
A Pioneering Perspective: The Global Social Movement Against Extreme Poverty

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A Pioneering Perspective

The Global Social Movement Against Extreme Poverty

JEFFREY SACHS

The Millennium Development Goals (MDGs) pose a profound challenge for the world. Is it possible for the global community to set ambitious goals and then work together to achieve them? The MDGs address the scourges of extreme poverty, hunger, and disease, but the larger question they pose—about the world's capacity to cooperate in order to achieve common and bold objectives—applies as well to nuclear proliferation, the control of climate change, and other global public goods.

This article steps back and examines the broad contours of the global social movement to end extreme poverty and how the MDGs have helped to shape and energize that effort. Strengths and weaknesses of current MDG efforts will be discussed and suggestions made as to how we can proceed after the MDG target date of 2015. The MDGs may not be enough to end extreme poverty, but the goals are definitely playing an enormously important and salutary role in that effort.

It is easy to be cynical about the MDGs. After all, the “world community” is not much of a community. Working together across countries, continents, and

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classes is not the hallmark of this era. The many partners in the MDG effort—national governments, international agencies, private businesses, civil society—all have their separate agendas, glaring imperfections and inconsistencies, and propensities to be distracted from any prolonged effort, especially one without direct and easily captured economic and political returns. However, such cynicism blinds us to the larger reality of the MDGs.

The MDGs are still very much with us a decade after their adoption by world leaders in September 2000. This is the best evidence of their deep staying power. The MDGs in fact play a surprisingly important role in shaping the formal development agendas of dozens of low-income countries. They have also captured the at-

tention of the international business community, major nongovernmental organizations, donor agencies, and scientific and professional bodies. Despite all the flaws of the international system, the MDGs have gradually yet powerfully given rise to a new awareness about the remediable conditions of extreme poverty on the planet. Lessons learned from the MDGs have also shed light on how to meet several other urgent global challenges, especially those concerning environmental threats and sustainable development, since the same kinds of complex efforts and alliances needed to meet the MDGs will be needed to fight climate change and preserve biodiversity.

The MDG Effort in Perspective

Ending extreme poverty is an epochal challenge, on the historic scale of ending slavery and colonial rule. It is partly an ongoing historical process, linked with the economic growth and technological advancement that occurs even without national or international directed efforts. It is partly a matter of high politics, in which governments and international organizations mobilize in light of specific challenges such as HIV/AIDS. It is also partly a matter of social action and the realization of human rights, so that excluded groups (such as indigenous populations, religious minorities, and girls and women) can obtain the rights of citizenship already enjoyed by others in society.

Critics find it easy to mock or scorn the MDG effort as an attempt to “accelerate history.” However, the MDG outcomes—reductions in poverty, hunger, disease, and environmental threats—will be the result of vast economic, social, political, and technological processes. Ending extreme poverty cannot be achieved by simply turning a policy dial, though policy dials must indeed be turned. A serious fight against hunger, poverty, and disease must be understood as part of a large and deep flow of history. If the world economy is barreling forward down a great and tortuous river, people can at best help to steer through the rapids, stay away from the banks, miss the dangerous and jagged rocks in the way, and pull the oars with all their strength when opportunities arise.

The world leaders who adopted the MDGs at the Millennium Summit in September 2000 certainly did not have a specific plan in mind when they signed the Millennium Declaration, which then-UN Secretary-General Kofi Annan had put before them. Their aim was aspirational, not technical. The world was entering a new millennium on January 1, 2001, and the leaders rightly declared to the world that as a now-global society, the world’s nations should mark that milestone with a renewed determination to solve humanity’s greatest problems. The MDGs themselves drew upon global objectives that had first been enunciated in a series of international conferences during the 1990s. They were assembled as a group of eighty goals, updated, and given a deadline of 2015.

Most occasions such as the Millennium Summit pro-

vide a photo-op and little else, and no doubt most of the assembled world leaders expected that the Millennium Declaration would last only until the next day. It is a testimony to the leadership of two UN Secretaries-General, Kofi Annan and Ban Ki-moon, and to the aspirations of the world community, beginning in the poorest countries, that the MDGs are still very much in mind more than a decade later. Whatever else one may say, the MDGs have found a solid foothold in the thinking and planning of most low-income-country governments, dozens of development agencies, thousands of nongovernmental organizations (NGOs), and countless local communities around the world.

A Multi-Sector, Multi-Stakeholder Approach

Kofi Annan honored me by inviting me in 2001 to head the United Nations’ Millennium Project, established to find a practical pathway to achieve the MDGs, and Ban Ki-moon has extended that honor by inviting me to continue as his special advisor on the MDGs. In 2001, I was just completing an assignment as Chairman of the World Health Organization’s Commission on Macroeconomics and Health (CMH). The CMH had determined that low-cost, high-efficiency health interventions are capable of lifting a great deal of the disease burden in low-income countries. For example, long-lasting insecticide-treated bed nets and new medicines can control malaria, people dying of AIDS can be treated with anti-retroviral medicines, and mothers dying in childbirth can be saved through antenatal care and emergency obstetrical treatment if necessary. Indeed, the CMH determined that a mere 0.1 percent of gross domestic product (GDP) of the rich world would fill the estimated financing gap that keeps these public health solutions from reaching those who are excluded in the low-income countries.

That operational approach—identifying needs, defining solutions in terms of technologies and governance systems, estimating costs, and creating viable financing models to fill financial gaps—became part of the framework of the UN Millennium Project. The project was a voluntary collaboration among hundreds of scholars and practitioners around the world, who knew from first-hand experience and their scientific leadership that practical solutions are readily available for many of the world’s problems. If farmers plant with improved seeds, fertilizer, and irrigation, their yields can be multiplied; if classrooms are provided closer to villages, children can go to school.

The Millennium Project was not naïve as to the complex circumstances of extreme poverty, however. In some cases, the problem of extreme poverty reflects disastrous politics (as in North Korea, for example). In other cases, it is caused mainly by the denial of human rights, for example, as long-standing legal and social discrimination against women. In still other cases the essential problem is poverty itself, a situation known as the “poverty trap.”

In the case of a poverty trap, the government, community, and households are simply too poor to pull themselves out of poverty. They are unable to fund the investments needed to raise productivity above the subsistence line. The basic proposals of the Millennium Project, launched in 2005, call on individual countries (meaning the government, NGOs, and the business community acting in a cooperative framework) to adopt national strategies in key areas: agriculture, health, education, infrastructure, and business development. In general, there should be a division of labor across the key stakeholder sectors. The government, of course, should focus on the supply of public goods; the private sector, on the provision and sale of private goods; and civil society, on the build-up and utilization of social capital (volunteerism, public awareness, and community mobilization). Where countries demonstrably need added budgetary help to fund public goods, international development aid should fill in the gaps, as in the case of the Global Fund to Fight AIDS, Tuberculosis, and Malaria.

Professor William Easterly at New York University, among others, criticized these proposals as global central planning by the United Nations, a patently incorrect description of the spirit and letter of the Millennium Project recommendations. This kind of criticism feeds the critics of development aid through exaggeration and misrepresentation. The planning we envision begins at the community and national level, not the international level. Global cooperation fills in financial gaps and assists in technology of nationally and locally designed and implemented programs. Poverty reduction starts at the ground level, not at the international level, but it should also occur at a scale commensurate with its global challenges, involving the partnership of global industry, aid agencies, civil society, and international institutions.

The Lack of Accountability

The Millennium Development Goals were launched as a global compact of rich and poor countries, enshrined in MDG Goal Eight. At the follow-up International Conference of Financing for Development in Monterrey, Mexico in March 2002, the terms of the compact were elaborated in the Monterrey Consensus. That consensus noted correctly that international cooperation includes trade, private direct investment, technology transfer, and official development aid. Aid is only one tool, in other words, but a necessary one nonetheless. The Monterrey Consensus (paragraph 42) reiterated and reinforced the long-standing global target of rich countries' official development assistance (ODA) at 0.7 percent of donor GDP. Three years later, the G8 meeting in Gleneagles, Scotland reiterated these pledges and made them even more specific, in part by calling for a doubling of aid to Africa between 2005 and 2010 (from roughly US\$30 billion per year in 2005 to US\$60 billion per year in 2010).

Unfortunately, in a weak-willed and flimsy "community" of donor countries, the Monterrey and Gleneagles

promises never materialized. The five countries (Denmark, Luxembourg, Netherlands, Norway, Sweden) that were at 0.7 percent of GDP as of 2002 are still the same countries that are at that promised aid level as of 2011. Other European countries, the United Kingdom the largest among them, still pledge to reach 0.7 percent by 2015. Yet many others have stopped talking about their earlier pledges. The other big donors remain far behind and without any intention to come close to 0.7 percent by 2015. US aid remains at around US\$30 billion per year, equal to 0.2 percent of US GDP. Canada's contribution is around 0.3 percent of GDP, and Japan's is around 0.2 percent of GDP. Aid to Africa (measured in constant prices) increased by approximately US\$15 billion between 2005 and 2010, but not the promised US\$30 billion.

The deepest truth of the MDG decade from 2000 to 2010 is that the US government never showed much interest in MDG advancement, with the notable exception of public health issues (namely AIDS and malaria). Aid has been lackluster and without political backing. President Barack Obama rarely mentions the MDGs, and President George W. Bush mostly neglected them. The United States pursues a militarized foreign policy; that is, "hard" power rather than "soft" power, to use Joseph Nye's helpful categorization. Military spending is around five percent of GDP, or roughly 25 times the development budget. This is not only an absurd waste of public resources, but also results in nothing short of a debacle in country after country, beginning with Afghanistan and Yemen, where development challenges are paramount, yet military approaches are used instead.

The New Development Partners

More generally, the MDG fifteen-year period from 2000 to 2015 is occurring at a historic juncture, when US global leadership is being superseded by a multipolar world, including the United States, the European Union, China, India, Brazil, and other regional powers. The stirring pledges of President John F. Kennedy's inaugural address, that the United States would "bear any burden" to defend liberty and would work with people "in the huts and villages of half the globe struggling to break the bonds of mass misery," are echoes of a different era. The mood and readiness of the United States to supply global public goods has changed markedly. Such boldness seems more likely to come from China today than from the United States.

For many Americans, the MDGs therefore appear to be distant and minor concerns, when they are concerns at all. Washington is filled with pundits who make a living mocking the very idea of such goals. Yet Americans will gradually learn a deeper truth: global development will move forward without them, more slowly and painfully than otherwise, but with equal fervor in other parts of the world. It will be Africans, Chinese, Indians, Koreans, and Brazilians working together on the front lines if the

United States decides to abandon the development stage. I believe, moreover, that these other countries will be amply rewarded for stepping up their global efforts in terms of goodwill, geopolitics, security, trade, finance, environment, and the flow of ideas. The United States, sadly, could pay a high price for its comparative neglect, in the atrophy of public values as well as in the American economy, global environment, and national security.

The Way Forward

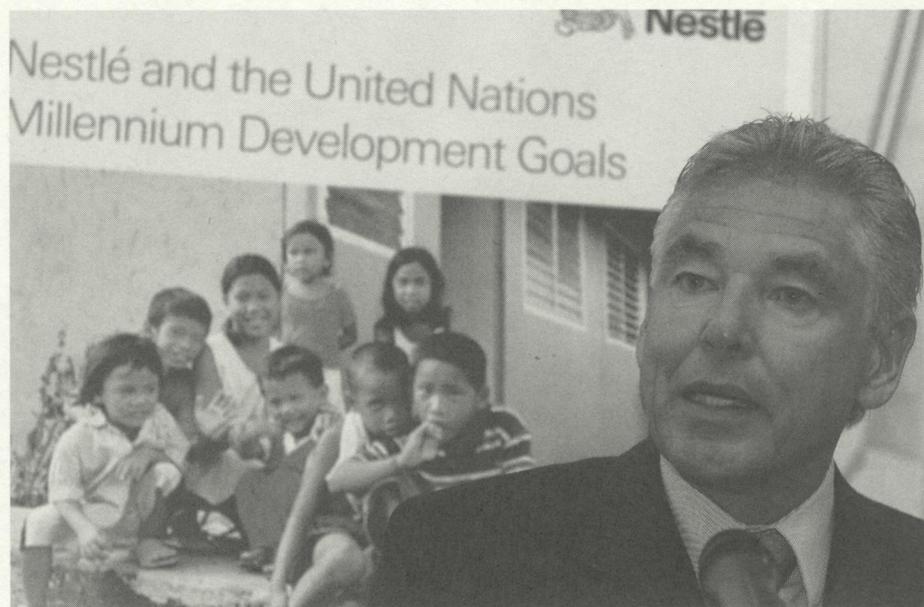
The world is in a race between sustainable development and disarray. After two centuries of more or less continual economic advance, we tend to think that progress is inevitable and that the only question is that of speed. Yet the situation is also fraught with uncertainty, instability, and roadblocks. The future is still yet to be won, whether in the poorest parts of the world which struggle to achieve the MDGs, or even in the richest countries which try to stave off stagnation, social conflict, and the onset of decline.

The causes for optimism about the MDGs are clearer and more powerful than they were in 2000 or 2005. First, the MDGs have secured a powerful foothold in local, national, and global policymaking. Countries have indeed made national, MDG-based plans. Global organizations such as the Global Fund to Fight AIDS, TB, and Malaria, the Global Alliance for Vaccines and Immunizations, and the Global Agriculture and Food Security Program are all exemplary models of MDG-targeted donor funds organized around national results-based planning in low-income countries. Alas, these innovative funding institutions lack the donor financing that they were promised and that they need, yet their successes in the field mean that new donors are likely to step in eventually.

Second, the technological base for breaking through extreme poverty is stronger than ever. New irrigation techniques, improved seed varieties, and sustainable farming practices can substantially increase productivity, and new diagnostics and medicines (such as those for malaria) permit highly effective community-based health care delivery for the first time. New business models, combined with new technologies, allow for mobile banking on the now-ubiquitous mobile phones. The information and communication technology revolution means that the great, ancient scourge of poverty—isola-

tion—is being overcome in just a few years.

Third, new development partners, including multinational companies, NGOs, and new donor countries, are stepping up to compensate for the decline in commitment of the more traditional development actors. Major multinational companies are increasingly seeing their long-term futures in today's poor countries. They are also recognizing that their technologies are pivotal to development success. The old psychological divide between the development community and business is dissolving. Sometimes that reflects "business at the bottom of the pyramid," and sometimes public-private partnerships mobilize business technologies and public financing. In either case, there is a rapid uptake of new development models underway, and new countries and

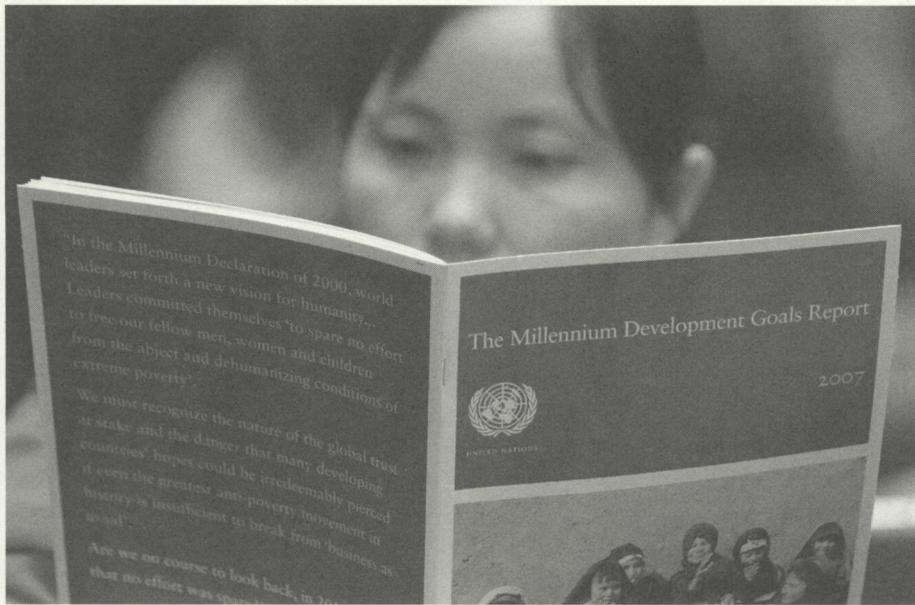


Peter Brabeck-Letmathe, CEO of Nestlé, speaks at a ceremony partnering Nestlé and the International Federation of Red Cross Societies. Nestlé is one of the various companies to pledge financial support to the UN Millennium Development Goals.

companies are guiding many of them.

The reasons for pessimism, however, cannot be overlooked. There is no margin for wishful thinking. Climate change is the first and foremost threat to the fulfillment and sustainability of the MDGs. Throughout the developing world, there is increasing instability in rainfall and greater frequency of heat waves, flooding, dry spells, extreme storms, and other climate-related shocks. The poorest countries are often the most environmentally marginal—for example, the band of extreme poverty throughout the zone stretching across the Sahel, the non-oil parts of the Arabian Peninsula, and Central Asia. Droughts and unstable rainfall have contributed to food insecurity, hunger, violence, and political unrest throughout this arid region. The situation will worsen unless specific targeted investments are made in these countries to adapt to human-induced climate change and to mitigate it globally over the longer term.

The second great source of worry is continued population growth. Fortunately, the proportionate rate of world population increase has slowed markedly from its peak of two percent per year between 1965 and 1970 to around 1.1 percent per year between 2010 and 2015. However, the absolute rate of increase of around 75 million to 80 million persons per year is still enough to threaten the planet, and especially the poorest countries, where the growth rate is highest. Egypt's high youth unemployment, for example, is clearly related to the fact that during Hosni Mubarak's 31-year reign, Egypt's population roughly doubled, from 44 million in 1980 to 85 million in 2010. Sub-Saharan Africa's population is on track, even under generally optimistic assumptions



A delegate peruses an official report on the Millennium Development Goals while attending the Economic and Social Council (ECOSOC) meeting at the United Nations European headquarters in Geneva, Switzerland on July 2, 2007.

about declining fertility rates, to go from 863 million in 2010 to around 1.75 billion in 2050, a dramatic increase that would almost surely be inconsistent with ending poverty and sustaining Africa's fragile environment and ecosystems.

Beyond 2015

The MDGs have already significantly accelerated the pace, focus, and awareness of poverty reduction. In the developing world, great progress will likely be achieved by 2015 in reduced rates of poverty, hunger, illiteracy, lack of schooling, and untreated diseases. Child and maternal mortality rates will fall significantly in most regions.

Yet the goals will not be achieved in all countries. We are running out of time. Even when poor countries mobilized action plans and local political support, their development partners in the G8 did not deliver as promised. The poorer countries are annoyed but not

distraught. They know that sustainable development is still possible, that with the rise of new regional powers in Asia, the Middle East, and Latin America will also come new economic and development partners.

The world is therefore asking, "What comes after 2015?" The cynics, of course, will want to drop the whole effort, but cynicism will be concentrated in the United States, and even there, only in the dyspeptic part of the political and academic scene. Young scholars and development practitioners throughout academia in the United States are ready to assume the challenge of ending extreme poverty left by the preceding generations. More generally, around the world, the young generation will have no time and little taste for cynicism. They will not draw on old and worn-out development practices, but instead reach for new kinds of public-private partnerships, methods of community-based delivery, and new global networks of development practice and mutual support.

The deadline of 2015 should therefore not mark an occasion of retreat or handwringing, but rather the start of an even more intensive phase, when the effort is not "merely" to halve extreme poverty (as in MDG 1) but rather to end the scourge of extreme poverty entirely, for example by the year 2025. That bigger goal is well within our technological, financial, and organizational reach. It will fit the aspirations of a new and rising generation that is more wired and less patient with poor political and

economic performance. And it will be truly multipolar, with expertise and energies coming from all continents.

Our even greater challenge lies ahead, at least till mid-century: to achieve economic development for all in a manner that is environmentally sustainable and consistent with the increasingly rapid depletion of key resources, such as fossil fuels and fresh-water aquifers. Sustainable development is truly the great challenge of our time. How can a planet of between seven and nine billion people, all of whom are aspiring to meet their economic needs, live peacefully and consistently with nature? The MDGs represent a first effort at highly complex, multi-stakeholder global problem solving. They show how a global movement can form and gain strength around shared global goals, and how cynicism can be overcome by practical achievements on the ground. In short, the MDGs help to pave the way for our decades-long coming challenge of sustainable development on a crowded planet. ■