

How Should MDG Implementation Be Measured: Faster Progress or Meeting Targets?¹

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A critically important aspect of the Millennium Development Goals (MDGs) is that they provide concrete, time-bound and quantitative objectives against which poverty reduction can be measured. Governments can be held accountable by their people. The international community can hold accountable, and be held accountable by, national governments. If this newfound accountability is to be worthwhile, however, the method of determining progress or lack thereof must be the correct one. We argue that the correct measure is whether faster progress is being made, not whether the targets are to be met. The MDGs are not hard planning targets; they are aspirational norms and they offer benchmarks in an evaluative framework.

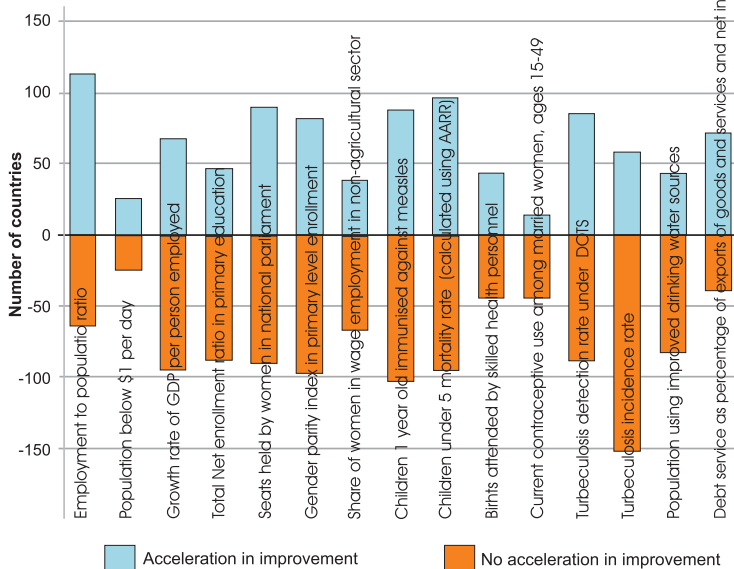
Global Goals. Norms, Not Planning Targets – The MDGs are drawn from the Millennium Declaration adopted by world leaders to set priorities for the twenty-first century. The leaders pledged to do their utmost to end extreme poverty and to secure three other challenges for humanity: democracy and human rights, peace, and environmental sustainability. The Declaration draws on the agendas of UN conferences in the 1990s. The MDGs are politically negotiated commitments, not technocratically defined targets based on careful analysis. They provide a normative framework—the desired outcomes or ends of a development strategy, not the means to reach those ends. Many of the 1990s conferences set goals, clearly explaining that these were global objectives and encouraging national governments to set their own strategies and targets.

It is unsurprising that the MDG targets do not hold up well to scrutiny as planning targets. Numerous economists have pointed out conceptual inconsistencies, including the choice of indicator, the seemingly arbitrary manner in which success is defined (for some indicators, absolute levels; for others, a certain percentage improvement) and the modelling of a development process that would simultaneously achieve this set of now 60 targets (Saith, 2006).

Similarly, as planning targets the MDGs do not always hold up well politically for advocacy purposes. Many civil society groups do not find the MDGs to be consistent with their own agendas and priorities. Targets are either too weak (for example, where targets such as universal primary education have already been achieved), over-ambitious (for example, where income poverty rates must be halved regardless of whether the starting level is 70 per cent or 10 per cent) or missing. National governments have been sceptical of MDGs as another weapon of conditionality, fearing that the Goals would lead to their being labelled as “failures”. The one-size-fits-all 2015 targets are most difficult to reach for the countries with the lowest starting point.

Operationalising MDGs. Evaluative Benchmarks – If the MDGs should not be used as hard planning targets, can they be used in development strategies and policies? Yes. First, they can set a

Number of Countries Showing Accelerated Improvement per Indicator



normative framework for the definition of policy objectives and resource allocation. Second, they can provide benchmarks for evaluating progress. We hold governments to account for doing more, and going beyond “business as usual” with new priorities and approaches. To assess progress, the key question is whether *more* is being achieved. The appropriate way to measure this is to assess whether faster progress is made towards meeting the MDG targets.

Methodology and Findings – In a recent IPC-IG Working Paper (Fukuda-Parr and Greenstein, 2010) we present a methodology and analysis, and our assessment of “progress” differs considerably from assessments using the conventional methodology. For example, while access to safe water is touted as an MDG success, in only a third of the countries has progress been faster. Overall, for most indicators and in most countries, progress has not been faster (see the figure).

More importantly, asking whether progress has accelerated provides more meaningful information that can be used to design more effective policies and to advocate that greater attention should be paid to poverty.

References:

Fukuda-Parr, S. and J. Greenstein (2010). ‘How Should MDG Implementation Be Measured: Faster Progress or Meeting Targets?’ *IPC-IG Working Paper*. Brasilia, International Policy Centre for Inclusive Growth.
Saith, A. (2006). ‘From Universal Values to Millennium Development Goals: Lost in Translation,’ *Development and Change* 37 (6), 1167–1199.

Footnote:

1. David Stewart contributed to this analysis.

