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Amanda J. Harvey
Roger Williams University

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The UN Millennium Development Goals with Respect to Water: Prospects for Achieving Them

Amanda J. Harvey, Roger Williams University

The United Nations Millennium Summit was held in September 2000. It produced the Millennium Declaration which set out a long list of values, principles, and goals for improving the condition of mankind at the turn of the century¹. Following the Summit, in 2002, the Millennium Project began, fueled by the international community and the UN Secretary General Kofi Annan. This Project highlighted, in a more tangible way eight goals together with targets and indications for reducing world poverty, hunger, and disease that have come to be known as the Millennium Development Goals (MDGs)². These quantifiable goals and targets were agreed to by 189 countries of the international community³.

The Millennium Development Goals (MDGs) are as follows. The first goal is to eradicate extreme poverty and hunger; the second, to achieve universal primary education; the third, to promote gender equality and empower women; the fourth, to reduce the child mortality rate; the fifth, to improve maternal health; the sixth, to combat HIV/AIDS, malaria, and other diseases; the seventh, to ensure environmental sustainability; the eighth, to develop a global partnership for development⁴.

Each of the eight Goals has its own respective Targets to be met and each are equally important, however Goal 7: ensure environmental sustainability, Target 10: improve access to safe drinking water and sanitation, is of particular interest because several of the other Millennium Development Goals are dependent upon its success. For example, poverty cannot be eradicated and the women around the world who travel miles each day to access water cannot gain equality

¹ "Implementing the Millennium Development Declaration: The Millennium Development Goals and the United Nations Role." *United Nations Department of Public Information*: October 2002. www.un.org/millenniumgoals/MDGs-FACTSHEET1.pdf; Internet

² "About the UN Millennium Project". *Millennium Project: Commissioned by the UN Secretary-General and Supported by the UN Development Group*, 2006. www.unmillenniumproject.org/who/index.htm; Internet.

³ "Core MDG Documents". *Millennium Project: Commissioned by the UN Secretary-General and Supported by the UN Development Group*, 2006. www.unmillenniumproject.org/policy/policy03.htm; Internet.

⁴ "Goals and Targets". *Millennium Project: Commissioned by the UN Secretary-General and Supported by the UN Development Group*, 2006. <http://www.unmillenniumproject.org/goals/goals02.htm#goal7>; Internet

unless water and sanitation are available to all. Target 10 strives to halve, by 2015, the proportion of the population without access to safe drinking water and sanitation⁵.

The United Nations Development Group (UNDG) was placed in charge of keeping the MDGs at the forefront of international discussion. The UNDG has representatives in nearly every country to assist in advocating for progress and educating the world's people about the importance of advancement⁶. The specific responsibility of monitoring Goal 7 Target 10 has been placed upon the United Nations Children's Foundation (UNICEF) and the World Health Organization (WHO). These two organizations combined have formed the Joint Monitoring Programme (JMP) to facilitate the measurement of Target 10⁷.

Monitoring of water and sanitation goals is very difficult to quantify. Specific numbers about the quality of water at the point of consumption and the correct maintenance and use of sanitary facilities are not currently within the reach of the JMP⁸. Instead, progress is determined by whether or not people in a given area are using improved drinking water sources and improved sanitation facilities⁹. Improved drinking water sources are categorized as household connections, public standpipes, boreholes, protected wells, protected springs, and rainwater collection. Conversely, unimproved drinking water sources are described as unprotected wells, unprotected springs, river and ponds, vendor-provided water, bottled water, and tanker truck water. Improved sanitation facilities are categorized as connections to public sewer systems, connections to septic systems, out-flush latrines, simple pit latrines, and ventilated improved pit latrines. On the other hand, unimproved sanitation facilities are described as public or shared latrines, open pit latrines, and bucket latrines¹⁰. The JMP uses the year 1990 as the start from which progress toward Target 10 is monitored to maintain conformity with other UN Millennium Project

⁵ "Goals and Targets", 2006.

⁶ "Implementing the Millennium Development Declaration: The Millennium Development Goals and the United Nations Role", 2002.

⁷ "Meeting the MDG Drinking Water and Sanitation Target: A Mid-Term Assessment of Progress – The Joint Monitoring Programme" *UNICEF, WHO*. <http://www.unicef.org/wes/mdgreport/monitoring.php>; Internet.

⁸ Roberto Lenton, Albert Wright, and Kristen Lewis, *Health, dignity, and development: what will it take?* (Sterling, VA, 2005), 28. *UN Millennium Project Task Force Report on Water and Sanitation*. <http://www.unmillenniumproject.org/documents/WaterComplete-lowres.pdf>; Internet.

⁹ "Meeting the MDG Drinking Water and Sanitation Target: A Mid-Term Assessment of Progress - Definitions of Indicators" *UNICEF, WHO*. <http://www.unicef.org/wes/mdgreport/definition.php>; Internet.

¹⁰ "Meeting the MDG Drinking Water and Sanitation Target: A Mid-Term Assessment of Progress - Definitions of Indicators"

documents that nearly all use 1990 as the year from which to begin reporting¹¹. The JMP has specified its goals as “to monitor progress toward the common goal for water, to monitor the trends and programs ongoing in each country, to help countries acquire the capacity to accurately monitor progress, and to keep countries informed about the status of their overall progress¹².”

In order to meet the goal of halving the population without access to improved drinking water sources, 6.4 billion people must have access to clean water by 2015¹³. Currently, 5.2 billion people have access, and the number is slowly growing¹⁴. In 1990, the first year of measurement, 77% of people worldwide had access to improved drinking water sources. By 2002, 83% of people worldwide had improved drinking water¹⁵. The greatest progress has been observed in South Asia, where India has been making significant improvements. Here, since 1990 coverage has increased from 71% to 84%¹⁶. Overall, the number of people with access to improved drinking water sources has grown more than 90 million per year since 1990; however, population growth is very burdensome when trying to reach this goal¹⁷.

Including the aforementioned population growth issue, there are several obstacles in the way of making significant progress towards the global drinking water goal. In sub-Saharan Africa, an area of concern, it has been determined that coverage only extends to 58% of people¹⁸. In order for Africa to meet Target 10, countries must triple the rate of progress that they experienced in the 1990s¹⁹. Northern Africa, on the other hand, has achieved a high level of coverage²⁰. Similar

¹¹ Lenton, Wright, Lewis, *Health, dignity, and development: what will it take?*, 31-32.

¹² *Ibid.*, 33.

¹³ “Progress towards the Millennium Development Goals”, 1990-2005. *Department of Economic and Social Affairs: Statistics Division*, 11-13. http://unstats.un.org/unsd/mi/goals_2005/Goal_7_2005.pdf; Internet

¹⁴ “Progress towards the Millennium Development Goals” 1990-2005. 11-13.

¹⁵ “Meeting the MDG Drinking Water and Sanitation Target: A Mid-Term Assessment of Progress – Progress Towards the Drinking Water Target” *UNICEF, WHO*. <http://www.unicef.org/wes/mdgreport/progress.php>; Internet.

¹⁶ “Meeting the MDG Drinking Water and Sanitation Target: A Mid-Term Assessment of Progress – Progress Towards the Drinking Water Target”

¹⁷ *Ibid.*

¹⁸ “Progress towards the Millennium Development Goals” 1990-2005: 11-13

¹⁹ “The Millennium Development Goals in Africa: Promises and Progress” *UNDP and UNICEF*. New York: June 2002: 21. http://www.undg.org/documents/246-The_Millennium_Development_Goals_in_Africa_Progress_and_Promises_-_The_MDGs_in_Africa.pdf; Internet

²⁰ “Millennium Development Goals: Progress Chart” *UN Department of Economic and Social Affairs and UN Department of Public Information*. September 2005: 2. <http://unstats.un.org/unsd/mi/pdf/MDG%20Chart%20Sept.pdf>; Internet

to sub-Saharan Africa, the region of Oceania is also doing rather poorly in efforts to meet the goal with only 52% currently using improved water sources²¹.

In Asia, 93% of people living in urban areas are covered for improved drinking water sources; however, in rural areas the coverage level is only at 75%²². The most highly problematic areas in Asia are Afghanistan, Mongolia, Cambodia, and Laos²³. Some areas in Asia, like China, have actually experienced a reversal in progress²⁴. In China, where coverage was once 100%, population growth and other issues have caused coverage to decrease to 92%²⁵. In other Asian territories, like India, coverage has risen significantly. Nepal has also seen great improvements with coverage increasing from 64% in 1990, to 87% in 2000. Despite the success observed in India and Nepal, and slow improvements made elsewhere, if the current trend in Asia continues, the region will miss Target 10²⁶.

In Europe and Central Asia, 90% of the population is covered by improved drinking water sources. In this region, by 2015, 4% more of the population is expected to gain coverage²⁷. The problems that are being experienced here are not a result of inability to access an improved water source, but instead the quality of the water within that source and the regularity of water being at the source²⁸. The most significant problem in Central Asia is water infrastructure collapse. The majority of the region does not have the means to maintain infrastructure, and so would benefit greatly from policies to strengthen and maintain what they already have in place to manage water. If these measures are taken it would prevent the constant cycle of progress gained and subsequently lost²⁹.

²¹ "Progress towards the Millennium Development Goals" 1990-2005: 11-13. This number includes Australia.

²² "Promoting the Millennium Development Goals in Asia and the Pacific: Meeting the Challenges of Poverty Reduction" United Nations Economic and Social Commission for Asia and the Pacific (ESCAP): 2004. www.unescap.org/LDC&POVERTY/MDG%20Asia%20Pacific.pdf; Internet.

²³ "Promoting the Millennium Development Goals in Asia and the Pacific: Meeting the Challenges of Poverty Reduction" 2004.

²⁴ "Millennium Development Goals: Progress Chart" 2005: 2.

²⁵ "Progress towards the Millennium Development Goals" 1990-2005: 11-13.

²⁶ "Promoting the Millennium Development Goals in Asia and the Pacific: Meeting the Challenges of Poverty Reduction" 2004.

²⁷ "Meeting the Environmental Millennium Development Goal in Europe and Central Asia" The World Bank. June 2003: 10.

[http://lnweb18.worldbank.org/eca/Ecssd.nsf/ECADocByUnid/19071D426DDC9AEE85256D2D00414B2C/\\$FILE/Meeting%20the%20Env%20MDG%20in%20ECA%20-%20Full%20Document.pdf](http://lnweb18.worldbank.org/eca/Ecssd.nsf/ECADocByUnid/19071D426DDC9AEE85256D2D00414B2C/$FILE/Meeting%20the%20Env%20MDG%20in%20ECA%20-%20Full%20Document.pdf); Internet.

²⁸ "Meeting the Environmental Millennium Development Goal in Europe and Central Asia" 2003: 10.

²⁹ *Ibid.*, 10.

The Pacific Islands face problems that are fairly unique compared to the rest of the world. The islands are only small areas of territory, and so the populations have a tendency to overwhelm the land and its resources³⁰. The region has a very limited capacity to monitor progress, and the assessments that do occur rarely reach policymakers or development planners. It has been noted however, that the rise in sea level has begun to contaminate freshwater sources, and that wastewater management is a large problem³¹. It is very difficult to determine whether or not the Pacific Islands are on target due to the insufficient monitoring in the area³².

The Caribbean, another region comprised of islands, has been experiencing success. 90% of homes on the islands have access to improved drinking water sources in the form of water piped into homes. Only the islands of Dominica and St. Lucia have not reached this level of coverage³³, seeing only moderate improvements from 1990-2000. In 2000, Barbados was determined to have provided access to clean water to 96.5% of its population³⁴. Even the slums found on Caribbean Islands are reportedly on track to meet Target 10 by 2015 based on current trends³⁵.

The Arab countries are, for the most part, another success story. Lebanon and Djibouti have reported having complete coverage, while Egypt, Comoros, and Sudan have also reported being on track for the 2015 goal³⁶. Libya, Mauritania, Oman, Tunisia, Morocco, and Jordan have all concluded that they are not currently on target due to setbacks, but many of the urban areas found in these countries do have complete coverage³⁷.

Another critical part of meeting Target 10 is the focus on sanitation. According to the UN Statistics Division, some progress in the area of sanitation was reported, but progress is still very low. Despite the significant improvement in access to improved water sources in Southern Asia, access to improved sanitation facilities is still strikingly low with almost 2/3 of the population still

³⁰ "Pacific Islands Regional Millennium Development Goals Report – Goal 7: Ensure environmental sustainability" UN/CROP Working Group: November 2004: 1.

³¹ *Ibid.*

³² *Ibid.*

³³ Downes, Andrew S, Downes, Doris A. "The Millennium Development Goals in Eastern Caribbean: A Progress Report" December 2003: 5. www.undp.org/rblac/targets/MDGCaribbean.pdf; Internet.

³⁴ Downes, "The Millennium Development Goals in Eastern Caribbean: A Progress Report" 2003: 34.

³⁵ *Ibid.*, 38.

³⁶ "The Millennium Development Goals in Arab Countries – Toward 2015: Achievements and Aspirations" UNDP. New York: December 2003. 17.

³⁷ *Ibid.*

using unimproved sources³⁸. In other parts of the world, like Western Asia and Oceania, the situation has even begun to worsen due to the inability of countries to keep up with their population growth, and thus, the amount of people being forced into urban slums. Slums are not the only problem when it comes to providing adequate sanitation, however. People in hard to reach rural areas are also suffering -- as well as people who have been displaced for any of a multitude of reasons³⁹.

In Europe and Central Asia, sanitation coverage is 93% for the region. By 2015 it is predicted to reach 95.1%. In this region the problem in reaching complete coverage appears to be highest in urban areas due to lack of maintenance⁴⁰. These urban areas have a very high rate of connection between the population and the sewage system; however the systems have largely been allowed to deteriorate to the point of inefficiency. For example, in Kazakhstan 59% of sewage treatment plants do not meet standards for maintaining adequate sanitation⁴¹.

The Caribbean Islands have experienced some major increases in sanitation levels, along with some moderate to poor increases. Antigua, St. Kitts, and St. Vincent have all increased from 50% coverage in 1990, to 96% coverage in 2000⁴². Barbados now reports coverage at 82%. Less of an increase was seen on the islands of Dominica and St. Lucia which each gained about a 10% increase since 1995, putting their coverage level around 50% each⁴³.

There is much more that needs to be done in order to meet Target 10. Sub-Saharan Africa is by far the largest problem the world is facing when it comes to collectively meeting the target. 2.6 billion people in the region are still without sanitation and the progress there is slow at best⁴⁴. The problems in sub-Saharan Africa could prevent the world from meeting Target 10 by half a billion people. To halve the number of people without access to these facilities, sub-Saharan Africa needs to gain access for 75% of its population. Currently, the region is only at 58%, up 9% from 1990-2002⁴⁵. This 9% was gained over a twelve year period. With progress nearly at a stand

³⁸ "Progress towards the Millennium Development Goals" 1990-2005: 11-13.

³⁹ *Ibid.*, 11-13.

⁴⁰ "Meeting the Environmental Millennium Development Goal in Europe and Central Asia" 2003: 9.

⁴¹ *Ibid.*, 18.

⁴² Downes, "The Millennium Development Goals in Eastern Caribbean: A Progress Report" 2003: 38.

⁴³ *Ibid.*, 38.

⁴⁴ "Meeting the MDG Drinking Water and Sanitation Target: A Mid-Term Assessment of Progress -- Progress Towards the Sanitation Target"

⁴⁵ *Ibid.*

still today, sub-Saharan Africa is not on track⁴⁶. The obstacles in the area are mainly politics and population. There is political instability causing conflict and preventing sufficient efforts to focus on the importance of water⁴⁷. The rate of population growth in Africa is very high, making it difficult to keep up with developing access to water and facilities for all of these new people. The region has trouble providing these resources to its current population, never mind the daunting task of trying to provide it to all of its newcomers⁴⁸.

Globally, to meet the sanitation target, 900 million rural and 1 billion urban dwellers need improved sanitation facilities⁴⁹. Over half of those without coverage reside in China and India. The hardest problems to overcome are found in South Asia, sub-Saharan Africa, West Asia, Eurasia, and Oceania and these problems have put these countries way off target⁵⁰. As aforementioned, population growth is a very serious hindrance in the move towards greater access to improved sources and facilities. According to UNICEF, population growth in the coming years will result in goals that are "seven times harder to achieve" as we move closer to the deadline of the project⁵¹.

The good news is that the world appears to be on target for meeting the goal of halving the number of those without access to improved water sources. Only a few areas are expected to miss the improved drinking water target: sub-Saharan Africa, Oceania, and some regions of Asia⁵². Enough progress has been made globally to offset the insufficient progress in these areas, and so the aspiration of halving the population with access to safe drinking water is predicted to be met⁵³. The bad news is that the world is very far from meeting the sanitation target. If the current trend holds true, the outlook is grim⁵⁴. As opposed to the improved drinking water achievements, only a few areas are expected to meet the sanitation target. Those include, and are limited to, North Africa, East Asia, and South East Asia. All other regions are expected to miss the target based on current trends⁵⁵.

⁴⁶ Ibid.

⁴⁷ Ibid.

⁴⁸ Ibid.

⁴⁹ Ibid.

⁵⁰ Ibid.

⁵¹ Ibid.

⁵² "Millennium Development Goals: Progress Chart" 2005: 2.

⁵³ Ibid.

⁵⁴ "Progress towards the Millennium Development Goals" 1990-2005: 11-13.

⁵⁵ "Millennium Development Goals: Progress Chart" 2005: 2.