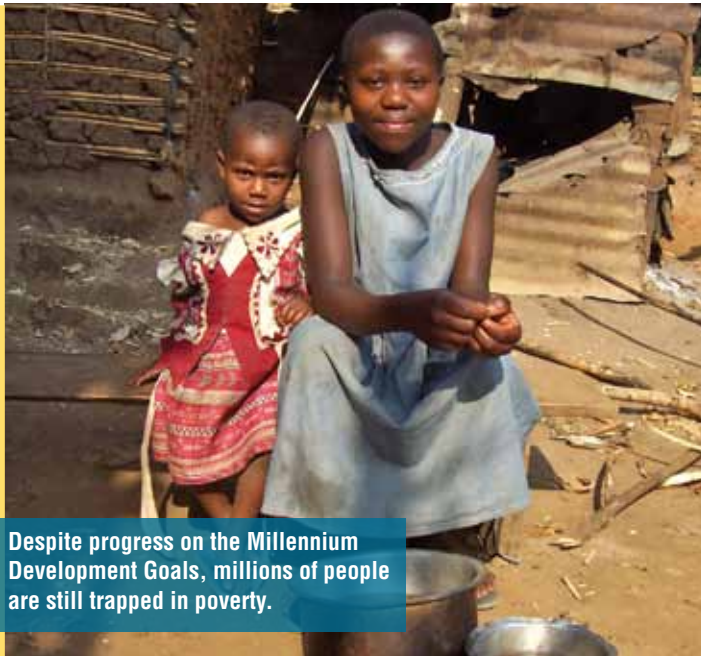




The Millennium Development Goals: Stepping Up Efforts

by Michele Learner



Despite progress on the Millennium Development Goals, millions of people are still trapped in poverty.

Kendra Rinas

The U.N. Millennium Development Goals have an expansive but straightforward purpose: to improve the lives of extremely poor people around the world. Five years before the agreed deadline, the record is mixed. We can still reach the goals by 2015, but it will take an intensified global effort.

How have governments fared in achieving the Millennium Development Goals (MDGs) they approved in 2000? Recently, more than 25 United Nations and international agencies examined the progress—or lack of it—in achieving these development goals.

Today, despite much progress, hundreds of millions of people are still trapped in poverty. Their own efforts have not been enough to give their families food, clean water, shelter, and health care. Factors largely beyond their control—whether global trade policy, the weather, or decisions made in a distant capital—shape their lives.

The eight MDGs:

1: Eradicate extreme poverty and hunger

- Reduce by half the proportion of people living on less than \$1 a day
- Reduce by half the proportion of people who suffer from hunger

2: Achieve universal primary education

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

3: Promote gender equality and empower women

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

4: Reduce child mortality

- Reduce by two-thirds the mortality rate among children under 5

5: Improve maternal health

- Reduce by three-quarters the maternal mortality ratio

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

- Halt and begin to reverse the spread of HIV/AIDS
- Achieve, by 2010, universal access to treatment for HIV/AIDS for all those who need it
- Halt and begin to reverse the incidence of malaria and other major diseases

7: 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 and basic sanitation

8: Create a global partnership for development

- Develop further an open, rule-based, predictable, non-discriminatory trading and financial system
- Address the special needs of the least developed countries

The issues they face are fundamental: Can they get their crops to the market before they spoil? Can their goods be sold so they can buy enough food? Can their crops survive the increasingly common droughts where they live? Can they send their children to school? Can pregnant mothers reach a hospital in time for an emergency caesarian section?

The hard work of people in developing countries, combined with the efforts of national governments and the international community, are bringing the MDGs within sight. But “business as usual” for the next five years will not be enough to achieve them.

How Are We Doing?

Here’s a brief update by region:

East and Southeast Asia led the world in reducing extreme poverty. In Southeast Asia, the percentage of people living on less than \$1.25 a day dropped from 39 percent to 19 percent. India is projected to reduce its poverty rate from 51 percent in 1990 to 24 percent in 2015.

However, South Asia has the world’s highest rate of child malnutrition—46 percent of children younger than 5 were underweight in 2008, down only slightly from 51 percent in 1990.

Asia is making progress on child mortality but is not yet on track to meet the 2015 goal. East and Southeast Asia have now closed the gender gap in education at both the primary and secondary levels, while South Asia has closed the gap in primary education but has just 87 girls per 100 boys in secondary school.

Signs of Progress

- Since 2001, 1.6 billion people have gained access to safe drinking water.
- By 2007, 86 percent of children in the developing world were completing primary school. Two notable success stories are Mozambique and Tanzania, which have doubled their primary school attendance rates to nearly 100 percent.
- Almost two-thirds of developing countries now send as many girls as boys to primary school. The gender gap is also narrowing in secondary school enrollment and completion.
- In 2000, measles caused 750,000 deaths. Today, the death toll has been reduced by nearly 80 percent.
- Also since 2000, U.S. foreign assistance has more than doubled, and U.S. assistance specifically to Africa has more than tripled.

Sub-Saharan Africa made the fastest progress among the developing regions in enrolling children in primary school, improving from 58 percent in 1999 to 76 percent in 2008. At this point, Africa is not on track to cut the rate of extreme poverty in half, although there has been some progress, from 58 percent in 1990 to 51 percent today.

The gender gap in education in that region is 91 girls per 100 boys in primary school; the secondary school gap is the world’s largest at 79 girls per 100 boys. Considerable progress has been made in the area of HIV/AIDS, with 3 million people on lifesaving antiretroviral (ARV) medications.

Latin America’s greatest progress has been in child health and gender equality. Since 1990, the proportion of underweight children has fallen from 11 percent to 6 percent, and child mortality has fallen from 52 to 23 per 1,000 births. Rapid deforestation harms the region’s prospects for environmental sustainability, while large gaps persist between rural and urban areas in the areas of clean drinking water and sanitation.

2010: A Turning Point?

The sudden spike in the price of staple foods in 2007-2008 and the global economic crisis pushed an additional 100 million people into poverty and set back progress toward achieving the MDGs—a stark reminder that progress is still fragile and a lot remains to be done. But it is not too late.

From September 20-22, 2010, the United Nations will host an MDG summit to assess achievements, lessons learned, and obstacles to further progress. The summit should produce an overall plan that spells out “who will do what” over the next five years to meet the goals. President Barack Obama backs this, calling for a concrete action plan, and added that it should look even beyond the MDGs to “end extreme poverty within a generation.”

The past year has seen increasing international political momentum on hunger and poverty issues. The United States launched Feed the Future, a new global hunger and food security initiative, as well as the Global Health Initiative. At the 2010 G-8 summit of leading donor nations, leaders of the world’s wealthiest nations pledged \$5 billion over five years to maternal and child health.

As governments, civil society, and communities work to meet the MDGs, it becomes increasingly clear that the goals are interconnected; thus, the solutions must be too. The efforts of developing countries and effective development assistance must break down the “silos” between sectors such as health, education, and agriculture, and support country-led development strategies.

Many donor countries are responding with efforts to improve the way they plan and implement development programs. The next in a series of international forums on aid effectiveness will take place in Seoul in 2011.

The United States is among those in the midst of planning for more effective development assistance—the subject both of Bread for the World’s 2009 Offering of Letters and our forthcoming 2011 Offering of Letters. The Obama administration has conducted two detailed assessments of current policy and will be issuing its conclusions and implementing recommendations in the coming months. Congress has begun to draft a new Foreign Assistance Act to replace legislation enacted in 1961.

In July 2010, the administration released its strategy on how the United States will help meet the MDGs. Calling the goals “a symbol of our common humanity,” the strategy notes that the MDGs have helped mobilize “unprecedented” political support and resources for development.

The administration’s MDG strategy is based on four principles: innovation, sustainability, outcomes, and mutual accountability. Each of these has implications for how development assistance will be allocated. Innovation might mean developing a new technology or, alternatively, finding more effective ways to bring existing solutions to more people.

The administration’s MDG strategy also emphasizes strengthening monitoring and evaluation, so that we know not only where the dollars went but what the results were and what could be done better next time. The fourth principle, mutual accountability, means that the United States will keep its commitments, learn from mistakes, and encourage other governments to do the same.

In addition to new initiatives and approaches, 2010 is a year of deadlines for older commitments. In 2005, the G-8 countries agreed to double both overall development assistance and assistance to Africa over five years. Development assistance has increased both in terms of funding and as a share of donors’ national income. This is welcome news given the difficult economic climate of the past couple of years, but as a group, the G-8 is behind in meeting its 2005 commitments. The shortfall is approximately \$20 billion. African countries have received only about \$11 billion of the original pledged increase of \$25 billion in development assistance.

Removing structural barriers for women is a continuing weakness for many countries engaged in the MDGs.



Margaret W. Nea

What Is Working Well?

The U.N. Development Program’s (UNDP) recent report, “The Path to Achieving the MDGs: A Synthesis of Evidence from Around the World,” focuses on 34 countries who most recently submitted reports on their efforts to reach the MDGs.

UNDP identified a number of factors from the country reports that help explain both successes and bottlenecks. All these factors offer lessons for developing countries and donors alike for the next five years. Many apply to several of the MDGs—further evidence that the goals are intertwined.

Countries that are making progress tend to have a clear national commitment to the effort. An area of weakness remains changing social attitudes and removing structural barriers—particularly for women. Anita Sharma, North America director of the U.N. Millennium Campaign, points out, “Efforts requiring systemic change or involving improving the status of women are performing poorly.”

Growth in the sectors of a country’s economy where poor people are concentrated can lower hunger and poverty significantly. Topping this list is agriculture. Another successful strategy is “pro-poor job creation”—working to educate and train people for the jobs that are available. For example, Kyrgyzstan has a “Second Education Project” focused on adapting education to the needs of a modern economy.

The MDGs force a closer look at whether or not economic growth is reaching the most vulnerable groups in a society.



The MDGs call for reducing by half the proportion of people without access to safe drinking water.

Richard Lord

Countries with low levels of inequality tend to do best in this area. For example, Ethiopia has a high poverty rate, but rural poverty is not sharply higher than urban poverty. The country's focus on agriculture-led growth means that rural residents are participating more fully in the national economy.

Safety-net programs to protect poor people also play a key role in making progress on the MDGs. The poorest people are the most vulnerable to shocks such as economic crisis or natural disaster; programs that help them recover also help them build resilience.

Another success factor is investing in safe drinking water and other needs linked with environmental quality. Countries as different as Niger and Bhutan find that large-scale reforestation efforts can reduce their vulnerability to drought.

Another characteristic of successful efforts is innovation, a flexible approach to solving problems. Ethiopia is educating children from pastoral communities through a "mobile schools" program. Each group sends someone to be trained as a teacher; the teachers then travel with their communities so school can continue. An added benefit is that instruction can be in students' first language.

"The road ahead will likely be more difficult than the road already traveled Many of the remaining poor and undernourished will be harder to reach because they live in marginal areas or face ethnic, religious, and other kinds of

deep-seated social exclusion," says the U.S. administration's MDG document. Many other obstacles—not least inadequate resources, natural disasters, and conflict—complicate the task. The challenges make it even more important to focus on what we know is effective.

UNDP sums it up: "There are a range of tried and tested policies which ensure progress. If they are backed by strong global partnerships, we can achieve the MDGs by 2015. Meeting the deadline will simply take more effort than we are devoting right now."

The Role of Advocates

A recent poll showed that 87 percent of Americans believe the United States should be involved in a worldwide effort to fight global poverty as part of the MDGs. Americans are generally quite willing to help once they understand what the problems are. Thus, anti-hunger and poverty advocates can build more support for the U.S. role in the MDGs by continuing to devote resources and educational efforts to the goals. Equally important, we can urge the administration and Congress to fund effective and efficient development assistance strategies.

U.S. churches are promoting the MDGs both through education and resources. Even in tight budget climates, for example, the Episcopal Church dedicates 0.7 percent of its revenue to international development programs supporting the MDGs. This percentage is a long-standing goal for development assistance from governments, a goal that many have not reached. Bishop James Mathes of San Diego says the funding commitment "is really about leadership. What we're trying to do here as the Episcopal Church is to say that the MDGs are a way that we lead as a church."

The Evangelical Covenant Church (ECC) is one of many churches working to educate Americans about the problems that the MDGs seek to solve and what we can do. Recently, their triennial gathering of ECC women sponsored a Hall of Justice exhibit. Bread for the World prepared a display illustrating a typical U.S. meal and a meal that a poor family in a developing country might eat. Many of the participants were bothered by the obvious inequities they saw.

Bread for the World's contributions to meeting the MDGs is a critical one: educating Congress on effective development assistance, keeping our elected representatives informed of progress and challenges for the goals, and urging Congress to approve policies and funding that will enable the United States to help. The future of the world's poorest billion people is at stake.