

The MDGs



July 2007 marks the midway point for the achievement of the United Nations Millennium Development Goals (MDGs), a series of time bound global development targets. This Dev-Zone Onepager explains the MDGs and the state of global progress towards reaching them.

Our planet reached the end of the last millennium divided more than ever before by unequal development. For a small portion of the world's population the previous two centuries had brought unprecedented increases in wealth and wellbeing, yet the vast majority of people saw little of this. A child born in Japan in the year 2000 could expect to live, on average, to the age of 80. A child born in the same year in Sierra Leone could expect to live to just 37. In Japan almost the entire population was literate. In Niger only one person in five could read and write. Roughly half the world's population lived in extreme poverty.

In September 2000 the United Nations hosted a summit of world leaders to develop a platform for addressing these disparities. Official representatives of 189 countries attended the summit and adopted the Millennium Declaration – a commitment to work towards environmentally sustainable human development.

THE GOALS & HOW THEY WORK

The Millennium Development Goals (MDGs) were crafted out of this declaration. There are 8 Millennium Development Goals which are divided up into

THE MILLENNIUM DEVELOPMENT GOALS

1. Eradicate extreme poverty and hunger
2. Achieve universal primary education
3. Promote gender equality and empower women
4. Reduce child mortality
5. Improve maternal health
6. Combat HIV and AIDS, malaria and other diseases
7. Ensure environmental sustainability
8. Develop a global partnership for development

specific targets and indicators. The first 6 goals relate to improved human development. The seventh Goal focuses on development and the environment. And the last Goal – through its targets and indicators – outlines a partnership for development between the developed and developing worlds. The Goals have 1990 as a baseline year and are intended to be met by 2015.

The MDGs are not binding: despite having signed up, countries are not punished if they fail to honour the commitment implied by the Goals. Instead, the MDGs are meant to work as a 'soft law' through which countries can be pressured into action.

CRITICISMS

Very little in international development is uncontentious and the MDGs are no exception. Since their creation, the Goals have been criticised on a variety of grounds.

Some critics have argued that they are under-ambitious while others have argued that they aim too high and are unrealistic for many countries.

Other critics have challenged the way the Goals deal with gender related development issues. Originally, the MDGs made mention of gender outcomes related to education, paid employment and political representation, but did not reflect key issues like access to sexual and reproductive health services, and violence against women. In 2006, as a result of campaigning around these omissions, the UN General Assembly announced that a new MDG target of universal access to reproductive health would be included under MDG 5. Issues such as violence against women remain absent from the Goals, however.

Another criticism of the MDGs is that they make no mention of indigenous and minority groups. Nor is separate data required to be collected for these groups. This means that the well-being

of vulnerable proportions of many countries' populations is not directly reported on by the Goals.

A final criticism is that, unlike the Millennium Declaration, the Goals make no mention of human rights like freedom of speech or association.

Against these criticisms, defenders of the MDGs have argued that the Goals can be modified for particular countries if they are irrelevant or unlikely to be met. They have also argued that no one set of goals can cover all aspects of development and that, even incomplete, the MDGs are still an important step in the right direction.

PROGRESS TOWARDS THE GOALS

Because progress towards the MDGs varies dramatically from country to country and between the different Goals it is very hard to provide a succinct summary. The task is also complicated by the fact that many countries do not have adequate data for measuring achievement of the Goals.

The data that is available shows that some parts of the world are doing well in meeting the Goals. Much of East and South East Asia, in particular, is on track to meet many of the targets and indicators by 2015 if not earlier. In other parts of the world – such as North Africa and Latin America – progress tends to be slower, and uneven, with some of the Goals unlikely to be met by 2015. And in other regions, particularly Sub-Saharan Africa, progress is very slow and, if current trends continue, almost all of the Goals will not be met.

Closer to home, the Pacific region is one of those showing mixed results. While some parts of the Pacific are performing relatively well, other parts, particularly some Melanesian countries are struggling and are unlikely to meet many of the Goals.

Official MDG site:
www.un.org/millenniumgoals/

Comments, critiques, links and resources
www.dev-zone.org/mdgs/