

# Hitting the Target or Missing the Point?

## Key Messages from an International Conference on the MDGs

**T**he Millennium Development Goals (MDGs) are an ambitious agenda for reducing poverty and improving lives that world leaders agreed at the UN Millennium Summit in September 2000. For each goal one or more targets have been set, most for 2015, using 1990 as a benchmark (see <http://www.un.org/millenniumgoals/>). Most governments and international agencies have publicly committed themselves to these goals; and many are making changes in their institutional structures that they hope will increase their effectiveness in meeting these goals.

In November 2003 IIED organised an international conference to explore how tensions between global targets and local needs can be used creatively – as opposed to leading to paralysis or mis-direction. Participants came from a wide variety of contexts, with strong representation from Southern organisations focusing on local sustainability and also from donor agencies and international institutions (see <http://www.meetingthemdgs.org>). The following messages came through strongly from the event:

### 1. Local actors and organisations are central to achieving most of the MDGs

The Goals bring together many of the aspirations of people living in poverty, such as an end to hunger and disease, schools for their children, secure homes with water and sanitation, and an end to discrimination (especially for women). While the MDGs are strong and clear about what the international community want to achieve, they are much less clear on the 'how'. Good local governance and community empowerment are central to achieving these goals. Poorer groups need to have greater voice within government to make it more accountable. Many participants stressed that it is low-income groups, their organisations and

federations that will help governments and international agencies achieve the MDGs. 'Poor people' are often seen as 'targets' for external assistance – but this misses the point. Poor people are active and energetic in trying to improve their living conditions. If their efforts are supported, it is much more likely the MDGs will be met.

### 2. There are many routes to achieving the MDGs, requiring innovation and change in current practice

In some cases, market-based approaches make best sense; elsewhere, local government reform is the obvious way forward. Some will be achieved through greater empowerment, voice and the rule of law; for others, changes to rules and regulations will provide the answer. Partnerships between different kinds of organisations may bring great benefits in some circumstances; while elsewhere, harnessing the political will of the state is essential to achieve progress.

### 3. Among national governments, MDGs have very different status: some have given them very high priority, while others give them little or no attention

Each government needs to find a means to achieve the MDGs through its own methods

#### KEY QUESTIONS:

- How can international agencies ensure support for the local processes that are needed to deliver most of the MDGs 'on the ground'? How can they encourage, catalyse and legitimate the diverse local processes through which the needs and priorities of the poor are identified and through which poverty is reduced?
- How can natural resource management be compatible with poverty reduction? Target-driven approaches can pay no attention to the process by which the targets are addressed (or achieved).
- Can accurate data be gathered with which to monitor progress towards the MDG targets? Some of the indicators chosen for monitoring the MDGs or their targets have serious deficiencies while for others, the data on which they are based is of such poor quality as to be of very limited value.
- If governments and international agencies focus more on the MDGs, what might get left out or marginalised – perhaps especially in regard to civil and political rights, decentralisation and democracy?



and processes. Achieving real progress and finding an effective balance between the Goals and the other dimensions of development and natural resource management they do not cover will require structural changes to the ways societies manage their economic, social and environmental affairs. Sustainable development means treating the issues of poverty, environmental management and economic development together, in the face of many difficult challenges.

But how can environmental protection, poverty alleviation and money-making objectives be integrated in practice; or trade-offs acceptable to all parties be developed, if integration is impossible? How can long-term needs really be balanced with short-term imperatives, especially when change is so unpredictable? How can local demands be treated alongside broader national and global requirements? And how do you get a decision-making process 'with the maximum possible participation' – as called for by Agenda 21 – that does not impose substantial costs in time or money? Strategies for sustainable development are about making and implementing such choices in realistic, effective and lasting ways.

#### **4. For donor agencies, perhaps the main challenge is institutional. How can they engage with bottom-up processes as well as supporting national governments?**

The increasing use of budgetary support can reinforce centralised political patronage. Mechanisms are needed by which donor funding can support bottom up processes and good local governance, in ways which strengthen accountability to local populations. International donors also need to find ways of encouraging policy coherence between the various goals, rather than each goal or target being pursued independently.

The Poverty Reduction Strategy process has become a central plank in donor relations with most low-income countries, and constitutes the main framework for discussion of aid priorities and national budgetary allocations. But there are limits to the capacity for the PRSP structure to support national efforts to realise the MDGs. For example, most poverty reduction strategies provide little attention to productive sectors of the economy (especially agriculture), and neglect constraints at international and global levels which hinder more productive and sustainable livelihoods for poor people.

#### **5. There are obvious, important changes needed at global level to meet the MDGs, which depend on rich-world governments shifting policy in major ways**

Targets on trade, debt relief and greenhouse gas reductions remain the weakest commitments in the MDGs, and have no time-bound goals associated with them. Goals 1 to 6 are oriented mainly towards governments in low- and middle-income nations. Goal 7 is meant to cover all nations, but its focus is primarily on water, environment and housing needs in low- and middle-income nations. Goal 7 should have included the greatest challenge to environmental sustainability, which involves getting rich nations and high-income groups to adopt more ecologically sustainable patterns of consumption and resource management. Goal 8 requires action by rich-world

governments involving much more than aid – it is about increasing market access, the removal of unjust subsidies for rich-world consumers and farmers, and debt relief that actually brings some relief. Goal 8 is the test of whether rich-world governments are serious about meeting the MDGs and recognise it's their turn to face targets.

#### **6. How can we assess whether the ambitious goals are being met, globally, nationally and locally?**

Central to the MDG process will be a monitoring and evaluation system that can offer simple clear guidance on progress being made. But in many instances the data available are very limited and of poor quality. Much of it is of no use for monitoring local action because it is based on national level samples; there are no accurate figures to monitor some of the key goals in many nations – such as who has 'safe' water and 'adequate' sanitation. But the impetus to improve the range and quality of the data needed for assessing progress must have at its core how best to support effective local action, including good governance and citizen-driven development. This includes developing monitoring systems which are more participatory and in which low-income groups are included in the design. If low-income groups and their organisations are recognised as key agents for achieving poverty reduction, monitoring and evaluation systems must change to reflect this.

#### **7. The key principles within the Millennium Declaration should not be forgotten in focusing on the MDGs – for these discuss the underlying causes of poverty and exclusion**

The Declaration acknowledges that heads of government have 'a collective responsibility to uphold the principles of human dignity, equality and equity at the global level' and presents Freedom, Equality, Solidarity, Tolerance, Respect for Nature and Shared Responsibility as 'fundamental values ... essential to international relations in the twenty-first century' (see <http://www.un.org/millennium/declaration/ares552e.pdf>). These shared principles will need a broader set of targets and indicators than is currently identified within the MDGs.

#### **8. Next steps for IIED**

Addressing the difficult challenges of meeting the MDGs is central to IIED's strategy over the next decade. With an extensive network of southern partners, we plan to assess critically the MDG process, focusing particularly on how local development processes can be strengthened. IIED is well placed to keep up-to-date with international responses and global initiatives surrounding the MDGs, as well as work stemming from the Millennium Project Task Forces (see <http://www.unmillenniumproject.org>). Working jointly with partners we can analyse options and recommend viable paths for national and local action aimed at the MDGs by showing what works and encouraging positive change.

**Further information is available on our dedicated website:**  
<http://www.meetingthemdgs.org> ●

#### **CONTACT:**