



Dili International Conference on the post-2015 Development Agenda

**'Development for all: Stop conflict, build states and eradicate
poverty'**

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BRIEFING NOTE - SESSION 1b

What are the Strengths and weaknesses of the MDGs?

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Introduction on MDGs

The Millennium Declaration called for halving the number of people who live on less than one dollar a day by the year 2015. This vision took the shape of eight Millennium Development Goals, which provide a framework of time-bound targets by which progress can be measured.

The MDGs marked a historic moment in 2000 as world leaders committed to tackle extreme poverty with goals including 1) eradicating extreme poverty and hunger 2) achieving universal primary education 3) promoting gender equality and the power of women 4) reducing child mortality 5) improving maternal health 6) combating HIV/AIDS, Malaria and other diseases 7) ensuring environmental sustainability, and 8) developing a global partnership for development. In total there were 8 MDGs, 21 targets and 60 indicators to measure progress.

Each year, the Secretary-General presents a report to the United Nations General Assembly on progress achieved towards implementing the Declaration, based on data on the selected indicators, aggregated at global and regional levels.

Progress on the MDGs

The UN Secretary General invited heads of state and government for a Summit at the opening of the General Assembly in September 2005 in New York, in order to review progress towards the goals. Here are some key facts about the general state of progress globally:

- The number of people living in extreme poverty has fallen from its 1990 level - from 2 billion in 1990 to 1.4 billion in 2008.
- Over 2 billion people gained access to better drinking water – with the proportion of people using an improved water source rising from 76% in 1990 to 89% in 2010.
- The share of slum dwellers living in cities fell from 39% in 2000 to 33% in 2012, improving the lives of at least 100 million people.
- The world achieved near parity in primary education between girls and boys – the ratio between the enrolment rate of girls and that of boys grew from 91 in 1999 to 97 in 2010.
- Progress in rates of child survival is gaining momentum – the number of under 5 deaths worldwide fell from more than 12 million in 1990 to 7.6 million in 2010.
- Global malaria deaths have declined – estimated global rate has decreased by 17% since 2000. Reported cases fell more than 50% between 2000 and 2010 in 43 out of the 99 countries with ongoing malaria transmission.

Challenges to achieving the MDGs

There are many shocking statistics that highlight how far we still have to go to achieve the vision of the Millennium Declaration “to realize our universal aspirations for peace, cooperation and development”.

Remaining challenges include:

- An estimated 1.5 billion people still live in poverty
- Every 4 seconds a child dies from preventable causes
- Over 900 million people, particularly women and young people, suffer from chronic hunger
- The global population is set to rise to 9.5 billion by 2050
- The food system is at breaking point
- Climate change threatens to destroy the lives of millions more and undo the progress made so far
- Inequality is growing everywhere
- Human rights are being undermined in the world’s most fragile and conflict-affected countries while the world economy continues to falter.

Progress has been slowest in fragile and conflict-affected states. Based on UN monitoring information, it appears still to be true that, as the 2011 World Development Report said, ‘no low-income fragile or conflict-affected country has yet achieved a single MDG’.

As we are approaching the original target date of 2015 for achievement of the MDGs, it is time to re-assess the current difficulties in achieving the MDGs, identify the gaps and explore potential future challenges so that together we can shape a development agenda post-2015 that will meet the needs of all.

On 31 July 2012, United Nations Secretary-General Ban Ki-moon announced the 26 members of a High Level Panel to advise on the global development agenda beyond 2015, the original target date for achievement of the Millennium Development Goals. The panel has the role to develop recommendations on a global post-2015 agenda for all countries to fight against poverty and promote sustainable development.

The member states of the United Nations have called for open, inclusive consultations involving civil society, the private sector, academia and research institutions from all regions, in addition to the United Nation's system, to advance the development agenda beyond 2015.

A number of consultations have been conducted around the world to gather information to contribute to the development of a new post-2015 agenda. This international conference will also be an important moment to get input from a wide range of people.

How have the MDGs benefited fragile states?

Numerous attempts have been made to assess the general benefits of the MDGs.¹ Such impacts could occur in four areas: development-related discourse, resource mobilisation and allocation, donor and partner country practices, and development outcomes.

Generally, when compared with earlier attempts to propagate international development goals in a more piecemeal fashion throughout the 1990s, there is agreement that the MDGs have achieved a large impact on development discourse. Though this impact is mostly limited to people who regularly talk to each other about international development, with research showing the MDGs are still unknown to the vast majority of ordinary people.²

As for the other three areas above, nobody has been able to demonstrate a relationship of probable causation between observed changes during the MDG 'era', from about 2001, and the adoption of the MDGs. This is largely because changes, such as the aid 'boom' that commenced around 2000 and continued for a decade, might have been brought about not by the MDGs, but by the same sentiments and contextual factors that led policymakers to adopt the MDGs. One important exception here is the use by donors and developing country governments of the MDGs for the purposes of planning, reporting and public communication. This shows a clear impact at the process level, though not automatically an impact in terms of resource allocation and development outcomes. With that in mind, the specific benefits the MDGs might have conferred on fragile states are examined.

First, it may be the case that the adoption of the MDGs brought about an overall increase in aid to fragile states. It certainly coincided with such an increase. Data suggests that while OECD Development Assistance (DAC) aid rose considerably during the MDG era – increasing by more than 60 per cent in real terms – aid to 'core fragile' states more than doubled as a proportion of total aid, from five to 13 per cent.³ The story is of course similar for the g7+ countries, of which 16 are in the former category, but the share of aid provided to LDCs and Pacific island countries actually fell slightly, reflecting the fact that the increase has gone principally to conflict-affected countries. The trends displayed above are consistent with other analysis, which has shown that additional aid has flowed disproportionately to countries most off track in achieving the MDGs.⁴

Second, it is clearly the case that the MDGs have provided a useful framework for national development strategies. It has been estimated that of 118 countries surveyed by UNDP, some 86 per cent had incorporated at least some elements of the MDGs into national development planning frameworks.⁵ A UNDP study of 30 countries found that ten had added or modified goals, 15 had added or modified targets and 25 had added or modified indicators.⁶ While there is no information readily available on how prevalent is the adoption or customisation of the MDGs among fragile states, it is reasonable to assume that countries

¹ One good example is a 2010 paper by Andy Sumner and Meera Tiwari, 'Global poverty reduction to 2015 and beyond: what has been the impact of the MDGs and what are the options for a post-2015 global framework?', Working Paper 348, Institute of Development Studies.

² The Centre for Global Development reports that only 5-6 per cent of people in the two largest donor countries, the US and Japan, have ever heard of the MDGs (Charles Kenny and Andy Sumner, 'More Money or More Development: What have the MDGs Achieved?', Centre for Global Development Working Paper 278, 2011).

³ See <http://www.oecd.org/development/stats/querywizardforinternationaldevelopmentstatisticsqwids.htm>

⁴ For example, see page 14 of Claire Melamed and Andy Sumner's 'A Post-2015 Global Development Agreement: why, what, who?' (Overseas Development Institute/UNDP, 2011), citing unpublished UNDP research.

⁵ See page 10 of the 2010 UNDP report *Beyond the Midpoint: Achieving the Millennium Development Goals*.

⁶ Cited in Richard Manning's 2009 paper, 'The Impact and Design of the MDGs: Some Reflections', *Institute of Development Studies Bulletin*, Volume 41, Number 1.

with weaker strategic planning capacities would derive particular benefits from, and thus be more likely to adopt, an MDG-based planning framework. However, as stressed above, this is not to say that development outcomes are thereby automatically improved. What is, perhaps, improved is the quality of dialogue between governments and citizens, and also between governments and their donor partners, about national development objectives and progress toward them.

Third, and finally, to the extent that the adoption of the MDGs might have brought about an increase in aid to fragile states, it might also have accelerated development progress in certain key dimensions. Most obviously, progress in relation to access to vaccines and drugs, educational enrolment and the availability of improved water sources might be linked to the priority accorded to these areas by donors in the context of the MDGs. There is evidence that the MDG era has seen accelerated progress toward most MDGs among LDCs and in sub-Saharan Africa, with at least half or more countries accelerating on at least four MDGs.⁷ According to the UN's 2012 MDG Report, sub-Saharan Africa - which has the highest level of under-five mortality - has doubled its average rate of reduction, from 1.2 per cent per year in the period 1990-2000 to 2.4 per cent in the period 2000-2010. And, according to the same report, global progress in reducing mortality from tuberculosis and malaria, diseases that disproportionality afflict fragile states, has also accelerated.

How have the MDGs failed fragile states?

Much can be and has been said about the limitations and deficiencies of the MDGs. So, before looking at them through a fragile states lens, four of these general criticisms are outlined.

- First, the MDGs are faulted for the way in which they were developed, which is seen as technocratic, non-transparent and essentially donor-driven.
- Second, the MDGs are criticised as being unfair on certain countries, which might show impressive development progress while still being assessed as 'off track' against global proportional reduction targets. Here the concern is that global goals and targets, which were really meant to apply to the 'average' country, have come to be applied to every (developing) country – which effectively sets a much higher bar than originally intended.
- Third, and somewhat contrary to the previous point, the MDGs are criticised for being unambitious, with targets that were conservatively extrapolated from previous experience and were in some cases watered down relative to earlier targets.
- Fourth, the MDGs are universally criticised for underplaying or leaving out several of the fundamentals of global, national and human development, including some specified in the Millennium Declaration. The absence of some of these fundamentals (including equitable growth and effective, transparent and accountable governance) is sometimes blamed for a stagnation in investment in the productive sectors, and a perceived over-investment in the social sectors.

From the specific perspective of fragile states, each of the above criticisms has a particular kind of resonance.

First, on the process point, the g7+ grouping has already strongly asserted its perspective on the post-2015 goals and will continue to do so. In addition, there are multiple survey and consultative exercises aimed at gathering the perspectives of poor people in developing countries, including fragile states. The post-2015 goals and targets will not be compiled by technocrats and adopted by stealth—though, by the same token, it cannot be taken for granted that they will be agreed by 2015, or at all.

Second, on the 'one-size-fits-all' point, the application of global goals and targets to individual nations for comparative monitoring purposes has been particularly disadvantageous to fragile states, and has in some cases been explicitly rejected by them.⁸ Given their starting points on many indicators, fragile states can often achieve good progress in absolute terms - for example, in reducing maternal mortality rates - while remaining stubbornly off track when measured against a global proportional reduction target like 'reduce by three-quarters the maternal mortality ratio'. To give one example, Malawi reduced its infant mortality rate

⁷ Sakiko Fukuda-Parr and Joshua Greenstein, 'How Should MDG Implementation Be Measured: Faster Progress or Meeting Targets?' International Policy Centre for Inclusive Growth, Working Paper, 2010.

⁸ Papua New Guinea asserted that the MDGs were unrealistic when applied at the national level, so developed its own set of national targets within the MDG framework.

from 209 per 1000 live births to 111 between 1990 and 2007, an impressive achievement - but did not achieve the two-thirds reduction necessary to be considered 'on track' to achieve MDG4.⁹

Third, on the point about lack of ambition, the fact that the poverty reduction target was so easily achieved, thanks largely to the fact that China has lifted more than 660 million people out of absolute poverty since the 1980s, distracts attention from the fact that poverty remains stubbornly high in fragile states, and is likely - depending on inequality trends in non-fragile middle-countries - to become increasingly concentrated there. At least one-third of the world's poor currently live in fragile states, compared to one-fifth in 1990; this is expected to increase to around one-half by 2030, with the absolute number of poor in fragile states remaining about where it has been since 1990, at not much less than 500 million.¹⁰

Fourth, on the point about missing fundamentals, fragile states obviously feel very keenly the absence of any reference to peacebuilding and statebuilding in the MDGs - an absence that is all the more surprising when one recalls the numerous references to peace, tolerance and justice in the Millennium Declaration's articulation of 'fundamental values'. Small island states, by contrast, perhaps feel more keenly the absence of any effective treatment of global and regional public goods, most notably climate change mitigation and support for regional infrastructure and regional institutions that in many cases substitute for weak national capacity.

Related to this last point, is another criticism - that the MDGs, with their exclusive emphasis on final outcomes, tend to direct resources away from some of the structural enablers of development in fragile states (such as the fundamentals of peacebuilding and statebuilding). Without enablers, some countries will never begin to make sustained progress toward the MDGs. The g7+ narrative can be interpreted as arguing that enabling goals must be achieved before fragile states can realistically be expected to achieve the MDGs or similar final goals.

Learning from the MDG experience

If we are to apply the collective learning from the MDGs, the post-2015 development agenda needs to build on the strengths and avert the weaknesses. Feedback on how the MDGs have helped or hindered the development effort at the country level is an essential component of that learning.

Guiding Question for the Session:

- *What are the strengths and weakness of the MDGs for fragile and conflict-affected and Pacific states, especially for vulnerable groups in society?*
- *How have the MDGs and the reporting mechanisms affected national planning, implementation and funding arrangements?*
- *How can we ensure the necessary peacebuilding and statebuilding pre-requisites are in place for fragile states to meet any new development goals?*
- *What is missing from the MDGs for fragile and conflict-affected and Asia Pacific states?*

⁹ Examples both drawn from Melamed and Sumner's 2011 paper, cited above.

¹⁰ See Homi Kharas and Andrew Rogerson, 'Horizon 2020', Overseas Development Institute, 2012.