

# Why the MDGs are a useful framework for tackling global poverty

## Introduction

The Millennium Development Goals (MDGs) are a comprehensive attempt to reduce poverty and improve lives, unprecedented in its strategic nature and scale. The Goals include measurable, time-bound targets addressing poverty and hunger, education, maternal and child health, the prevalence of diseases including HIV and AIDS, gender equality, the environment, debt, trade and aid. The MDGs have been taken on-board by international institutions and agencies, such as the UK's Department for International Development (DFID) where they are a central basis of policy and practice. The MDGs do not summarise all the aspects and complexities of poverty, and even if they are all met there will still be a large minority of people still living in poverty. However, they are though an important set of tools for encouraging accountability, measuring progress, setting priorities and achieving results.

The MDGs are still achievable, but not by 'business as usual'. The MDGs take a target driven approach to reducing poverty, and this places a great emphasis on defining and monitoring progress. The UN Millennium Development Project was commissioned by the UN in 2002 to develop a concrete plan of action. In September 2005 at a World Summit, national governments agreed to adopt and implement a comprehensive national development strategy to agree the national development goals and objectives. This includes 'localising' the MDGs, and setting national targets and plans. These provide an important mechanism for campaigners to hold their own governments to account.

Njongonkulu Ndungane, the Archbishop of Cape Town, has said: "*The Millennium Development Goals are the most comprehensive and ambitious commitment that the world has ever made to combating the evils of poverty.*" They are a global agenda for reducing poverty and improving lives. All 191 member states of the United Nations promised to achieve the MDGs by 2015.

The MDGs are derived from the broader 'Millennium Declaration' signed in September 2000 at the UN Millennium Summit by all UN member states. The declaration reaffirms values including equality, mutual respect, and shared responsibility for the condition of all peoples, and relates the MDGs to an even broader context, including peace and human rights. The global efforts towards the MDGs come at a time of rapidly increasing inequality. Not only are rich countries becoming richer, but many poor countries are becoming poorer. The MDGs are, therefore, seen by many as a much needed framework towards building a better world.

What makes the MDGs so significant is their clear commitment to a timetable. By being so time-specific, they give an exceptional set of explicit targets, which the development community can use to hold leaders accountable and insist that they fulfil their promises.

## **Biblical Values**

Biblical values are that Christians should love God by serving people. Consequently concern for the poor provides a biblical mandate to combat global poverty. Specifically, the MDGs provide a useful tool to remind governments they are accountable to God, as well as a timetable for Christians, as agents of hope, to work towards, and they reaffirm values that are based on a Christian worldview.

## **Principles of a Christian response**

### **Concern for the poor**

The Bible requires us to take responsibility for our neighbour. The call to ‘love the Lord your God and love your neighbour,’ read with a global world view, demands we address the effects and the causes of global poverty as they threaten vast numbers of our neighbours. The MDGs provide unprecedented levels of consensus and momentum to take on this responsibility and address a broad area of poverty inducing issues.

### **Governments accountable to God**

The Creator God requires all governments to, “*give justice to the weak and the orphan; maintain the right of the lowly and destitute*”, and to, “*rescue the weak and the needy; deliver them from the hand of the wicked*” (Psalm 82). Regardless of their political ideology or religious persuasion, all governments are accountable to God for their performance in delivering policies that respond effectively to the needs of poor and oppressed communities. The MDGs provide a tool to remind our leaders of this accountability.

### **Agents of hope**

The Bible spells out that we are required to pursue justice, be passionate about mercy, and to walk humbly with God (Micah 6:8). This serves to remind us that we are called to go beyond talk about poverty reduction into practically working for justice and mercy. Again the MDGs provide a tool, and timetable, for Christians to work towards.

### **Reaffirming values**

The MDGs are derived from the broader “Millennium Declaration” that was signed in 2000 by all UN member states. The declaration reaffirms values including equality, mutual respect, and shared responsibility for the condition of all peoples, values that are based on a Christian worldview. It relates the MDGs to an even broader context, including peace and human rights, and helps strengthen global efforts towards these wider issues.

## **Approaches to the MDGs and debates**

### **1. Are the MDGs dangerously ambitious or deceptively unambitious?**

The MDGs are, to some, an unrealistic set of targets that will never be met. Others argue they are actually deceptively unambitious – as even when the targets are met extreme poverty will only have been halved. So are the MDGs worth having?

The MDGs are an important set of tools for encouraging accountability, measuring progress, setting priorities and achieving results. They cover a core set of areas, such as health, education and access to clean water which are universally agreed as being fundamental for sustainable development. The goals, their targets and the indicators all have their limitations, and it is the role of those speaking up on behalf of, and with, the poor that need to ensure they are kept on-track and meet the needs of those they set out to benefit in both the immediate and long-term.

*The MDGs must be kept on-track and focussed on the poor to ensure they make the best impact. It must also be remembered that the MDGs are a means to moving towards sustainable development – they are not an end in themselves.*

**2. The MDGs are a technocratic and bureaucratic approach which does not take into account the full complexity of the world. Global plans are not flexible enough to adapt to local realities.**

Meeting the MDGs will require international collaboration on an unprecedented scale. This includes co-ordination and planning by national governments and international organisations to increase both the quantity and quality of aid available to developing countries, alongside innovative ways of improving access to basic services and enabling people to meet their own needs. Everyone has a part to play; donor governments must honour their commitments to increase the resources that are available to developing countries through aid and debt relief- this requires continued political will, maintained through pressure on leaders through campaigns and lobbying. In developing countries, this additional finance needs to be used effectively to meet the needs of the poor, and be directed to the sectors where it will have the greatest impact. Citizens of these countries have a role to play in holding their own governments to account for how this finance is used, as well as taking steps to end poverty in their own communities.

In recent years, there have been many international initiatives which aim to improve the effectiveness of international aid, including the 2005 Paris Declaration on Aid Effectiveness, which is being followed up in 2008 with the Third High Level Forum on Aid Effectiveness in Accra, Ghana. These have emphasised improved co-ordination between donors to provide predictable long-term aid flows to governments through budget support and the use of medium term expenditure frameworks. These global initiatives aim to support the work done in each developing country to meet their MDGs.

The MDGs have been localised at different levels- most 'second generation' Poverty Reduction Strategy Papers (PRSPs) are now aligned to the MDGs. This has led to improved systems of data collection and monitoring to better understand who the poor are, as well as actions to tackle poverty. There have been significant efforts to localise the MDGs, through the development of national plans, developed through consultation with many stakeholders, including local organisations and community groups.

*For the MDGs to be met, poverty reduction initiatives must be based around the needs of the poor. In particular, the poor must be empowered to shape their own futures, identifying issues that affect them, and being part of solutions. This is the vision of Micah Challenge, bringing thousands of Christians together across the*

*world, to put pressure on their governments to take action to tackle poverty, and undertaking initiatives themselves in their own communities.*

### **3. MDGs ignore some fundamental issues, such as power inequalities in global trade**

It has been argued that the MDGs focus too much on the symptoms of poverty rather than on underlying causes at a global level. Apart from a relatively bland mention in Goal 8 they set no target, for example, for achieving a fairer trade system, and they make no direct mention of conflict or human rights violations.

More aid for the MDGs will have limited impact if there is no shift in the way that high-income nations approach their trading, investment and business relations with low- and middle-income nations. These latter nations currently lose far more from unfair trade practices (as high-income nations protect their markets and subsidize their producers) than they gain from development assistance. Not only do these policies mean hundreds of billions of dollars are lost every year by low- and middle-income nations, it also diminishes the capacity within these nations to fund schools, health centres and improved provision for water and sanitation – the very services that will help to achieve the MDGs.

*To meet and sustain the MDGs high-income nations will have to align their domestic policies with their development cooperation policies so that policies on trade, industry, agriculture, exports and employment do not undermine the achievements of the MDGs.*

*Specifically, the funding gap will not be filled without reform of international trade rules, which lead to economic growth for poor countries, allowing them to finance their own efforts to meet the MDGs.*

Richard Clarke, Tearfund UK  
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