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MDGs: Which Millennium is the UN Aiming For?

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By Evonne Liew, Contributor

It has been nine years since the United Nations established the Millennium Development Goals, a roadmap to tackle eight critical issues: extreme poverty and hunger, universal primary education, gender equality, child mortality, maternal health, HIV/AIDS, environmental sustainability, and the creation of a global partnership for development. The noble hope was to improve the quality of life for the most impoverished areas in the world. However, this daunting list of global ills might just turn out to be impossible for the UN to accomplish by its 2015 target. The 2009 MDG Report indicates that more than half of the MDGs have been progressing too slowly and have been further stalled by the global economic recession.

On the bright end, figures show that 88 percent of the developing world now has access to primary education. On the dimmer end, fewer than half of the pregnant women in developing nations have access to prenatal care. Keep in mind that the goal is to achieve universal access to reproductive health within the next six years.

"I love a challenge," concluded Helen Clark, UN Development Program Administrator, at the close of a meeting in which she discussed the MDGs' progress (or lack thereof) with the [Women's' Foreign Policy Group](#) last month in Washington, DC. Clark must be head-over-heels for the MDGs. Many of the MDGs are interdependent of one another, making success that much more elusive. Child mortality rates, for example, are difficult to decrease if hunger levels are increasing, which they are. By the end of 2009, it is predicted that there will be 55 to 90 million more people living in poverty than originally forecasted.

Prior to 2007, however, before the housing market crashed and banks had begun to close, the MDGs were already off schedule. The Millennium Project, which was created in 2002 to "recommend a concrete action plan" to achieve the MDGs, issued its final report in 2006, providing four reasons for the shortfalls. The report cited "poor governance marked by corruption, poor economic policy choices, denial of human rights, [...and] local and national economies [being] too poor to make the needed investments." Three years later, the same problems persist. A recent UNDP report indicates the Philippines is failing the MDGs on three different fronts—poverty/hunger, education, and HIV prevention. Nigeria is projected to only achieve three of the eight goals. The list continues.

Measuring the MDG indicators is nearly as challenging as achieving the goals themselves. Many of the figures cited in the latest MDG report seem to have fine print and asterisks attached. For instance, the UN has made much advancement towards universal primary education, but not enough to meet the MDG deadline. Why? Because the percentage of children in school is measured by enrollment figures of school-aged children. Enrollment alone does not constitute education. The UN recognizes that retention rates are as equally important as enrollment, stating "completion of a full course of primary schooling is necessary to achieve universal primary education." Yet, the report lacks up-to-date and comprehensive figures regarding retention and completion. It merely mentions that millions drop out and "too many children leave school without having acquired the most basic literacy and numeracy skills."

Perhaps the question to be asked now is not, are the MDGs on track, but rather, can they still be achieved? The answer is a pessimistic maybe—contingent upon whether the UN and the MDG countries make drastic changes, specifically, towards obtaining adequate funding and proper infrastructure. As of now, none of the sub Saharan African nations are forecasted to accomplish the MDGs,

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according to the Organization for Economic Cooperation and Development Observer. In fact, most low income countries must grapple with financing gaps from 10 to 20 percent of their GDP, states the 2006 Millennium Project report. Theoretically, the gap should be filled by official development assistance, but ODA also needs to increase dramatically in order to appease the MDG funding deficit. By 2015, ODA direct assistance to the MDGs needs to reach \$135 billion; in 2002, ODA was a measly \$16 billion.

The UNDP, which promotes the MDGs in a coordinative, advocacy and advisory capacity, has a particularly challenging time obtaining funding because it must fund-raise its own budget either through contributions from member states or through cost-sharing partnerships with the private sector. However, the record shows that more often than not, the amount pledged to the UNDP from voluntary sources does not match the amount received. From 2000 to 2007, the UNDP has consistently received less funding than promised.

Monetary woes aside, there is another large problem: the lack of a synchronized international aid system. One of the 10 reasons cited by the 2006 MP Report as a major shortcoming of the MDGs is that, “multilateral organizations frequently compete for donor government funding.” Other factors include erratic funding from donor countries, implementation of contradictory policies, and lack of technical support for developing nations.” The UN Development Group was established as a coordinating body of all UN agencies to prevent such confusion, but instead it contributes to the melee by serving merely as a “forum for dialogue than real coordination.”

The facts on the ground seem to paint a disheartening picture for 2015. Unless the UN works with developing nations to fix the cracks soon, the MDGs may well be on target—for the next millennium.

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