The Millennium Development Goals (MDGs) project comes to an end this year. These global human development objectives were agreed by the United Nations in 2000. Eight goals, and 21 specific targets, were intended to improve the lives of millions of people in developing countries over 15 years. So, what has been achieved and what comes next?

Big problems, bold targets

The MDG targets had to be bold. At the time they were set:

- 1.2 billion people lived on less than $1 per day
- 850 million people suffered from hunger
- about 20% of adults were illiterate

The most well known targets are:

- **Target 1A** Halve the proportion of people living on less than $1.25 a day.
- **Target 1C** Halve the proportion of people who suffer from hunger.
- **Target 2A** Ensure that, by 2015, all children can complete a full course of primary schooling.
- **Target 4A** Reduce by two-thirds the under-five mortality rate.

Top-down goals?

The goals and targets have been criticised for being top-down. As they were centrally set by the UN, they perhaps did not reflect the needs of ordinary people. Nevertheless, a global partnership to achieve the goals emerged. National governments set their own country-specific targets in the context of the MDGs. Global IGOs such as the World Bank, World Food Programme and World Health Organization directed development programmes in line with the MDGs. Aid from developed countries, and NGOs, also supported the goals.

Achieving the MDGs required money. Figure 1 shows that, beginning in the early 2000s, there was a dramatic ramping-up of aid (called official development assistance, or ODA) from the rich OECD countries and some others. The growth in aid has levelled off, partly as a result of the global financial crisis. The debt of some developing countries was also reduced via the Highly Indebted Poor Countries (HIPC) initiative. In theory, less debt and more aid would allow developing nations to move closer to their targets.

![Aid (US $ billions)](source: OECD StatExtracts)

Figure 1 Official development assistance to the developing world, 1990–2013.

2015 was the end-date for the Millennium Development Goals. Did they succeed?
Progress?

Assessing MDG progress is challenging, because of the number of targets and countries involved. Table 1 shows a snapshot for two regions and three targets. While most east Asian (EAP) countries have achieved the extreme poverty target, 18 in sub-Saharan Africa (SSA) are seriously off-target. Both regions have made less progress towards the hunger target, and the picture for maternal mortality is even worse.

Table 1 Progress towards the MDGs in two regions

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Progress (number of countries in region)</th>
<th>Extreme poverty</th>
<th>Hunger</th>
<th>Maternal mortality</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>SSA</td>
<td>EAP</td>
<td>SSA</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Target met</td>
<td>11</td>
<td>9</td>
<td>11</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Sufficient progress</td>
<td>5</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>4</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Insufficient progress</td>
<td>5</td>
<td>0</td>
<td>4</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Moderately off target</td>
<td>2</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>1</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Seriously off target</td>
<td>18</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>24</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>


Overall, progress has been good in some regions (southeast and east Asia) but not in others (Africa). Brazil has met or surpassed all of its targets, Benin has failed on almost all.

Two points to note

China

Globally, about two-thirds of the progress in poverty reduction is accounted for by one country — China. Take out China’s stratospheric statistics, and the global picture is much less flattering.

Proportion vs number

The poverty and hunger targets are relative ones: they are about reducing the proportion of poor and hungry people. However, the number of poor and hungry people in 2015 is similar to that in 1990 because the world has roughly 2 billion more people now.

- 1.8 billion people lived on under $1.25 per day in 1990, versus 1.2 billion today.
- 800 million people are hungry today versus 990 million in 1990.

These numbers suggest that despite some progress, very large numbers of people still need a global framework for development.

Post-2015 development agenda

The process of deciding what, if anything, should replace the MDGs after 2015 began at the UN Rio Summit in 2012. The current proposal is for Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs) with some targets similar to the MDGs, such as ending poverty and hunger, and others focused more on combating the threat of global warming and protecting oceans and forests from further degradation. In September 2015 the UN will make some key decisions on this. Watch this space.

Questions for debate

1. The process of deciding what should replace the MDGs is under way. What would be your ‘top three’ goals for the period 2015–30?
2. Look at Figure 1, particularly the period after 2008. Is further reduction in hunger and poverty likely if the trends in ODA continue as shown?
3. The UK recently met a target (first set in 1970) of giving 0.7% of the country’s GDP as aid to developing countries. Only four other OECD countries meet this target (Denmark, Sweden, Norway and Luxembourg). Should this money be spent in the UK instead?

Weblinks to follow up

The UN website on proposed Sustainable Development Goals: http://tinyurl.com/nnkb2lz
ODA statistics can be explored at: http://www.oecd-ilibrary.org/statistics
The World Bank monitors progress towards the MDGs: http://data.worldbank.org/mdgs

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