

# Bridging the Gap: How the Millennium Development Goals are Uniting the Fight Against Global Poverty

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# BRIDGING THE GAP:

## HOW THE MILLENNIUM DEVELOPMENT GOALS ARE UNITING THE WORLD IN THE FIGHT AGAINST GLOBAL POVERTY

by Kemal Dervis\*

### INTRODUCTION

The debates preceding the 2005 World Summit at the United Nations in September 2005 helped us all realize just how much the Millennium Development Goals (“MDGs”) have caught the imagination of the development community and civil society, including non-governmental organizations, young people, and others across the world. Today there is unprecedented global support for achieving the MDGs, the eight goals agreed to by all UN Member States in the year 2000, which include ensuring that all children get a primary school education, reducing the number of child and maternal deaths, combating HIV/AIDS and other diseases, as well as the overarching aim of halving the number of people living in extreme poverty.

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Support for the goals was especially apparent at the World Summit when, from the highest levels at the UN General Assembly to the various side events that brought together celebrities, musicians, and artists, all agreed on the urgent need to put in place the policies and resources needed to tackle global poverty. Part of the reason for this widespread backing lies in the fact that the MDGs are so comprehensible. As an economist, I tend to think in terms of fiscal balance, the gross domestic product of countries, and per capita income. While all of these dimensions of development are important, the beauty of the MDGs is the way that they are concrete development objectives that people everywhere can relate to: ensuring that mothers do not die as a result of childbirth; that children live beyond their fifth birthday; that people have access to basic necessities such as clean water and sanitation. These tangible, measurable, and time-bound goals have become globally accepted benchmarks of broad development progress. Supported by donors, developing countries, and civil society, the MDGs have also become a tremendous asset to all of us who work in the development field, mobilizing energy, political support, and resources around the urgent development challenges we face.

### THE FEASIBILITY OF THE MDGs

One of the key issues currently being debated is whether the Millennium Development Goals are actually feasible. Is it really reasonable to say that by the year 2015 these objectives will be met? It does of course depend on a range of factors. It depends on the growth performance of developing countries and of the world economy over the next five to ten years. Given that many of the big failures in development are as a result of violent conflict, it depends on whether countries can recover from conflict, or avoid it in the first place. It also depends on key issues such as what kind of progress there is on trade, which is one of the big drivers of economic growth, poverty reduction, and human development. When we look at the facts, I do believe that the MDGs are technically feasible and economically attainable in a very large number of countries. Since 1990 (the benchmark for measuring progress on the MDGs, with 2015 the deadline) much has been achieved in human development. As the United Nations Development Programme’s 2005 Human Development Report details, on average, people in developing countries are healthier, better educated, and less impoverished. There are three million fewer child deaths annually, 30 million fewer children out of school, and more than 130 million people

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# THE UNITED NATIONS MILLENNIUM DEVELOPMENT GOALS

<http://www.un.org/millenniumgoals>

## Goal One: “Eradicate Extreme Poverty and Hunger”

Reduce by half the proportion of people living on less than a dollar a day;  
Reduce by half the proportion of people who suffer from hunger.

## Goal Two: “Achieve Universal Primary Education”

Ensure that all boys and girls complete a full course of primary schooling.

## Goal Three: “Promote Gender Equality and Empower Women”

Eliminate gender disparity in primary and secondary education preferably by 2005 and at all levels by 2015.

## Goal Four: “Reduce Child Mortality”

Reduce by two-thirds the mortality rate among children under five.

## Goal Five: “Improve Maternal Health”

Reduce by three-quarters the maternal mortality ratio.

## Goal Six: “Combat HIV/AIDS, Malaria, and the Spread of Other Diseases”

Halt and begin to reverse the spread of HIV/AIDS;  
Halt and begin to reverse the incidence of malaria and other major diseases.

## Goal Seven: “Ensure Environmental Sustainability”

Integrate the principles of sustainable development into country policies and programs; reverse loss of environmental resources;  
Reduce by half the proportion of people without sustainable access to safe drinking water;  
Achieve significant improvement in lives of at least one hundred million slum dwellers, by 2020.

## Goal Eight: “Develop a Global Partnership for Development”

Develop further an open trading and financial system that is rule-based, predictable, and non-discriminatory; includes a commitment to good governance, development, and poverty reduction—nationally and internationally;  
Address the least developed countries' special needs, including tariff- and quota-free access for their exports, enhanced debt relief for heavily indebted poor countries, cancellation of official bilateral debt, and more generous official development assistance for countries committed to poverty reduction;  
Address the special needs of landlocked and small island developing states;  
Deal comprehensively with developing countries' debt problems through national and international measures to make debt sustainable in the long term;  
Develop decent and productive work for youth, in cooperation with the developing countries;  
Provide access to affordable essential drugs in developing countries, in cooperation with pharmaceutical companies;  
Make available the benefits of new technologies—especially information and communications, in cooperation with the private sector.

who have escaped extreme poverty. These human development gains should not be underestimated. Experience shows that development progress is possible. Never before have we had the resources, the technology, the knowledge and, critically, as support for the MDGs show, the essential public support needed to lift millions of people out of extreme poverty. However, in a world where more than one billion people continue to live in abject poverty on less than one dollar a day, much more remains to be done if the world is to demonstrate it is serious about the fight against extreme poverty and promoting human development for all.

Today there is something of a secondary debate that is related to the question of whether the MDGs are feasible in terms of resources – how important is the volume of aid resources for development? There are those who point to the past and say that in last three or four decades billions of dollars have been spent in developing countries with limited results. When one looks at the data and analyzes aid and growth, it is the case that broadly speaking, the productivity of aid has not been as strong as it could have been. But one should also recall that one major structural feature of the past, which we can hopefully overcome in the future, is that aid was very politicized during the Cold War. For many decades foreign aid often had as its primary purpose – not necessarily the only purpose – political and military objectives. Since the end of the Cold War we have had a chance to refocus these resources firmly on development objectives. If we reform the architecture and conditions of aid with a single minded focus on development and achieving the MDGs, I believe that we can dwarf the results that were possible in the past.

Countries cannot, however, develop without domestic and foreign resources. At least a doubling of global development assistance over the next few years is necessary if countries are to achieve the MDGs. As a former Minister of Economic Affairs, I am all too aware of the budgetary and fiscal constraints governments face. However, compared to other components of budgetary expenditures, the aid component is still relatively small in most rich countries, making incremental increases feasible whilst maintaining overall fiscal responsibility. This is particularly true in a world where for every one dollar rich countries spend on aid, about ten dollars is allocated to military expenditures.

While the deployment of resources by itself does not solve the problem, today the message is: developing countries need additional resources if they are to achieve the MDGs, but the other side of the bargain is that there has to be the reforms.

## CONDITIONALITY

I am the first to recognize that, ultimately, development is up to the governments and people of developing countries themselves – to root out corruption, build up institutions able to deliver services to their people, encourage private investment and enterprise, respect human rights, and address inequalities. Thoughtful conditionality can, however, be a tremendously useful instrument in supporting reform in developing countries, and in preventing the moral hazard and failure of the whole aid effort. I do, therefore, believe that there have to be conditions

on aid and relating to macroeconomics, as well as to income distribution and social and human development variables. Social progress – what a country is doing for its people, what health-care and education services are in place – these are all concerns that should be at the heart of the development debate and part of the conditionality of delivering increased resources.

There is, however, one big problem with conditionality, and that is the legitimacy of the institutions that bring it. Without

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political legitimacy, conditionality can only achieve limited results. If policy prescriptions are perceived as being driven by “external” actors or interests, it is impossible to build the domestic support necessary to implement them successfully and in a sustainable manner. If policy conditionality is to be perceived as legitimate around the world, and if stakeholders in a country are to be convinced that conditions should be met, development institutions themselves need to be credible. How to build a more legitimate system where good policy advice, conditionality, and cooperation can take place, but not in an environment where developing countries feel it is being imposed from abroad, is a critical challenge for both the United Nations as well as the Bretton Woods Institutions. Without this legitimacy, the whole equation does not work. The grand bargain where, on the one side, rich countries mobilize more resources for development, reform trade rules, and provide enhanced debt relief, and on the other side, developing countries commit to deep reform, tackling corruption, and adhering to

good governance and opening markets, cannot succeed without reform of these institutions so that they are legitimate reflections of the world as it is today. Giving developing countries a much greater say in the decision-making process would provide greater legitimacy for global institutions and the policy prescriptions they offer.

## **CONCLUSION**

The MDGs present us all with ambitious, yet achievable goals. In order to achieve success, the necessary resources and policies need to be in place and the legitimacy of international institutions enhanced. While there is more to development than the MDGs, progress towards meeting the MDGs reflects progress towards human development and building a safer, more prosperous, and more secure world for all. Achieving the Millennium Development Goals is, therefore, one of the most pressing challenges we face today.

