

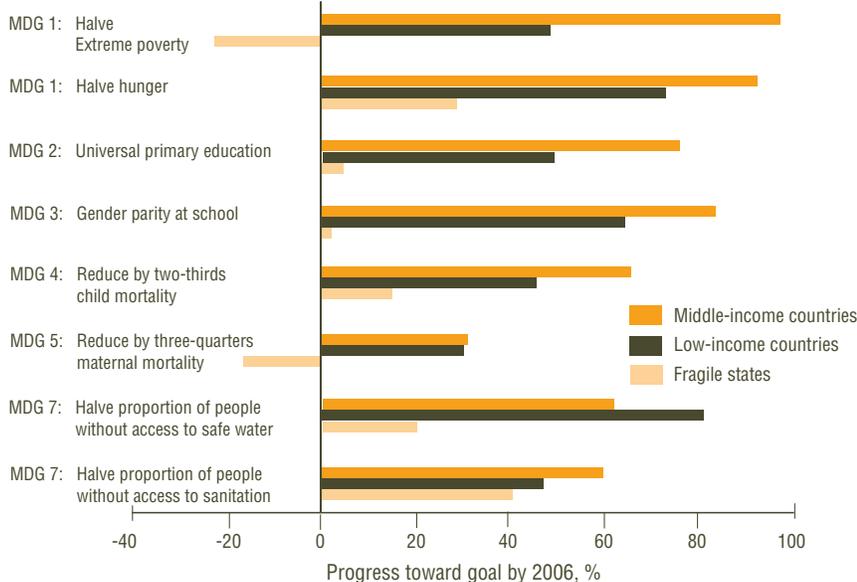
The Millennium Development Goals: Facing Down Challenges

by Eric Muñoz

Bread for the World Institute provides policy analysis on hunger and strategies to end it. The Institute educates its advocacy network, opinion leaders, policy makers and the public about hunger in the United States and abroad.

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Progress Toward MDG Targets is Slowest in Fragile States



Source: Adapted from *Global Monitoring Report*, 2008.

Key Points

- Many developing countries are making progress towards achieving the Millennium Development Goals. However, some face significant challenges because of starting conditions, weak institutions, conflict and environmental degradation.
- Sustainable development is difficult in countries with weak governments that are inefficient and unaccountable to their citizens.
- Conflict not only halts development—it can cause countries to swiftly regress. Peace, however fragile, provides an opportunity to make rapid progress.
- The loss of natural resources can slow long-term efforts to reduce poverty. Many developing countries face heightened environmental risks, some associated with existing threats such as deforestation, as well as newly emerging threats associated with global climate change.
- Developed countries need to provide flexible assistance that can help countries address these challenges and meet the MDGs.

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Abstract

The Millennium Development Goals (MDGs) represent an unprecedented partnership among nations to better the lives of hungry and poor people across the globe. As the 2015 target date approaches, many developing countries have already made extraordinary progress, improving the lives of millions of people. But not all countries or regions of the world are on track to meet the MDGs.

Developing nations face many barriers to achieving the MDGs, some unique and country-specific, others broadly shared. Common problems faced by fragile nations can be grouped into four areas: poor starting conditions; weak governance and institutions; conflict and instability; and environmental degradation.

To meet the MDGs and create a sustainable path to development, countries must adopt policies and programs to overcome these problems. Developed countries have a role to play in overcoming these barriers. Aid donors, particularly the United States, must ensure that development assistance is flexible enough to help countries address these challenges and meet the MDGs.

In 2000, nations around the world renewed their commitment to creating a better, freer, safer world. As part of this commitment, developed and developing countries agreed to the Millennium Development Goals (MDGs). The MDGs identify key areas of human development, provide a framework for coordinated action, and set clear targets to measure progress. As we near the 2015 deadline, many developing countries have already made extraordinary progress, improving the lives of millions of people.

But not all countries or all regions of the world are on track to meet the MDGs. As a region, sub-Saharan Africa is off track on every goal.¹ The news is not all bad: for example, Malawi is making progress against child mortality and Ghana against hunger. But successes like these can become obscured by a tendency to see sub-Saharan Africa as a monolith rather than a region of 47 individual countries.

Strong economic growth in India means that it—and the broader South Asia region—has already achieved the poverty goal. Far less progress has been made on other goals, in particular reducing child mortality and improving maternal health.

In Latin America, several of the MDGs have already been met, notably ensuring universal primary school enrollment and empowering women (generally in the sectors of education, business and politics). The region has not made progress on other MDGs, though, such as halting and reversing the spread of HIV/AIDS, malaria, and other diseases.

Around the world, only East Asia has made progress toward MDG #7, ensuring environmental sustainability. Six other regions are off track or making no progress toward this goal.²

Developing nations face many challenges to achieving the MDGs. Some are specific to individual countries or regions, others broadly shared. These challenges make development substantially more difficult and raise the likelihood that some countries will not be able to meet the MDGs. Another factor that exacerbates all of these conditions is the sudden increase in food and fuel prices.

Common challenges can be grouped into the following categories:

- **Poor Starting Conditions:** Countries whose human development indicators are at the lowest levels must make the greatest investments to achieve the MDGs. Not surprisingly, though, these are the countries with the fewest resources and the least capacity for rapid scale-up of programs in sectors such as health and education.
- **Weak Governance and Institutions:** Governments in developing countries have primary responsibility for promoting equitable, sustainable economic growth and human development. Governments that are unaccountable, inefficient, and/or do not respect human rights make growth and human development much more difficult.
- **Conflict and Instability:** Conflict not only stops development but reverses progress, exacerbating hunger, poverty,

UN Millennium Development Goals for 2015

Goal 1: Eradicate extreme poverty and hunger

Target 1: Halve, between 1990 and 2015, the proportion of people whose income is less than one dollar a day

Target 2: Halve, between 1990 and 2015, the proportion of people who suffer from hunger

Goal 2: Achieve universal primary education

Target 3: Ensure that, by 2015, children everywhere, boys and girls alike, will be able to complete a full course of primary schooling

Goal 3: Promote gender equality and empower women

Target 4: Eliminate gender disparity in primary and secondary education, preferably by 2005, and in all levels of education no later than 2015

Goal 4: Reduce child mortality

Target 5: Reduce by two-thirds, between 1990 and 2015, the under-five mortality rate

Goal 5: Improve maternal health

Target 6: Reduce by three-quarters, between 1990 and 2015, the maternal mortality ratio

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

Target 7: Have halted by 2015 and begun to reverse the spread of HIV/AIDS

Target 8: Have halted by 2015 and begun to reverse the incidence of malaria and other major diseases

Goal 7: Ensure environmental sustainability

Target 9: Integrate the principles of sustainable development into country policies and programs and reverse the loss of environmental resources

Target 10: Halve, by 2015, the proportion of people without sustainable access to safe drinking water and basic sanitation

Target 11: By 2020, to have achieved a significant improvement in the lives of at least 100 million slum dwellers

Goal 8: Develop a global partnership for development

Target 12: Develop further an open, rule-based, predictable, non-discriminatory trading and financial system

Target 13: Address the special needs of the least developed countries

Target 14: Address the special needs of landlocked developing countries and small island developing States (through the Program of Action for the Sustainable Development of Small Island Developing States and the outcome of the twenty-second special session of the General Assembly)

Target 15: Deal comprehensively with the debt problems of developing countries through national and international measures in order to make debt sustainable in the long term

Target 16: In cooperation with developing countries, develop and implement strategies for decent and productive work for youth

Target 17: In cooperation with pharmaceutical companies, provide access to affordable essential drugs in developing countries

Target 18: In cooperation with the private sector, make available the benefits of new technologies, especially information and communications

and disease and sharply increasing rates of premature death. Countries emerging from conflict have an opportunity to make rapid improvements in human development, but these are fragile opportunities that are easily passed up.

- **Environmental Degradation:** Many developing countries face heightened environmental risks. Deforestation, overfishing, droughts, and floods are longstanding problems in some regions. Global climate change has potentially devastating long-term consequences since higher temperatures harm many crops.

Poor Starting Conditions

Almost one billion people live on less than \$1 a day; nearly as many suffer from chronic hunger.³ This year, 10 million children will die before they reach their fifth birthday, and complications during birth and pregnancy will take the lives of a half-million women.⁴ Around the world, more than one billion people do not have access to clean water, and hundreds of millions of people are not receiving treatment for deadly diseases such as HIV/AIDS, malaria, and tuberculosis.⁵

The global burden of underdevelopment is vast, but this burden is not shared equally by everyone. Thirty-three countries, many of them in East and Central Europe, have poverty rates of 2 percent or less; in 18 countries, half of them in sub-Saharan Africa, poverty rates exceed 30 percent. The same is true of hunger: the percentage of children suffering from moderate and severe stunting (resulting from chronic hunger) ranges from 1 percent or less in several countries to 40 percent or more in 22 countries.⁶ A quick glance at other MDG indicators reveals more such disparities: vast differences between developed and developing countries are the norm, and even among developing countries there are wide differences.

Countries that are starting out with the lowest levels of many human development indicators, for example, infant and maternal mortality rates, are the least equipped—both technically and financially—to reach the MDGs. A recent study conducted by the Millennium Task Force, a group of technical experts charged with creating a roadmap for meeting the MDGs, puts the financial needs of the least developed countries in perspective. Using Ghana as the model for an “MDG needs assessment,” the Millennium Task Force reports that an investment of approximately \$100 per person per year is needed between now and 2015 for the country to meet the MDGs.⁷ In Ghana, as elsewhere in the developing world, investments of such magnitude require assistance from the international community.

Recent progress in the West African nation of Mali is reason for hope, though the country remains extremely underdeveloped. Over the past decade, Mali has been able to dramatically reduce poverty, from 72 percent of the population in 1991 to just 36 percent in 2004. But despite such impressive accomplishments in poverty reduction, hunger rates remain essential-

ly unchanged from 1991 and almost one third of the population is undernourished. Maternal mortality stands at an alarming rate of 12,000 deaths per 100,000 live births. Though primary school enrollment has increased from 21 to 50 percent, the current pace is too slow to meet MDG #2.⁸ At the current rate, it will take the country another 50 years to meet the MDG target of reducing by two-thirds the under-five mortality rate.⁹

For Mali to achieve the MDGs, it must invest heavily in providing basic services, but the country is poorly equipped to do this. Mali is dependent on just three commodities—cotton, gold and livestock—for 90 percent of its export revenues.¹⁰ Fluctuations in prices for these commodities drive rapid swings in state revenues and the broader economic fortunes of the country. The country is landlocked, which makes international trade more difficult. A limited transportation infrastructure exacerbates the difficulties of rural households in reaching schools, hospitals and markets. Finally, Mali is highly vulnerable to environmental shocks such as droughts and locust infestations.

In its strategic plan to fight poverty, Mali has identified three areas for priority action: governance and institutions, social services, and infrastructure and economic development.¹¹ Delivery of social services is essential. For example, achieving MDG #2, ensuring universal primary school enrollment, requires classrooms and teachers, schoolbooks and chalkboards. To fight infectious diseases and improve maternal and child health, resources must be put into areas like health care, clean water, and sanitation. On its own, Mali lacks the resources to invest in its people on a large enough scale to meet the MDGs, so it is not surprising that Mali is off track on many MDGs. In such a context, the country’s success in reducing poverty is even more impressive.

Weak Governance and Institutions

To achieve the MDGs and establish a sustainable development path, governments must be efficient, transparent, and accountable. Good governments manage bureaucracies efficiently, adhere to the rule of law, control corruption, protect civil and political rights, and remain accountable to their citizens. Through laws and institutions, governments set the direction of a country’s economy as well as its business climate. A stable macroeconomic environment (exchange rates, inflation levels) and a healthy, open business climate promote sustainable economic growth and ensure that economic opportunities are available to poor people.

By simplifying the rules for opening and running a business, governments can spur creation of more jobs and collect more tax revenue. When corruption is under control, government can target tax revenues to basic services such as roads, water, hospitals, and schools. These, in turn, are essential for a healthy, educated population and a stronger economy.

Effective governments should also empower people to participate in the selection of their government and freely

express their opinions and concerns, especially through an active press. Without a way to express their needs and hold leaders accountable, poor people cannot advocate for the reforms and investments needed to help them move out of poverty. By listening to poor people, government policymakers can invest wisely to spur development and meet the MDGs.

In Botswana, good governance has led to strong progress in human development in spite of “a small population, a narrow economic base, a poor natural resource endowment,” and one of the highest HIV/AIDS infection rates in the world.¹² Economic growth that depends on extracting and selling natural resources can create problems since countries with large stores of natural resources tend to become uncompetitive in other industries. Botswana’s economy is no exception: it depends heavily on diamonds, while the country’s agricultural output from 1990-2000 was negative.¹³ More recently, agricultural production has increased, but both farm and industrial production are still limited.

Despite daunting problems, Botswana is making progress on the MDGs in large part because of a committed, efficient, and transparent government. Since the 1990s, hunger has declined from 14 percent to 6.5 percent and maternal mortality has been cut in half, from 300 deaths per 100,000 live births to 150.¹⁴ Moreover, the government has worked hard to ensure that the gains from economic growth are used to fund basic infrastructure needs, such as roads, water, and electricity, as well as services such as hospitals and schools. Botswana’s example shows what is possible when governments invest in people.

The opposite is equally true: government actions can easily stop development in its tracks and reverse progress. Zimbabwe illustrates the devastating impact that poor governance can have on a country and people.

After decades of repression under colonialism and apartheid, Zimbabwe held free elections in 1979 which brought Robert Mugabe to power. The years that followed promised an African success story: a country with indigenous leadership capable of delivering economic growth and human development. While a number of African countries fell into a cycle of conflict after the end of the cold war, Zimbabwe, like its neighbors South Africa and Botswana, was able to maintain peace and stability. During the 1980s there were periods of economic volatility, but generally the economy was growing and this helped to drive human development. The United Nation’s Human Development Index (HDI), a composite score of the well-being of a country’s people, reflected steady improvements over the first decade after Mugabe took office. In 1990, Zimbabwe’s HDI score placed it solidly in the middle of developing countries.¹⁵

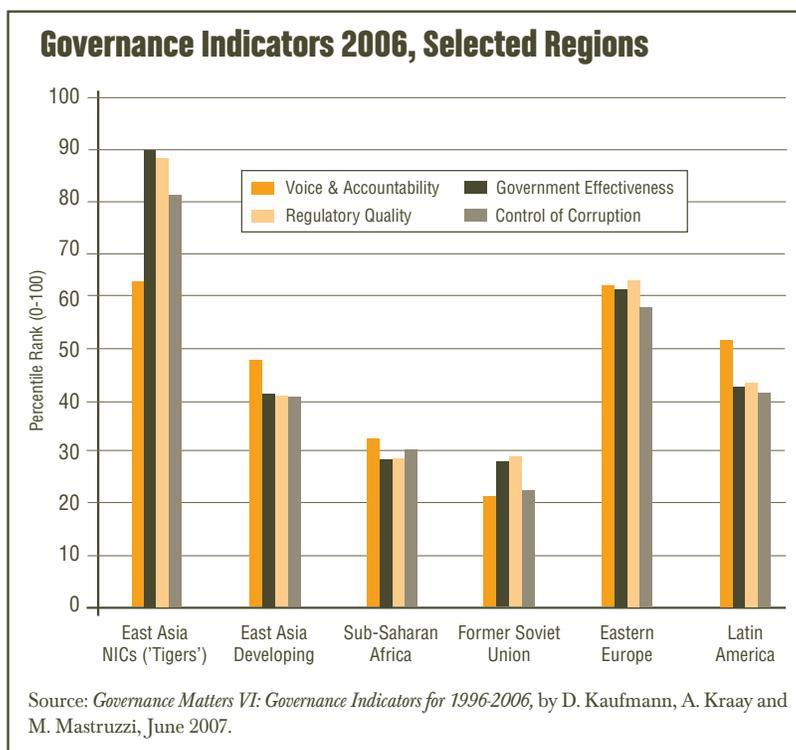
Today, Zimbabwe ranks 151st out of 177 countries on the HDI.¹⁶ This decline in people’s well-being mirrors the increasing autocracy of Zimbabwe’s government and its failure to deliver social services and manage the economy. In 2000, the government launched a large-scale land redistribution scheme. In the face of mounting protests over the plan, the government shut down newspapers and jailed political opposition leaders. Along with civil unrest, land redistribution caused an 8.5 percent decline in agricultural output between 2000 and 2005.¹⁷

Since 2000, Zimbabwe’s economy has shrunk by an average of 6 percent per year.¹⁸ The International Monetary Fund estimates that annual inflation was 1,700 percent in February 2007.¹⁹ The impact of the downward economic spiral has reverberated throughout the country. The last available national statistics show that 45 percent of the population is undernourished. Maternal mortality and infectious diseases such as tuberculosis are on the rise.²⁰ Unless there is a miraculous turnaround, it is highly unlikely that Zimbabwe will meet the MDGs.

The contributions and support of the international community are critical to achieving the MDGs. But as the striking differences between Botswana and Zimbabwe illustrate, development depends equally on the commitment of developing countries to open, accountable, and efficient governments. Development is much more difficult without strong leadership within a country.

Conflict and Instability

Nearly three-quarters of the world’s very poorest countries, many of them in sub-Saharan Africa, have a recent history of conflict.²¹ Weak states preoccupied with quelling violence or staving off coups cannot focus on important development goals. Violence can quickly destroy the physical and financial environment needed to ensure sustainable development. Displaced populations are more vulnerable to hunger and disease. Livelihoods are abandoned and economic development reversed. Bombs and bullets scar the



natural environment; unexploded landmines can make land permanently unusable.

Poverty is both a cause and an outcome of conflict. Development economist Paul Collier found that low-income countries are much more prone to civil wars than wealthier countries. “Halve the starting income of a country and you double the risk of civil war,” he concludes.²² Moreover, he argues that the rate of economic growth is another marker for conflict: higher growth rates decrease the risk of a country falling into war. Finally, Collier has identified a third factor strongly associated with conflict: dependence on primary commodity exports as an economic driver.²³

In the Democratic Republic of Congo (DRC), a combination of factors—including a history of colonial repression, bad governance, a genocidal war in neighboring Rwanda, and abundant natural resources—created an environment ripe for conflict. The DRC has been plundered rather than developed by kleptocratic ruler Mobutu Sese Seko and, more recently, by warring factions seeking to take control of the country. When Mobutu was finally deposed in 1997, the DRC ranked in the bottom third of countries in the HDI.²⁴ In the years since Mobutu’s overthrow, the situation for ordinary people has deteriorated still further. War has cost the lives of 3.9 million people, and millions more have been internally displaced or fled the country, creating instability in neighboring nations.²⁵

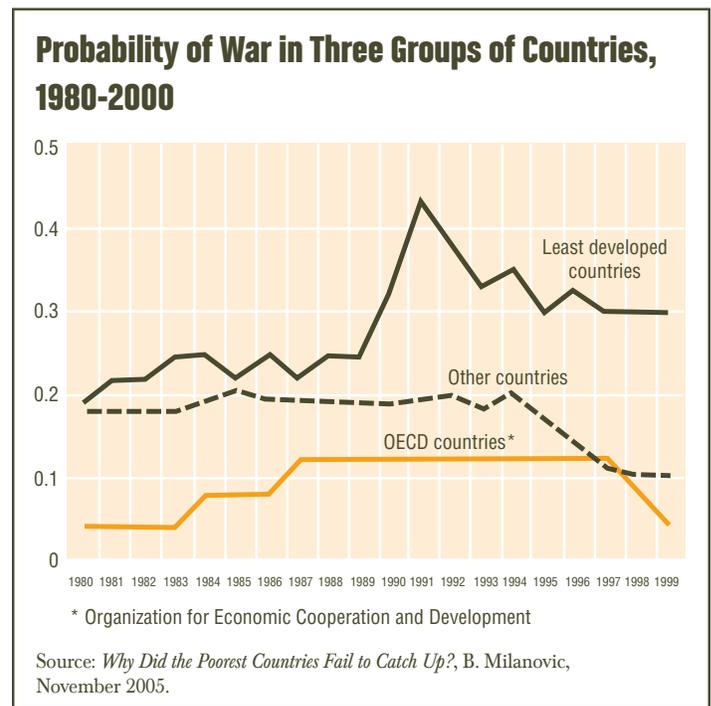
War is devastating to human development on several fronts. For example, the DRC has the highest rate of hunger of any country in the world. Seventy percent of the population is undernourished.²⁶ No surprise then that the DRC is ranked just nine spots from the bottom of the 2007 HDI.²⁷ Some of the worst human rights abuses of the war have been suffered by women.²⁸ Gender-based violence, including rape, greatly increases the risk to women’s health. The maternal mortality rate has increased in the DRC, a problem that is further exacerbated by the country’s extremely limited health infrastructure.

Wars not only disrupt normal economic activity: they are also extremely expensive. Collier estimates that the average civil war costs a country (and its neighbors) around \$64 billion. He puts the total cost of all wars over the past decade at approximately \$1 trillion, money that might have otherwise been spent promoting economic and human development.²⁹ Collier also argues that conflict is a trap that countries fall into and find difficult to escape. Wars reduce economic growth rates and increase poverty, thereby increasing the risk of continuing or slipping back into conflict.

Improvements in human well-being form the basis for sustainable economic development, and in turn, economic growth and poverty alleviation lessen the likelihood of conflict. Progress in human development and a peaceful and stable environment are mutually reinforcing.

Sierra Leone is a good example of how peace and development can work together. After a decade-long conflict, Sierra Leone emerged from civil war in 2002. The conflict left the country

with the lowest levels of human development in the world, including a shattered healthcare system.³⁰ Despite miserable starting conditions, the country has pledged to meet the MDGs. But meeting MDG #5 on maternal mortality, for example, will require the country to lower the maternal mortality rate from 2,000 deaths for every 100,000 live births to 450. Sierra Leone’s MDG progress report notes that this will require addressing basic issues of access to health care, including “the paucity of trained staff, poor conditions of service and high exodus rate of medical practitioners.”³¹ The country has estimated that improving human development, including basic healthcare services, would require a \$350 million investment over three years.³² While it is impossible for Sierra Leone to raise such a sum on its own, so far the international community has stepped



up to provide additional support. It is unclear how long this support will continue. But without long-term development assistance, neither sustainable improvements in human development nor continued peace and stability are likely.

Environmental Degradation

Population growth, industrial production, mining and oil extraction, logging, intensive farming and fishing, and a host of other activities are placing significant pressures on the earth’s environment. People around the world need clean air and clean water, adequate sanitation, and a safe, healthy environment to survive and to thrive. The connections among the MDGs and environmental protection are many and diverse, but one of the closest connections is between protecting the environment and meeting MDG #1 of reducing hunger. A recent report on the MDGs and the environment declares that “Balancing nature and development so that social welfare does not decline over time is at the core of environmental sustainability.”³³ The

problem is that many countries are not striking that careful balance by providing sufficient environmental safeguards as they struggle to reduce hunger.

The small island nation of Timor-Leste illustrates some of the environmental pressures faced by developing countries. Roughly the size of Connecticut and with a population of approximately 1 million, the country has 700 miles of coast line and a varied topography that includes dense forests and steeply sloping hillsides.³⁴ Timor-Leste is categorized as a “least developed country,” with high rates of hunger, poverty, and child and maternal mortality. According to Conservation International, Timor-Leste and its surrounding region is also a biodiversity hotspot.³⁵ It’s an immensely rich ecosystem, but it’s under extreme stress and the threat of irreparable environmental degradation.

Rising food prices and the environment

The poorest of the poor, smallholder farmers, should not have to respond to the current food crisis by farming marginal land and ecologically sensitive areas. That is why the best investment in poor people and in the environment is to increase agricultural productivity. Those investments must ensure that farming practices contribute to a healthy environment rather than exacerbate existing environmental problems.



One of the major environmental concerns in Timor-Leste is the loss of forests. Under Indonesian rule, timber was unsustainably harvested as an export commodity. War in the late 1990s heavily damaged forests, turning many areas into degraded scrubland. This problem has been exacerbated more recently by large-scale forest fires.³⁶ Wood also serves as a major source of energy for cooking, and population pressures are increasing the need to comb the forest for available fuel. Efforts to increase food production have also contributed to deforestation as farmers practice slash and burn techniques in order to enlarge and enrich arable land.³⁷ In 1972, more than half of the area that now makes up Timor-Leste was forested.

Today, only about one-third of the country’s forested land remains intact.³⁸

The rapid loss of forest in Timor-Leste presents several important development problems. First, woodlands are an important asset for poor people, providing resources to improve people’s lives and sustain their livelihoods. Rivers, grasslands, and forests provide timber, fuel, food, and water to use at home or sell in local markets. Estimates from the World Bank suggest that 90 percent of the world’s poor people rely on forests for some part of their income or livelihood.³⁹ The declining availability of natural resources means that families, particularly women and girls, must walk greater distances and spend more hours searching for firewood simply to survive. Time and energy spent securing basic goods such as fuel is time that children could instead be learning and adults pursuing economic opportunity.

An added problem in resource-depleted areas such as Timor-Leste is increased vulnerability to natural disasters. For example, trees help to anchor hillsides. In their absence, devastating mudslides can occur. Coastal marshes and swamplands help protect against coastal flooding. Poor people are more vulnerable to environmental disasters. They are also more isolated, so it is harder for relief agencies to help them in the aftermath of disasters.

Put simply, development gains are jeopardized by environmental degradation. Meeting MDG #7, ensuring environmental sustainability, is critical to achieving sustainable development. But around the world, MDG #7 has proven to be especially challenging. Rapid global ecological changes are threatening to overtake the efforts of many countries. As the recent Intergovernmental Panel on Climate Change details, environmental degradation, in particular large-scale air pollution and emission of greenhouse gases, is projected to lead to rising temperatures, higher sea levels, and rapidly changing weather patterns characterized by more frequent and more intense storms.⁴⁰ Countries such as Timor-Leste, already at risk of flooding, face an even graver threat from global climate change.

Postscript on Partnerships for Development

In 2000, when the world’s nations agreed to the MDGs, developed countries pledged to renew and strengthen partnerships for development, including providing aid and promoting policies and programs to help meet the goals. Eight years later, as we have crossed the halfway mark before the 2015 deadline, it is crucial to focus on the challenges that developing countries face.

The challenges described above must be addressed—not ignored because they are too difficult—or we risk putting the MDGs beyond the reach of too many countries. Developing countries must take the lead in overcoming these barriers—without committed governments, progress toward human development is much more difficult—but developed countries also have a key role to play.

A variety of examples shows that development assistance can help address some of the most difficult challenges developing countries face in achieving the MDGs.

- Through investments in irrigation systems and transportation infrastructure, the U.S. government is helping Mali to diversify and strengthen its economy, a key step in ensuring that recent gains in the fight against poverty are sustainable.⁴¹
- The World Bank is investing in Mongolia to build on recent improvements in human development. The Bank's technical and financial assistance is aimed at improving the efficiency and transparency of the country's government, especially its financial accounting systems.⁴²
- Since 2005, the British government has provided more than \$170 million to aid Sierra Leone in its move from conflict to peace and achieve social and political stability through democratic and accountable government.⁴³

In each of these cases, development assistance is flexible enough to meet real conditions in developing countries. Unfortunately, too often such examples are exceptions to the rule.

U.S. development assistance is a powerful tool to help achieve sustainable development, but currently, it is not designed to meet the challenges identified in this paper. The current structure makes it difficult for U.S. assistance to respond in flexible and creative ways. There is much that can be done to update and improve U.S. assistance policies.

The good news is developing countries are increasingly taking charge of their own development agendas. It is the responsibility of developed countries to stand as partners for development. Working together, developed and developing countries are proving that the MDGs are an ambitious but achievable agenda for human development.

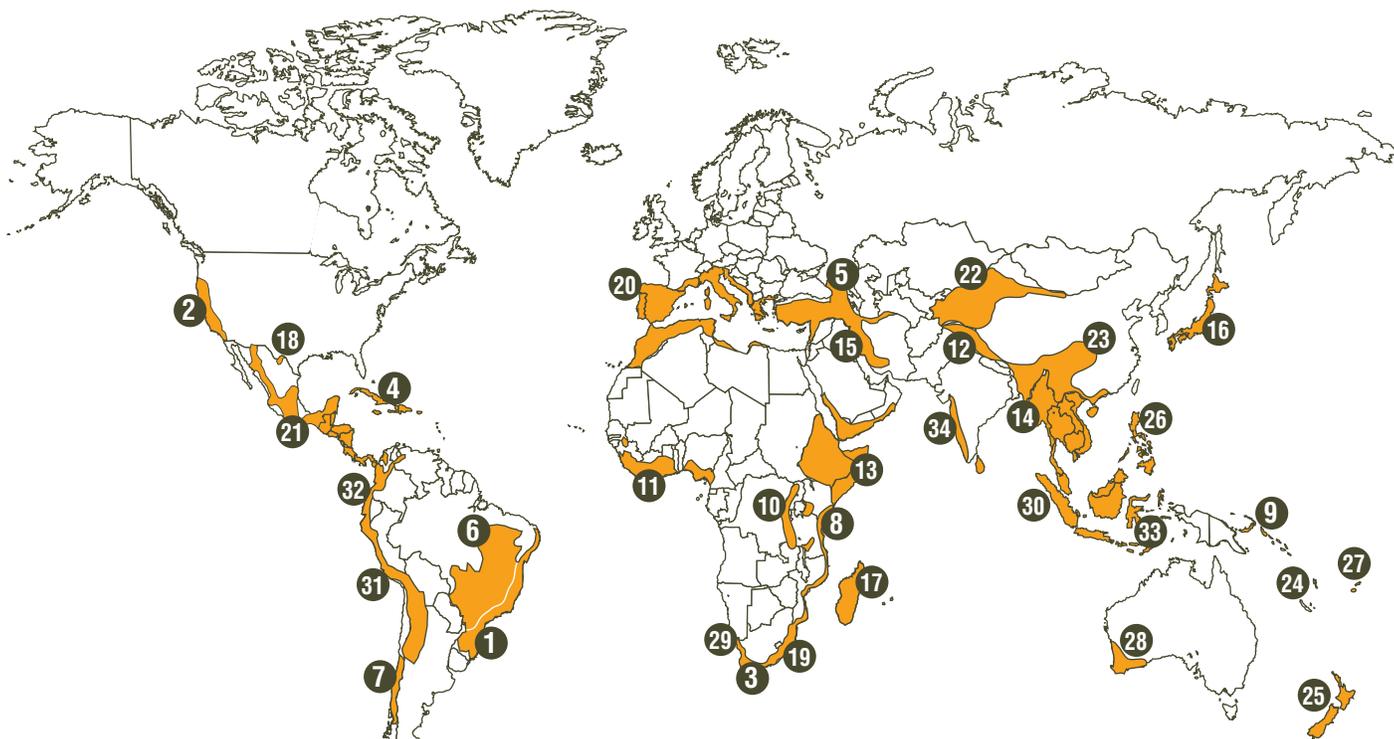
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Biodiversity Hotspots

Each dot represents a biodiversity hotspot, areas of rich biodiversity but under extreme environmental pressure. For more information about biodiversity hotspots visit www.biodiversityhotspots.org



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|---|--|--------------------------------|
| 1 Atlantic Forest | 13 Horn Of Africa | 24 New Caledonia |
| 2 California Floristic Province | 14 Indo-Burma | 25 New Zealand |
| 3 Cape Floristic Region | 15 Irano-Anatolian | 26 Philippines |
| 4 Caribbean Islands | 16 Japan | 27 Polynesia-Micronesia |
| 5 Caucasus | 17 Madagascar And Indian Ocean Islands | 28 Southwest Australia |
| 6 Cerrado | 18 Madrean Pine-Oak Woodlands | 29 Succulent Karoo |
| 7 Chilean Winter Rainfall-Valdivian Forests | 19 Maputaland-Pondoland-Albany | 30 Sundaland |
| 8 Coastal Forests Of Eastern Africa | 20 Mediterranean Basin | 31 Tropical Andes |
| 9 East Melanesian Islands | 22 Mountains Of Central Asia | 32 Tumbes-Chocó-Magdalena |
| 10 Eastern Afromontane | 23 Mountains Of Southwest China | 33 Wallacea |
| 11 Guinean Forests Of West Africa | | 34 Western Ghats And Sri Lanka |
| 12 Himalaya | | |

Source: Conservation International, 2008.



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