A critical evaluation of the UN Millennium Development Goals

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Summary

The UN Millennium Development Goals (MDGs) facilitated some notable advances within international development, especially in relation to poverty reduction. However, as a form of global policy-making it had significant shortcomings or limitations. Above all it raised a number of issues – specifically in relation to monitoring, data collection, funding, feasibility and implementation – that will need to be addressed in future policy schemes of this nature.

Future Policy Organisation

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Acronyms and abbreviations

ADB: African Development Bank.
AU: African Union.
GNI: gross national income.
HLP: High-Level Panel.
ICTs: information and communication technologies.
LEDCs: less economically developed countries.
MDGs: UN Millennium Development Goals.
MDGGTF: MDG Gap Task Force
MEDCs: more economically developed countries.
ODA: official development assistance.
ODI: Overseas Development Institute.
SDGs: UN Sustainable Development Goals.
SDSN: Sustainable Development Solutions Network.
TRIPS: Trade-related aspects of intellectual property rights.
UNECA: UN Economic Commission For Africa.
UNESCO: United Nations Educational, Scientific & Cultural Organisation
WTO: World Trade Organisation.
Introduction

In September 2000, the United Nations adopted the UN Millennium Development Goals (MDGs) as its primary strategy for international development. The MDGs synthesized the various declarations and targets from international summits and conferences held during the 1990s, and consisted of eight goals which were to be achieved by 2015.

The MDGs marked a policy shift within international development because taken together the goals formed a universal framework for pursuing development and eradicating extreme poverty. In other words, the MDGs constituted a concerted attempt by the international community to define the aims and purpose of development (Hopper, 2012). Indeed, the MDGs have been followed by the formation and pursuit of the Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs). Cumulatively, these policy goals have established a global strategy for development for the period 2000-2030, absorbing a vast amount of financial and human resources in the process.

However, what is less clear is the effectiveness of this approach. In particular, what impact is this type of unitary global policy formation having on developing societies? To what extent, if at all, are local models and indigenous practices informing the universal goals and targets? How reliable is the data that is informing this policy approach? And what affect is the international pursuit and prioritization of global development goals having on other areas within development?

The value of goal-orientated policy-making for international development therefore merits further investigation. In this regard, nearly a year after the completion of the time-scale for the MDGs, it is an appropriate moment to reflect on whether or not they were a success. In contrast, the international community moved swiftly from the MDGs to focusing on the SDGs with seemingly relatively little analysis and public discussion of the effectiveness and record of the MDGs.

This policy report is divided into four sections. In the first section, the defining aspects of the Millennium Development Goals are set-out as well as the UN’s rationale for undertaking this project. The second section deals with the major criticism that the MDGs have generated. The third section outlines the major achievements of the MDGs. Finally, the fourth section, undertakes a critical evaluation of the MDGs.
It should be noted that the focus of this publication will be primarily on the key indicators or targets that are associated with the different millennium development goals. To undertake a comprehensive analysis of all of the targets for each of the goals is beyond the scope of a policy report of this size. Further analysis of the MDGs will be the task of future FPO publications.
Section 1: The UN Millennium Development Goals

The UN pushed ahead with the MDGs following the adoption of the United Nations Millennium Declaration (UNMD) in September 2000 by the leaders of 189 countries (see Boxes 1 and 2). In relation to development and poverty eradication, the UNMD stated:

> We will spare no effort to free our fellow men, women and children from the abject and dehumanizing conditions of extreme poverty, to which more than a billion of them are currently subjected. We are committed to making the right to development a reality for everyone and to freeing the entire human race from want. (UNGA, 2000)

From the UN’s perspective, it hoped that establishing a common project with time-bound goals would encourage joined-up thinking and action within international development. It was also a way of continuing the process of broadening the nature of development from the traditional preoccupation with economic growth to prioritising wider social and human-centred issues. Moreover, in the context of increasing pressure on levels of aid spending, and growing criticism about its effectiveness, the MDGs provided a clear and simple global cause for governments, international agencies, NGOs and the world’s citizens to rally around.

The eight millennium development goals that were to be achieved by 2015 were the following (for further information go to: [http://www.un.org/millenniumgoals/poverty.shtml](http://www.un.org/millenniumgoals/poverty.shtml)):

- Goal 1: Eradicate extreme poverty and hunger.
- Goal 2: Achieve universal primary education.
- Goal 3: Promote gender equality and empower women.
- Goal 4: Reduce child mortality.
- Goal 5: Improve maternal health.
- Goal 6: Combat HIV/AIDS, malaria and other diseases.
- Goal 7: Ensure environmental sustainability.
- Goal 8: Develop a global partnership for development.
In order to meet the eight MDGs, specific targets were established for each goal. Key targets for each goal included the following:

- For Goal 1: Reduce by half the proportion of people living on less than a dollar a day and the proportion of people who suffer from hunger.
- For Goal 2: Ensure that all boys and girls complete a full course of primary schooling.
- For Goal 3: Eliminate gender disparity in primary and secondary education preferably by 2005, and at all levels by 2015.
- For Goal 4: Reduce by two thirds the mortality rate among children under five.
- For Goal 5: Reduce by three quarters the maternal mortality ratio.
- For Goal 6: Halt and begin to reverse the spread of HIV/AIDS and the incidence of malaria and other major diseases.
- For Goal 7: Reduce by half the proportion of people without sustainable access to safe drinking water.
- For Goal 8: Develop further an open trading and financial system that is rule-based, predictable and non-discriminatory.
Section 2: Criticism of the Millennium Development Goals

From the outset the MDGs generated considerable debate, but also attracted significant criticism. The main criticisms can be categorised in the following way:

1. A Western project
Firstly, some critics questioned the value of the goals. In particular, they noted that the MDGs were not universal rather they were targeted at the developing world. Moreover, for many developing countries, whether or not they attained the goals would largely be dependent on the financial assistance they received from wealthier states. The MDGs were therefore replicating an often heard criticism of international development, namely that it is essentially a western project imposed on southern countries, one that hampers their ability to develop autonomously. Of course, by focusing on the developing world, it also meant that the MDGs neglected the challenges and difficulties facing poor people in developed countries.

2. A lack of inclusivity
Secondly, and linked to the previous charge, the millennium development campaign received criticism for not allowing southern states and minorities within developed countries to contribute substantively to the formation of the MDGs. It is part of a broader claim that the MDGs were notable for the lack of consultation and inclusion. In this regard, Mark Malloch-Brown (the head of the UN Development Programme at the time) has stated that the MDGs were devised by a small group in the basement of the UN headquarters in New York (Tran, 2012). As a general rule, policies are more likely to succeed if those who are affected by them are involved in their design and creation as well as implementation. Indeed, the issue of inclusivity was an important feature of the processes that led to the formation of the Sustainable Development Goals.

3. The goals were unrealistic
Thirdly, other critics maintained that the time frame to achieve such ambitious goals was unrealistic. For example, eradicating extreme poverty and hunger (MDG 1) was a huge undertaking on the part of the international community. It is reflected in the fact that ‘ending hunger’ is part of the second sustainable development goal (SDG 2). In other words, it was a task or goal that had not been completed by the end of 2015.
The concern over the timeframe of the MDGs was expressed prior to the global financial crisis that began in 2008. The crisis itself harmed the economies of the poorest countries and led to a downturn in levels of spending on foreign aid on the part of many developed nations, making it even more difficult to achieve the MDGs. It is a reminder of how susceptible global projects can be to international influences and developments, and the need therefore for realistic goals and targets.

4. Inadequate data collection

Fourthly, it has been claimed that the MDGs lacked proper monitoring and data-collection processes making it difficult to determine their progress and effectiveness (SDSN, 2015). In part this stemmed from the fact that the project lacked the funds to set these systems up especially in poorer states where in some instances they were almost entirely absent. Indeed, a report published in 2015 by the Overseas Development Institute (ODI) entitled The Data Revolution: Finding the Missing Millions, warned that many poorer countries are simply unable to adequately measure their progress in areas such as poverty reduction (Stuart, Samman, Avis and Berliner, 2015). According to the authors of the report, this means that hundreds of millions more people could be living in extreme poverty than indicated by official estimates. At the very least, shortfalls in data gathering must cast doubt over the credibility of UN claims about the effectiveness of the millennium development goals.

5. Impact on other areas of development

Fifthly, concern was expressed about the potential impact of the MDGs on other aspects of development. For instance, Ashwani Saith (2006) believed the MDGs and their respective targets could potentially distort international development by influencing the priorities and direction of academic research and investigation. Others feared that those policy areas within international development that were not part of the MDGs would simply lose influence and funding. Indeed, in this vein, a general charge raised against the MDGs is that as a project it was too narrow in scope with important development issues like peace and security, reducing inequality, climate change, and human rights, omitted from the list.

6. Lack of emphasis on rights

Sixthly, some commentators questioned the lack of emphasis on rights within the MDGs. Indeed, the failure to address the issue of human rights almost certainly undermined some of the goals. For example, it is difficult to improve maternal health (MDG 5) without addressing the issue of women’s sexual and reproductive rights. Likewise, if the international community was serious about eradicating hunger (MDG1), then arguably access to food should have been treated as a human right.

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A critical evaluation of the UN MDGs
As we will see in the next section, the criticism that the MDGs attracted has implications for the debate about whether or not they constituted an effective use of resources and are a model that should be replicated.
Section 3: The Millennium Development Goals – the achievements

On July 1, 2015, the United Nations published a final report on the progress of the MDGs entitled *The Millennium Development Goals Report 2015* (United Nations, 2015). The authors of the report contend that the MDGs have been the most successful anti-poverty movement in history with the number of people living in extreme poverty declining by more than half since 1990. Below the headline themes from the report are set out in relation to each millennium development goal (and associated targets) as well as an analysis of these claims and their wider implications.

**Goal 1: Eradicate extreme poverty and hunger**

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<thead>
<tr>
<th>Target 1.A: Halve, between 1990 and 2015, the proportion of people whose income is less than $1.25 a day.</th>
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<tr>
<td>Target 1.B: Achieve full and productive employment and decent work for all, including women and young people.</td>
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<td>Target 1.C: Halve, between 1990 and 2015, the proportion of people who suffer from hunger.</td>
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**Box 1: Achieved by 2015 according to The Millennium Development Goals Report 2015**

- In 1990, nearly half of the population in the developing world lived on less than $1.25 a day; that proportion dropped to 14 per cent in 2015.
- Globally, the number of people living in extreme poverty has declined by more than half, falling from 1.9 billion in 1990 to 836 million in 2015. Most progress has occurred since 2000.
- The number of people in the working middle class—living on more than $4 a day—has almost tripled between 1991 and 2015. This group now makes up half the workforce in the developing regions, up from just 18 per cent in 1991.
- The proportion of undernourished people in the developing regions has fallen by almost half since 1990, from 23.3 per cent in 1990–1992 to 12.9 per cent in 2014–2016.
FPO Analysis

While there were country to country variations, the global target for reducing extreme poverty was met ahead of schedule. More specifically, Target 1.A – halving the proportion of people living on less than $1.25 a day between 1990-2015 – was reached by 2010 when the world poverty rate fell to 22 per cent (World Bank, 2012). This is achievement also needs to be seen in the context of the international community struggling to deal with food, fuel and financial crises in the years leading up to 2010.

However, anti-poverty campaigners have noted that even after the MDGs there were still approximately 1 billion people worldwide living in extreme poverty in 2015 (DoSomething.org, 2015). It forms part of their broader critique that the MDGs mistakenly focused on reducing the proportion of people living in extreme poverty rather than the absolute number (Pogge, 2003). In other words, they argue, the UN set itself a less ambitious target in relation to poverty reduction.

As with all of the goals, there were considerable regional variations with MDG1 in terms of performance. For example, in south-east Asia extreme poverty fell by 84 per cent, while in sub-Saharan Africa extreme poverty was down by only 28 per cent. Moreover, advocates of trade liberalisation believe that the impressive performance of countries in south-east Asia is due primarily to their active participation in global markets, which they maintain has accelerated their economic development and in turn greatly aided poverty reduction in the region.

The target of halving the proportion of people who suffer from hunger between 1990 and 2015 was narrowly missed (Target 1.C). Determining the proportion of undernourished people is a measure of food deprivation based on factors like the minimum dietary energy required for an average person. As outlined in Box 1, the proportion of undernourished people fell from 23.3 per cent to 12.9 per cent during this period. The high price of staple foods between 2008-2011 perhaps helps to explain why this target was not achieved. Although the fact that MDG1 did not adequately address issues like food security, access to nutritious food, and price volatility, means that hunger looks set to remain an everyday reality for many people living in parts of the developing world.

Likewise external factors, notably the global financial and economic crisis that began in 2008, undoubtedly shaped the track record of MDG1 in relation to employment and the nature of work (Target 1.B). Achieving full and productive employment and decent work for all inevitably became much more difficult under such conditions.
Lastly, returning to the central aim of this goal – ‘eradicating extreme poverty and hunger’ – in its final report on the progress of the MDGs, the UN acknowledged that an estimated 825 million people still lived in extreme poverty and 800 million still suffered from hunger in 2015 (United Nations, 2015). It is perhaps telling that the UN also declares that ‘eradicating poverty and hunger remains at the core of the post-2015 development agenda’ (ibid., 23).

Goal 2: Achieve universal primary education

Target 2.A: Ensure that, by 2015, children everywhere, boys and girls alike, will be able to complete a full course of primary schooling.

Box 2: Achieved by 2015 according to The Millennium Development Goals Report 2015

- The primary school net enrolment rate in developing regions reached 91 per cent in 2015, up from 83 per cent in 2000.
- The number of out-of-school children of primary school age worldwide fell by almost half to an estimated 57 million in 2015, down from 100 million in 2000.
- Sub-Saharan Africa has had the best record of improvement in primary education of any region since the MDGs were established. The region achieved a 20 percentage point increase in the net enrolment rate from 2000 to 2015, compared to a gain of 8 percentage points between 1990 and 2000.
- The literacy rate among youth aged 15 to 24 has increased globally from 83 per cent to 91 per cent between 1990 and 2015. The gap between women and men has narrowed.

FPO Analysis

The ambitious goal of achieving universal primary education was missed: the primary school net enrolment rate reached 91 per cent in 2015. Nevertheless, there were some notable advances in relation to primary education worldwide, such as the increase in the enrolment rate for sub-Saharan Africa.
Achieving universal primary education is an appealing and understandable goal. However, it arguably simplified the existing ‘education for all’ (EFA) agenda, which was established at the UN-led World Conference on Education for All in Jomtien (Thailand) in March 1990 (Fukuda-Parr, 2013). EFA is a multidimensional rights-based approach to education underpinned by the Universal Declaration of Human Rights and the Convention on the Rights of the Child (see Box 2a). In essence, it decrees that all citizens have the right to benefit from an education that will meet their basic learning needs and which allows them to improve their lives and transform their societies (UNICEF, 1999).

In addition, while many developing countries achieved universal primary education during the MDG phase, reaching this target tells us little or nothing about the nature of the educational curriculum or the quality of the teaching received by children. Moreover, due to limited resources the promotion of primary education in some developing countries has been at the expense of secondary, tertiary and higher education. Indeed, perhaps the most serious charge that can be raised against MDG2 is that it illustrates a lack of joined-up thinking on the part of the international community in relation to global education. By not putting in place adequate provision for the other tiers of education, it has meant that some primary school leavers have nowhere to go to continue their education. For example, while primary school enrolment rate for sub-Saharan Africa increased significantly, more than half of children in the region old enough to be in secondary school are now outside of formal education. This shortcoming helps to explain why the successor to MDG2 in the Sustainable Development Goals pursues a more comprehensive approach to education globally. More specifically, SDG4 seeks to ensure inclusive and equitable quality primary and secondary education for all boys and girls, and to promote lifelong learning opportunities for all.

In evaluating MDG2, it should also be noted that progress on increasing primary school enrolment rates stalled from 2007. This strongly suggests that significant obstacles to achieving universal primary education remain. In this regard, a report by UNESCO and UNICEF entitled Fixing the Broken Promise of Education for All (published in 2015) addressed this matter. The report highlighted those children and adolescents that MDG2 largely by-passed, notably those living in conflict, facing discrimination because of disability, ethnicity and gender, and child labourers. For these disadvantaged children and adolescents, the report argues, the conventional UN approach to achieving universal education – namely devoting more resources for classrooms, textbooks and teachers – may prove insufficient. Instead, there needed to be targeted interventions that directly address the particular problems and challenges faced by each of these marginalised groups.
**Box 2a: The 6 Education for All Goals**

**Goal 1:** Expanding and improving comprehensive early childhood care and education, especially for the most vulnerable and disadvantaged children.

**Goal 2:** Ensuring that by 2015 all children, particularly girls, children in difficult circumstances and those belonging to ethnic minorities, have access to, and complete, free and compulsory primary education of good quality.

**Goal 3:** Ensuring that the learning needs of all young people and adults are met through equitable access to appropriate learning and life skills programmes.

**Goal 4:** Achieving a 50 per cent improvement in levels of adult literacy by 2015, especially for women, and equitable access to basic and continuing education for all adults.

**Goal 5:** Eliminating gender disparities in primary and secondary education by 2005, and achieving gender equality in education by 2015, with a focus on ensuring girls’ full and equal access to and achievement in basic education of good quality.

**Goal 6:** Improving all aspects of the quality of education and ensuring excellence of all so that recognized and measurable learning outcomes are achieved by all, especially in literacy, numeracy and essential life skills.

(Source: World Education Forum, 2000)

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**Goal 3: Promote gender equality and empower women**

**Target 3.A:** Eliminate gender disparity in primary and secondary education, preferably by 2005, and in all levels of education no later than 2015.

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**Box 3: Achieved by 2015 according to *The Millennium Development Goals Report 2015***

- The developing regions as a whole have achieved the target to eliminate gender disparity in primary, secondary and tertiary education.
- In Southern Asia, only 74 girls were enrolled in primary school for every 100 boys in 1990. Today, 103 girls are enrolled for every 100 boys.
- Women now make up 41 per cent of paid workers outside the agricultural sector, an increase from 35 per cent in 1990.
- Between 1991 and 2015, the proportion of women in vulnerable employment as a share of total female employment has declined 13 percentage points. In contrast, vulnerable employment among men fell by 9 percentage points.
- Women have gained ground in parliamentary representation in nearly 90 per cent of the 174 countries with data over the past 20 years. The average proportion of women in parliament has nearly doubled during the same period. Yet still only one in five members are women.

**FPO Analysis**

In relation to policy formation and implementation, there are aspects of MDG3 that required greater attention and even rethinking. Firstly, while MDG3’s progress was tracked by indicators ranging from the ratio of girls to boys in class to the proportion of female MPs in national parliaments, the promotion of gender equality and the empowerment of women is a huge undertaking requiring more than one target (Target 3.A). While issues affecting women and girls formed part of the targets for some of the other MDGs, this does not constitute addressing gender equality and the empowerment of women in a systematic way.

Secondly, and following on from the previous point about the narrow focus of MDG3, critics have noted the omission of issues needed to achieve gender equality and women’s empowerment. These issues included: eliminating violence against women, challenging discriminatory laws and constitutions, and addressing women’s lack of rights ranging from limited access to resources like land to lack of control over their own life-paths (Ford, 2015). In other words, while the focus of MDG3 on education was important, there are many other aspects of social, economic and political life that need to be addressed if we are to achieve gender equality and the empowerment of women.
Thirdly, by simply calling for the promotion of gender equality rather than setting out to actually achieve it, states and their respective leaders arguably had too much autonomy to pursue their own approaches to this policy area. This may in part account for the fact that the target to eliminate gender disparity in all levels of education by no later than 2015 was not achieved. MDG3 therefore needed to be reframed. In this regard, it is unsurprising that the SDGs seek to address this matter. More specifically, SDG5 calls on governments to achieve – rather than just promote – gender equality and the empowerment of women and girls.

Fourthly, and more fundamentally, are targets an appropriate approach to achieving gender equality and the empowerment of women? For Andrea Cornwall (2015), MDG3 ignored everyday realities shaping this area or issue, such as the ‘hidden curriculum’ of gender stereotypes within education or the patriarchal codes and practices that imbue politics. She even questions whether the categories of MDG3 serve any real use. More specifically, the division into neat categories of ‘women and girls’ and ‘men and boys’ held together by a focus on ‘gender equality’, underplays gender stereotypes, the structures of privileges and power, intersecting inequalities and that some women may have stake in preserving patriarchy. From this perspective, it is telling that MDG3 did not address or even mention lesbian, gay, bisexual and transgender (LGBT) rights.

Interestingly, as part of its overall assessment of the MDGs, the UN concedes that the fundamental causes of inequality between women and men still need to be rectified (United Nations, 2015: 31). It also acknowledges the areas that were not addressed under the MDGs, notably: violence against women and girls; unequal employment opportunities and pay; gender-based discrimination in law and practice; women’s limited control over assets and property; and women’s unequal participation in private and public decision-making (ibid.). Finally, the UN acknowledges that even in the areas where progress was made – education, employment and political representation – there is still much work that needs to be done (ibid., 28-31).

Goal 4: Reduce child mortality

**Target 4.A: Reduce by two thirds, between 1990 and 2015, the under-five mortality rate.**
Box 4: Achieved by 2015 according to *The Millennium Development Goals Report 2015*

- The global under-five mortality rate has declined by more than half, dropping from 90 to 43 deaths per 1,000 live births between 1990 and 2015.
- Despite population growth in the developing regions, the number of deaths of children under five has declined from 12.7 million in 1990 to almost 6 million in 2015 globally.
- Since the early 1990s, the rate of reduction of under-five mortality has more than tripled globally.
- In sub-Saharan Africa, the annual rate of reduction of under-five mortality was over five times faster during 2000-2013 than it was during 1990-1995.
- Measles vaccination helped prevent nearly 15.6 million deaths between 2000 and 2013. The number of globally reported measles cases declined by 67 per cent for the same period.
- About 84 per cent of children worldwide received at least one dose of measles-containing vaccine in 2013, up from 73 per cent in 2000.

**FPO Analysis**

It is a mixed picture for the child health goal. Encouragingly, the under-five mortality rate declined by more than half between 1990-2015. However, this was less than the stated MDG4 target of two-thirds. According to the *Levels and Trends in Child Mortality Report 2015*, published by UNICEF and other UN agencies, this means that 16,000 children are dying a day before reaching the age of five (UNICEF, 2015). Diarrhoea, malaria and pneumonia are the biggest preventable causes of death of children in this age group. Moreover, at the end of 2014, the UN declared in its publication *The Millennium Development Goals Report 2014* that at the current rate of progress it will take until 2028 to achieve MDG4 worldwide (United Nations, 2014).

As with the other MDGs there are notable regional differences with infant mortality, with half of all under-five child deaths occurring in sub-Saharan Africa. This translates as one child in 12 dies before their fifth birthday in sub-Saharan Africa.
A notable development that may impede future progress in tackling child mortality is the growing inequalities within countries. Save the Children published a report in 2015, *The Lottery of Birth*, highlighting the ways in which national averages often mask considerable differences in mortality rates between children within the same country. The report is based on an analysis of data from 87 low- and middle-income countries. It highlights four different types of social and economic group where there are notable disparities in under-five child mortality rates between children from advantaged and disadvantaged groups: economic groups, subnational regions, urban and rural areas, and ethnic minorities (Save the Children, 2015: x). The report found that it is children from rural areas, disadvantaged regions, the poorest sections of society, and those belonging to ethnic minorities, who suffer from higher levels of mortality, even in countries that have seen significant declines overall (ibid., ix).

In its own evaluation of MDG4, outlined in *The Millennium Development Goals Report 2015*, the United Nations maintains that reducing under-five mortality requires political will, sound strategies and adequate resources. It also notes the need for effective treatments and improved service delivery (United Nations, 2015: 37). All of these factors can play a part in reducing child mortality as will the employment of more skilled health workers and greater access to vaccinations. However, the Save the Children report suggests that if we are to tackle this issue once and for all then inequality will also need to be addressed in the post-2015 era. The adoption of SDG10 to ‘reduce inequality within and among countries’ is therefore a welcome move.

**Goal 5: Improve maternal health**

**Target 5.A: Reduce by three quarters, between 1990 and 2015, the maternal mortality ratio.**

**Target 5.B: Achieve, by 2015, universal access to reproductive health.**
Box 5: Achieved by 2015 according to The Millennium Development Goals Report 2015

- Since 1990, the maternal mortality ratio has declined by 45 per cent worldwide, and most of the reduction has occurred since 2000.
- In Southern Asia, the maternal mortality ratio declined by 64 per cent between 1990 and 2013, and in sub-Saharan Africa it fell by 49 per cent.
- More than 71 per cent of births were assisted by skilled health personnel globally in 2014, an increase from 59 per cent in 1990.
- In Northern Africa, the proportion of pregnant women who received four or more antenatal visits increased from 50 per cent to 89 percent between 1990 and 2014.
- Contraceptive prevalence among women aged 15 to 49, married or in a union, increased from 55 per cent in 1990 worldwide to 64 per cent in 2015.

FPO Analysis

The target (5.A) of reducing by three quarters the maternal mortality ratio between 1990-2015 was not achieved. Indeed, the maternal mortality ratio fell by 45 per cent during this period, which while welcome, is some way short of three quarters. Moreover, a 2016 study in The Lancet has highlighted ongoing problems in relation to this area in sub-Saharan Africa. Thus, even after the MDGs, a woman’s lifetime risk of dying in pregnancy and childbirth in sub-Saharan Africa remains one in 36 compared with one in 4900 in high-income countries (The Lancet, 2016).

The target (5.B) to achieve universal access to reproductive healthcare by 2015 was added to MDG5 by world leaders in 2005. Progress for this target is measured by indicators ranging from the prevalence of contraception to antenatal care coverage. Overall there was some progress with target 5.B but there is still much more that needs to be done. For example, in 2015 a quarter of babies worldwide were still being delivered without the assistance of skilled health personnel.

There are wider issues at stake in relation to this particular millennium development goal that cannot be addressed simply through the pursuit of measurable targets. As mentioned in Section 2 of this publication, it is difficult to improve maternal health without confronting the issue of women’s sexual and reproductive rights. For instance, access to contraception is of little use for women if they are unable to decide for themselves when and how many children they have. Maternal health is therefore a debate about the status and empowerment of women. In other words, sexual and reproductive health and rights must go hand-in-hand if maternal health is to be improved.

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Goal 6: Combat HIV/AIDS, malaria and other diseases

Target 6.A: Have halted by 2015 and begun to reverse the spread of HIV/AIDS.
Target 6.C: Have halted by 2015 and begun to reverse the incidence of malaria and other major diseases.

Box 6: Achieved by 2015 according to *The Millennium Development Goals Report 2015*

- New HIV infections fell by approximately 40 per cent between 2000 and 2013, from an estimated 3.5 million cases to 2.1 million.
- By June 2014, 13.6 million people living with HIV were receiving antiretroviral therapy (ART) globally, an immense increase from just 800,000 in 2003. ART averted 7.6 million deaths from AIDS between 1995 and 2013.
- Over 6.2 million malaria deaths have been averted between 2000 and 2015, primarily of children under five years of age in sub-Saharan Africa. The global malaria incidence rate has fallen by an estimated 37 per cent and the mortality rate by 58 per cent.
- More than 900 million insecticide-treated mosquito nets were delivered to malaria-endemic countries in sub-Saharan Africa between 2004 and 2014.
- Between 2000 and 2013, tuberculosis prevention, diagnosis and treatment interventions saved an estimated 37 million lives. The tuberculosis mortality rate fell by 45 per cent and the prevalence rate by 41 per cent between 1990 and 2013.

FPO Analysis

The record of MDG6 in combating HIV/Aids, malaria and other diseases was mixed. As indicated in Box 6, there has been significant progress in dealing with malaria and tuberculosis (TB). For example, the MDG target of halting and beginning to reverse the incidence of TB was met. However, **Target 6.A**, which sought to halt and begin to reverse the spread of HIV/AIDS by 2015, was not met. Although the number of people living with HIV that were receiving antiretroviral therapy (ART) globally did increase significantly during this period.
The reason that the UN focused on tackling Aids, malaria and tuberculosis was because these diseases were having major impact on human life – killing around 6 million people each year – when the MDGs were created in 2000. However, this approach has led to criticism that it has resulted in ‘other diseases’ being neglected and lacking adequate funding (e.g., Molyneux, 2008).

There were a number of common themes linking MDG4, MDG5 and MDG6. Firstly, and most obviously, they were all health goals and often interrelated. For example, the goal of improving maternal health (MDG5) is closely related to the goal of reducing infant mortality (MDG4). Secondly, while progress was achieved with each of these three goals, by the end of 2015 some of their respective targets had still to be met. Thirdly, and following on from the previous point, the fact that the health-oriented MDGs fell short of their targets has led them to being merged in the post-2015 agenda to form one sustainable development health goal. This goal seeks to ‘ensure healthy lives and promote wellbeing for all at all ages’.

Finally, a report commissioned by the UN Economic Commission For Africa, the African Development Bank, the African Union and the UNDP’s Africa bureau entitled *MDG Report 2015: Assessing Progress in Africa toward the Millennium Development Goals* (2015) surveyed the particular challenges that Africa faced in implementing the MDGs including in relation to health issues. In undertaking this survey the report highlights the limitations of pursuing targets – in this case combatting HIV/AIDS, malaria and other diseases (MDG 6) – that do not lead to the establishment of strong and resilient health systems. This became evident with the Ebola crisis in West Africa that almost led to the collapse of the health systems of the three most affected countries, which in turn hindered their ability to combat disease (UNECA et al. 2015: 80-81). In other words, the pursuit of targets is not necessarily a guarantor of an integrated approach to development.
Goal 7: Ensure environmental sustainability

Target 7.A: Integrate the principles of sustainable development into country policies and programmes and reverse the loss of environmental resources.

Target 7.B: Reduce biodiversity loss, achieving, by 2010, a significant reduction in the rate of loss.

Target 7.C: Halve, by 2015, the proportion of the population without sustainable access to safe drinking water and basic sanitation.

Target 7.D: Achieve, by 2020, a significant improvement in the lives of at least 100 million slum dwellers.

Box 7: Achieved by 2015 according to *The Millennium Development Goals Report 2015*

- Ozone-depleting substances have been virtually eliminated since 1990, and the ozone layer is expected to recover by the middle of this century.
- Terrestrial and marine protected areas in many regions have increased substantially since 1990. In Latin America and the Caribbean, coverage of terrestrial protected areas rose from 8.8 per cent to 23.4 per cent between 1990 and 2014.
- In 2015, 91 per cent of the global population is using an improved drinking water source, compared to 76 per cent in 1990.
- Of the 2.6 billion people who have gained access to improved drinking water since 1990, 1.9 billion gained access to piped drinking water on premises. Over half of the global population (58 per cent) now enjoys this higher level of service.
- Globally, 147 countries have met the drinking water target, 95 countries have met the sanitation target and 77 countries have met both.
- Worldwide, 2.1 billion people have gained access to improved sanitation. The proportion of people practicing open defecation has fallen almost by half since 1990.
- The proportion of urban population living in slums in the developing regions fell from approximately 39.4 per cent in 2000 to 29.7 per cent in 2014.
**FPO Analysis**

Goal 7 was perhaps the least successful of all of the MDGs. The stated goal of ‘ensuring environmental sustainability’ was too broad as a policy aim and the associated targets were too limited in ambition. Most importantly, there was little sense with MDG7 of what environmental sustainability entailed, and it allowed states too much freedom to pursue their own conceptions of sustainable development. In part, this may have been due to the fact that the UN group devising the MDGs only included a goal on the environment late in the day (Tran, 2012). The UN has subsequently acknowledged that the experience of the MDGs has demonstrated the ‘importance of true integration of environment into development ambitions’, and that it will seek to achieve this in the post-2015 agenda (United Nations, 2015: 61).

This disappointing picture for MDG7 is evident in the second target (7.B), which aimed for a significant reduction in the rate of biodiversity loss by 2010. According to a study published in 2016, which the researchers claim to be the most comprehensive examination to date of biodiversity loss, the variety of plants and animals has fallen to dangerous levels across more than half of the world’s landmass (Newbold, et al., 2016). A reduction in biodiversity makes it more difficult for ecological systems to function generating risks for agriculture, human health, economies, poverty reduction and in the long-term sustainable development. The primary fault lies with humans continuing to destroy habitats to use as farmland and other forms of development. The researchers used the latest records, including human population numbers from 2000 and species data from 2005. Habit destruction has therefore continued in the recent period, which includes the millennium development phase.

There were also some other notable environmental reverses or setbacks during the period of the millennium development goals. For example, according to The Millennium Development Goals Report 2015, between 1990-2015 global emissions of carbon dioxide increased by over 50 per cent (United Nations, 2015: 8). Likewise, a comprehensive study published in Current Biology has mapped how humans destroyed a tenth of Earth’s remaining wilderness over the same time frame (Watson et al., 2016). These forms of environmental decline particularly affect the poor. For example, the more erratic rainfall patterns that result from climate change create additional challenges for agricultural societies, such as those in sub-Saharan Africa.
Arguably, the most notable achievement of MDG7 is that in 2015 over half of the world’s population enjoyed access to improved drinking water. This aspect of Target 7.C was therefore achieved. However, the other aspect of this target – halving the proportion of the world’s population without access to basic sanitation by 2015 – was not achieved. Moreover, at the end of the MDGs there were still an estimated 672 million people without access to water and 1.7 billion people without access to sanitation. In addition, as with the other goals, regional variations in performance are apparent with MDG7. For instance, unlike other regions in the world, sub-Saharan Africa was unable to halve the proportion of those without access to improved drinking water.

Goal 8: Develop a global partnership for development

| Target 8.A: Develop further an open, rule-based, predictable, non-discriminatory trading and financial system. |
| Target 8.B: Address the special needs of least developed countries. |
| Target 8.C: Address the special needs of landlocked developing countries and small island developing States. |
| Target 8.D: Deal comprehensively with the debt problems of developing countries. |
| Target 8.E: In cooperation with pharmaceutical companies, provide access to affordable essential drugs in developing countries. |
| Target 8.F: In cooperation with the private sector, make available benefits of new technologies, especially information and communications. |

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As indicated in Box 8, between 2000 and 2014, official development assistance (ODA) or aid from developed countries increased by 66 per cent in real terms. This is perhaps the most notable achievement of MDG8. However, according to the UN’s own Integrated Implementation Framework set-up to track the financial commitments made to the MDGs, $191.1 billion dollars still needed to be delivered to meet the UN target of 0.7 per cent of gross national income (GNI) devoted to ODA by 2015. This amount constituted 0.41 per cent of developed country GNI.

MDG8 is an ambitious but also broadly expressed policy goal. Indeed, this goal is difficult to evaluate because the targets are essentially statements of intent lacking measurable indicators and specific dates. Thus, while few would object to the development of ‘an open, rule-based, predictable, non-discriminatory trading and financial system’, what grounds do we have to judge whether or not this has been achieved?
The thinking behind MDG8 was that progress on its targets, such as dealing with the debt problems of developing countries (Target 8.D), will facilitate other aspects of development for poorer countries. However, a genuine global partnership for development is likely to require structural change to the world economy and even an ideological shift. As critics have noted, this system encourages competition between states, which perpetuates underdevelopment in parts of the world and makes partnerships difficult to achieve and sustain. It is reflected in the length of time spent trying to conclude the Doha round of trade talks, known as the Doha development agenda, which began in November 2001 under the umbrella of the WTO.\(^1\) Likewise, such competitiveness means that future trade deals as well as levels of aid spending are always susceptible to a global rise in protectionist sentiment. Moreover, one of the MDG8 achievements – the growth in mobile-cellular subscriptions – is arguably due to information technology companies pursuing profit maximisation rather than a grander notion of a ‘global partnership for development’. Indeed, this type of consideration adds to the difficulty of determining what the MDGs actually achieved.

A global partnership for development will also require the reform of international institutions that restrict the influence of southern states, including in the area of international development. Two examples will suffice to substantiate this point. Firstly, the World Trade Organisation’s (WTO) trade-related aspects of intellectual property rights (TRIPS) agreement is an example of global rule-making that has worked against the Global South. Critics argue that powerful northern countries were able to secure this agreement through their domination of the WTO. They claim that TRIPS has made access to products ranging from drugs to computer technology more expensive and therefore less accessible to southern countries. Secondly, the MDGs themselves arguably embody the unequal nature of global power as the focus of the whole project has been on what developing countries needed to achieve. There were no equivalent goals or targets for the Global North.

In sum, a global partnership for development will require structural, institutional and attitudinal change, something which the target-setting, project-orientated MDGs were not set-up to achieve. Indeed, arguably the MDGs were geared to maintaining the status quo in the sense of making the existing world system work more equitably.
Section 4: How effective were the Millennium Development Goals?

Evaluating the MDGs

As outlined in the previous section, there have been a number of advances within international development during the millennium development phase. However, it is difficult to determine the extent to which these advances were due to the MDGs or were a product of other factors, such as broader processes of economic development. For instance, both India and China have gone undergone massive economic expansion since the 1990s, which in turn has contributed to poverty reduction and raised standards of living in an important region in the developing world. Likewise, in some states, independent local initiatives or government schemes may be the major contributor to the empowerment of women and other development aims.

Conversely, some states in developing regions – notably in sub-Saharan Africa – have been adversely affected by conflicts, fragile states, authoritarian rule, burgeoning populations and food insecurity between 1990-2015. All of these factors tended to work against the millennium development project serving to undermine attempts to achieve each of the goals.

There were also global developments that worked against some of the goals. For example, the target of halving the proportion of people who suffer from hunger (Target 1.C) was made more difficult by the dramatic rise in world food prices between 2007-2011, especially for staple foods like maize, rice and wheat. More broadly, the global economic recession brought about by the financial crisis of 2008-09 led to a reduction in overseas development assistance for two years in a row as states dealt with austerity measures and debt (Provost, 2014). Lastly, in addition to challenges at the national and global level, in some instances individual behavior worked against the fulfillment of the MDGs. For example, combating HIV/Aids (MDG 6) was made more difficult by some of the world’s citizens continuing to practice unsafe sex.

Enhancing international development goals

The millennium development goals have helped to promote many policy areas as well as international development more broadly. In that sense, the project has served a purpose. However, in terms of policy formation and implementation, there are aspects of the MDGs that raise concern and will need to be addressed in future global goal-setting projects:

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Firstly, given the widespread view that the MDGs lacked effective data-collection processes and systems, is it actually possible to evaluate this project with any accuracy? Based on their research, Varad Pande and Molly Elgin-Cossart (2014) found that during the MDG phase more than 40 developing countries lacked sufficient data to track performance on extreme poverty and hunger (MDG1). It is generally the poorest countries that have the most rudimentary data gathering systems but also face the most severe development challenges, such as highest rates of infant and maternal mortality. Moreover, data gathering for the MDGs was based on traditional household surveys which are expensive to conduct and rarely comprehensive.

Reflecting the unsatisfactory nature of data collection under the MDGs, a designated aim of the SDGs is to measure development progress more effectively after 2015 by instigating a ‘data revolution’. Indeed, the UN high-level panel on post-2015 development, which paved the way for the SDGs, recommended that future development targets only be considered achieved if they are met for every social group and income (United Nations HLP, 2013). In other words, this was call for more precise data and statistics in order to properly determine the progress of development goals and in turn ensure evidence-based policy-making.²

Secondly, the millennium development goals and targets were not only determined by the UN, but also largely monitored and evaluated by it. For example, on page 72 of The Millennium Development Goals Report 2015, it states that ‘[c]ontributions on data and analysis for each target presented under the eight goals were provided by individual agencies as indicated below’ (United Nations, 2015: 72). It then goes on to list a range of UN agencies that provided the data and analysis. Overall within its own publication, the UN presents a very positive account of the MDGs. Indeed, as mentioned above, the report opens with the former UN Secretary-General Ban Ki-Moon declaring: ‘The global mobilization behind the Millennium Development Goals has produced the most successful anti-poverty movement in history’ (United Nations, 2015: 3).³

It was strategically important for the UN that the MDGs were positively appraised in the light of preparation for the post-2015 agenda. Quite simply, setting-up the SDGs would have been more difficult if the MDGs were strongly criticised. If this seems an overly cynical view, the most effective way for the UN to counter such perspectives is through the implementation of an independent review. As part of this review, the impact on those affected by the global goals needed to be assessed by independent experts in their respective fields. It should include the world’s citizens providing feedback on their experiences and perceptions of this form of global policy-making.
In addition an independent review could focus on questions that the UN largely fails to address in its own report, such as:

- How were the MDGs administered and monitored?
- Were appropriate indicators and metrics employed to monitor the progress of the MDGs?
- How much did the pursuit of the MDGs cost? Were they value for money?
- Why were some goals achieved and others not?

Thirdly, another notable feature of the MDGs is that accountability was not built into the goals and associated targets. It meant that no person, group or body was responsible for whether or not particular goals and targets were attained. As a consequence it arguably reduced the incentive to drive the project forward and to ensure that time scales were met and budgets not exceeded. In short, a lack of accountability can hamper effective policy-making. In future therefore this type of global policy formation will require specific individuals and/or agencies being set clear tasks, responsibilities and time frames.

Fourthly, the MDGs were by definition a broad-brush approach to international development. In other words, they were not necessarily the best instrument or mechanism for dealing with context-specific challenges and difficulties faced by individual developing countries. Indeed, in some instances, the focus on the MDGs may have hampered the ability of governments in LEDCs to formulate nationally appropriate development strategies. Furthermore, within the MDG paradigm those states that do not meet particular goals or targets are deemed to have failed, but this does not take into account their particular circumstances, such as a lack of natural resources or history of internal conflict. A more nuanced approach to development would take into account these factors and the extent to which they have been surmounted by states. This arguably is a far more accurate gauge of the development path of an LEDC.

Fifthly, if the international community is serious about eradicating poverty then it will have to address two inter-related issues – issues that the MDGs largely failed to address. Firstly, the UN will need to be more focused on tackling inequality. This is because numerous studies indicate that poverty and inequality are inextricably linked (e.g., Naschold, 2002). Secondly, dealing with inequality will require a global push for a progressive taxation system. It must entail universal inheritance taxes and progressive income taxes at the national level. At the international level, it means establishing a fair and enforceable global tax policy that promotes transparency, compels multinational corporations to disclose their country-by-country income and tax, and deals with aggressive tax evasion and avoidance. In other words, the issue of global income and wealth distribution that help to sustain current patterns of inequality and poverty worldwide will need to be addressed. In short, achieving substantive poverty reduction will necessitate distributional policies.

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Sixthly, the issue of taxation is part of the broader debate of how to fund global goals. During the MDG phase, world figures like Ban Ki-Moon regularly called for an increase in aid spending so that the goals could be reached. Adequate official development assistance (ODA) is essential not only for developing countries with limited capacity to raise such funds for such projects, but also as a way of attracting other financial flows, including private finance. It is widely recognised that the success of the ambitious post-2015 development agenda will largely depend on attracting sufficient funding. However, a positive aspect of the pursuit of global goals is that there is evidence to suggest that such projects increase mobilisation of financial resources for international development. Indeed, based on their research, Charles Kenny and Andy Sumner (2011) believe the MDGs helped to increase the level of aid spending. Between 2000 and 2009 (i.e., before the impact of the global financial crisis was really felt), official development assistance (ODA) rose from $72 to $128 billion (Kenny and Sumner, 2011: 4).

Seventhly, and finally, global goals must be founded upon a joined-up approach to development. In this regard, from a development perspective, the MDGs were undermined by a lack of coherent thinking. This is because the omission of policy areas like peace and security, inequality, and climate change from the MDGs meant that any advances within international development were always susceptible to being reversed. For example, the failure of the MDGs to address peace and security may in part account for the high number of fragile states and displaced people in this period, all of which work against social and economic development. It is therefore no coincidence that the SDGs have a broader policy remit and approach.
Conclusion

In summary, during the period of the MDGs there have been some notable advances within international development. However, it is difficult to determine the extent to which these achievements are down to the MDGs or are due to other factors like the rapid modernisation programmes of China and India. What is more certain is that the MDGs and the publicity surrounding them has helped to place poverty reduction at the heart of international development.

However, as a form of policy-making the MDGs have been plagued by a number of shortcomings or limitations. In particular, the project raised a number of issues – specifically in relation to monitoring, data collection, funding, feasibility and implementation – that will need to be addressed in future policy schemes of this nature.
Notes

1. The MDG Gap Taskforce, which was formed to monitor MDG8, believes the failure to conclude the Doha round of trade negotiations during the MDG phase hindered the attempt to achieve a global partnership for development (see MDGGTF 2014).

2. Advocates of the MDGs believe the focus on data collection during this project, has led some states to improve the capacities of their national statistics offices and in some instances establish such offices.

3. This is why this publication has often looked to independent peer-reviewed research on many of the goals and targets rather than simply taking on board the UN’s own statistics and analysis.
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