

Development beyond 2015

PARIS – It is now halfway to the target date of 2015 for the Millennium Development Goals (MDGs) – the ambitious blueprint, backed by the entire development community, for development in the world’s poorest countries. In the wake of the global financial crisis, which is about to hit the developing world, it is time to ask the right questions about the international community’s commitment to achieving these goals.

Sadly, we know that most countries will not meet the objectives by 2015. And the global food and financial crises threaten to stymie recent progress. If the global poverty reduction target is met, it will be due to high growth in emerging countries such as China or India rather than to a decline in absolute poverty in the neediest countries.

This is worrisome, because it is a symptom of two more significant ills. First, the international community seems to be suffering from schizophrenia: whereas all countries solemnly affirmed their commitment to the MDGs, few have provided the means to achieve them. The reality is that aid increased only slightly over the 2000-2006 period: because of massive debt write-offs, the substantial increase in official development assistance did not translate into new and available funds on the ground.

The MDGs were meant to help international solidarity move from a logic of inputs (how much aid do we give?) to one of outputs (what concrete impact are we aiming for?). But with deliverable aid levels remaining practically constant, and given strong population growth, notably in Africa, the international community has not given itself sufficient means to reach its ambitious targets.

Second, this poor performance shows how short-sighted the international community can be. Global responsibility to assist developing nations goes far beyond the MDGs – in both time and scale. The pace of sustainable development is necessarily slow. In areas such as health or education, the acceleration needed to meet the targets in many countries would be faster than anything we have witnessed in history. While more action is needed to accelerate progress, a failure to achieve the MDGs by 2015 would not mean that they are worthless, or that aid is inefficient. Achieving these goals is an important step on the slow path to lasting development.

Thus, by focusing on the (arbitrary) date of 2015, we fail to perceive the fundamental change that the MDGs represent. By aiming for targets that are far out of reach of the poorest countries’ public finances, the international community has agreed to substitute itself for those states in providing essential social services through long-term financial transfers.

The current global inequalities in living standards are close to those that existed within our own societies over a century ago. Globalization has generated a new global market, but also global risks that beg for collective management. No single economic space has ever been created without the parallel establishment of solidarity mechanisms to handle these risks and care for those left behind.

What is at stake with the MDGs is the creation on a global scale of the same sort of public redistribution mechanisms that were progressively established in the world’s richest societies over the course of the twentieth century. As most of today’s financial, environmental, or sanitary crises are unpredictable and ignore borders, it is in everyone’s interest to create a global “social safety net” that will span an indefinite period of time.

If we accept the logic behind the more pragmatic and ambitious philosophy of international aid that underpins the United Nations' "Millennium Declaration," we must quickly adapt our instruments to ensure more sustainable and predictable modes of financing. This is one of the main aims of global taxation mechanisms, such as the International Finance Facility initiative and the Airplane Tax. We also need instruments that are better suited to delivery of long-term international transfers. Finally, we must find ways to nurture stronger and more vigorous economic growth, a prerequisite to solid investment in social sectors.

Beyond the MDGs semi-success or semi-failure by 2015, the key question is whether the international community will be able to overcome its myopia and schizophrenia. It must accept the idea of a long-term international redistribution policy to assist those who are excluded from the benefits of globalization, and give itself the means to implement this ambitious policy. Otherwise, any success in the battle on poverty is bound to be short-lived.

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