

The Millennium Development Goals and local processes: a summary

Any discussion of development assistance and of the role of international agencies has to consider the relevance of the Millennium Development Goals (MDGs) for at least two reasons: 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.

This publication focuses attention on the local processes that can deliver the MDGs with regard to poverty reduction and sustainable resource use. It is perhaps stating the obvious that the deprivations faced by “the poor” are experienced locally – inadequate food intakes, inadequate asset bases, daily challenges to health in poor quality homes, the inadequacies in provision for water, sanitation and drainage, the difficulties in getting proper health care (including emergency treatment for acute injuries or illnesses) and in getting children into schools (or in affording to keep them there), and the long hours worked, in often



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dangerous conditions. Many of the poorest rural and urban households live with the constant threat of violence and of eviction from the land they farm or occupy for housing. Tens of millions of households are particularly vulnerable to extreme weather events. Most of these deprivations will not be addressed by “more external investments”; rather, they need changes in the way external investments are made and in who determines what investments are made and how external resources are used; also changes in to whom those who make these decisions and investments are accountable. Improved “local governance” has a critical role in ensuring local development processes do address the MDGs within each locality.

To meet the MDGs, international agencies need to determine what role they can have in encouraging, supporting, catalyzing and legitimating the diverse local processes through which the needs and priorities of the poor are identified and addressed, and through which poverty is reduced and natural resource management is improved. This includes supporting solutions that the poor develop themselves, together with the processes by which they negotiate with government and other external agencies in doing so. This means supporting change on many fronts and recognizing the multiple interconnections between them.

This is not to suggest that only local processes are needed. Within all low- and middle-income nations, these kinds of local processes can benefit greatly from the economic changes that debt relief and more trade opportunities can bring. These local processes also have importance in ensuring that such economic changes are pro-poor, since rapid economic growth without the kinds of local processes noted above can bring rapid impoverishment for large sections of the (rural and urban) population.

The MDGs and IIED

The MDGs contain much of what IIED has been promoting for 30 years. At their core is a strong and explicit



commitment to reducing poverty and to integrating the principles of sustainable development into all nations' policies and programmes. This has been at the centre of IIED's work since 1972, when its President, Barbara Ward, pointed to the need "...to clearly define what should be done to maintain the earth as a place suitable for human life not only now but also for future generations."¹ During the 1970s, IIED sought to persuade international agencies to make explicit their commitment to many of the goals that are now among the MDGs, including commitments to sustainable development and to adequate water and sanitation for all. During the 1980s, IIED fought to keep the principles of sustainable development alive, as interest waned among both governments and international agencies – and this included our work to support the Brundtland Commission and its 1987 report on *Our Common Future*, as well as preparations for the UN's Earth Summit in 1992.

Changing processes to achieve desired outcomes

If all the MDGs are met by their target dates (mostly by 2015), this would be a significant change in the effectiveness of partnerships between development assistance agencies and governments in low- and middle-income nations. It would end the many setbacks of the 1990s (where many nations had increasing poverty and hunger, rising child mortality and declining per capita incomes). It would bring major improvements to the health of many of the poorest groups and significant reductions in income-poverty.

But there are also concerns that while the MDGs may have broadened the set of outcomes by which development assistance will be judged, there has been too little reflection on the processes that need to change to ensure these outcomes are achieved. Target-driven approaches may pay no attention to the process through which the targets are

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1. See the Introduction by Barbara Ward, in Ward, Barbara and Rene Dubos (1972), *Only One Earth: The Care and Maintenance of a Small Planet*, Andre Deutsch, London, 304 pages.



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addressed. IIED has always sought to base its promotion of sustainable development on knowledge gained from local engagement, working with partners in Africa, Asia and Latin America – for instance, through its work on sustainable livelihoods in agriculture and forestry, on provision for water and sanitation, and on community-driven development in urban areas. Such a local engagement allows a check on whether global programmes actually deliver what they promise. It also helps identify what changes are needed to make sure that they do. IIED’s work suggests that six points need particular attention, as outlined below.

How can international agencies ensure support for the local processes needed to achieve the MDGs “on the ground”? Examples of needed local processes are:

- ◆ Water and sanitation systems to ensure “adequate” provision, which are designed, built and managed locally; as the Conference documentation describes, government–NGO–community partnerships have a much better record of improving provision for low-income groups than privatization. In addition, the problem of inadequate provision is often incorrectly attributed to water stress and this often leads to inappropriate or ineffective “solutions”.
- ◆ Health care centres that are well staffed, well equipped and accessible to all, and that have the resources to radically cut infant, child and maternal mortality. Such centres also need to know how to take the lead in supporting local processes to reduce the incidence of malaria, tuberculosis, Aids and other major diseases, and help those infected with these diseases and their families to cope.
- ◆ Local schools that are also well staffed, well equipped and accessible to all, with resources to allow special provision to support gender equality and help the poorest families to keep their children at school.
- ◆ Local governments with the capacity and commitment to support such schools and health centres and



improvements in water and sanitation – and also to support local economic development and food security provision that benefit poorer groups. This also means local governments where the capacity for corruption and unaccountable actions is kept in check. The quality of local governance also influences whether resource conservation and poverty reduction objectives can be combined.

- ◆ Supporting solutions that the poor develop themselves, especially for significantly improving the lives of slum dwellers, together with the processes by which slum dwellers, rural smallholders and agricultural workers can negotiate better deals with government and other external agencies. The Conference documentation includes many examples of innovation in this – including a finance facility supported by DFID and Sida that allows federations of slum dwellers in India to develop a range of projects for improving housing conditions and basic services there, while working with local and national government (CLIFF – the Community-Led Infrastructure Finance Facility).

No international agency finds it easy to support a multitude of local institutions (including local governments and those of civil society) and to work with them in necessarily diverse ways. Bilateral and multilateral donor agencies were set up and structured to work directly with national governments, not diverse local actors. The challenge for international agencies in meeting the MDGs is as much to do with developing ways to support bottom-up processes accountable to low-income groups (and often initiated and managed by low-income groups) as it is to do with total financial flows.

How can natural resource management be compatible with poverty reduction? The only natural resource management indicators for monitoring the MDGs’ commitment to ensuring environmental sustainability are the proportion of land area covered by forest, and the ratio of area protected for maintenance of biological diversity to

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surface area. Whether the achievement of these goals benefits the poor depends very much on how this is done. It can be achieved through national governments and international agencies establishing controls on protected areas and forests (a “fences and fines” approach) in ways that exclude or displace the poor populations that draw resources from them. Some conservation organizations have adopted the rhetoric of poverty reduction and sustainable livelihoods without changing practices that actually exacerbate poverty on the ground and undermine local livelihoods. There is also the worry that “Ensuring environmental sustainability” is one among eight MDGs, when the achievement of many of the other goals depends on good natural resource management, especially eradicating extreme poverty and hunger and the targets relating to provision for water and sanitation.

Ridding the world of hunger requires action on many fronts. Three goals have to be combined: making agriculture more productive and ecologically sustainable; ensuring poor rural households have access to the land and water they need (most poverty and hunger is related to this); and ensuring all those who need to purchase food can afford it, as well as affording non-food necessities. Prosperous smallholder agriculture is important not only for rural development but also for urban development and for off-farm employment too. It often underpins the economies of expanding urban centres and creates new employment opportunities for rural and urban dwellers.

Getting agricultural development right will contribute to many of the MDGs. But to do so, and to make it ‘pro-poor’ requires:

- ◆ A more equitable distribution of land ownership and/or secure rights to use land and water resources;
- ◆ Policies and public investments that do not discriminate against small- and medium-sized farms and rural enterprises;
- ◆ Cost-reducing and resource-conserving technologies;



- ◆ Agricultural services and markets that work for all;
- ◆ Reasonable infrastructure and education; and
- ◆ For many agricultural products, the removal of trade barriers around the markets of high-income nations and of the large subsidies to rich country farmers.

The chapter on West Africa (chapter 7) highlights how successful family farms often are in providing livelihoods and in terms of production and productivity per hectare. But to make their incomes and their production more secure and their resource-use more sustainable, they need support:

- ◆ Globally, to curb their loss of income from trade barriers and subsidies paid to farmers in high-income nations; to improve market access for processed raw materials; and to address heightened risks of climatic variability;
- ◆ Regionally, to facilitate movement of people and goods throughout the region;
- ◆ Nationally, to promote agricultural development in ways that do not favour agribusiness and ignore smallholders; also curb imports of cheap foodstuffs that destroy markets for local food producers and strengthen decentralised government; and
- ◆ Locally, to encourage a fair and accountable system of local government, able to respond to diverse interest groups (farmers, agricultural labourers, pastoralists, urban dwellers...), manage collective resources and reform land tenure in ways that protect the rights of the poorer groups, including secondary right holders.

High-income nations 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 achievement of the MDGs. 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.

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Low- and middle-income 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. Imagine how much more progress towards most of the MDGs would have been achieved if the 10 million cotton producers in Africa were allowed fair prices and access to high-income markets, if clothing producers in low-income nations did not face large tariff barriers around the world’s most prosperous markets, if non-tariff barriers around these same markets were not used to keep out imports, if tariffs and other measures did not prevent “value added” in low-income nations, and if coffee producers had not seen their share of total income generated by coffee drop so dramatically. These represent not only hundreds of billions of dollars lost every year but also a loss of income that directly affects tens of millions of poor households. One of the key characteristics of prosperous smallholder agriculture in low- and middle-income nations is the number of jobs and enhanced incomes it supports through local forward and backward multiplier linkages. It can also help build stronger, more diversified economies. Also imagine the benefits for many of the poorest nations if the development finance institutions and export credit agencies in high-income nations were to base their financial decisions on development criteria, not domestic priorities. Finally consider the implications if governments in high-income nations could ensure that the investment activities and supply-chain relationships of their transnational companies in low and middle-income nations were bringing benefits to these countries rather than forcing out local producers.

Target-driven approaches with time-bound goals need accurate data to monitor progress. Target-driven approaches with time-bound goals place much emphasis on monitoring. But if this monitoring is based on inappropriate indicators or indicators based on inappropriate assumptions, it will not show which people reach adequate income levels or service provision levels. 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 are of such poor quality as to be of very limited value. For instance:

- ◆ For water and sanitation, there are no accurate data on who has “safe” and “sustainable” provision for water and adequate provision for sanitation in most nations. Existing data sources (mostly censuses and household surveys) only ascertain who has access to some facility (a well, a pipe, a latrine) and not the quality of provision, the price that users have to pay and the ease of access. Yet, the health benefits of water and sanitation depend on good quality, affordable, easily accessible provision.
- ◆ For eradicating extreme poverty and hunger, the “dollar a day” poverty line is not an appropriate indicator, in part, because the costs of avoiding extreme poverty are higher than this in many locations and, in part, because so much deprivation is not the result of inadequate income.
- ◆ For “Ensuring environmental sustainability”, too much attention is given to quantitative measures for protected areas and forest cover when the concern should also be the form protection takes (and the extent to which it benefits or excludes local people, including poor people living in or around protected areas who are dependent on resources there). With regard to what is protected, there is too much emphasis on Northern priorities towards rare or endangered species and habitats rather than on species that are valued by local people for food and medicines, or are of cultural significance.

If governments and international agencies focus more on the MDGs, what might be left out or marginalized – especially with regard to civil and political rights, decentralization and democracy? The UN Secretary-General recently noted that insufficient progress was being made in meeting the broader objectives of the Millennium Declaration on such issues as human rights, democracy and good governance; also on conflict resolution and the special needs of Africa.

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In addition, might the focus on the MDGs divert attention from changing a world economic system that locks many low- and middle-income nations into poverty? There is the worry that the governments in high-income nations will see the MDGs as the task only of their aid agencies, and so not address the needed policy changes towards fairer international trade regimes and debt relief. The MDGs include goals and targets related to stronger and more prosperous economies among low- and middle-income nations, including more international support for addressing the special needs of the least-developed countries, landlocked countries and small island states, and more attention to addressing debt problems and removing trade barriers. But the MDGs include no time-bound targets for the removal of the trade barriers around the economies of most high-income nations or for debt relief. Politically, it is easier for governments in most high-income nations to increase aid budgets than to reduce or remove the subsidies and other forms of protection around their agriculture and some of their industries, or to meet their commitments to reduce greenhouse gas emissions.

This booklet ends with a commentary on the difficulties currently facing Pakistan, including many that a focus on the MDGs may not resolve.