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Are There Synergies Between MDGs?

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The MDGs are designed as a set of independent goals. However, the issues covered by the MDGs are closely interlinked such that acceleration in one goal potentially speeds up progress in others. Such synergies bear implications for the debate on the post-2015 development agenda. If one MDG triggers another, one may reduce the number of MDGs to those that turn out to be key triggers. Although theoretically convincing, the extent to which these synergies are realized is an open question. Recent research addresses this issue by investigating the joint performance of MDG indicators.

In theory, MDGs are strongly interrelated...

Synergies between MDGs can take several forms. For example, closing the gender gap in education (MDG 3) may be regarded as a "leading" goal for achieving other MDGs (Klasen 2005). Better education leads to higher earnings of women which contribute to the reduction of child mortality through women's increased spending on child health (MDG 4). Women's earnings are also associated with improved education of children (MDG 2). Girls' education further contributes to the prevention of neonatal and maternal deaths (MDG 5) (Lay and Robilliard 2009).

...but in practice, results differ

Recent research (Klasen and Lo Bue, 2012) has investigated these synergies by looking at progress of pairs of MDGs at country level. Considering MDG 3 and 4, they find that countries reveal very different performances. Three groups of countries are identified: "good performers", characterized by strong positive synergies; "poor performers", exhibiting low progress or even regress and "partial performers", denoting countries where progress in one MDG goes along with regress or stagnation in another.

Table 1 shows the geographical distribution of the three performance clusters. All world

regions except for South Asia are represented among good performing countries. All countries in this group are middle-income countries, with the notable exception of Niger which is a low-income country.

The partial performers - the largest group - mainly consist of middle-income countries, too, except for some Sub Sahara African countries like Tanzania, Togo or Burkina Faso. Contrary to this, the group of poor performers is made up only from countries from Sub Sahara Africa. The analysis for other pairs of MDGs brought about similar results.

Strong institutions and growth improve MDG achievement

What factors determine country performance? Research results show that poor levels of government effectiveness expressed by low quality of public and civil services and low levels of political commitment by the government are particularly associated with partial and poor performance. Unsurprisingly, political violence causes the transmission mechanisms between MDGs to dysfunction and is associated with poor or partial performance countries. In addition, rising levels of inequal-

ity are strongly correlated with partial performance. Countries exhibiting high rates of economic growth and strong institutions tend to be good performers.

Conclusions

The results add much to the discussion of the post MDG agenda. Synergies between MDGs have only been found in a limited number of countries. Boiling down the number of MDGs is thus only meaningful for countries that have the capacity to utilize such synergies. Economic growth and sound institutions are strong determinants of synergies and thus need to be considered as complementary goals to the MDGs. The same applies to the settlement of conflicts. Focusing on MDGs only may therefore not bring about the desired results in the foreseeable future. ■

References

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Table 1: Joint performance of MDG 3 and MDG 4 by selected countries

Region	Good Performers	Partial Performers	Poor Performers
South Asia		India, Sri Lanka	
Subsahara Africa	Cape Verde, Niger, Sao Tome	Burkina Faso, Chad, Ghana, Madagascar, Mauritius, Mozambique, Senegal, Tanzania, Togo	Botswana, Burundi, Cameroon, Central African Republic, Congo Dem. Rep., Congo, Rep., South Africa, Swaziland
East Asia and Pacific	China, Lao, Malaysia	Indonesia, Philippines, Tonga, Solomon Islands	
Eastern Europe and Central Asia	Poland, Romania	Belarus, Bulgaria, Ukraine	
Latin America and the Caribbean	Bolivia, El Salvador	Colombia, Costa Rica, Cuba, Honduras, Jamaica, Mexico, Nicaragua, Paraguay, St. Lucia, Uruguay, Venezuela	
Middle East and North Africa	Iran, Morocco, Syria, Tunisia	Algeria, Jordan	