

# **POLICY OPTIONS FOR MEETING THE MDGs in Sub-Saharan Africa**

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## **Introduction**

It is no secret that many developing countries, donors and non-governmental organizations have made reaching the Millennium Development Goals their top priority. But, as the world reaches the 2005 MDG review; there are worrying signs of stagnation and reversal in others. Although rapid advances by some countries show that MDGs are achievable, Sub-Saharan Africa is yet to mobilise resources, political and financial support to meet specific global challenges, especially the fight against HIV/AIDS and weak fragile economies. A 2003 United Nations Development Programme (UNDP) review of Sub-Saharan Africa's social development indicators provides a bleak picture of the region's progress towards MDGs. The number of Africa's population living on less than \$1 a day is increasing. It is also true that while most of the world made significant progress in the fight against hunger during the 1990s, the prevalence of underweight children remained at nearly 50% in South-Central Asia and Sub-Saharan Africa, which are averse to development in an era of global overproduction of food.

## **MDGs and Stumbling blocks**

The exacerbating Debt crisis, unfair international trading practices, tied aid interwoven with endless conditionalities, let alone HIV/AIDS, conflicts, problems associated with economic indiscipline, lack of sustainable democracies and poor governance are among a host of stumbling blocks to Africa's ability to attain MDGs. Nowhere are the signs more ominous than in Sub-Saharan Africa, the world's poorest and least developed region. Africa entered the new millennium with the highest poverty and child mortality rates, and the lowest school enrolment figures in the world.

Looking at Uganda as a case in point, the debt stock has soared from US\$800million to 4.3billion in 2003, continuing to be a heavy burden for a population of approximately 26 million. Some 75% of Uganda's debt is owed to the World Bank and the International Monetary Fund. Most African countries, more so heavily indebted poor countries (HIPC) graduates, continue to spend more on debt service than on health and education. Africa's debt servicing still stands at \$15 billion a year to the North.

A number of African countries still need to customize the MDG targets to reflect national circumstances and priorities, which will increase the sense of national ownership and adapt development objectives to the socioeconomic and political realities of each country. For example, countries facing an acute HIV/AIDS pandemic cannot be expected to achieve the same levels of progress as those not confronting one. In Southern Africa for

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instance, there is a severe health crisis, with nine of its member states featuring in the ten African countries with the highest HIV/Aids prevalence rates. Malaria and tuberculosis also continue to wreak havoc in the region, leading to reduced economic productivity, high infant mortality rates and plummeting life expectancy. The problem of insufficient funding and red tape in the release of the much needed donor funds continue to hamstring progress in fighting health and social problems.

While the MDGS provide long-term objectives for development within the broader frame of the Millennium Declaration, the PRSP is a medium term planning and monitoring instrument. What is unfortunate and regrettable is that PRSPs in some countries are found wanting in scope and coverage. In Zambia, for instance, due to limited scope of PRSPs, government went on to develop a National Development Plan to take care of PRSP weaknesses. However, the donor community in Zambia prefers to fund PRSPs rather than the National Development Program.

One of the problems with the goals is the inconsistency in reporting whether countries are on track to meet the MDGs. UNDP and national MDG reports have shown considerable differences, raising concerns about the reliability and credibility of indicators being used. Global, regional and national frameworks, strategies and processes must be harmonized so that accurate predictions and evidence-based policy decisions can be made.

It is important to note that the MDGs reinforce each other - progress on one front has positive spill-over effects on other variables. For instance, a breakthrough on Goal 8's debt question will definitely lower income poverty and increase household income in Africa which will then facilitate higher school enrolment levels while better access to clean water reduces the toll of disease, and affects school drop-out rates.

## **Positives**

The desire to attain MDGs among development partners in a given country has had its positive impacts in Africa. In Uganda, for example, bilateral donors are now channeling about half of the country's aid into budgetary support, instead of funding individual projects. This reform gives governments more flexibility in spending decisions, reduces time and paperwork, and helps to align donor programmes with national development priorities. Uganda has in recent years recorded high school enrolment rates, though the quality of education is something still debatable. On the other hand, with MDGs came the concept of donor harmonization, alignment and result-based development planning which seems to be yielding results by reducing transaction costs, donor missions per year, corruption and procurement hiccups.

MDGs have resulted in the global community rethinking development. Recent utterances on total debt cancellation by the United Kingdom and United States governments, the Blair Commission on Africa and its quest to put Africa as the key discussion issue for the G7/8 meetings in Scotland in June 2005 are only resulting from the challenge to attain the MDGs. As global targets the MDGs are as much applicable to countries in conflict or emerging from conflict as they are to countries that are not in the throes of civil unrest. Responses to conflict in Ivory Coast and Sudan's Darfur region demonstrate that the international community has the ability to unite against conflict and its associated ills as long as the political will to fostering a world free of civil unrest is there. Civil society initiatives such as the Global fight against Poverty and Making Poverty History are just but examples of what MDGs have got the global community into.

In Africa, the number of countries preparing formal poverty reduction strategy papers (PRSPs) increased significantly in 2002, with nine countries finalizing their PRSPs, compared with four in 2001. Many countries have reduced their budget deficits and inflation rates to manageable levels and, according to the Economic Commission of Africa (ECA), resulting in improved domestic economic climate over two decades of often painful reform. The MDGs themselves have become part of the reform process. They have been incorporated into Africa's own development blueprint, the New Partnership for Africa's Development (NEPAD).

## Recommendations

1. If Africa and other developing regions are to make significant and sustainable progress, far greater resources will have to be generated from all sources - debt relief, ODA, foreign direct investment, trade, and domestic investment and savings. As the UN Secretary General, Kofi Annan rightly noted, apart from developing countries setting national strategies for the attainment of MDGs, "we will also need more convincing action from the developed countries to support those strategies by phasing out harmful trade practices, by providing technical assistance, and by increasing both the volume and quality of aid to levels consistent with the goals."<sup>2</sup>
2. There is need for total unconditional Debt Cancellation from both Multilateral and Bilateral donors in order to give Africa a new start and the chance to attain the MDGs. Debt service in Africa continues to tear down schools and clinics without which MDGs will not be attainable.
3. Creditors/donors need to commit themselves to a timeline on which to fulfil the long overdue 0.7% of their GNP promised at Monterey's Financing for Development Conference. One of the most important challenges regarding the achievement of the MDGs is that co-operation between rich and poor countries must not turn into a recital of broken promises. The need for increased co-operation among donor governments, NGOs, pharmaceutical companies and African states to increase drug accessibility and strengthen health infrastructure cannot be over-emphasized.
4. Aid needs to have no strings attached; untied aid will help build local capacities in African countries which are a prerequisite to attaining MDGs. Many a times local human resource capacity remains undeveloped as donors insist on their countrymen coming to work in the name of technical assistance without necessarily building local capacities.
5. MDGs will only become reality when those living in poverty have their voices heard. A human rights based development approach in which local grassroots people in Africa are the claim holders, holding their governments and donors accountable for their actions and obligations will foster development. In a nutshell, it is crucial for development practitioners to realise and acknowledge that people are not developed but they develop themselves.
6. The international trade regime needs to be democratized if Africa is to attain the MDGs. The failure of the World Trade Organization meeting in Cancun in September 2003 was a further setback to Africa's development prospects. This is being worsened by the Economic Partnership Agreements (EPAs) that the

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<sup>2</sup> Kofi Annan's address to High Level Seminar on Meeting the Hunger MDG in Africa, in Addis Abba, 5 July 2004, organised by the Ethiopian government, Millennium Project Task Force on Hunger, UNDP & Africa Union.

European Union is promoting. Trade that removes subsidies to European farmers and opens markets for African products is a great stride towards MDGs in Africa.

7. There is urgent need to end all World Bank and IMF policies that hinder people's access to food, clean water, shelter, health care, education, and right to organize. Pursuit of the MDGs could well be undermined in the future, as it has been in the past, if there is no change in structural adjustment policies. These policies include user fees, privatization and economic austerity programs forced upon recipient countries in the South - Africa being the chief victim of all.

Last but not least, political will, social action and the ability to galvanise resources for the MDGs is key. Partnership between the North and the South must be genuine, local participation and ownership of development at grassroots levels should not be cosmetic but real and meaningful. Attaining MDGs requires radical structural, institutional and policy changes at national, regional and global levels. Half baked solutions and measures will only leave Africa in deep and if not deeper poverty. Needless to say, to reiterate the call on the world's governments to best deploy their resources by fully funding the Global Fund to Fight AIDS, Tuberculosis, and Malaria.