

# The Power of Global Goals: Reflections on the MDGs

In the year 2000, world leaders adopted the Millennium Declaration. A commitment to a peaceful, prosperous, and just world, the declaration included a set of targets for development and poverty reduction to be reached by 2015. These came to be known as the Millennium Development Goals (MDGs).

Over the past decade, the MDGs have become a central reference point for aid and international cooperation, not only providing a compelling vision for international development, but also a set of quantitative benchmarks against which development progress can be measured.

As their 2015 end date approaches, the world has turned its attention to what the successor framework to the MDGs should be. In designing this framework, it makes sense to reflect on lessons learned from the MDGs experience.

The policy brief provides the historical context for the MDGs, assesses progress made against the goals and identifies their strengths and limitations.

It draws on a longer NSI Report by Kate Higgins, [\*Reflecting on the MDGs and Making Sense of the Post-2015 Development Agenda\*](#).

## Historical Context

The 21st century began with an unprecedented international commitment to a new consensus on ending global poverty. In September 2000, world leaders from 189 countries gathered at the United Nations (UN) General Assembly and adopted the Millennium Declaration. The declaration was ambitious and aspirational, and outlined the world's commitment to peace, security and disarmament; development and poverty eradication; protecting the environment; human rights, democracy and good governance; protecting the vulnerable; meeting the special needs of Africa; and strengthening the United Nations.

As with many UN resolutions, the Millennium Declaration could have been forgotten. Indeed, the Millennium Declaration looked to be going down the same path as many international declarations of the 1990s, where a summit concluded with commitments to specific targets that captured attention for some time but gradually receded into oblivion (Vandemoortele 2012, 5).

To avoid this, in early 2001, Michael Doyle, a special adviser to then UN Secretary-General Kofi Annan, and Jan Vandemoortele, also from the UN, established and co-chaired a group of experts from across the UN, World Bank, International Monetary Fund and Organisation for Economic Co-operation and Development-Development Assistance Committee to provide some structure around the promises made in the Millennium Declaration.

They extracted targets from the declaration, selecting those with agreed indicators and robust data, and turned them into the eight goals (see Figure 1), 18 targets and 48 indicators (this was later expanded to 21 targets and 60 indicators). The group also clarified that 1990 to 2015 should be the period over which the targets should be met, largely for two reasons: first, it was unrealistic to meet some of the targets (for example the targets on poverty and hunger) between 2000 and 2015; and second, most of the targets outlined in the Millennium Declaration had their origin in the 1990s, when commitments were made at various international summits and conferences (Vandemoortele 2011, 4–5). This is how the MDGs as we know them came to be.

**Figure 1: The MDGs**



## MDG Progress

The MDGs were designed as *global* goals with *global* targets. They were intended to be achieved at the global level, not by every country individually. A true assessment of

whether or not they will be achieved therefore needs to examine global progress.

Significant progress has been made against some of the MDGs. An often-cited example of this progress is that the MDG target on poverty reduction has been met and the proportion of people living in extreme poverty is falling in every region of the world for the first time since poverty trends began to be monitored.<sup>1</sup> Global progress has also been made on non-income dimensions of poverty. The world has met the target of halving the proportion of people without access to improved sources of water and has achieved parity in primary education between boys and girls. Access to treatment for people living with HIV/AIDS has increased in all regions and the world is on track to achieve the target of halting and beginning to reverse the spread of tuberculosis (UN 2012).

But progress on other goals and targets has been less impressive. For example, vulnerable employment has decreased only marginally. The world is far from meeting the 2015 target on maternal mortality and hunger remains a global challenge (UN 2012, 4). Critically, progress on MDG 8, the “global partnership for development”, has been mixed, with rich countries’ action on aid, an open and non-discriminatory trading and financial system, technology transfer and debt relief on the whole falling short (MDG Gap Task Force 2012).

Despite the intention that the MDGs constitute goals and targets to be measured at the global level, there has been a widespread tendency to misinterpret the MDGs as goals and targets for every country to achieve (Vandemoortele 2012, 8). This interpretation

<sup>1</sup> The proportion of people living on less than US\$1.25 a day fell from 47 per cent in 1990 to 24 per cent in 2008—a reduction of people living in extreme poverty from over 2 billion to less than 1.4 billion (UN 2012, 4).

is incorrect and, as Easterly (2009) has vehemently argued, makes the attainment of the MDGs in countries with low starting points, including many low-income countries in Africa, less likely.

If one is to look at progress on the MDGs at the country level, however, there are better ways to do this. It makes sense to examine both *absolute* progress (the amount of progress made – e.g. how much a country has reduced the share of the population living in extreme poverty) as well as *relative* progress (progress made against an MDG target – e.g. how close a country is to meeting the target of halving child mortality). Typically, this approach reveals that low-income countries, especially in Africa, have performed better when it comes to absolute progress. Middle-income countries, on the other hand, perform better when relative progress is assessed (ODI 2010). Fukuda-Parr, Greenstein and Stewart (2013) suggest that measuring the *rate of progress* against MDGs at the country level is instructive and provides a more accurate insight into country-level performance. Indeed, they find that countries in sub-Saharan Africa perform comparatively well when assessed against this yardstick.

What this research demonstrates is that at the global level, progress has been mixed, and at the country level, a more nuanced approach to measurement offers a more realistic picture of country performance. This experience in assessing MDG performance should inform the measurement and accountability framework put in place to track progress on the post-2015 agenda.

## MDGs: Strengths and limitations

Considerable effort has been devoted to identifying the strengths and limitations of the MDGs. These are summarized in Box 1.

### Box 1: Strengths and limitations of the MDGs

#### Strengths of the MDGs

**Simplicity:** The simple and limited nature of the MDGs enhances their utility in communications and advocacy efforts.

**Measurability:** The numerical targets and indicators that make up the MDGs act as a straightforward scorecard against which the world's progress on development can be measured.

**Deadline-driven:** The 2015 deadline provides a clear end date that the world is collectively working towards. It is near enough to incentivize action but far enough away to avoid electoral cycles.

**Consensus-driven:** MDG priorities are areas of global consensus that are difficult to disagree with or challenge.

**Data improvements:** The political attention that the MDGs have attracted has spurred efforts to improve the quality of the data availability to evaluate progress.

#### Limitations of the MDGs

**Donor-driven agenda:** The process for establishing the MDGs was dominated by a small group of donor country experts, with minimal inputs from developing country stakeholders.

**Lack of country ownership:** While successful at influencing the global agenda, the MDGs have been less successful at framing the development agenda at the country-level.

**Ignores key issues:** A number of important issues, such as employment, inequality, governance and security, are not adequately captured.

**Lack of commitments for industrialized countries:** The MDGs lack specific quantitative targets or deadlines for industrialized countries to meet.

*Sources:* Aryeetey et al. 2012; Fukuda-Parr, Greenstein, and Stewart 2013; Karver, Kenny, and Sumner 2012; Klasen 2012; Melamed 2012; Nayyar 2011.



# Lessons for the Post-2015 Framework

Given the success of the MDGs at framing the global development agenda, and the significant attention that is already being devoted to establishing their successor

framework, it is likely that the post-2015 framework will have significant influence on global, and potentially national, development priorities. As we look toward 2015 and beyond, then, what lessons from the MDGs should be considered? Figure 2 identifies nine key lessons for the post-2015 framework (adapted from Higgins 2013).

**Figure 1: Lessons for the post-2015 development framework**



Source: Adapted from Higgins (2013).

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