

MDG Targets: Misunderstood or Misconceived?

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In a recent One pager entitled “MDGs: Misunderstood Targets?”, Jan Vandemoortele seeks to correct a “common misunderstanding... in the conventional view on the MDGs”. He notes that “the MDGs are essentially an extrapolation of global trends of the 1970s and 1980s and projected forward till 2015... Thus, assessing whether progress is ‘on track’ for meeting the targets by 2015 can only be done at the global level... It is erroneous, for instance, to lament that sub-Saharan Africa will not meet the MDGs. These targets were not set specifically for that region.” The same applies, a fortiori, at the country level as well. This One pager argues that if Vandemoortele were right, the MDGs are not so much misunderstood as misconceived.

Vandemoortele was the co-chair of the UN inter-agency group that put the MDGs together. His contention, therefore, could in principle be presumed to represent the ‘official’ view. It appears however to be at odds with numerous documents that suggest otherwise, at both regional and national levels. For example, the UN Millennium Project’s main report is replete with statements such as “[t]he countries of East Asia have, as a group, moved closer toward achieving the Goals, but progress has been uneven within the region, within countries, and across the Goals. Some countries have already come close to achieving most of the Goals and have even committed themselves to more ambitious, MDG-plus targets, but others remain significantly off track for meeting the original Goals” (2005, p. 161).

More importantly, Vandemoortele’s interpretation would rob the MDG framework of much of its force, if not of its very *raison d’être*. There are several reasons. The first has to do with the MDG targets being merely extrapolations of historical trends. If that is all that one is aiming for, why bother at all? Ensuring that past trends would continue does not seem to call for all the fuss that surrounds the MDGs. A worthy justification for setting such targets would be to induce greater efforts to improve on past performance. The MDGs were presumably meant to accelerate trends through reforms in developing countries on the one hand, and increased flows of aid and investment from developed countries on the other.

Secondly, the fact that quantitative targets are based on *global* trends is not in and of itself a reason for not applying them at other levels, such as regional or national. Indeed the UN Millennium Project’s Report explicitly interprets the MDGs as “country goals, since this is the spirit in which they are pursued the world over” (p. 3).

Thirdly, past trends are averages of diverse experiences. Some countries obviously lie below the average. One purpose of setting past trends as target could be to encourage weak performers to lift themselves up to the average level. This would also pull the average up. If this were the intention, the MDG targets would have to apply at the regional and national levels, not at the global level from which they are derived. It is not necessarily true that “[i]nterpreting the MDGs as a uniform yardstick will *inevitably* condemn more than half of the countries to the category of ‘poor’ performers...” (emphasis added). This would only be the case if past trends persisted, not when they accelerate. It is in principle possible for every country in a group to do better than the group average in the past.

Finally, if the MDGs were meant to be tracked only at the global level, why would so many countries try to reach the MDG targets at the national level? Clearly, many countries seem to find a conservative interpretation of the MDGs – that they apply only at the global level – inadequate and have adopted them on their own. Indeed, it is Vandemoortele’s own organization, the UNDP, that is leading the MDG monitoring efforts and insisting on reporting at national level!

Vandemoortele however is surely right that “[i]t would be a tragic misunderstanding of the MDGs if ...countries [missing the global targets] were to be classified as ‘failures’... ” There could indeed be any number of perfectly legitimate reasons why some countries might fall short of historical trends at the global level or any other quantitative targets, however set. The real yardstick for judging performance and effort is whether they have done the best they could under the circumstances.

References:

- UN Millennium Project. 2005. *Investing in Development: A Practical Plan to Achieve the Millennium Development Goals*. New York.
- Vandemoortele, Jan. 2007. “MDGs: Misunderstood targets?”. International Poverty Centre. One pager No. 28. January.