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Beatriz Gil-Schwandl | The United Nations  
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or Tangible Ambitions?

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# The United Nations Millennium Development Goals: Platonic Ideals or Tangible Ambitions?

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## **ABSTRACT**

With less than four years left before the 2015 deadline, though their cause is tirelessly being championed by the United Nations and other international organizations, the Millennium Development Goals are worryingly still seen by many as vague and elusive objectives not really anchored in reality.

In order to provide a clearer picture of how attainable these Goals are, this paper aims to provide an assessment of them as well as of their individual targets so far, and is therefore structured accordingly. It will examine where these ambitions have succeeded and failed and endeavor to explain why, as well as highlight areas which are being overlooked and suggest courses of action that could boost the achievement of the MDGs in time to prove their viability.

Keywords: Millennium Development Goals, United Nations, Hunger, Poverty, Education, Environmental Sustainability, Gender Equality, Mortality, Global Partnership

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## Introduction

In 2000, all the member states of the United Nations joined together in an unprecedented union to pledge their commitment to the Millennium Declaration with the ambition of achieving, by 2015, the eight goals it underlined. Made up of several smaller targets, each of these goals was elaborated with the objective of bringing economic and social development to the world's developing nations, touching on a series of wide-ranging issues that are believed to be holding back progress in the countries who need it the most.

Now, less than four years are left before the deadline knocks at the door, yet there is little mainstream media coverage in what concerns these ambitions, whose boldness and global impact should have turned them into topics of heated and constant world-wide debates. Moreover, policymakers' eerie silence on the matter since the financial downturn of 2008 is not encouraging either: as even the world's most developed nations struggle to stay afloat, there seems to be precious little energy left to expend on solving other countries' problems, especially those that are seen to yield little power and relevance.

Yet this instinctive (if understandable) self-centeredness is a perilous and foolhardy stance to take. Naturally, Ban Ki-Moon's enthusiastic call to this noble cause is fraught with a very valid moral imperative to free fellow humans from extreme hardship and is thus a worthwhile endeavor from an humanitarian standpoint alone, but it also has several more practical and calculable implications that make it a commitment worth pursuing for developed nations. The modern world has made way for a framework in which events and issues now have a worldwide repercussion regardless of their origins, and impact us all in some way or another. Ignoring the developing world's plight is thus laying the foundations of an explosive situation in which developed countries' economies and societies will suffer from the effects of poorer nations' strains, such as poverty and illness, which are likely to overflow their local and national confines and become a problem on an international scale. As a result, these goals must be viewed and



treated as global issues and efforts and accountability must be embraced by the international community: it is only through joint action that these goals will ever be met.

Presently, we will examine each of the Millennium Development Goals and measure their progress so far. It is worth noting that there is a certain difficulty in obtaining accurate assessment as data can be unreliable and progress is rarely homogenous within countries, though that is the UN's chosen method of measuring evaluation. Moreover, it is crucial to keep in mind that these targets have been established prescriptively and are, in essence, a series of assumptions about how different countries and peoples ought to strive for in order to achieve their full human potential according to benchmarks that, whilst sensible and logical, are not absolute.

## **GOAL 1: ERADICATE EXTREME POVERTY & HUNGER**

**Target:** Halve the population whose income is less than 1\$/day

The ability of developing countries, particularly Asian ones, have demonstrated in sustaining economic growth means that halving the number of people subsisting below the absolute poverty threshold is an attainable ambition. The first half of the decade's steady growth resulted in the reduction of four hundred million people living on less than \$1.25/day between 1990 and 2005, leading the poverty rate to drop from 46% to 27% during those fifteen years.

In spite of the financial crisis in developed countries and subsequent decline in global growth, the growth experienced by developing countries is nevertheless still sufficient to meet this particular target. The World Bank, who is in the process of implementing an upgraded poverty projection assessment, which will take into account the fluctuations of food and fuel prices, predicts that less than 900 million people will be living in extreme poverty by 2015. Whilst it is still a



high number in absolute terms, it paves the way and nourishes hope for further improvements.

It is important to highlight that progress has not been homogenous across the globe. Asia, with China and India standing out, has experienced the most radical growth spurt: the poverty rates are predicted to plummet to 5% and 22% respectively by 2015. Sub-Saharan Africa showed promise too, and the poverty rate is predicted to drop to 36% or less by 2015. Nevertheless, it is worth noting that obstacles remain in obtaining accurate and up-to-date information on the evolution of global poverty, especially in Sub-Saharan Africa where sufficient data is unavailable in less than 50% of the countries, thus making important yet subtle variations in trends difficult to discern and react to.

**Target:** Achieve full and productive employment and decent work for all, including women and young people.

The economic crisis has taken its toll on the labour market and thereby slowed down progress in employment and poverty. Indeed, it is estimated that there were approximately 40 million more poor living in extreme poverty in 2009 than pre-crisis predications led to anticipate. In most of the developing world conditions of employment are precarious and many find themselves in vulnerable positions when faced by unreliable working conditions, lack of formal contracts or social protection as well as low wages.

However, the landscape presented by the developing world is less bleak than anticipated. After the initial impact of the crisis, employment rates picked up again and more or less recovered losses by the end of 2010, containing the effects of the economic downturn and achieving an approximately neutral balance overall, except in sub-Saharan Africa Western Asia, where the outcome has been negative.



**Target:** Halve the proportion of people who suffer from hunger

In spite of the decrease in extreme poverty levels, the hunger target remains elusive. The relatively slow but steady decline of the previous years came at a halt after 2002, and has remained plateauing at 16% ever since. An initiative to tackle this issue has been undertaken by the Food and Agriculture Organization (FAO), with the aim of reviewing existing programs and policies and improving their efficiency<sup>1</sup>, but policymakers have so far failed to devote enough energy to explain the discrepancy between the poverty and hunger levels, so that adequate solutions have yet to be found.

Indeed, whilst East Asia the Caribbean and Latin America could still reach the target in time, Southern Asia and Sub-Saharan are not expected to be successful if the status quo persists. In the latter, the famine presently occurring in the Horn of Africa is the result of a combination of mismanagement, economic vulnerability and sheer ill luck (mainly droughts and bad harvests). Some short-term relief programs have already been put in place to help alleviate the crisis, and in the United Kingdom the Department for International Development has pledged to donate 38 million pounds to the World Food Program, along with launching emergency appeals. Nevertheless, it is estimated that over 10 million people in the affected parts of Africa (i.e. Somalia, Ethiopia, Kenya, Djibouti and Uganda) will suffer from severe and continuous food shortages<sup>2</sup>. It is therefore clear that although swift, palliative action is not sufficient, and permanent longer-term measures are essential to create strategies to combat and cope with hunger emergencies.

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<sup>1</sup> Ghosh J., “The Truth about the Global Demand for Food” [Online], Available: <http://www.guardian.co.uk/global-development/poverty-matters/2011/aug/02/global-demand-for-food>

<sup>2</sup> United Nations Office for the Coordination of Humanitarian Affairs, “Horn of Africa summit calls for joint action to help millions”, *OCHA* (2011) [online] Available at: <http://www.unocha.org/top-stories/all-stories/horn-africa-summit-calls-joint-action-help-millions>



Children are hunger's worst victims: according to the 2011 MDG report, ¼ of under five year olds in the developing world is undernourished, though there has been a somewhat satisfactory reduction of 7 percentage points between 1990 and 2009. The nutrition problem is pervasive and multi-faceted: lack of hygiene combined with malnutrition bolsters the apparition of diseases such as diarrhea, which aggravate undernourishment. Thus, it is important to not only focus on providing sufficient and nutritious food, but to also take action to implement preventive measures concerning proper sanitation and to provide adequate maternal and infant care.

The existence of significant disparities within regions is also worth pondering. Unsurprisingly, economic factors play an important role: children from low-income households are not only the worst afflicted by under-nutrition but are also a category that has made almost no progress since 1995 in Southern Asia, whereas their wealthier peers have benefited from a 33% improvement. Moreover, those in rural areas are worse hit than those in urban ones. An illuminating illustration is provided by India, where the World Bank estimates 43% of children are underweight. Nutrition problems are still rampant, mainly due not to the lack of food but to the lack of efficiency and transparency of the programs in place. The largest scheme consists of heavily subsidized food distribution, which creates a culture of corruption: it is estimated that only around 50% of the food subsidized by the government and NGOs reaches the mouths of those who need it<sup>3</sup>. Thereby, the Indian example exposes some of the gaps and flaws of government initiatives to combat hunger, and the necessity of demanding transparency and accountability in order to make this target viable.

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<sup>3</sup> Burke J., "Indian Children Still Underweight After 20 Years of Intervention" [Online], Available: [http://www.guardian.co.uk/global-development/2010/sep/14/mdg1-hunger-poverty-india%20\(2010\)](http://www.guardian.co.uk/global-development/2010/sep/14/mdg1-hunger-poverty-india%20(2010))





## GOAL 2: ACHIEVE UNIVERSAL PRIMARY EDUCATION

**Target:** Ensure that, by 2015, children everywhere, boys and girls alike, will be able to complete a full course of primary schooling.

Surpassing previous expectations, Sub-Saharan Africa has shown the most progress, with enrolment rates rising from 58% in 1999 to reach 76% in 2009. Northern Africa (8% increase) and Southern Asia (12%) have also displayed considerable improvement, though there has been a 1% decrease in Central Asia and the Caucasus that has yet to be investigated. Regardless, the panorama is a pleasing one: in the majority of developing regions, primary school enrolment has risen and reached an 89% net enrolment ratio in 2009, despite only 2% of worldwide aid currently being dedicated to education.

Consequently, the literacy rate amongst young people has also increased by 6 percentage points during the decade before 2009 when it attained 89% globally, partly thanks to Northern Africa and Southern Asia's accomplishments. Yet progress seems to have lost its momentum and has slowed down since 2004, with a mere 2 percentage point improvement between then and 2009, making the goal difficult to attain by the deadline, though it is not unfeasible. Indeed, despite Sub-Saharan Africa's track record so far, approximately half of the children out of primary school (i.e. 32 million) live there. Furthermore, it is in Sub-Saharan Africa and Southern Asian that 90% of young illiterate people are to be found.

According to the 2011 MDG Report, 87 out of 100 children from the developing world finish their primary schooling. However, according to 2009 data over 20% of children in the least developed countries did not have access to primary school, despite substantial improvement since 1999: for example, in some countries such as Madagascar, Rwanda, Burundi and Tanzania the adjusted net enrolment was over 95% in 2009. One of the major factors for this progress in these countries has been the termination of school fees that were unaffordable for



the poorest section of the population. The latest MDG Report contends that the three most critical factors impacting school enrolment are “being female, poor and living in a country affected by conflict”. Indeed, though the proportion of unschooled girls across the developing world has gone from 58% to 53% between 1999 and 2009, they remain a majority and 42% of children not enrolled in primary school live in conflict zones.

Indeed, as reported by the UNHCR, another crucial pervasive determinant is being a refugee: in 87 documented urban areas, only 63% of children have the opportunity to go to school. The cost, discrimination, inability to speak the language are often prohibitive, as is the fact that many refugee children are required to work in order to sustain themselves and their families. In refugee camps, the situation is even grimmer. Only 34% of boys and 27% of girls are enrolled at school, where the lack of necessary infrastructure, supplies and qualified teachers encumber the opportunity and ability to learn. Moreover, these figures apply only to those refugees who are registered; for the unregistered, the chances of school attendance are even lower without legal status.

Another and often too overlooked pervasive factor in undermining the universal education goal is the eminent lack of transparency in education systems, particularly in Sub-Saharan Africa. According to Transparency International’s analyses in 7 African countries, there is a severe lack of local, regional and national accountability in the management of school structures, made worse by the fact that parents of the most vulnerable children often do not display any interest in how their education systems are coordinated and are lax about demanding accountability for careless management.



### GOAL 3: PROMOTE GENDER EQUALITY AND EMPOWER WOMEN

**Target:** Eliminate gender disparity in primary and secondary education, preferably by 2005, and in all levels of education no later than 2015.

In 2009, 96 girls were enrolled in school for every 100 boys enrolled in primary and secondary school in the developing world. Yet only South-Eastern and Central Asia, the Caribbean and Latin America have managed to establish gender equality in primary schooling; in other regions of the developing world access to early education for girls remains difficult particularly in Africa and Oceania. Where secondary school is concerned, South-Eastern & Central Asia and Northern Africa have been successful at attaining gender parity, and have even outdone boys in Easter Asia, the Caribbean and Latin America. Nevertheless, they still lag behind in Sub-Saharan Africa, Oceania and Western Asia.

The impact of child marriage has in achieving gender parity should not be underestimated, reminds the UN. It not only inhibits the success of this goal, but has a domino effect on six of the other MDG Goals such as the eradication of hunger and poverty and HIV and other diseases, universal education, improvement in maternal health and reduction of under-five mortality. Indeed, underage brides are usually unable to continue attending school, which in turn makes them vulnerable by preventing them from obtaining secure and adequately paying jobs, thus dashing any hope of independence and emancipation. Ten million girls under 18 are married every year<sup>4</sup>, and many without consent, though it is difficult to give an accurate estimate of their numbers. According to the UN Convention of the Rights of the Child, the marriage- whether consensual or not- of an individual under the age of 18 is a Human Rights infringement. If efforts to

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<sup>4</sup> Anderson L., “Child Marriage Condemns Millions of Girls to Poverty”, *Trustlaw* (2011) [online] Available at: <http://www.trust.org/trustlaw/news/child-marriage-condemns-millions-of-girls-to-poverty/>



halt this phenomenon are not redoubled, it is estimated that the number of child brides will reach 100 million by the end of the next decade according to the International Center for Research on Women (ICRW). The situation is particularly grim in sub-Saharan Africa: over 70% of under-eighteen girls in Mali, Chad and Nigeria were already married in 2010<sup>5</sup>. One of the key steps in preventing these marriages is to increase girls' level of education: the ICRW reports that young girls who finish their secondary schooling have a six-fold increase chance of avoiding that fate. The reasons why child marriages are still commonplace in most of the developing world are too numerous and complex to discuss in detail here, but in the longer-term the most important factor in halting their incidence lies in obtaining a change in mentalities. Women must be allowed to be and seen as active contributors to the economy, as well as important participants and contributors to society.

In over 50% of the developing world, considerable gender disparities linger in the professional arena. The financial crisis that began in 2008 is partly to blame for the dawdling progress consisting of only 5 percentage points in the decade between 1990 and 2009 of the proportion of women engaged in paid non-agricultural employment (35% to 40%). Women were the most affected segment of the population by the economic downturn's impact on the job market. Though unemployment for both genders increased, it increased faster for women than for men, and its decline in 2010 has been slower for the former than for the latter. Sub-Saharan Africa and Southern Asia were where improvement was greatest, but despite this the proportion of paid working women still hovers below 20%. Progress is further inhibited by the fact that agricultural jobs are the majority in these areas, and these unfortunately lack stability and social protection. In Northern Africa, improvement has been virtually non-existent since 1990.

Women's participation in politics remains limited: at the beginning of 2011, only 19.3% of women across the world held parliamentary seats, though it is nevertheless a record highlighting the slow but existent progress over the last

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<sup>5</sup> Ibid.



decade. In addition, women in some countries such as South Africa, Cuba and Rwanda have managed to become active participants despite not being members of the houses of the parliament (over 40% rate for each of the countries listed). On the other hand, according to the 2011 MDG Report, in 48 countries houses of the parliament have a 90%+ male component; whilst in nine there are no women at all (including Qatar, Saudi Arabia and Belize). Lack of media coverage, financing and stubborn stereotypes are heavily responsible in influencing electoral decisions obstructing women in obtaining to leadership positions.

#### **GOAL 4: REDUCE CHILD MORTALITY**

**Target:** Reduce by two thirds, between 1990 and 2015, the under-five mortality rate.

Overall, the results in reducing child mortality have been acceptable so far: the under-five rate has decreased by a third between 1990 and 2009, from 12.4 million to 8.1 million globally. Moreover, in many parts of the developing world where child mortality was particularly high, these rates have declined by more than 50% in spite of the demographic growth. These countries include Madagascar, Nepal, Bangladesh and Eritrea. Eastern Asia and Northern Africa have done particularly well and there the under-five mortality rate has sunk by 68%. However, Southern Asia, Oceania and Sub-Saharan Africa are still trailing far behind, widening the chasm between those who have witnessed a positive evolution and those who have not. In the latter, the average under-five mortality is nearly double the average in other parts of the developing world and shockingly over 18 times the average in developed regions.

Nevertheless, it is likely that this target is attainable as long as measures taken to prevent children's deaths are increased, especially in the countries that need it the most. Improvement in post-natal care is crucial, as its absence is the number one cause of child death in Southern Asia, and in Sub-Saharan Africa illnesses



such as malaria and diarrhea are the biggest reapers of young children's lives. Under-nutrition is also a great evildoer, responsible for 1/3 of total death amongst under-fives in the developing world. Unsurprisingly, rural areas are the worst affected in all regions, and the children from the poorest households are the most susceptible.

Another key but often overlooked factor influencing infant mortality is the mother's level of education: the more educated she is, the better her child's chances of surviving, which explain why Eastern Asia, Latin America and the Caribbean have managed to lower their under-five mortality rates. Child survival rates can also be boosted by allowing women more access to welfare and health care by removing socio-financial obstacles they often face when trying to obtain them, and by ameliorating the quality of the services provided by health care institutions by raising their accountability at local levels. Continuing widespread vaccination campaigns is essential in eliminating the risk presented by deadly yet preventable diseases such as measles: by 2008, measles-related deaths had dropped by 78%, thereby representing  $\frac{1}{4}$  of the dive taken by under-five mortality rates since 2000. Yet the neediest are still the last to be able to benefit from immunization: marginalized, and often in remote areas, many families are not able to access health facilities or even aware of the importance of immunization. Thus, efforts to spread awareness and to facilitate reaching vaccination centers must be sustained and extended. Yet this may well prove to be a challenging task due to lack of available funding necessary for these campaigns, which is not only presently insufficient but also declining and therefore resulting in the rise of measles deaths. Policy-makers' commitment towards this goal is an absolute necessity in order not to lose the advances that have been so painstakingly made.



## GOAL 5: IMPROVE MATERNAL HEALTH

**Target:** Reduce by  $\frac{3}{4}$ , between 1990 and 2015, the maternal mortality ratio.

Though exact statistics concerning deaths during pregnancies and births are unavailable in most developing countries, the estimated number of maternal deaths remains elevated, though progress has been made and the maternal mortality ratio has decreased by 34% across the developing world since 1990. Northern Africa as well as Southern and Eastern Asia have led the way, but it is unfortunately not sufficient in order to reach the goal in time. There is still room for much-needed improvement especially in Southern Asia and Sub-Saharan Africa, where 87% of maternal deaths occurred in 2008, where the most vulnerable women are predictably the very young or very old, and the uneducated.

Frustratingly, most of these deaths can be avoided with the correct precautions and presence of qualified health-care workers. The presence of the latter in deliveries has had a modest 10% global increase between 1990 and 2009, when it reached 65%. According to the World Bank, progress can be sped up by focusing more on the quality of the health services provided as opposed to merely seeking to increase their quantity, and suggests implementing performance-related salaries for health workers. This approach has already been tested in Rwanda, where health facilities were paid according to their achievements (such as the number of children who received immunization). The results of this experiment were positive, and it is possible that implementing it on a global scale would yield unprecedented improvements.

**Target:** Achieve, by 2015, universal access to reproductive health.

A minimum of basic antenatal care is essential to prevent complications during pregnancy and birth, and to ensure both the mother's and the child's health



afterwards. Good nutrition, advice on how to cope with being HIV positive, and preventive malarial treatment are some of the foundations of a sound pregnancy and essential in preventing both infant and maternal mortality. Fortunately, the number of women who are able to have access to antenatal care has been on the rise, jumping from 64% in 1990 to 81% in 2009. However, the quantity of care given still leaves to be desired: according to the World Health Organization, pregnant women need at least four visits to a health-care provider in order to obtain information on how to maximize the chances of having a healthy delivery and advice on how to handle eventual complications. Though it has slowly risen over the past twenty years, the percentage of women receiving sufficient antenatal care was only of 51% in 2009.

The risk of complications is particularly high with very young women, and adolescent pregnancies remain numerous across the world. Progress in these area has been erratic so far: the proportion of adolescent births was reduced between 1990 and 2000, but subsequently rose again till 2008, after which it has remained relatively stable, therefore showing little tangible improvement or, in the case of Sub-Saharan Africa, none at all. The availability of contraceptives is a major determining factor as they allow individuals to make important decisions about their reproduction, helping to avoid unwanted pregnancies and thereby enhancing the chances of planned pregnancies to occur smoothly. It is therefore not surprising that Sub-Saharan, where infant and mortality rates are the highest, also has the lowest levels of contraceptive use (especially amongst adolescents) with only 22% of the population using them, a percentage that has remained approximately stable since the beginning of the millennium. In order to keep up with the increasing number of women of childbearing years in the developing worlds, governments and agencies need to instill family planning awareness, make contraceptives more widely available especially to those with lower incomes and facilitate the obtainment of reliable and frequent healthcare. It is especially important to focus these efforts on adolescent and young women, with which the health risks associated with pregnancy are the highest. This will not only have a beneficial impact on infant and mortality rates, but also facilitate the





accomplishment of several other Goals such as establishing gender parity, obtaining education and employment, and consequently reducing poverty.

## **GOAL 6: COMBAT HIV/AIDS, MALARIA AND OTHER DISEASES**

**Target:** Have halted by 2015 and begun to reverse the spread of HIV/AIDS

HIV incidence rates have been gradually declined by 25% since 2001, mostly thanks to the numerous awareness campaigns established across the world. In 2009, approximately 2.6 million people had acquired HIV, compared to the 3.15 million in 1997. With more and more people also receiving treatment, the number of deaths caused by AIDS has dropped by 19% between 2004 and 2009. Yet the global picture is not entirely accurate as extensive regional variations still exist. There has been precious little improvement in Central and Western Europe, Eastern Asia and North America, and even more worryingly, these infections have been increasing in Central Asia and Eastern Europe. On a more positive note, the HIV incidences have considerably lowered in Southern Asia and Sub-Saharan Africa, though the latter remains the worse hit region in both incidences of new infections (69%) and AIDS-related deaths (72%).

The young are the ones at most risk and account for 41% of new infections, whilst 51% of HIV-positive people in the world were women in 2009. According to the 2011 MDG Report's statistics, a mere 33% of young men and 20% of young women in the developing world had accurate information concerning the spread of HIV. Condom usage remains meager, particularly amongst the young: for example, in Sub-Saharan Africa less than 50% of young men and a third of young women used condoms during their last sexual encounter, exposing especially the poorer and uneducated to enormous risk of infection, even more so in rural areas. The most vital step in preventing new infections is to continue and redouble awareness-spreading campaigns, especially amongst young people, and



make condoms more easily accessible. Additionally, and perhaps even more importantly,

**Target:** Achieve, by 2010, universal access to treatment for HIV/AIDS for all those who need it.

Treatment for HIV-positive and AIDS victims has increased, but it remained insufficient to reach the 2010 goal. On the one hand, several countries did manage to achieve universal access to treatment (meaning that at least 80% of the population had access to it) such as Rwanda, Botswana Cambodia and Cuba. On the other hand, after redefining the qualifications that classified individuals needing treatment, the WHO estimates that the number of these had actually increased by roughly 44% by 2009.

**Target:** Have halted by 2015 and begun to reverse the incidence of malaria and other major diseases.

Malaria-related deaths have witnessed a 20% improvement over the past ten years, most noticeably in Africa. This is mostly due thanks to increases in funding and preventive measures such as mosquito nets and use of insect repellents. Moreover, according to the WHO, Turkmenistan and Morocco have presently succeeded in practically fully eliminating malaria incidences.

Yet over 90% of deaths from malaria still take place in Sub-Saharan Africa, and these affect mostly the under-five population. Even more worryingly, the disease has been on the rise in Zambia, Sao Tome and Principe and in Rwanda, despite previous decreases of illness rates in these countries. One of the most likely explanations for this deadly resurgence is the laxness in preventive measures in the light of its previous established achievements.

One of the other major diseases, tuberculosis, has also been steadily declining in all regions since 2004, when it last the incidence rates last peaked; the UNDP believes that up to 6 million people have been saved since 1995 thanks to



improvements in treatment and diagnoses. If the rates continue falling by 1% each year as they have, it is estimated that the goal can be reached for tuberculosis.

## **GOAL 7: ENSURE ENVIRONMENTAL SUSTAINABILITY**

**Target:** Integrate the principles of sustainable development into country policies and programs and reverse the loss of environmental resources.

Deforestation is still a cause for serious concern, though its occurrences (as well as those of deforestation via natural causes) have slowed down and decreased from about 16 million hectares per year in 1990 to around 13 million hectares per year in the last ten years. This is mostly explained by the fact that Asian forests have managed to expand, especially in China. In total, Asia has gained approximately 2.2 million hectares each year between 2000 and 2010, thanks to policies promoting afforestation particularly in Vietnam, China and India.

Nevertheless, loss of forest areas has been an alarming problem in Africa and South America over the past decade, imperiling the world's flora and fauna. Indeed, forests fulfill multiple roles, and one of the most important ones consists in carbon absorption: when forests are destroyed, they release their stored carbon back into the atmosphere, making deforestation thereby responsible for over 1/6 of human-related greenhouse gas emissions.

Plans have been recently elaborated to establish more protected areas, which now represent 13% of the world's forests. Furthermore, the 2010 United Nations Framework Convention on Climate Change set up a program seeking to reward developing nations who manage to diminish their deforestation-related carbon emissions, and has already attracted four billion dollars in funding, and 2011 has been declared the International Year of Forests in a bid to spread information and awareness of the importance of preserving forests not only for their biodiversity but also for the people whose livelihoods depend on them. In addition, the 1987 Montreal Protocol on Substances that Deplete the Ozone Layer, which encourages the reduction of substances responsible for the depletion of the ozone Layer with



the aim of achieving its full recovery by 2050, has so far tallied several victories, culminating with the neutralization of 98% of the ozone-destroying substances under the Montreal Protocol's supervision at the beginning of 2010. Also noteworthy are the Cancun Agreements (2010) laid out during the UN Climate Change Conference were vital for creating an international framework to ensure responsible global development by emphasizing the long-term effects of greenhouse gas emissions. However these agreements have not yet been put into action, and are subject to further modifications at the next conference, taking place in December 2011 in South Africa.

**Target:** Reduce biodiversity loss, achieving by 2010 a significant reduction in the rate of loss.

In the attempt to achieve this target, the number of ecosystems that are qualified as protected zones represent 12.7% of the world's land surface and 7.2% of its coastal marine areas, though this is only equivalent to 1.5% of the world's total ocean areas. These efforts are praiseworthy, but not sufficient as biodiversity loss rates continue to inflate. According to the International Union for Conservation of Nature, the number of existing species is steadily diminishing and the Red List Index, cataloguing species in danger of extinction, is swiftly expanding.

To halt this, adding more draconian measures to paradoxically protect these protected ecosystems is imperative. Firstly, there are several zones in protected areas that do not benefit from this so-called protection. For example, only 26% and 22% respectively of some of the world's greatest protection sites (such as Important Bird Areas and Alliance for Zero Extinction) are completely protected. This protection must not only be extended but made a priority, with all its implications: adequate management, and international accountability and commitment. It is crucial to assess this problem on a large, long-term scale to remind not only policy-makers by also the population at large that the repercussions of the destruction of the world's ecosystems will impact quality of



life on an individual level- as humans, we are too part of the ecosystem, and thus benefit from its protection as well as suffer the consequences from its degradation.

**Target:** Halve, by 2015, the proportion of the population without sustainable access to safe drinking water and basic sanitation.

Unfortunately, water remains an alarming problem: ecosystems are already stretched to their limits, with Northern Africa and Western Asia exceeding the limits for sustainable water resources. It is predicted that in 2015, more than 1 out of 10 people will still not have access to safe drinking water, and in fact access to it has declined in 13 developing nations. As usual, it is in poor and rural households that the problem is at its worst: in Sub-Saharan Africa, urban citizens are 1.8 times more likely to have access to safe drinking water than rural inhabitants.

However, progress is already underway: between 1990 and 2008, access to potable water has increased from 77% to 87%, meaning that it is likely that this target will be met -and perhaps even surpassed- by the 2015 deadline. In fact, success has already been achieved in Eastern and South-Eastern Asia, Latin America and the Caribbean, but this improvement must not obscure the need to redouble efforts in order to reach the most vulnerable.

Lack of sanitation persists in most of the developing world, where half of the population still had no access to basic hygienic facilities. Indeed, approximately 1.1 billion people in 2008 were not able to practice safe human waste disposal, putting them at risk for a number of serious and potentially fatal diseases. Predictions on this issue are pessimistic, and suggest that the sanitation target would only be met in 2049 at the trend's current rates.

**Target:** By 2020, to have achieved a significant improvement in the lives of at least 100 million slum dwellers.



The proportion of urban slum dwellers went from 39% in 2000 to 33% in 2010, a small but nevertheless existent improvement considering that roughly 200 million of these people were thereby able to obtain access to basic facilities such as sanitation, water and improved housing. Dismally, slum dwellers are still growing in numbers as a result of expanding urbanization, increasing by 110 million between 1990 and 2000. Most of this augmentation has taken place in Sub-Saharan Africa, where 62% of the urban population consists of slum dwellers, and in Southern Asia as well as South-Eastern Asia (35% and 31% respectively).

To combat this, efforts must be intensified and local and national accountability highlighted, as proposed by the April 2011 Governing Council of the United Nations Human Settlements Program. Concretely, goals need to be established on smaller scales too in order to make the viable: accurate figures are needed for slum dwellers on national levels, and targets aiming to improve their quality of life need to be set individually and realistically.

## **GOAL 8: DEVELOP A GLOBAL PARTNERSHIP FOR DEVELOPMENT**

**Target:** Address the special needs of the least developed countries, landlocked countries and small island developing states.

The year of 2010 saw Luxembourg, the Netherlands, Denmark, Sweden and Norway surpass the United Nations' expectation for official development assistance (ODA) of 0.7% of these countries' gross national income (GNI). The United States, the United Kingdom, France, Japan and Germany were the ones who contributed the most quantities in volume, and contribution in real terms had some of the largest increases in Portugal. More and more aid is being directed to the least developed countries, which receive around a third of it.

However, OECD polls have indicated that most of these prominent donors, although still intending on continuing their contributions, plan to do so on a



diminished level. These projections mean that aid growth is likely to drop from 8% per year between 2007-2010 to 2% per year between 2011-2013. African Aid will be especially affected and is believed to rise by a mere 1% a year in the coming years, contrastingly sharply with the previous average of a yearly 13% rise since 2007.

**Target:** Develop further an open, rule-based, predictable, non-discriminatory trading and financial system.

Despite the financial crisis of the recent years, which sparked fears of protectionist strategies, this target is still on track thanks to the international collaboration put in place by the G20 and other global organizations to avoid protectionism and keep markets open. The least developed countries (LDCs) countries are now able to have access to developed markets by exporting their products there with no custom duties, giving these developing economies a much-needed boost under the World Trade Organization's "Most Favoured Nation" (MFN) initiative. In 2009, 53% of LDCs were able to benefit from MFN treatment and is expected to increase. Their exports include electronics, as well as raw and manufactured products.

However, though tariffs on agricultural produce from LDCs are slowly but steadily dropping, they have not changed in what concerns textiles and clothing. Unsurprisingly, the recent economic downturn inhibited further tariff-reducing policies, and the preferential tariffs approach is leaving way for the MNF system, meaning that the preference margin for LDCs is more elevated than that for other developing nations, illustrating the success of the initiative. Even though the declining tariffs approach is not as widely used as it was before in developed markets, LDCs' now have the option of directing their attention to the expanding emerging markets, particularly in BRIC countries, where MFN tariffs remain elevated, or even more advanced developing countries who are now importing half of LDCs exports.

**Target:** Deal comprehensively with developing countries' debt

Developing countries debts have been extensively affected by the economic downturn, highlighting their vulnerability and dependence on developed markets. Indeed, the deterioration of developed countries' economies translated into a decline of their imports, which in turn affected LDCs and other developing nations' export rates and therefore their ability to honour their debts despite the Heavily Indebted Poor Countries (HIPC) program, whose assistance forty developing nations are qualified for. Nevertheless, 36 of these countries have had their debts reduced by 59 billion dollars, and 32 of those received further financial help amounting to a total of another 30 billion dollars. Countries participating in the HIPC initiative have, on average, debts lower than the LDC average, attesting to the success of the initiative.

In 2009, the profits made from exports in developing countries have lowered by 21%, though the interest paid on public borrowing remained the same as during the pre-crisis period. The ration of public debt service in the developing world subsequently rose by 3.6% on average in most areas apart from Oceania and South and Western Asia, heavily hitting LDCs. Yet the HIPC's financial assistance, though heavily touted by the UN as a promising solution, is not sufficient nor is it a real solution but a palliative. In order to comprehensively tackle the problem in the longer term, it is necessary to stimulate trade and production instead of overly relying on unsustainable monetary donations.

**Target:** In cooperation with the private sector, make available the benefits of new technologies, especially information and communications.

Efficient communication is nowadays essential for economies and governments to function, and brings has a tangible positive impact on individuals' quality of life. As global communication networks expand, with 90% of the world's inhabitants being able to benefit from cellphone coverage in 2010 and one out of





three being able to access the internet, this target seems to be right on track. Indeed, the communication and information sectors are experiencing increasing demand, consequently promoting competition leading to lower prices and technological innovations, both enabling a growing number of people from the developing world to partake from the benefits of advanced methods of communication such as access to impartial and accurate political and health information for example.

## Conclusion

The Millennium Development Goals have been accused by critics such as William Easterly as being too idealistic, lacking emphasis on economic growth and prone to becoming obsolete in light of a rapidly changing world and rapidly accelerating climate change. Truly, some of these goals are unlikely to be met by the official deadline whilst others, which are on track, will not benefit all regions and all sections of society. Moreover, as Ha-Joon Chang points out, it is also true that these targets do not have any specific set of instructions or ‘how-to’ manual, making structural changes more difficult to envisage and achieve.

However, in spite of these flaws, the MDGs have brought to the forefront the urgent necessity to focus on development on a multidimensional level. Indeed, the merit of the initiative lies in the fact that it joined the international community together to make a collective effort to reset countries’ priorities to be in tune with global human development, as Vandermoortele<sup>6</sup> argues. Both he and Jolly<sup>7</sup> stress the fact that these goals are meant to be reached collectively, and that they can overall be achieved even if some countries are not entirely successful.

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<sup>6</sup> Vandermoortele J., “The MDG Story: Intention Denied”, *Development and Change* 42 (2011): 1–21 and “Making Sense of the MDGs”, *Development and Change* 51(2008): 220-227.

<sup>7</sup> Jolly, R., *Global Goals—the UN Experience*, Human Development Report Office (2003).



Thus viewed in the context of a global effort, the MDGs are plausible objectives, and their mere formulation- despite criticisms of being too vague- is enough to assist in keeping countries turned towards a common end. It is important to give developing countries space for active participation, as they are the ones who understand their problems best, though it is crucial that developed nations continue to provide guidance and solidarity, and that the current successes are not jeopardized by the economic crisis.

On a final note, we must remember that these are some of the most comprehensive and greatest ambitions that the world has ever set out for itself. So far, there have been no precedents for or alternatives of the MDGs capable of matching the many success stories it can boast of today. Moreover, if looked at from the broader perspective, the accomplishment of the MDGs is in the interest of the entire international community as it brings humanity a few steps closer to one of the UN's- and the world's- core desires: that of blending good governance and economic growth in a potent blend resulting in lasting world peace.



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