

Development in Brief



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Assessing MDG Progress Realistically

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The MDGs have made a large contribution to placing human development and poverty reduction at center stage. As one of its major innovations, the MDG framework provides numerical targets that come with a deadline, the year 2015, by which they ought to be achieved. While originally conceived as global targets, even UN agencies have later turned to interpreting the targets at the country-level. Several contributions have pointed out that this interpretation is inappropriate as the numerical targets are too ambitious for many countries. This brief argues that in a post-2015 Development Agenda, country-level targets are worth retaining while they should be changed to match countries' potential.

Are the MDGs realistic?

In a widely-cited paper, Easterly (2009) argues that the MDGs are 'unfair' to Africa. Clearly, it requires more effort for countries starting at low levels of development to reach level-end targets such as bringing up primary completion rates to 100 percent (q.v. Clemens 2004).

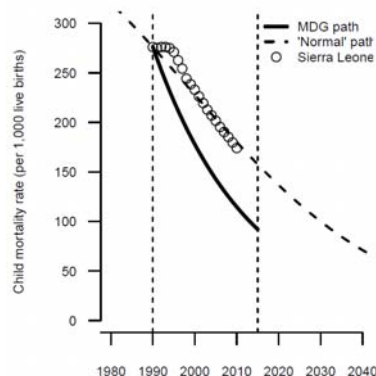
In a recent paper, Klasen and Lange (2011) show that the same is true for targets defined as proportional changes such as MDG 4 and MDG 5, reducing child and maternal mortality by two-thirds and three-fourths, respectively: countries with high initial mortality are reducing mortality in line with historical averages. Out of 18 countries with an initial child mortality rate exceeding 180 per 1,000 only one (Malawi) can be said to be 'on-track' to attain MDG 4. Comparing countries' levels and changes in child mortality over different time periods shows that, here as well, progress has been remarkably uniform. In terms of historical 'average' performance, many developing countries that will likely fail to attain MDG 4 turn out to be doing just fine.

Figure 1 exemplifies this for the case of Sierra Leone. The 'normal' path and the path required by MDG 4 are depicted as dashed and solid lines, respectively. After a temporary increase in child mortality in the early 1990s, Sierra Leone made considerable progress – just in line with the average performance of all countries. However, Sierra Leone is unlikely to achieve a reduction by two-thirds by 2015. In fact, if it continues to follow the normal transition path, it will need an additional 15 years to achieve MDG 4.

An alternative approach to assessing performance

Instead of assessing a country's MDG performance against its achievements towards global goals, Klasen and Lange suggest to judge countries' progress by comparing actual progress to expected progress, based on the average transition path. The ratio of these two quantities is a simple performance index indicating whether the observed actual progress of a country exceeds (the index is greater than one) or falls short (the index is less than one) in terms of progress. Applying this

Figure 1: Child mortality in Sierra Leone, 1990-2010, 'normal' transition path, and MDG path



Source: Own calculations

index to MDG 4 changes the performance picture dramatically. Several countries turn out to be over-performers, that is, their progress in reducing under-five mortality is much faster than the average. At the same time many of these countries are 'off-track' to meet the MDG target. This is often the case with high-mortality countries in Africa such as Eritrea, Tanzania, Guinea, Liberia, Niger, and Sierra Leone.¹ The overall picture is thus considerably more positive.

The danger of unrealistic targets

Setting numerical and time-bound targets can be an attractive policy option. Targets provide constituencies with a yardstick against which to judge policy performance and may thus strengthen accountability. Unrealistic targets are of little use, however, as governments cannot be held responsible for not achieving them. While the MDGs deserve praise for providing such targets, the vast majority turns out to be overly ambitious as they require countries to develop faster than the historical average.

Klasen and Lange therefore suggest that in a Post 2015 Development Agenda, country-specific targets should be fixed at a 'fair' level-ambitious, yet realistic given their starting points. Further, country performance should be assessed by the performance index showing whether countries progress faster or slower than 'normal'. ■

References

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¹ The other countries in this group are Cambodia, Vietnam, Bolivia, Guyana, Cuba, the Dominican Republic, Albania, and the Russian Federation.