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Global poverty

Are we nearly there yet?

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Mid-way through the UN's drive against poverty remains half crusade and half charade.



Make poverty history is a compelling slogan. Halve it by 2015, in contrast, is a measurable commitment. That is the logic behind the Millennium Development Goals (MDGs), targets in the struggle against global deprivation, disease and illiteracy, set by leaders at the United Nations in 2000.

The goals claim to convert slogans into bankable pledges, complete with number and date. The world has resolved to cut deaths from childbirth by three-quarters from 1990 to 2015. The percentage of people without safe water will fall by half; infant mortality by a third.

The 2000 summit was unprecedented in its pulling power. But many targets were recycled for the second or third time. The 1980s were supposed to bring water and sanitation to the great unwashed; the 1990s were supposed to provide 'education for all'. Surely, then, no one would take the MDGs seriously? Surely, they would quietly fade away like so many other turn-of-the-millennium fantasies?

But they have remained surprisingly prominent, becoming a kind of gospel for aid organisations. The UN cherishes them. But the goals also converted the UN's rivals in the aid business (the World Bank, the World Trade Organisation, and the International Monetary Fund).

As a result, the MDGs can justly claim to generate a buzz about duties governments might otherwise neglect. After all ministers in poor countries have many other concerns and saving mothers in childbirth or children from diarrhoea does not always command full attention. The goals ensure some international recognition for politicians who can make progress on such things.

Sadly, they cannot do what they claim, which is to provide credible benchmarks against which to judge governments. Set for the world, the targets do not fit any particular country. China had almost met the target of halving poverty from its 1990 level by the time it was set. Sub-Saharan Africa will fall short of all the goals, despite its economy growing quicker than it has for a generation and is putting children in school faster than any region. Some goals cannot be met, others cannot be measured. Poor countries collect no reliable numbers on deaths from malaria or childbirth. The goals are supposed to be everyone's responsibility, which means they are no one's.

Some MDG zealots think the responsibility for achieving them is more clear-cut. They work out what needs to be done to meet the goals; add up the costs, then demand rich government's foot the bill. Only a lack of generosity separates poor countries from the 2015 targets, they argue.