

MDGs: Misunderstood Targets?

by Jan Vandemoortele

Currently UN Resident Coordinator in Pakistan; co-chair of the UN inter-agency group that put the MDGs together in 2001

The millennium development goals recently marked their fifth anniversary. They have generated tremendous support, globally and nationally. However, a common misunderstanding warrants a correction in the conventional view on the MDGs.

Origin – In 2000, the Millennium Summit synthesised previously agreed global goals and targets in a document called the ‘Millennium Declaration’. Formulated as 8 goals and 18 targets, the ‘MDGs’ were endorsed by the UN General Assembly in late 2001. They were selected on the basis of available indicators and reliable data for documenting progress.

The MDGs aim to reduce hunger by one-half, infant and child mortality by two-thirds, and maternal mortality by three-quarters. The obvious question is: Why are these targets different? Why do they not call, for example, for a reduction by three-quarters across the board?

The simple answer is that most of the global targets are based on historical trends. They were set on the premise that progress observed at the global level over the previous 25 years would continue for the next 25 years – the period from 1990 to 2015. Thus, the MDGs are essentially an extrapolation of global trends of the 1970s and 1980s and projected forward till 2015.

Global vs. local targets – Thus, assessing whether progress is ‘on track’ for meeting the targets by 2015 can only be done at the global level. The quantitative targets were set in line with global trends, not on the basis of historical trends for any particular region or specific country. It is erroneous, for instance, to lament that sub-Saharan Africa will not meet the MDGs. These targets were not set specifically for that region.

The spirit of the Millennium Declaration was not to impose a one-size-fits-all benchmark for appraising and comparing country performance, regardless of differing historical background, natural endowments and particular challenges. Yet, it is common to misinterpret the MDGs as a uniform yardstick for human development. Statements such as ‘55 countries are off track to reach this target’ or ‘sub-Saharan Africa will reach that target by 2076’ exemplify this misunderstanding.

It should not be surprising that many countries will miss several of the global MDGs because these targets were not set specifically for individual countries; they were based on aggregate global trends. It would be a tragic misunderstanding of the MDGs if all these countries were to be classified as ‘failures’ for the irrelevant reason that they will not meet artificial benchmarks set on the basis of past global trends.

The misinterpretation of the MDGs is not purely an academic matter. Being called a ‘poor performer’ when one is doing a

perfectly respectable job is fundamentally disempowering. Interpreting the MDGs as a uniform yardstick will inevitably condemn more than half of the countries to the category of ‘poor’ performers – thereby undermining the support for the global targets among politicians and the public at large.

Making sense at the country level – Before dismissing the MDGs as targets that are ‘easily set but never met’, there are four practical steps that can be taken to make sense of the MDGs at the country level.

1. Global targets must be tailored to make them context-sensitive – essential for generating a sense of national ownership. They are meant to encourage countries to strive for accelerated progress. Their applicability, however, can only be tested and judged against what is realistically achievable under country-specific circumstances. No stigma should be associated with setting national targets that are less ambitious than the global MDGs. History shows that successful target setting critically depends on striking a judicious balance between ambition and realism.
2. Intermediate targets are essential for sustaining political commitment and ensuring accountability. The MDGs must be linked to the political agenda of today’s government. Long-term goals, by themselves, are unlikely to help shape current policy reforms and action plan because the deadlines are too far in the future.
3. Actionable propositions and reforms must be formulated to make adequate progress towards agreed longer-term benchmarks. They will range from immunising children to iodising salt, training teachers and building schools, treating Aids patients and distributing bed nets, enforcing laws against gender discrimination, abolishing user fees for primary education and basic health care, and strengthening progressive taxation and re-allocating spending in favour of the poor.
4. Costing these actions and reforms will inform the national budget and aid allocations. National budget must adequately reflect the tailored and intermediate targets set under steps 1 & 2 – a link that is often missing in practice. However, it would be ill advised to estimate the costs of the MDG targets over an extended period of time.¹ MDG costing will only yield results that have a reasonable degree of accuracy when done within a 2-3 year timeframe.

In short, global targets have their place but they have to be kept in their place. If the MDGs continue to be misinterpreted as a one-size-fits-all yardstick, a great silence is likely to befall them as the 2015 deadline draws closer.

Reference:

1. See Jan Vandemoortele & Rathin Roy, 2005, *Making Sense of MDG Costing*. Helsinki Process Magazine, Ministry of Foreign Affairs, Helsinki (Finland).