

Monitoring the Millennium Development Goals: A Critical Review

In September this year world leaders will meet at the UN Millennium +5 Summit to review progress made towards the MDGs. So, five years on from the adoption of the Millennium Declaration and with 10 years to go before the deadline for the majority of the goals, what progress has been achieved, is the world on track, and how have achievements affected the world's poorest?

Mechanisms for Monitoring and Reporting on the MDGs

From 2001 to 2002 clear mechanisms and guidelines for monitoring the MDGs were established and developed by a number of official agencies¹ and experts who divided each of the goals by targets (18 in total) which are measured by 48 specific indicators (Hammond 2003). In 2003 a detailed document containing guidance on definitions, rational, concepts, and sources of data for these 48 indicators was prepared.² Since 2002 the UN Secretary General has produced annual reports outlining global and regional progress, and countries are now producing national monitoring reports³ (Hammond 2003; UN Statistical Division 2005). Overall a combination of figures from national statistical services and international agencies are used to monitor the indicators (UN Statistical Division 2005).

Worldwide and Regional Progress

So what has the progress been to date and is the world on track to meet the goals set by the 2015 deadline? To a great extent the answer to this question depends on the geographical level at which the MDGs are monitored, and the particular segment of the population being analysed. In relation to global achievements, progress has been modest at best, and figures provided for each of the goals⁴ present a dismal picture. According to Vandemoortele (2003), only one of the goals, MDG7 (target 10 – halving the proportion of people without access to safe water by 2015) is on track globally. Regarding regional progress, achievements vary considerably,⁵ with some regions making significant headway towards the attainment of certain goals and others making little, none or even negative progress (UN Millennium Project 2005). 2004 figures, for example, show that

Northern Africa is on track to achieve, or has met, 12 of the targets, and South-East Asia is on course to meet nine targets, whilst Sub-Saharan Africa is not on track to achieve any, with progress actually declining in relation to some. As the UN Millennium Project (2005:14) report highlighted, in Sub-Saharan Africa 'between 1990 and 2001 the number of people living on less than \$1 a day [MDG 1] rose from 227 million to 313 million, and the poverty rate rose from 45 percent of the population to 46 percent'.

National and Sub-national Progress and Disparities

Progress varies further by countries within regions⁶ and also within individual countries. These are variations which global, regional and national averages disguise. Sub-national variations may occur both geographically and between different socio-economic groups, for example according to age, gender, ethnicity, religion, and rural or urban location. These variations are important as they often highlight issues for which special measures and efforts need to be taken, and reveal disparities otherwise hidden in national averages (Vandemoortele 2003; UN Millennium Project 2005). In Zimbabwe for example, between 1988 and 1999, the under 5 mortality rate (U5MR) declined nationally by four percentage points. However, for the bottom quintile of the population it actually increased by 20 percentage points, and in 1999 'children in the poorest quintile had a U5MR that was four times higher than that for their counterparts in the richest quintile' (Vandemoortele 2003:12). Figures illustrate that similar situations have occurred in countries over a number of regions, including Brazil, Colombia, Dominican Republic, Ghana, Indonesia, Kazakhstan and the Philippines (Vandemoortele 2003).

So Who Benefits From Progress?

These examples illustrate not only the significant variations in progress made, but also the misleading nature of averages in relation to the daily lives of many of the world's poor. The mechanisms by which progress is achieved has been called into question, with evidence suggesting that

national average progress has often been realised by improving the situations of the least poor, which is easier to attain, with the poor remaining in the same situation and 'bypassed by "average" progress' (Vandemoortele 2003:10). In such circumstances average progress means very little to those living with the stark reality of poverty and experiencing a deterioration of their situation.

Data Availability and Reliability

In addition, concerns abound regarding the methodology used to measure progress towards the MDGs, and the availability and reliability of data. In relation to MDG1, for example, it has been argued that 'current data on global poverty are simply not robust enough to make an informed judgement as to whether the world is on track towards the 2015 target' (Vandemoortele 2003:16). Indeed, many countries do not have the capacities to produce the data needed and where data is produced it is often of poor quality, resulting in the use of estimates (UN Statistical Division 2005). Furthermore, concerns have been voiced regarding the actual indicators used and their appropriateness for measuring poverty and the other goals, targets and indicators (Satterthwaite 2003).

Conclusion

According to the current figures the world is not on track to meet the MDGs by 2015, and any progress that has been made has occurred in particular locations and amongst specific groups of the world's population, with many of the poor experiencing little or no change or a worsening of their situation. If the limited progress made is bypassing the poor, any achievements will be restricted and the adoption of the Millennium Declaration will have failed in its commitment to 'making the right to development a reality for everyone and to freeing the entire human race from want' (UN Statistics Division 2005). The UN Millennium +5 summit needs to assess why progress has been so limited, and outline what can be done to reverse current trends and address the situation of the world's poorest. In addition any measurements of progress need to highlight the situation of the most

disadvantaged so that the reality of their situation is not concealed.

Written by Hannah Warren

Researcher, INTRAC

E-mail: hwarren@intrac.org

Notes and References

1. The 'Road Map' was prepared by the Secretaries of the UN, IMF, OECD and World Bank (Hammond 2003).
2. UN (2003) Indicators for Monitoring the MDGs: Definitions, Rational, Concepts, and Sources, New York: UN.
3. National reports are often produced with assistance from UN agencies and PARIS21 – launched in 1999 to assist countries in

developing their statistical capabilities (Hammond 2003).

4. For a summary of progress towards each goal see UN Millennium Project 2005: 23–7.

5. For an overall regional update on progress in relation to each goal see: <http://www.un.org/millenniumgoals/mdg2004chart.pdf> Accessed: 1/3/05.

6. For country tables go to: <http://www.developmentgoals.org/Data.htm>.

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UNFPA (2005) Millennium Development Goals, URL: <http://www.unfpa.org/icpd/mdgs.htm>, Accessed: 28/1/05.

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Vandemoortele, J. (2003) 'Are the MDGs Feasible?' *Development Policy Journal* 3:1–21.

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