

## **India: The global laggard in meeting the MDGs\***

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It's raining development goals! As the period for the [Millennium Development Goals](#) draws to a close next year, discussions around these goals and what should replace them have reached fever pitch, with national governments, international organisations and representatives of civil society all participating.

Of course, before thinking of the next set of goals, the obvious prior requirement is to judge whether the MDGs themselves have been met, globally and in different regions and countries. It should be remembered that these goals and the associated targets were not all that ambitious – in most cases they amounted to little more than simple extrapolations of past global average trends. The choice of targets was seen as somewhat arbitrary, and they were not always equivalent in importance. Further, they were focussed on quantitative outcomes rather than the processes that assisted or retarded such outcomes.

For example, the first goal of reducing extreme poverty and hunger is so broad that it effectively contains several major goals all subsumed under this one head. This became especially so evident when the critically important target of “full and productive employment and decent work for all, including women and young people” was added to the already major targets of halving the proportion of people living in extreme poverty and the proportion of hungry (or undernourished) people. To make all this part of only one goal seems a bit odd, say in comparison to Goal 2 (achieving universal primary education) or Goals 4 and 5 (reducing child mortality and improving maternal health) or Goal 6 (combating HIV-AIDS, malaria and other diseases), which are more limited in scope.

Other MDGs are inadequately delineated by the specific targets chosen. Thus, Goal 3 (promoting gender equality and empowering women) has been reduced to what many have seen as extremely limited indicators: achieving gender equality at different levels of education; reducing vulnerable employment of women; and increasing their participation and representation in politics and government. Similarly Goal 7 (ensuring environmental sustainability) is a mix of good intentions (integrate principles of sustainable development into country policies and reduce biodiversity losses) and specific but limited targets (halving the proportion of the population without sustainable access to safe drinking water and basic sanitation, and improving the lives of at least 100 million slum dwellers).

Whatever their limitations, it is certainly true that the MDGs at least provided a framework for interpreting and assessing progress in human conditions across the world. The UN's [MDG Report 2014](#) provides a very useful summary of the achievements of the various goals in the final year before they are supposed to be met.

It clearly shows that, while there has been significant progress in some areas (such as universal education) some of the goals and targets are unlikely to be met at the global level, especially with regard to reduction of hunger, more good quality employment generation and improving maternal health. This lack of success is largely because of poor progress in two regions: Sub Saharan Africa and South Asia.

Within South Asia, the role of India obviously looms large, and indeed because of the size of its population it matters for the entire world. A large part of the success of the MDGs is because East Asia (and especially China) has met them well in advance – and the lack of success is largely due to the lack of sufficient progress in India. So it is safe to say that these goals cannot be met globally if India alone does not meet them.

The UN MDG Report 2014 shows that progress on reducing income poverty has been slowest in South Asia, largely due to India's relatively poor performance based on extrapolating past trends. Around one –third of the world's extremely poor people reside in India, according to this Report. However, the India Country Report on the MDGs from the Ministry of Statistics and Programme Implementation in India gives the opposite impression, suggesting that this particular target has already been met in India, because of the significant recent decline in income poverty from 37 per cent in 2011-12 to 22 per cent in 2011-12. Of course there are continuing concerns with looking at income poverty alone, which range from the multidimensionality of poverty to the problematic and changing methods of estimating the incidence of income poverty.

More worrying is the evidence on hunger, where once again South Asia and Sub Saharan Africa are the worst performers, comparing very badly with the impressive progress made in other parts of developing Asia. Even this official GOI Report admits that progress on nutrition has been poor, to the extent that the target of halving the incidence of hunger is definitely not likely to be met. Outcome indicators of child undernutrition remain significantly above target – and once again nearly one-third of the underweight children in the world live in South Asia, dominantly in India.

The GoI's Report on India does not contain information on employment trends even though this is identified as one of the targets of Goal 1. Maybe this is because the indicators for this target are so dreadful for India. The UN's global Report highlights this, noting that 73 per cent of men and 80 per cent of women in South Asia are involved in "vulnerable employment", with scarcely any improvement in this over the period since 2000.

Primary education enrolment has improved across the world, including in India, and is one of the few targets that is likely to be met. However, dropout rates remain high even in primary school and in South Asia they appear to have shown little improvement.

The goal of promoting gender equality and empowering women still remains a distant dream in most regions. The UN Report shows that gender disparities are prevalent at higher levels of education and there is significant evidence of gender discrimination in labour markets in all regions. In India we have other evident concerns: the decline in economic empowerment reflected in falling recognised work participation, the very low political representation (less than 12 per cent of elected representatives in Parliament), the low and still falling sex ratio, and the continued incidence of violence against women in different forms.

Child mortality and maternal mortality continue to be very important concerns, and once again India is an underperformer in comparative global terms. The world will not meet the target of reducing the under-five mortality rate by two-thirds largely because of Sub Saharan Africa and South Asia. The GoI's Report notes that in India, the infant mortality rate (IMR) has reduced by nearly 50 per cent during 1990- 2012,

with the present level at 42. On such a trend, the IMR would be 40 deaths per 1000 live births in 2015, while the MDG target is 27. It is true that recently the pace of decline has accelerated, but this is still not enough to meet the declared target.

Similarly the maternal mortality rate (MMR) in South Asia is estimated to be way above the 2015 target for the region. The India Report suggests that at current trends India will reach an MMR of 140 by 2015, falling short by as many as 31 points. This reflects poor nutrition and sanitation conditions for mothers, low age at marriage, inadequate attendance of skilled personnel at delivery and many other related problems that should have been direct concerns of policy makers.

Another area in which the India performance is poor if not embarrassing is in sanitation and conditions of slum dwellers. Improved sanitation is still more talked about than acted upon: nearly two-thirds of the estimated billion people globally who have to rely on upon defecation reside in India. The NSS 2012 revealed that 59 per cent of rural households and 9 per cent of urban households had no latrine facilities - and even when such facilities exist, access to water remains a huge problem. Meanwhile, the Census 2011 has reported 37 per cent growth in the number of slum households since 2001, with around 18 per cent of the urban population now living in identified slums.

For Indian observers, therefore, these Reports on the progress of the MDGs are sources of shame and concern. They should serve as wake-up calls for our leaders, but the sad truth is that there have been many such wake up calls in the past few years, and the people who matter do not seem to have been listening.

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