

The Millennium Development Goals

Events: In September 2000, the largest gathering of world leaders to date took place, as 147 heads of state and government met at the Millennium Summit in New York. The Summit concluded with the adoption of the Millennium Declaration, which, in turn, provided the framework for the Millennium Development Goals (MDGs or MDG-8), a long- and medium-term development agenda approved by UN General Assembly in the December. The eight headline MDGs are: Goal 1: Eradicate extreme poverty and hunger; Goal 2: Achieve universal primary education; Goal 3: Promote gender equality and empower women; Goal 4: Reduce child mortality; Goal 5: Improve maternal health; Goal 6: Combat HIV/AIDS, malaria and other diseases; Goal 7: Ensure environmental sustainability; and Goal 8: Develop a global partnership for development. All 193 UN member states and at least 23 international organizations have agreed to achieve these goals by the year 2015.

Significance: The purpose of the MDGs was to inject renewed urgency into global development efforts by establishing challenging targets in each of the key human development areas. The MDGs are focused not only on transferring wealth, but also on changing the rules of the global economy to remove structural inequalities. This is particularly emphasized by Goal 8 (the only goal that does not have fixed targets), which encompasses the goal of establishing an open trading and financial system that is rule-based, predictable and non-discriminatory. The significance of the MDGs is usually judged by the extent to which key goals have been met, or are on target to be met. On this basis, the record is mixed. In the Millennium Development Goals Report 2012, the UNDP concluded that achieving the MDGs was 'challenging but possible'. Important successes include that the proportion of people living on less than \$1.25 a day fell from 47 per cent in 1999 to 24 per cent in 2008 (with, for the first time, poverty rates declining in all developing regions, including sub-Saharan Africa); the target of halving the proportion of people without access to improved sources of water has been met; and, by 2010, the net enrolment rate for children in primary education in the developing regions had reached 90 per cent. However, among the concerns



raised were that maternal mortality rates and the number of people living with HIV/AIDS have remained stubbornly high, and that, in 2011, core development aid fell in real terms for the first time in more than a decade.

The MDGs have, nevertheless, been subject to wider criticism. For instance, the absence of goals related to political and cultural rights, and the lack of strong objectives and indicators for equality, mean that the MDGs paint a partial and possibly misleading picture of development. Similarly, where progress has been made, it may either have been brought about by factors unrelated to the MDGs, or reflect developments in a limited range of countries. Improved growth in sub-Saharan Africa may thus largely be explained by high commodity prices, while the goal of halving the number of people living on less than \$1.25 a day was achieved (three years ahead of target) simply by the economic emergence of China. In addition, it has been difficult to gather reliable data to monitor progress, both because of the use of local, and often inflated, data on poverty reduction levels, and because, especially with health-related goals, progress is impossible to measure in practice. Among the deeper structural problems that have been associated with the MDGs are that, being devised by the UN and relying heavily on the global North to provide more generous assistance to the global South, they constitute an essentially 'top-down' approach to promoting development, and are, anyway, guided by a liberal model of development that has brought mixed benefits to the developing world.