

Towards Achieving Millennium Development Goals (MDGs): the Role of the International Community

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ABSTRACT

In September 2000, 189 member states adopted the historic Millennium Declaration at the United Nations Millennium Summit in New York. Distilled from the Declaration as well as the development goals agreed on at international conferences and world summits during the 1990s, the Millennium Development Goals (MDGs) have been formulated as a set of measurable and time-bound targets that the international community should work on to achieve human development and eradicate poverty. Ranging from poverty eradication, universal primary education to gender empowerment, environmental sustainability and global partnership, the MDGs consist of eight ambitious, but achievable, development goals with 18 targets and 48 indicators.

In order to help achieve the MDGs, the United Nations launched, in July 2002, its core strategy consisting of four pillar activities: (1) research through the Millennium Project; (2) monitoring through the Millennium Development Goal Reports; (3) advocacy through the Millennium Campaign; and (4) implementation through the integration of the MDGs into the UN system's work at the country level.

In light of the above, the objective of this paper is to discuss the latest efforts and developments of the international community to achieve the MDG, drawing on the major findings of the UNDP Human Development Report 2003. It will also briefly touch upon the opportunities and challenges for agricultural development in the context of global developments to promote the MDGs.

INTRODUCTION

The Millennium Development Goals, or MDGs, have emanated from the Millennium Declaration adopted at the UN Millennium Summit held in September 2000. These Goals represent an unprecedented commitment of the international community to a set of measurable and time-bound targets to achieve human development and eradicate poverty.

In order to help achieve the MDGs, the United Nations launched its core strategy in July 2002. Since then, there have been numerous initiatives, diverse efforts, and rapid developments around the world to reach these Goals.

Agricultural development and research have an extremely important role to play in achieving the MDGs. Seventy percent of the world's poorest people live in rural areas, depending on agriculture in one way or another. It is therefore, worthwhile to discuss and locate a wide range of international agricultural research efforts within the emerging overall context of global development efforts. This paper attempts to provide an overview of the MDGs which will serve as a basis for discussions on the role of agriculture and international collaborative research in the years to come.

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From this perspective, the paper will address the following three questions:

- (1) What is the importance of the MDGs as International Development Goals?
- (2) Where does the world stand in achieving MDGs?
- (3) What needs to be done?

In concluding remarks, the paper will briefly discuss a few implications of this global development effort in light of the role that international agricultural research is expected to play in years to come.

WHAT IS THE IMPORTANCE OF THE MDGS?

The MDGs consist of eight ambitious development Goals with 18 targets and 48 indicators. The first goal is the most famous:

Goal 1. Eradicate extreme poverty and hunger.

This includes a couple of specific targets, for example: to halve, between 1990 and 2015, the proportion of people whose income is less than one dollar a day.

Though less well-known around the world, the remaining seven Goals are no less important.

Goal 2. To achieve universal primary education

Goal 3. To promote gender equality and empower women

Goal 4. To reduce child mortality

Goal 5. To improve maternal health

Goal 6. To combat HIV/AIDS, malaria, and other diseases

Goal 7. To ensure environmental sustainability

Goal 8. To develop a global partnership for development

These MDGs are very comprehensive, covering a broad range of development challenges. Moreover, none of them can be considered new. Most, in fact, are distilled from the development goals agreed upon at international conferences and the world's summits during the 1990s. In a way, the MDGs even sound like age-old challenges.

This prompts us to question why the Goals matter more now, in the first decade of the 21st century? What is new about the Goals, and how has their significance grown? There are three perspectives that make the MDGs unique and innovative in the context of ongoing international development efforts.

Power of global commitment. The Millennium Declaration, the basis for the MDGs, was endorsed by 147 Heads of State and 191 nations at the UN Millennium Summit. In terms of the number of nations endorsing the declaration at the highest level of political authority, it can be said that the MDGs mark the articulation of the broadest consensus of the international community.

Furthermore, the MDGs are reaffirmed at the UN Conference on Financing for Development in Monterrey and the Johannesburg Summit on Sustainable Development in 2002. Most recently, they were endorsed at the Evian Summit of the G8 in July 2003. The New Partnership for Africa Development (NEPAD), for its part, has embraced the MDGs as integral to its future programme.

In this way, the global consensus around the MDGs is extraordinary, and perhaps unique. In the past, the world's major intergovernmental fora dealing with development matters have invariably had different priorities and worked with different frameworks. However, the strong commitments made to the MDGs are now being translated into a global legitimacy and a powerful common framework of global actions. With this global legitimacy in place, governments, aid agencies, and civil society organizations are reorienting their work around MDGs.

MDGs as a monitoring and accountability framework. The MDGs include not only general Goals, but also measurable and time-bound targets, such as the "\$1 per day" poverty target, or "reducing the under-five mortality rate by two-thirds by 2015." To measure progress toward each target, the MDGs have specific indicators. This measurement system embedded in the MDGs can provide a strong and common framework

for monitoring the development outcomes for various development actors.

By monitoring progress quantitatively and systematically, the MDGs also help improve the accountability of the resources that go into development assistance. The argument that aid goes into an unaccountable void can be empirically refuted. As an accountability framework, the MDGs can provide credible instruments for providing necessary assurance by demonstrating measurable progress.

Goal 8: Global Partnership. One of the precursors of the MDGs can be found in the OECD/DAC report, "Shaping the 21st Century: The Contribution of Development Cooperation" issued in May 1996. This report proposed a series of seven time-bound and measurable development goals known as "International Development Goals," or IDGs. These were very similar to the MDGs.

Yet the MDGs are significantly different from the IDGs, as the former Goals contain Goal 8 which defines the responsibility of the developed countries. In order to meet Goals 1 to 7, the goals for which the developing countries are mainly responsible, Goal 8 calls on the developed countries to increase aid, relieve debt burden, increase access to their markets, and transfer their technologies.

In other words, this "global deal" holds that poor countries should mobilize domestic resources for development and exercise good governance to achieve the first seven Goals, while rich countries, in turn, should make an effort to achieve Goal 8. The MDGs are not only a monitoring tool to track the progress of the poor countries, but also a compact between North and South, South and South, and North and North.

IS THE WORLD ON TRACK TO MEET THE MDGS?

Let us next look at where the world stands to meet the MDGs. The Human Development Report 2003, "Millennium Development Goals: A compact among nations to end human poverty," provides a number of global analyses and policy recommendations to achieve the Goals.

A Human Development Crisis in the 1990s. Major development indicators deteriorated sharply in the 1990s. Economic growth deteriorated in 54 countries, income poverty in 37 countries, hunger in 21 countries, child mortality in 14 countries, and primary enrollment in 12 countries.

The Human Development Index (HDI) is a measure of three dimensions of human development: living a long and healthy life, being educated, and having a decent standard of living. This index usually moves upwards over time, though its pace may be slow, because three components of the index take time to change. But once progress is made, it is not easily reversed. In other words, when the HDI falls, it indicates a crisis of the country, losing its "basis for development – people, their real wealth."

From this perspective, 21 countries declined in HDI between 1990 and 2001, while only 4 countries declined in the 1980s. All in all, human development has been in crisis since the 1990s.

Poverty. Progress towards the poverty target of reducing the population living on less than \$1 a day has been mixed.

South Asia and East Asia are well on track to achieve the poverty target of the Goal 1 by 2015. If poverty continues to decrease at the same rate that it did in the 1990s, these regions are mostly likely to achieve the target on time. East Asia can even achieve the target ahead of schedule. Yet poverty followed an upward trend in the 1990s in Sub Sahara Africa, Central and Eastern Europe and the CIS, and, to a small extent, in Latin America.

Child mortality rate. Child mortality declined considerably in the 1990s, but much further declines will be necessary to meet the MDG target in 2015. While child mortality declined in all regions, the pace of improvement in Sub Saharan Africa is far behind that required to meet the child mortality target by 2015.

Some challenges. The 2003 Human Development Report also pointed out that dramatic progress is indeed possible, based on successful experience in some of the countries. For instance:

- Uganda and Zambia halted the spread of HIV/AIDS once it reached crisis proportion.
- Bangladesh and Malawi increased primary enrolment by more than 20%.

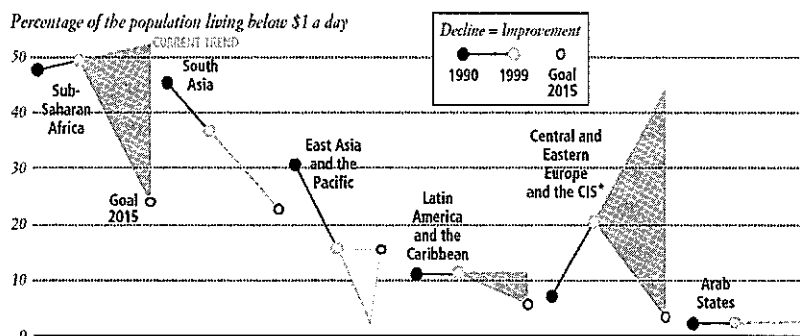


Fig. 1. Percentage of the population living below \$1 a day

- Sri Lanka increased life expectancy by 12 years in less than a decade.

In addition, the Report stated that the goal of halving poverty would be met globally due to the fast economic growth in the world’s two most populous countries, India and China.

At the same time, however, the Report warned that improvements were far too slow in many other countries and many other areas. For instance, at the current rates of progress:

- Sub Sahara Africa will achieve the child mortality goal 150 years late.
- South Asia won’t halve hunger until the 22nd century.
- Poverty is increasing in the CIS and stagnant in Latin America.

In summary, the Human Development Report 2003 reveals that much of the world is on track for some of the Goals, but when progress is broken down by region, country, and within countries, a huge amount of work clearly remains.

WHAT NEEDS TO BE DONE? UN STRATEGY FOR THE MDGS

Next comes the third question, “What needs to be done?” This is certainly a daunting question which is beyond the scope of this short paper. At the same time, it is also important to note that the MDGs do *not* constitute a development strategy. In other words, the Goals do not propose any particular approaches or prescriptions that can “fix the world” all at once.

This also means that, ultimately, the MDGs have to be translated into national agenda and development strategy in each country. The MDGs have to be owned by both developed and developing countries. Partnership and solidarity have to be established among various actors. It will be necessary to mobilize political will, good policy ideas, resources, and even ordinary people to make the MDGs a reality.

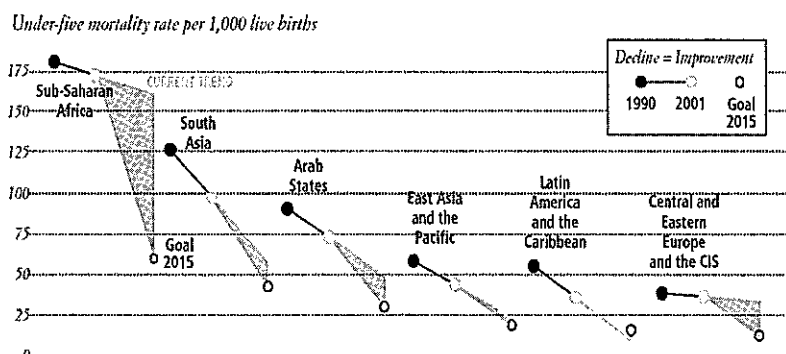


Fig. 2. Under-five mortality rate per 1000 live births

Since the launch of its strategy in July 2002, the United Nations has been working to achieve the MDGs on several fronts. UNDP, in particular, has been designated by the UN Secretary-General as a "campaign manager and scorekeeper" of the MDGs.

The United Nations strategy on the MDGs consists of four pillars:

Research. The first pillar is the Millennium Project, a global research network on the MDGs. Headed by Professor Jeffrey Sachs, Special Advisor to the UN Secretary-General on the MDGs, this project is conducting research and generating ideas on what it takes for countries to meet all the Goals in terms of policy, capacity, and required investment and financing. The outcome of the research undertaken so far has been reflected in the 2003 Human Development Report. The final report on the Project will be submitted to the UN Secretary-General in June 2005.

Monitoring. The second pillar is monitoring. As mentioned earlier, the MDGs provide a monitoring framework to track the world's progress in development outcomes. To operationalize this framework, the United Nations has introduced a monitoring mechanism at the global and country level.

At the country level, each developing country prepares an MDG Report that analyzes the situation related to the MDGs and tracks progress towards their achievement. As "scorekeeper" of the MDGs, UNDP, together with other UN agencies, is assisting this country-level monitoring effort. So far, about 40 MDG Reports have been produced and another 60 are in preparation.

These country-level Reports are being complemented by the UN Secretary-General's Millennium Declaration reports, which annually monitor and analyze the global progress towards achieving the MDGs.

Campaign. The third pillar is the MDG Campaign. The MDGs cannot be surely achieved by 2015 without the active involvement of a broad range of social actors throughout the world. The objective of the Millennium Campaign is to raise awareness, promote and stimulate public debate, and build and enhance support for the MDGs at many levels, from global to local, among a broad range of actors.

To help drive this forward, the former Development Minister for the Netherlands, Ms. Eveline Herfkens, was appointed as Executive Coordinator for the MDGs Campaign in October 2002. A new Director of the MDG Campaign Unit, Mr. Salil Shetty, former Chief Executive Director of an international NGO, Action Aid, was appointed in early November 2003. As "campaign manager," UNDP is working to catalyze, organize, coordinate, and promote this MDGs campaign both in developing and developed countries.

Implementation. The fourth pillar of the MDG strategy is implementation. In response to the priorities identified by each developing country, UNDP is helping to integrate MDGs into all aspects of the UN system's work at the country level. UNDP has recently reformulated its corporate policy and funding framework, called the Multi-Year Funding Framework (MYFF), in alignment of the MDGs. Closer partnership between MDGs and the Poverty Reduction Strategy Paper (PRSP) is increasingly taking place.

In this way, in just a few years, the MDGs have become a major driving force to bring about changes and promote a broad range of development activities in both developed and developing countries. This global force is gaining momentum and becoming stronger in many parts of the world. It will no doubt be an even stronger and powerful movement at many levels over the next decade.

CONCLUDING REMARKS

In light of the emergence of the global development effort discussed above, this last section briefly touches upon a few implications for agricultural research.

Focus on poverty. First, agricultural research will have to be increasingly relevant to poverty reduction. Researchers will have to pay more systematic attention to the poverty impact of their work on agricultural development.

Focus on results. Second, given the strong emphasis on a results-based perspective of the MDGs, agricultural researchers will have to focus more on the development of a measurement system to assess the impacts of their work in terms of the MDGs. More broadly, agricultural research will be required to incorporate results-based management approaches into its focus. This will call for not only technological research, but also policy and institutional research to ensure that low-income groups have access to the potential benefits of technological developments.