

MDG Review Summit: Business as usual is no longer an option

Ten years on, the Millennium Development Goals (MDGs) have delivered mixed results. For example, little regional progress has been made in achieving universal primary education (MDG 2), reducing child mortality (MDG 4) and extreme poverty (MDG 1a). The prospect of missing the target (MDG 1c) to halve the proportion of people who suffer from hunger is alarming. Initial positive trends have reversed worldwide – although the United Nations had allowed itself 25 years (1990–2015) to achieve this goal. According to the Food and Agriculture Organization FAO, 845 million people were affected in 1990, declining to 825 million by 1995, but escalating since then across the one-billion mark. Indeed, since 2005 the proportion of people suffering hunger has grown at a rate outstripping that of global population growth. Establishing a global partnership for development (MDG 8) has seen virtually no progress – because of the lack of commitment from industrial nations. Measured by its own yardstick, the United Nations is at risk of failure. The UN High-level Plenary Meeting on the MDGs in New York on 20–22 September will discuss how a global breakdown can be averted.

The disappointments – particularly the rising numbers of the hungry – should not lead to general disillusionment about the MDGs. On the contrary, they are the first ever set of indicators for guiding poverty reduction. They do work, because they have led to a new transparency in development policy: each nation's successes and gaps are measured and recorded and made available internationally. This ensures that, despite the economic downturn, poverty reduction remains an important issue on the policy agenda.



The MDGs have accomplished little at national and local level, however. They have no appreciable relevance to development processes at

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village and municipal level, or to national poverty reduction strategies. Potential solutions based on helping people to help themselves have too infrequently been derived from the MDGs and really implemented. Individual governments must press ahead with adapting development strategies to suit their own circumstances. These should include not only the cities but the rural areas which have too often been overlooked for support and funding. A new UN action plan should also reinforce practical local solutions – such as practised by Welthungerhilfe in its “Millennium Villages” initiative (see article on Millennium Villages, pp. 28–29).

■ Don't forget the poorest of the poor

Achieving the MDGs urgently calls for rapid and sustainable successes. As this is easier in poor and emerging market countries than in the difficult context of the least developed countries (LDCs), there is a danger of development efforts being concentrated on those countries and regions that show particular promise of success. Reaching objectives according to MDG indicators must not take precedence over providing sustainable support to the poorest of the poor during the next five years. The implementation of basic human rights such as the right to food must have top priority.

Business as usual is no longer an option. This applies in particular to the raft of instruments for poverty reduction bandied around at summit meetings: new initiatives, funds to improve food security and high level task forces established, global committees set up or reformed – seldom do they achieve discernible results. In the spirit of the Paris Declaration and the Accra Agenda for Action, the forthcoming Global Poverty Summit in New York is not about creating new international bodies and initiatives, or yet another toothless resolution, but about implementing the MDGs at a local level. It is also about holding on to the 2015 target, formulating binding action plans, and keeping promises made. In view of the dramatic global food situation, investment in agriculture and rural areas is vital. Another binding commitment for the years beyond 2015 would also be desirable, this one to free all people from hunger and poverty.