium Development Goals (MDGs). Following the UN example, other leading world organisations, such as the IMF and World Bank, welcomed the MDGs, consisting as they did of an array of eight goals to be achieved by 2015, with 1990 as reference datum. The goals are people-centred, time-bound and measurable.

Overall Picture

The eight MDGs range from eradicating extreme poverty and hunger (Goal 1) and achieving universal primary education (Goal 2) to reducing child mortality (Goal 4) and improving maternal health (Goal 5). Now, halfway along the timeline, the envisaged results have not even come into view. Let's take first Goal 1, to eradicate extreme poverty and hunger. This has as measurable target halving over the 25 years from 1990 to 2015 the proportion of people whose income is less than US\$1 a day. According to MDG Report 2007, there were 1.25 billion people in developing countries living on less than US\$1 a day in 1990. This number fell to 980 million in 2004. Expressed in percentage terms, this means the proportion of people living in extreme poverty across the globe dropped from 32% to 19% in nearly fifteen years, and that is very promising indeed. If this rate of progress continues, the MDG target will be met.

Getting Poorer

But the progress shows geographical bias; the majority of the decrease results from rapid economic growth in China, India and south-east Asia. In contrast, poverty in sub-Saharan Africa fell only slightly, from 47% in 1990 to 46% in 1999, arriving at 42% in 2004. Imagine 47%! That means nearly half the population suffers from severe poverty and malnutrition. These are daunting percentages. But what do the absolute numbers say? There were 815 million hungry people in the developing world in 2002, nine million less than in 1990. However, in sub-Saharan Africa the number of people living in extreme poverty increased by 34 million over the same period, partly as a result of annual population growth rate of 2.3%, while numbers of extremely poor rose slightly from 296 million in 1999 to 298 million in 2004. Worse, sub-Saharan Africa enjoys the dubious privilege of being the only region in the world where the poor are getting poorer; the average income of people living on less than US\$1 a day fell from US\$0.62 in 1990 to US\$0.60 in 2001. An UNDP/UNICEF report (June 2002) states that should poverty reduction progress at this rate it will take until 2150 to halve extreme poverty. And that in a region where nearly half the population consists of children under the age of fourteen, this figure comes to a round 350 million, expected to reach over 400 million in 2015.

Primary School

Speaking of children: how do things stand regarding enrolment in primary education for children living in sub-Saharan Africa? The target of Goal 2 is to ensure that by 2015 children everywhere, boys and girls alike, are able to complete a full course of primary schooling. The target is thus that 100% of children somewhere between the ages of six and twelve should be in school all day, instead of helping their fathers in the field or carrying stones to a construction site for a coin or two. Globally, the net ratio of primary education enrolment in developing regions increased from 80% in 1990 to 88% in 2004. In sub-Saharan Africa the increase was even more spectacular, from 54% in 1990 to 70% in 2004 - but note that in 1990 only half of youngsters attended school. And 70% actually means that to date less than two-thirds of children are enrolled, these statistics themselves probably providing too glowing a picture. Enrolment is an administrative matter and does not guarantee the physical presence of Promise in the classroom. Promise's parents may have other, higher, priorities, and while her classmates do their spelling Promise is busy in the fields, reaping yam and cassava. (Some teachers and extramural others might surmise children are taking an extended summer break from school to enjoy a well-deserved holiday; however, it is no coincidence that the vacation coincides with harvest time). It will probably take sub-Saharan African countries until 2140 to achieve full primary school attendance for all their children.

Time to Act

In the UN MDG Report 2005, Kofi Anan, then secretary-general, stated unequivocally: "Instead of setting targets, this time leaders must decide how to achieve them". In the UN MDG report 2007, the present UN secretary-general, Ban Ki-Moon, reinforced Anan's words: "There is a clear need for political leaders to take urgent and concerted action, or many millions of people will not realise the basic promises of the MDGs in their lives". There is plainly a great deal of willingness to formulate goals and targets, but some reluctance to act on them. Let us keep our fingers crossed that the Millennium Development Goals will not go down in history as a gesture of humanitarian fervour inspired by no fewer than three noughts in the year, noughts which might turn out in retrospect to have been an omen sadly indicative of the final outcome.

