
Despite cynicism and photo ops, this week should see real progress on poverty alleviation | MDG blog

Around 140 world leaders are arriving at the United Nations today and in the next few days for this week's focus on the Millennium Development Goals (MDGs). The timing is crucial, as the MDGs have reached the halfway mark of the 15-year period from 2000 to 2015. Monday's sessions will focus on the MDGs in Africa while on Thursday the political leaders will take on the MDGs worldwide.

Secretary General Ban Ki-Moon will highlight some great success stories, including the scaled-up war on malaria. He will also point to urgent areas where much more needs to be done, and fast, such as helping subsistence farmers to grow more food in Africa. The Secretary General's Africa MDG Taskforce has identified a strategic roadmap for MDG success in Africa.

Throughout the week, dozens of special events with government leaders, policy makers, scientists, CEOs, and celebrities will highlight the proven investments and strategies that can overcome hunger, poverty, food and nutrition security, AIDS, malaria, water, climate change, and more. The challenge is turning these strategic ideas and local successes into national, continental, and indeed global successes. If the MDG week is successful, we should end it with a much clearer roadmap on how to "scale up" successful strategies to achieve the MDGs.

It's easy to be cynical about grand challenges like the MDGs. When world leaders assembled at the UN in September 2000 on the eve of the new millennium and adopted eight goals to fight poverty, hunger, disease, and deprivation by 2015, most of the leaders at the UN and those in public paying attention probably expected that the goals would sink out of sight by the next week's news cycle. Global goals

are for photo ops, not for grown-ups, is a popular view of our cynical age.

Yet something has happened which brings world leaders back time and again to declare their commitment to the MDGs. Part of it is the stark reality that 10 million children under the age of 5 die each year of extreme poverty. Even the most hardened of cynics know that this stark fact is dangerous for our hopes for peace and stability, as well as for sustaining human values and quality of life on a crowded planet.

Part of the continued interest is the understanding that the MDGs are not fantasies but practically achievable objectives. Measles deaths have been reduced by 91 per cent in Africa since 2000 through MDG-based initiatives. Malaria deaths have plummeted in recent years in Rwanda, Sao Tome, Zanzibar, Ethiopia, Kenya, and other countries, because of the mass distribution of bed nets and effective medicines. Food production has roughly doubled in Malawi because of an ingenious voucher program for seed and fertiliser for impoverished farmers.

A third reason for the MDG staying power is that poor people and their governments have taken seriously the call to fight poverty. Throughout Africa, governments and NGOs have devised specific plans of action – to grow more food; train community health workers; extend coverage of medicines for AIDS, TB, malaria and other killers; pave roads; and install solar-power pumps for safe water and irrigation. The plans have been made. Special financing mechanisms like the Global Fund to Fight AIDS, TB, and Malaria have been devised, and have proven their worth.

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The laggards in the struggle for the MDGs are not the poor countries or their ostensibly corrupt governments. The laggards are the rich world, so full of promises and high rhetoric and so low on delivery. The MDGs are falling short because of a lack of promised financing to put in place the clinics, schools, roads, power, and other investments needed for their success. Six years ago, the rich countries pledged in Monterrey, Mexico to “make concrete efforts toward the international target of 0.7 per cent of GNP in official development assistance.” Yet the United States stands at 0.16 per cent, Japan at 0.17, Italy at 0.19, Canada at 0.28, Germany at 0.37, and France at 0.39.

In a week in which the US taxpayers will put out almost \$1,000bn for a bank bailout and a year in which the US will spend \$700bn on the military, it's hard to credit the idea that the promised development aid is simply unaffordable. Wall Street bonuses in recent years, topping \$30bn per year, have exceeded all of the world's annual aid to Africa. The shortfall in meeting the MDGs is not their great expense or their lack of feasibility. It is, rather, the short-sighted choices we've been making in the rich world – to fight wars and to stuff the pockets of rich bankers, the ones who are looking for their own handouts this week.

The MDGs are still alive because they are vital to humanity and because they can still be achieved. This week will determine whether the rich and the poor can find the common ground and the practical means for success that they promised the world eight years ago.