

# The Origins of the Millennium Development Goals

*John W. McArthur*

*This article describes the establishment of the Millennium Development Goals (MDGs) by identifying seven associated myths and offering explanations for each. From his perspective helping to lead the United Nations Millennium Project—then-UN secretary-general Kofi Annan’s independent advisory body mandated to recommend an action plan for achieving the MDGs—the author provides an insider’s perspective to the agreements, proposals, and real-time global political debates that shaped the process behind the Goals.*

The Millennium Development Goals (MDGs) were established as a response to many of the world’s foremost challenges as they appeared in 2000. At the time, the policy orthodoxy that had focused on development through macroeconomic fundamentals had achieved limited results. The Asian financial crisis of 1997–98 had sent shockwaves around the globe and Latin America was recovering from its own series of economic crises. Post-Cold War aid budgets were in secular decline. Many former Eastern Bloc countries were still struggling to regain their economic footing following the demise of the Soviet Union. Most disconcertingly, sub-Saharan Africa had suffered two “lost decades” of economic growth while a rampant HIV/AIDS pandemic infected twenty-five million people without a global treatment effort.

The late 1990s also saw a deepening global mistrust towards international economic institutions. Many people viewed globalization as a force imposing the will of rich corporate interests against the needs of the disempowered poor. When the OECD proposed a multilateral agreement on investment (MAI), it was rejected by developing countries. The Asia crisis only worsened the reputational burdens of the World Bank and International Monetary Fund (IMF) after more than a decade of “structural adjustment” impositions in developing countries. Tensions culminated in the December 1999 “Battle in Seattle,” where street protests forced the midstream abandonment of a WTO ministerial meeting.

---

John W. McArthur is a visiting fellow with the Brookings Institution, senior fellow with the United Nations Foundation, and senior fellow with the Fung Global Institute. He was previously the CEO of Millennium Promise, the leading international non-governmental organization solely committed to supporting the achievement of the Millennium Development Goals to cut the many forms of extreme poverty by half by 2015. He was also a faculty member at Columbia’s School of International and Public Affairs and a scholar at the University’s Earth Institute, where he earlier served as policy director.

In 2000, a momentous turn of the calendar offered political leaders an opportunity to revise the terms of global cooperation. Although the UN had a mixed track record in supporting development outcomes during the twentieth century, its core premise of one-country-one-vote gave it unique legitimacy to convene the global conversation. Moreover, then-UN secretary-general Kofi Annan was at the height of his influence and his perceived moral leadership was pivotal to reframing debates around a new spirit of partnership. That spirit gave rise to the MDGs.

The MDGs have since become the world's central reference point for development cooperation. But contrary to many beliefs, the MDG launch process did not take place on a single date as a unified global policy effort, accompanied by explicit budgets, strategies, or operational procedures. Instead, the MDGs took shape through a complex mix of international political processes, agreements, and proposals, interwoven with real-time global debates. Perhaps inevitably, the complexity of formulating and launching these goals has led to a variety of common misunderstandings regarding their origins. This article provides an overview of the MDGs' multi-year launch process, reviewed through the lens of common myths and explanations.

**Myth 1: The MDGs were established by a few people in a UN conference room.**

*Explanation*

The MDGs were a product of iterated distillation, extracted from a wide array of global processes, with many actors involved over several years. During the 1990s, many international goals and targets were established through a

---

The MDGs were a product of iterated distillation, extracted from a wide array of global processes, with many actors involved over several years.

---

series of major subject-specific conferences. The agendas spanned priorities like education (Jomtien 1990), children (New York 1990), the environment (Rio 1992), population (Cairo 1994), social development (Copenhagen 1995), and the status of women (Beijing 1995). In 1995 and 1996, in the face of declining aid budgets, members of the OECD development assistance committee set out to summarize the disparate agree-

ments into a shorthand set of “international development goals” (IDGs) that could help motivate donors.<sup>1</sup>

Building on the political momentum of the international conferences, the IDGs became an increasingly common reference point for donor cooperation. In substance they looked similar to Goals 1 through 7 of today's MDGs, but they lacked developing country buy-in. Structural adjustment strictures were still a sore point, and the IDGs offered no clear support to empower the implied ambitions. Over time the locus of discussion shifted from the OECD to the UN. But when Kofi Annan endorsed a version of the IDGs in June 2000, widespread backlash from global civil society prompted

UN leaders to recognize that a more concerted approach to global partnership was required.

In the lead-up to the September 2000 UN Millennium Summit, the intergovernmental drafting process was led by John Ruggie, Kofi Annan's advisor and assistant secretary-general. Mark Malloch Brown, the UNDP administrator, also played a key strategic role. This included forging a new era of cooperation between the UN and the World Bank. In the end, world leaders signed off on a historic Millennium Declaration text that distilled a wide-ranging global agenda down to a relatively pithy framework of global priorities. The aim was a results-oriented approach to global collaboration that put people at the center. The text was ultimately drafted in a UN conference room, but its contents had roots in the outcomes from the 1990s conferences.

Following the Millennium Declaration, the UN General Assembly mandated Annan to prepare a long-term road map towards implementation. Annan in turn commissioned Michael Doyle, John Ruggie's successor as assistant secretary-general, to coordinate the process. Doyle led a two-pronged overarching effort, supported by Abiodun Williams of the secretary-general's Strategic Planning Unit.<sup>2</sup> One prong was the political process of negotiating follow-up conversations with member states, including critical discussions with the Group of 77 (G77) that led to MDG 8 for partnership.<sup>3</sup> The other prong was an interagency technical process co-chaired with Jan Vandemoortele of UNDP, serving to incorporate expert inputs from UNICEF, UNFPA, the OECD, World Bank, IMF, and later the WHO.

The end product was a September 2001 report of the secretary-general entitled "Road map towards the implementation of the United Nations Millennium Declaration" (hereafter "Road Map").<sup>4</sup> This was the first document to present the formal term "Millennium Development Goals" as a specific package of goals and targets. After several years of international processes, this culminating text crystallized an extensive series of international processes into a consolidated agenda for action.

### **Myth 2: The MDGs were meant to be global rather than country-level goals.**

#### *Explanation*

The MDGs were framed around a "global plus national" strategy from the outset. This was clear at least since the Goals were first articulated in Annan's September 2001 Road Map. Paragraph 81 of that document explicitly states, "It is crucial that the millennium development goals become national goals and serve to increase the coherence and consistency of national policies and programs." The annex further states that, "The United Nations will report on progress towards the millennium development goals at the global and country levels."<sup>5</sup>

Confusion on this point is partially because the predecessors to the MDGs embedded a mixed approach to global and national targets. In the IDGs, for example, the goal of cutting extreme poverty by half was framed

globally, but the goal for cutting child mortality applied equally to each country.<sup>6</sup> Meanwhile, Annan’s seminal March 2000 *We the Peoples* report set the stage for the Millennium Summit and urged that the extreme poverty target be reached “in every region, and every country.”<sup>7</sup> But the Millennium Declaration’s development targets are stated in global terms, so the debate of global versus national goals took place in Doyle’s technical working group, which aimed to strike a balance between ambition and feasibility. As of June 2001, the United Nations Development Group’s (UNDG) organizational leaders were already preparing a strategy for MDG Country Reports, but there was tension in Doyle’s group regarding whether national reporting would be in reference to global targets or distinct national targets.<sup>8</sup>

By the time the Road Map was published, Mark Malloch Brown was tasked with spearheading the global MDG effort in his capacity as UNDP administrator and chair of the UNDG. He was committed to a country-plus-global organizational approach from the outset.<sup>9</sup> By October 2001, the UNDG Guidance Note on country-level reporting clarified that, “The common list of 8 goals, 18 targets and 40+ indicators . . . will help ensure a common assessment and understanding of the MDGs at global, regional and national levels.”<sup>10</sup> The accompanying reporting template explicitly presumed that each country would track against consistent MDG targets, such as a two-thirds reduction in under-five mortality.<sup>11</sup> There was, however, some ambiguity regarding how to ensure countries felt empowered by the Goals rather than constrained by them:

The MDGs will need to be contextualized within the country-specific situation. In other words, the global goals and targets will need to be adapted into national equivalents with the endorsement of national stakeholders. Each country will, therefore, have to decide on one or more among the following three options: (a) select those goals and targets as agreed at the global level; (b) select the appropriate goals and targets but adapt them to the country circumstances; and (c) add other goals and targets that are relevant to the country, if so desired.<sup>12</sup>

For example, the document states that countries suffering from the AIDS pandemic will need to set “different targets” for child mortality. In retrospect, the pessimism on anticipated health outcomes highlights how much progress the world has made in the intervening years, since many of the foremost MDG achievements for child mortality have taken place in countries like Ethiopia and Malawi, which were severely afflicted by HIV/AIDS.<sup>13</sup>

The “global plus national” logic was also embedded in the remit Annan gave Jeffrey Sachs when appointing him as his Special Advisor on the MDGs in January 2002, and soon after that the Director of the UN Millennium Project, the independent advisory body mandated to recommend an action plan for the MDGs. John Ruggie later described the Project as the “core” of the UN’s “elaborate implementation plan” for the MDGs.<sup>14</sup> From the outset, Sachs understood his mandate to include a foremost imperative in tackling the special needs of Africa, as called for in the Millennium Declaration, and in helping “off track” countries get on track. Together with Mark Malloch

Brown, he also knew that the country-level processes were the critical locus for achieving policy traction, and that an equitable approach to member states could only imply each country being supported to achieve the same proportionate goals. Absent this logic, officials would either be in the impossible position of endorsing high targets for some countries and low targets for others, or else a simplistic focus on global aggregates would have suggested they adopt a near exclusive focus on the most populous countries like India. The most important issue was therefore to identify operational and political means for all countries to pursue the Goals.

The opposing argument of “global but not national” has been made for many years by Jan Vandemoortele, who emphasized the need to preserve developing countries’ policy space from undue external pressures.<sup>15</sup> At its essence, the difference of viewpoints hinged on whether, for example, supporting African health ministers to pursue ambitious health targets amounted to providing them more or less policy freedom. In any case, Vandemoortele’s argument was not reflected in the 2001 Road Map, and was not shared among multiple UN leaders who played key political roles in launching the MDG effort. As of early 2002 Vandemoortele was responsible for UN coordination of MDG Country Reports.

**Myth 3: The MDGs’ quantitative targets were set after the Millennium Declaration.**

*Explanation*

All of the original MDG targets were taken directly from the Millennium Declaration. Doyle’s working group identified a subset of eighteen commitments, which they categorized under eight overarching “Goals.” The eighteen commitments were labeled as “Targets.” Ten of those targets were quantitative and nine of the ten set a deadline for 2015, the exception being the slum dweller target for 2020. Table 1 lists the original eighteen MDG targets next to the relevant passages from the Millennium Declaration.

The only target that could potentially be deemed an interpretive stretch from the Millennium Declaration is the non-quantitative Target 9, which is to “integrate the principles of sustainable development into country policies and programs and reverse the loss of environmental resources.” The Millennium Declaration includes the first half of the sentence but not the second half, although the latter can be presumed as addressed through the substance of “Agenda 21,” which had its own complicated global history after the 1992 Rio Earth Summit. However, Target 9 has not been a source of significant global political friction.

Table 1 shows how Goals 1 through 6 included eight quantitative targets, as marked by “Q.” Goal 7 included two quantitative targets plus one non-quantitative target, the latter marked by “NQ” in table 1. Goal 8 included seven non-quantitative targets, with no explicit deadlines. The ten quantitative targets are generally considered the core aims of the MDGs, and the eight non-quantitative targets are typically seen as important enablers. The eighteen targets were later expanded to be twenty-one, based on 2005 UN World Summit agreements, as described in table 2.

To minimize confusion between goal numbers and target numbers, the UN also subsequently adjusted the labeling system whereby the targets are ordered by capital letters under each of the MDG Goals. Thus the target under Goal 2 for primary education is now described as “Target 2.A” rather than “Target 3.” For completeness, table 3 maps the targets from the original 1 through 18 numbering scheme to the current ordering from 1.A through 8.F.

**Table 1. The Original 18 MDG targets and corresponding language from the Millennium Declaration**

Original MDG Target	Millennium Declaration Language (September 2000)
<b>Goal 1 – Eradicate poverty and hunger</b>	
<p>(Q) <b>Target 1.</b> Halve, between 1990 and 2015, the proportion of people whose income is less than one dollar a day</p> <p>(Q) <b>Target 2.</b> Halve, between 1990 and 2015, the proportion of people who suffer from hunger</p>	<p><b>Paragraph 19.</b> “We resolve further: To halve, by the year 2015, the proportion of the world’s people whose income is less than one dollar a day and the proportion of people who suffer from hunger.”</p>
<b>Goal 2 – Achieve universal primary education</b>	
<p>(Q) <b>Target 3.</b> Ensure that, by 2015, children everywhere, boys and girls alike, will be able to complete a full course of primary schooling</p>	<p><b>Paragraph 19.</b> “We resolve further: . . . To ensure that, by the same date, children everywhere, boys and girls alike, will be able to complete a full course of primary schooling and that girls and boys will have equal access to all levels of education.”</p>
<b>Goal 3 – Promote gender equality and empower women</b>	
<p>(Q) <b>Target 4.</b> Eliminate gender disparity in primary and secondary education, preferably by 2005, and in all levels of education no later than 2015</p>	<p><b>Paragraph 20.</b> “We also resolve: To promote gender equality and the empowerment of women as effective ways to combat poverty, hunger and disease and to stimulate development that is truly sustainable.”</p>
<b>Goal 4 – Reduce child mortality</b>	
<p>(Q) <b>Target 5.</b> Reduce by two-thirds, between 1990 and 2015, the under-five mortality rate</p>	<p><b>Paragraph 19.</b> “We resolve further: . . . By the same date, to have reduced maternal mortality by three quarters, and under-five child mortality by two thirds, of their current rates.”</p>
<b>Goal 5 – Improve maternal health</b>	
<p>(Q) <b>Target 6.</b> Reduce by three-quarters, between 1990 and 2015, the maternal mortality ratio</p>	
<b>Goal 6 – Combat HIV/AIDS, malaria and other diseases</b>	
<p>(Q) <b>Target 7.</b> Have halted by 2015 and begun to reverse the spread of HIV/AIDS</p> <p>(Q) <b>Target 8.</b> Have halted by 2015 and begun to reverse the incidence of malaria and other major diseases</p>	<p><b>Paragraph 19.</b> “We resolve further: . . . To have, by then, halted, and begun to reverse, the spread of HIV/AIDS, the scourge of malaria and other major diseases that afflict humanity.”</p>

Table 1. , cont.

**Original MDG Target**

**Millennium Declaration  
Language (September 2000)**

**Goal 7 – Ensure environmental sustainability**

**(NQ) Target 9.** Integrate the principles of sustainable development into country policies and programs and reverse the loss of environmental resources

**Paragraph 22.** “We reaffirm our support for the principles of sustainable development, including those set out in Agenda 21, agreed upon at the United Nations Conference on Environment and Development.”

**Paragraph 23.** “We resolve therefore to adopt in all our environmental actions a new ethic of conservation and stewardship . . .”

**(Q) Target 10.** Halve by 2015 the proportion of people without sustainable access to safe drinking water (“and basic sanitation” [added in 2002])

**Paragraph 19.** “We resolve further: . . . To halve, by the year 2015, . . . the proportion of people who are unable to reach or to afford safe drinking water.”

**\*WSSD 2002, Paragraph 8.** “We agree to halve, by the year 2015, the proportion of people who are unable to reach or to afford safe drinking water (as outlined in the Millennium Declaration) and the proportion of people who do not have access to basic sanitation.”

**(Q) Target 11.** By 2020, to have achieved a significant improvement in the lives of at least 100 million slum dwellers

**Paragraph 19.** “We resolve further: . . . By 2020, to have achieved a significant improvement in the lives of at least 100 million slum dwellers as proposed in the ‘Cities Without Slums’ initiative.”

**Goal 8 – Develop a global partnership for development**

**(NQ) Target 12.** Develop further an open, rule-based, predictable, non-discriminatory trading and financial system

(Includes a commitment to good governance, development, and poverty reduction—both nationally and internationally)

**Paragraph 12.** “We resolve therefore to create an environment—at the national and global levels alike—which is conducive to development and to the elimination of poverty.”

**Paragraph 13.** “Success in meeting these objectives depends, *inter alia*, on good governance within each country. It also depends on good governance at the international level and on transparency in the financial, monetary and trading systems. We are committed to an open, equitable, rule-based, predictable and non-discriminatory multilateral trading and financial system.”

Table 1. , cont.

**Original MDG Target**

**(NQ) Target 13.** Address the special needs of the least developed countries

(Includes: tariff and quota free access for least developed countries’ exports; enhanced program of debt relief for Heavily Indebted Poor Countries [HIPCs] and cancellation of official bilateral debt; and more generous ODA for countries committed to poverty reduction)

**(NQ) Target 14.** Address the special needs of landlocked countries and small island developing states (through the Programme of Action for the Sustainable Development of Small Island Developing States and the outcome of the twenty-second special session of the General Assembly)

**(NQ) Target 15.** Deal comprehensively with the debt problems of developing countries through national and international measures in order to make debt sustainable in the long term

**Millennium Declaration Language (September 2000)**

**Paragraph 15.** “We also undertake to address the special needs of the least developed countries. . . . We call on the industrialized countries:

- To adopt, preferably by [May 2001], a policy of duty- and quota-free access for essentially all exports from the least developed countries;
- To implement the enhanced program of debt relief for the heavily indebted poor countries without further delay and to agree to cancel all official bilateral debts of those countries in return for their making demonstrable commitments to poverty reduction; and
- To grant more generous development assistance, especially to countries that are genuinely making an effort to apply their resources to poverty reduction.”

**Paragraph 17.** “We also resolve to address the special needs of small island developing States, by implementing the Barbados Programme of Action and the outcome of the twenty-second special session of the General Assembly rapidly and in full. We urge the international community to ensure that, in the development of a vulnerability index, the special needs of small island developing States are taken into account.”

**Paragraph 18.** “We recognize the special needs and problems of the landlocked developing countries, and urge both bilateral and multilateral donors to increase financial and technical assistance to this group of countries to meet their special development needs and to help them overcome the impediments of geography by improving their transit transport systems.”

**Paragraph 16.** “We are also determined to deal comprehensively and effectively with the debt problems of low- and middle-income developing countries, through various national and international measures designed to make their debt sustainable in the long term.”

Table 1. , cont.

<b>Original MDG Target</b>	<b>Millennium Declaration Language (September 2000)</b>
<b>(NQ) Target 16.</b> In cooperation with developing countries, develop and implement strategies for decent and productive work for youth	<b>Paragraph 20.</b> “We also resolve: . . . To develop and implement strategies that give young people everywhere a real chance to find decent and productive work.”
<b>(NQ) Target 17.</b> In cooperation with pharmaceutical companies, provide access to affordable essential drugs in developing countries	<b>Paragraph 20.</b> “We also resolve: . . . To encourage the pharmaceutical industry to make essential drugs more widely available and affordable by all who need them in developing countries.”
<b>(NQ) Target 18.</b> In cooperation with the private sector, make available the benefits of new technologies, especially information and communications	<p><b>Paragraph 20.</b> “We also resolve: . . .</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>· To develop strong partnerships with the private sector and with civil society organizations in pursuit of development and poverty eradication.</li> <li>· To ensure that the benefits of new technologies, especially information and communication technologies, in conformity with recommendations contained in the ECOSOC 2000 Ministerial Declaration, are available to all.”</li> </ul>

Sources: United Nations, *Millennium Declaration*, UN General Assembly A/55/2 (2000), <http://www.un.org/millennium/declaration/ares552e.pdf>; United Nations, *Road Map Towards the Implementation of the United Nations Millennium Declaration: Report of the Secretary-General*, UN General Assembly A/56/326 (2001), <http://www.un.org/millenniumgoals/sgreport2001.pdf>; United Nations Millennium Project, *Investing in Development: A Practical Plan to Achieve the Millennium Development Goals* (London: Earthscan, 2005), <http://www.unmillenniumproject.org/documents/MainReportComplete-lowres.pdf>.

\*Language from the September 2002 World Summit on Sustainable Development in Johannesburg, South Africa.

Note: (Q) indicates quantitative target. (NQ) indicates non-quantitative target.

**Table 2. MDG targets added or revised following 2005 UN World Summit agreements**

**Post-2005 Incremental/  
Revised MDG Target**

**World Summit Outcome  
Document (2005)**

**Target 1.B**

Achieve full and productive employment and decent work for all, including women and young people

**Paragraph 47.**

“We strongly support fair globalization and resolve to make the goals of full and productive employment and decent work for all, including for women and young people, a central objective of our relevant national and international policies as well as our national development strategies, including poverty reduction strategies, as part of our efforts to achieve the Millennium Development Goals.”

**Target 5.B**

Achieve universal access to reproductive health

**Paragraph 57.**

“We commit ourselves to: . . . (g) Achieving universal access to reproductive health by 2015 . . . ”

**Target 6.B**

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

**Paragraph 57.**

“We commit ourselves to: . . . (d) Developing and implementing a package for HIV prevention, treatment and care with the aim of coming as close as possible to the goal of universal access to treatment by 2010 for all those who need it . . . ”

**Target 7.B.**

Reduce biodiversity loss, achieving, by 2010, a significant reduction in the rate of loss

**Paragraph 56 (c).**

“All States will fulfil commitments and significantly reduce the rate of loss of biodiversity by 2010 . . . ”

Sources: United Nations, *Millennium Development Goals*, <http://www.un.org/millenniumgoals/>; United Nations, *World Summit Outcome*, UN General Assembly A/60/1 (2005): <http://www.un.org/womenwatch/ods/A-RES-60-1-E.pdf>.

Note: Latest targets taken from <http://www.un.org/millenniumgoals>.

**Table 3. Mapping of original MDG targets 1 through 18 to current MDG targets 1.A through 8.F**

<b>Original Target Number</b>	<b>Revised Target Label</b>	<b>Target Language</b>
<b>GOAL 1</b>		
1	1.A	Halve, between 1990 and 2015, the proportion of people whose income is less than \$1 a day
16 *	1.B	Achieve full and productive employment and decent work for all, including women and young people
2	1.C	Halve, between 1990 and 2015, the proportion of people who suffer from hunger
<b>GOAL 2</b>		
3	2.A	Ensure that, by 2015, children everywhere, boys and girls alike, will be able to complete a full course of primary schooling
<b>GOAL 3</b>		
4	3.A	Eliminate gender disparity in primary and secondary education, preferably by 2005, and in all levels of education no later than 2015
<b>GOAL 4</b>		
5	4.A	Reduce by two-thirds, between 1990 and 2015, the under-five mortality rate
<b>GOAL 5</b>		
6	5.A	Reduce by three-quarters, between 1990 and 2015, the maternal mortality ratio
[new]	5.B	Achieve universal access to reproductive health
<b>GOAL 6</b>		
7	6.A	Have halted by 2015 and begun to reverse the spread of HIV/AIDS
[new]	6.B	Achieve, by 2010, universal access to treatment for HIV/AIDS for all those who need it
8	6.C	Have halted by 2015 and begun to reverse the incidence of malaria and other major diseases
<b>GOAL 7</b>		
9	7.A	Integrate the principles of sustainable development into country policies and programs and reverse the loss of environmental resources
[new]	7.B	Reduce biodiversity loss, achieving, by 2010, a significant reduction in the rate of loss
10	7.C	Halve, by 2015, the proportion of people without sustainable access to safe drinking water and basic sanitation

Table 3., cont.

<b>Original Target Number</b>	<b>Revised Target Label</b>	<b>Target Language</b>
11	7.D	Have achieved by 2020 a significant improvement in the lives of at least 100 million slum dwellers
<b>GOAL 8</b>		
12	8.A	Develop further an open, rule-based, predictable, non-discriminatory trading and financial system**
13	8.B	Address the special needs of the Least Developed Countries**
14	8.C	Address the special needs of landlocked developing countries and small island developing states**
15	8.D	Deal comprehensively with the debt problems of developing countries**
17	8.E	In cooperation with pharmaceutical companies, provide access to affordable essential drugs in developing countries
18	8.F	In cooperation with the private sector, make available the benefits of new technologies, especially information and communications**

Sources: United Nations, “UN Millennium Project,” 2005, <http://www.unmillenniumproject.org/>; United Nations, *Millennium Development Goals*, <http://www.un.org/millenniumgoals/>.

\*Target language was tweaked following 2005 UN World Summit. See table 2.

\*\* Simplified Target language indicated, as extracted from <http://www.un.org/millennium-goals>.

---

#### **Myth 4: The Millennium Declaration established 1990 baselines.**

##### *Explanation*

The one substantive adjustment made by UN officials between the 2000 Millennium Declaration and the 2001 Road Map was to identify a 1990 baseline for the 2015 targets. This was important because most of the Declaration’s proportionate targets (i.e., excluding the absolute value targets for primary education and gender equality) are not explicit regarding a baseline. The exception is the language for child and maternal mortality, which specifies ambitions “compared to current rates.”

The 1990 baseline was set for three key reasons. First, most of the targets affirmed in the Millennium Declaration were derived from the global conferences of the 1990s, which used 1990 as a baseline, as described in para-

graph 6 and annex paragraph 3 of the 2001 Road Map. Second, as Doyle's team assessed the available information, the statistical experts pointed out that data for 2000 were not yet available for a wide range of countries and were not likely to be for another few years. Referencing the year 1990 allowed monitoring efforts to begin much more quickly. Third, the team determined that 1990 would be a more reasonable fit compared to historical trends, thereby lessening the pressures on world leaders for 2015. Even though the MDGs were squarely created to *change* trajectories, the UN leadership did want the new Goals to be viably achievable. Thus anyone who prefers the "goals of the Millennium Declaration" to the MDGs is implicitly arguing for *more* ambitious and expansive goals.

**Myth 5: The MDG indicators are equal in stature to the goals and targets.**

*Explanation*

The goals and targets have a very different political status than the dozens of indicators used to track progress against them. Even though all three categories are often listed together in documentation, only the goals and targets have the political legitimacy that comes from intergovernmental agreements. In 2001, the UN interagency technical group identified a series of indicators that could reasonably be used to track progress on the goals and targets. A first pass is suggested in the Road Map's annex as a "proposed formulation."<sup>16</sup> The indicators have subsequently evolved through a valiant technical process whereby specialist staff align ongoing, if imperfect, improvements in data systems with the political agreements of world leaders. But the indicators are not a product of intergovernmental agreement and should not be considered in the same political category as the goals and targets.

**Myth 6: Goal 8 sets foreign aid targets, including the "0.7" target.**

*Explanation*

There are no explicit aid targets within the MDGs themselves. However, the MDGs do *imply* the need for increased aid and their political lifeblood hinged directly on the agreements of the 2002 Monterrey Consensus. The Millennium Declaration includes multiple non-quantitative assertions regarding the need for increased official development assistance (ODA), as outlined in table 4. Paragraph 15 states that, "We call on the industrialized countries: . . . to grant more generous development assistance, especially to countries that are genuinely making an effort to apply their resources to poverty reduction." The Millennium Declaration also commits to a follow-up "High-Level International and Intergovernmental Event on Financing for Development" to figure out how to finance the Declaration's sustainable development objectives. That event was originally slated for 2001, but ended up taking place in Monterrey, Mexico in March 2002.

**Table 4. Key Foreign Aid Language from 2002 Monterrey Consensus and 2000 Millennium Declaration****Monterrey Conference on Financing for Development (2002)**

**Paragraph 39.** “Official development assistance (ODA) plays an essential role as a complement to other sources of financing for development, especially in those countries with the least capacity to attract private direct investment. ODA can help a country to reach adequate levels of domestic resource mobilization over an appropriate time horizon, while human capital, productive and export capacities are enhanced. ODA can be critical for improving the environment for private sector activity and can thus pave the way for robust growth. ODA is also a crucial instrument for supporting education, health, public infrastructure development, agriculture and rural development, and to enhance food security. For many countries in Africa, least developed countries, small island developing States and landlocked developing countries, ODA is still the largest source of external financing and is critical to the achievement of the development goals and targets of the Millennium Declaration and other internationally agreed development targets.”

**Paragraph 40.** “Effective partnerships among donors and recipients are based on the recognition of national leadership and ownership of development plans and, within that framework, sound policies and good governance at all levels are necessary to ensure ODA effectiveness. A major priority is to build those development partnerships, particularly in support of the neediest, and to maximize the poverty reduction impact of ODA. The goals, targets and commitments of the Millennium Declaration and other internationally agreed development targets can help countries to set short- and medium-term national priorities as the foundation for building partnerships for external support.”

**Millennium Declaration Language (2000)**

**Paragraph 14.** “We are concerned about the obstacles developing countries face in mobilizing the resources needed to finance their sustained development. We will therefore make every effort to ensure the success of the High-level International and Intergovernmental Event on Financing for Development, to be held in 2001.”

**Paragraph 15.** “We call on the industrialized countries: . . . To grant more generous development assistance, especially to countries that are genuinely making an effort to apply their resources to poverty reduction.”

**Paragraph 18.** “We recognize the special needs and problems of the landlocked developing countries, and urge both bilateral and multilateral donors to increase financial and technical assistance to this group of countries to meet their special development needs and to help them overcome the impediments of geography by improving their transit transport systems.”

**Paragraph 28.** “We resolve . . . To take special measures to address the challenges of poverty eradication and sustainable development in Africa, including debt cancellation, improved market access, enhanced Official Development Assistance and increased flows of Foreign Direct Investment, as well as transfers of technology.”

Table 4., cont.

**Monterrey Conference on  
Financing for Development (2002)**

**Millennium Declaration  
Language (2000)**

**Paragraph 41.** “We recognize that a substantial increase in ODA and other resources will be required if developing countries are to achieve the internationally agreed development goals and objectives, including those contained in the Millennium Declaration. To build support for ODA, we will cooperate to further improve policies and development strategies, both nationally and internationally, to enhance aid effectiveness.”

**Paragraph 42.** “In that context, *we urge developed countries that have not done so to make concrete efforts towards the target of 0.7 per cent of gross national product (GNP) as ODA to developing countries and 0.15 to 0.20 per cent of GNP of developed countries to least developed countries, as reconfirmed at the Third United Nations Conference on Least Developed Countries, and we encourage developing countries to build on progress achieved in ensuring that ODA is used effectively to help achieve development goals and targets. We acknowledge the efforts of all donors, commend those donors whose ODA contributions exceed, reach or are increasing towards the targets, and underline the importance of undertaking to examine the means and time frames for achieving the targets and goals.*” [emphasis added]

Sources: United Nations, *Report of the International Conference on Financing for Development: Monterrey, Mexico, 18-22 March 2002* (New York: United Nations, 2002), <http://www.un.org/esa/ffd/monterrey/MonterreyConsensus.pdf>; United Nations, *Millennium Declaration*, UN General Assembly A/55/2 (2000), <http://www.un.org/millennium/declaration/ares552e.pdf>.

---

In Monterrey, then-US president George W. Bush and other world leaders signed a pivotal intergovernmental agreement around aid frameworks, famously declaring in paragraph 42 that, “We urge developed countries that have not done so to make concrete efforts towards the target of 0.7 percent of gross national product (GNP) as [official development assistance] to developing countries.”<sup>17</sup> This language was painstakingly negotiated between senior European and American diplomats, with the latter insisting on the word “towards” preceding “the target.” The wobble word left ambiguity as to how long it might take to achieve the target, but it is unambiguous that the United States and all other countries endorsed “0.7” as a legitimate objective.

The promise of developed countries getting serious on financial support was paired with developing countries’ explicit commitment to good governance and to mobilizing domestic resources, including a key phrase stressing that, “Each country has primary responsibility for its own economic and social development.”<sup>18</sup> The agreement also affirmed that markets are the primary engines of economic development and that aid is needed to support poor countries where markets and local governments could not meet the key challenges on their own. This was how the MDGs took shape as the world’s first explicit development partnership framework between developed and developing countries.

Some of the political confusion around the early history of Goal 8 traces back to the 2001 Road Map. Under the document’s broad approach of presenting “potential strategies for action,” paragraphs 135 and 136 describe the mismatch by which ODA had been declining at the same time as a series of ambitious international programmatic commitments were being made and a growing number of developing countries were undertaking successful governance and policy reforms towards reducing poverty.<sup>19</sup> It then stated that “Strategies for moving forward include: A commitment by the industrial countries at the [Monterrey 2002] International Conference on Financing for Development to implement the target of providing ODA equal to 0.7 percent of their gross national product.” In other words, one way to implement the Millennium Declaration’s commitment to increasing aid would be to implement the 0.7 aid target at next year’s conference on how to finance the MDGs.

Although the Road Map only proposed seven non-quantitative targets under Goal 8, the report’s annex does mention the 0.7 benchmark under a proposed list of indicators to be used for tracking purposes. A suggested indicator for the Millennium Declaration’s pledged aid increases was listed as follows: “Net ODA as percentage of OECD/DAC donors’ gross national product (targets) of 0.7 percent in total and 0.15 percent for [least developed countries].” A prominent single footnote cautions that “the selection of indicators for Goals 7 and 8 is subject to further refinement.”

Despite the Millennium Declaration’s explicit call to increase ODA and the Road Map’s clear caveats regarding proposed indicators, representatives of the US government were angry that the secretary-general was referencing a quantitative aid target. This led to the myth, common in Washington, that the MDGs and the 0.7 target were a “UN fabrication.” In some circles

this belief persisted for years after President Bush endorsed the 0.7 target in Monterrey. Nonetheless, as of March 2002, the 0.7 target had intergovernmental legitimacy as one element of the overarching strategy for the MDGs, even if not as a literal component.

**Myth 7: The MDGs have guided major development players' operations since 2000.**

*Explanation*

The MDGs' operational building blocks took shape during a few distinct phases in the years following the Millennium Summit. The first, from September 2000 to September 2001, translated the Millennium Declaration commitments into a set of goals and targets under the MDG label. The second, from September 2001 through to mid-2002, confirmed the Monterrey Consensus principles for financing and saw the UN firm up its internal operational strategy.<sup>20</sup>

The third phase, from mid-2002 through September 2005, focused on technical debates and advocacy encouraging multilateral, government, and civil society stakeholders to commit resources and operational processes towards achieving the Goals. A build-up of global media attention and a series of major donor pledges then culminated in the September 2005 UN World Summit, where governments committed to align the international development system's core goals with its core processes, which take place at the country level. They resolved, "To adopt, by 2006, and implement comprehensive national development strategies to achieve the internationally agreed development goals and objectives, including the Millennium Development Goals."<sup>21</sup> The period since September 2005 has been characterized by efforts to implement the relevant pledges, with varying degrees of success.

Two strands of tension added particular complexity during the MDGs' early years. One was between the UN and the US government, exacerbated by debates over the Iraq War. In Washington, confusion over the MDGs worsened when President Bush launched the Millennium Challenge Corporation, a name inspired by the MDGs but with no operational links to the MDGs. Indeed the US government actively resisted using explicit MDG terminology from September 2001 until September 2005, when President Bush first used the words "Millennium Development Goals" in public. This came a month after his ambassador to the UN John Bolton attempted to have the MDGs deleted from the international record. Until September 2005, US officials would commonly state either that, "the United States supports the goals of the Millennium Declaration but not the Millennium Development Goals," or "we support Goals 1 through 7 but not Goal 8," even though neither statement holds up logically. When the world's largest economy, largest source of UN funding, and largest provider of official development assistance sends such mixed signals around a key global agenda item, international cooperation becomes more complicated.

The other tricky political layer pertained to the World Bank, the world's largest development institution, which had always had a mixed

record of MDG engagement. Although most of the World Bank's political leadership actively supported the MDGs, the technical staff and operational

---

When the world's largest economy, largest source of UN funding, and largest provider of official development assistance sends such mixed signals around a key global agenda item, international cooperation becomes more complicated.

---

machinery tended to downplay the Goals' role as practical objectives. Some staff considered the MDGs flawed for not focusing enough on economic growth or corruption. Others resented the UN taking a leadership role on development policy. The practical challenge was most pronounced through the World

Bank's role in facilitating Poverty Reduction Strategy processes, the primary policy vehicle for low-income countries to define their parameters for external support. For example, staff declined to help countries prepare policy scenarios indicating how they might actually achieve the MDGs, since donor funding requirements for such strategies were considered to be "unrealistic." The word "realistic" thus became an implicitly self-fulfilling bias in favor of donor country budgets, rather than a neutral technical assessment of feasibility. In a subtle turn of phrase, World Bank documents used phrases like "accelerating progress towards the MDGs," rather than focusing on steps need actually to "achieve the MDGs."

When such a pivotal technical institution has an ambivalent relationship with the global development system's primary goals, it becomes all the more difficult for other entities to pursue the goals too. This was why the 2005 World Summit agreement for MDG-consistent national strategies was politically salient at the time. It provided low-income countries with intergovernmental backing to pursue MDG-based Poverty Reduction Strategies, even if subsequent implementation of the agreement was still mixed. Although the World Bank's support for the MDGs has increased over the years, the key point to note is that it did not fully mobilize around the MDGs early on. This institutional history also provides context for understanding how MDG health breakthroughs have occurred through processes guided by other organizations, including the GAVI Alliance, the Global Fund to Fight AIDS, TB, and Malaria, and US bilateral programs for HIV/AIDS and malaria.

### **Taking Stock and Looking Forward**

The MDGs are often portrayed as having been simplistically hatched in 2000 by a small group huddled in a UN conference room, and then mechanically rolled out to guide many years' worth of global development policy. The reality is much more complicated. It took several years to forge global agreement on a common development agenda, and in turn several more to roll out the ideas and achieve policy traction. As the international community considers a new generation of global development goals, it stands on the shoulders of many hard-fought underlying achievements.

Careful assessments of MDG success and failure will form a critical ingredient for any post-2015 policy breakthroughs. To be done well, these should examine the complex pathways through which a diversity of targets were born. The MDG story is qualitative as much as quantitative. Analysts and practitioners will also be well served to consider the factors that led the MDGs even to be worthy of assessment. The effort was methodical enough to invigorate technical experts while political enough to motivate broad coalitions for action. Many forms of active leadership helped to drive each step forward. It is a new generation's task to carry similar convictions through to 2030.

---

As the international community considers a new generation of global development goals, it stands on the shoulders of many hard-fought underlying achievements.

---

### Notes

<sup>1</sup> Richard Manning, "Using Indicators to Encourage Development: Lessons from the Millennium Development Goals," *Danish Institute for International Studies DIIS Report 01* (2009); Note that the IDGs also became known as "international development targets" (IDTs) in some circles, especially in the United Kingdom.

<sup>2</sup> Michael W. Doyle, "Dialectics of a Global Constitution: The Struggle over the UN Charter," *European Journal of International Relations* 18, no. 4 (2012): 601–624.

<sup>3</sup> Michael W. Doyle, personal communication, August 6 and 8, 2014.

<sup>4</sup> United Nations, *Road Map Towards the Implementation of the United Nations Millennium Declaration: Report of the Secretary-General*, UN General Assembly A/56/326 (2001).

<sup>5</sup> *Ibid.*, Annex, paragraph 4.

<sup>6</sup> Richard Manning, "Using Indicators to Encourage Development: Lessons from the Millennium Development Goals," *Danish Institute for International Studies DIIS Report 01* (2009).

<sup>7</sup> Kofi A. Annan, *We the Peoples: The Role of the United Nations in the 21st Century* (New York: United Nations, 2000), 20.

<sup>8</sup> United Nations Development Group (UNDG), "Reporting on the Millennium Development Goals at the Country Level," Guidance Note (October 2001).

<sup>9</sup> Mark Malloch Brown, personal communication, August 6, 2014.

<sup>10</sup> United Nations Development Group (UNDG), "Reporting on the Millennium Development Goals at the Country Level," 5.

<sup>11</sup> *Ibid.*, Annex 3.

<sup>12</sup> *Ibid.*, 5.

<sup>13</sup> John W. McArthur, "Seven Million Lives Saved: Assessing Child Mortality since the Launch of the Millennium Development Goals," working paper, Brookings Global Economy and Development Working Paper 78, September 2014.

<sup>14</sup> John Gerard Ruggie, "The United Nations and Globalization: Patterns and Limits of Institutional Adaptation," *Global Governance* 9 (2003): 301–21.

<sup>15</sup> Jan Vandemoortele, "Advancing the Global Development Agenda post-2015: Some Thoughts, Ideas, and Practical Suggestions," *Background paper for UN Task Team on the post-2015 UN Development Agenda* (2012).

<sup>16</sup> United Nations, *Road Map Towards the Implementation of the United Nations Millennium Declaration*, 55.

<sup>17</sup> United Nations, *Report of the International Conference on Financing for Development: Monterrey, Mexico, 18–22 March 2002* (New York: United Nations, 2002).

<sup>18</sup> *Ibid.*, paragraph 6.

<sup>19</sup> United Nations, *Road Map Towards the Implementation of the United Nations Millennium Declaration*, 2.

<sup>20</sup> United Nations Development Group (UNDG), “The United Nations and the MDGs: A Core Strategy,” Mimeo, June 7, 2002; United Nations, *Report of the International Conference on Financing for Development: Monterrey, Mexico, 18–22 March 2002*.

<sup>21</sup> United Nations, *World Summit Outcome*, UN General Assembly A/60/1 (2005): paragraph 22a.