

IN FOCUS
***Funding Transformative Development through Millennium
Development Rights***

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How far has the international community come in the last ten years towards achieving the Millennium Development Goals (MDGs)? How far must we still go?

This past September, the United Nations Summit on the MDGs brought together government officials, donor representatives and non-governmental organizations (NGOs) to engage in an assessment of these questions.

As the United Nations Secretary-General Ban Ki-moon recently warned: “With five years to go to the target date of 2015, the prospect of falling short of achieving the Goals because of a lack of commitment is very real.”¹



The MDGs seek to make measurable progress in critical areas facing the world today, areas like extreme poverty and hunger; universal primary education; gender equality and women’s empowerment; child mortality; maternal health; HIV/AIDS, malaria and other diseases; and environmental sustainability. Such ambition for breaking the chains of poverty is desperately needed, and donor agencies in the United States and around the world have been working to support a range of activities and programmes aimed at realising the MDGs by 2015. Still, the world’s prognosis for achieving the MDGs is not good.

How the MDGs Continue to Fail International Human Rights Standards

The September Summit concluded with the adoption of a global action plan to achieve the eight anti-poverty goals by their 2015 target date. While the 32-page outcome document recognizes at a cursory level “that the respect for and promotion and protection of human rights is an integral part of effective work towards achieving the Millennium Development Goals,” the MDGs themselves continue to fail at meaningfully reflecting international human rights standards, particularly in the area of economic, social and cultural rights. Human rights advocates continue to be skeptical about whether the international community is serious about changing the face of poverty as we know it. Without deeply integrating a rights-based approach to development, attempts to advance human development have limited power

¹ Report of the UN Secretary-General, ‘Keeping the promise: a forward-looking review to promote an agreed action agenda to achieve the Millennium Development Goals by 2015,’ February 2010.

to transform societies over the long run. In fact, we can already see how this is true even for those countries that *are* able to achieve some of the targets and goals of the MDGs.

Take Brazil as one example. Often acclaimed for already having met its targets with respect to Goal 1 on eradicating extreme hunger and poverty, Brazil can also claim 45 million people living in poverty.² Afro-Brazilians and indigenous peoples, particularly those living along the Amazon basin, continue to be disproportionately represented amongst the poorest of the poor in Brazil.³ Brazilian NGOs have noted that progress on achieving Goal 1 has been largely concentrated in the already richer non-Amazonian States of the South East, in effect only leaving the Amazonian States further and further behind.

Thailand has also already achieved most of the MDGs well in advance of 2015, and has even set targets that go beyond the original goals.⁴ However, as the United Nations Development Programme (UNDP) has noted “some regions and groups are being left behind, and disparities are striking.”⁵ Concerns have been raised about the quality of programmes being provided in order to meet the goals, like education, which may not be meaningful in practice and which are also not reaching especially vulnerable and marginalized groups within Thai society.

Goal 5 of the MDGs on maternal health is also especially telling. Around the world, one woman dies every 90 seconds in pregnancy or childbirth – that’s more than 350,000 women every year. According to the United Nations Population Fund (UNFPA), the lifetime risk of dying in pregnancy and childbirth in Africa is 1 in 22, while it is 1 in 120 in Asia and 1 in 7,300 in developed countries. Goal 5 of the MDGs aims to improve maternal health through reducing by three quarters the maternal mortality ratio and achieving, by 2015, universal access to reproductive health. Yet, of all the goals, Goal 5 has seen by far the *least* progress, despite the fact that most maternal deaths are in fact entirely preventable. As Mahmoud Fathalla, former President of the International Federation of Obstetricians and Gynecologists noted, “Women are not dying of diseases we can’t treat. They are dying because societies have yet to make the decision that their lives are worth saving.”

These trends point to a profound development deficit in terms of human rights.

The Benefits of the Human Rights-Based Approach to Development

There is good news; evidence of the positive and lasting benefits of the human rights based approach to development, which has the power to profoundly transform the lives of the poor. In a 2007 review by major donor agencies like Care International, DFID (the United Kingdom’s Department for International Development), and Save the Children of development projects either incorporating a rights based approach to development, or not, revealed that “working with RBAs [rights based approaches] to development adds value and demonstrates a greater range and depth of positive impacts, which are more likely to be sustained over time, than does working with non-RBAs.”⁶ On the MDGs specifically,

² Track Brazil’s progress at: www.mdgmonitor.org (last accessed 29 September 2010).

³ Helen Mendes, ‘Millennium Development Goals “beyond Brazil’s reach,”’ The Science and Development Network, 30 April 2007. See also: Nathalie Beghin, ‘Notes on Inequality and Poverty in Brazil: Current Situation and Challenges,’ Oxfam International Background Paper, 2008.

⁴ Track Thailand’s progress at: www.mdgmonitor.org (last accessed 29 September 2010).

⁵ United Nations Development Programme – Thailand, <http://www.undp.or.th/focusareas/mdgprogramme.html> (last accessed 29 September 2010).

⁶ UK Interagency Group on Human Rights Based Approaches, ‘The Impact of Rights-based Approaches to Development: Evaluation / Learning Process: Bangladesh, Malawi and Peru,’ December 2007. Available online at: http://www.crin.org/docs/Inter_Agency_rba.pdf (last accessed 29 September 2010).

the same donor report highlights that “[i]t would be possible to reach the MDGs while still ignoring the “worst” 20% of poor people in the world, that is, the poorest and most marginalized (around 500 million people). This is not acceptable in RBAs, which work to increase equity and improve justice, for all people, without discrimination.”⁷

The Idea of Millennium Development Rights

What we need now is to urgently move from the notion of Millennium Development Goals to the idea *Millennium Development Rights* (MDRs). MDRs, defined as the full body of indivisible human rights that contribute to and are necessary for human development, would go far in improving the lives of the poor. To see how the MDGs could be transformed into MDRs, consider one example.

Target 10 of Goal 7 aims to halve by 2015 the proportion of people without sustainable access to safe drinking water and basic sanitation. Yet it fails to include measures to ensure non-discrimination, access to information, participation and accountability – all issues dealt with specifically by the human rights framework. People in poor neighborhoods and settlements pay more for water, and get less adequate and consistent supplies. If the human right to water is used to complement the MDGs, development initiatives would target the most disadvantaged, including the poor, rather than those to whom services can more easily be provided and ‘counted’. Furthermore, vulnerable and marginalized groups, such as the poor, racial minorities and women, would be better able to participate in decisions aimed at achieving Target 10 and therefore shape a more effective program of action.

How Funders Can Help

Funders can help enormously in this transformation simply by ensuring that their grantmaking consistently embraces and prioritizes a rights-based approach to development. The way forward on the MDGs themselves demands a two-pronged strategy. First, funders can help to ensure that their grantees not only step up their efforts to realise the current MDGs, but that the work of their grantees: 1) clearly and demonstrably prioritizes the most vulnerable and marginalised in the achievement of the goals, 2) is linked to international human rights standards, 3) ensures non-discrimination and gender equality, 4) promotes the participation of all relevant stakeholders, and 5) ensures accountability. Second, and importantly in the long term, funders can also support organizations in their efforts to design and advocate for a post-2015 global framework on human development which is centred on the notion of *Millennium Development Rights*. Work in this area needs to be supported now if real impact is to be seen by 2015.

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