

**The Millennium Development Goals:
Far from perfect, but absolutely crucial**
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A paper presented at
'Creating a Fairer World: What should the G-20 do?'

Thursday 16 November 2006
Melbourne Town Hall

I begin by acknowledging the traditional owners of the land.

The simple point I would like to make this morning is that the Millennium Development Goals are far from perfect, but absolutely crucial if we are serious about creating a fairer world and ultimately eradicating extreme poverty.

Let's be frank, the Goals have been subjected to some criticism and I think you would be hard-pressed to find a person in the aid sector who would say they are perfect.

So, why have organizations around the world joined together under the Make Poverty History banner to ensure the goals are achieved. Why the level of passion that has driven hundreds of staff and volunteers to organize three mammoth Make Poverty History events this week? Why did more than 23 million determined individuals across the world stand in unity one month ago to ask their leaders to ensure the goals are achieved?

My intention in this brief talk is to show very clearly why Make Poverty History values the goals so highly and why we are committed to ensuring they are achieved.

The Millennium Development Goals – or MDGs – have been described as 'the most broadly supported, comprehensive, and specific poverty reduction goals the world has ever established. As Kofi Annan has said: they are "a set of simple but powerful objectives that every man and woman in the street, from New York to Nairobi to New Delhi, can easily support and understand.'

Already, significant progress has been made towards the achievement of the Goals. If there is any cause for hope, it is the progress made in the past 15 years in getting young children into school. Almost every region has increased primary school enrolments, particularly Latin America, the Caribbean, and North Africa.

Here, in our own region, 72 per cent of developing countries are on track to meet Goal 2, which aims to achieve universal primary education by 2015, and 80 per cent are on track to achieve Goal 3, relating to gender equality in education.

Yet, despite this and other progress toward the goals, the international community is lagging on its commitment to these targets and, unless urgent action is taken, we will miss them.

I want to look briefly at some of the criticisms that have been made of the goals because I believe – perhaps ironically – these criticisms actually serve to illustrate the vital need for such a set of targets.

One of the major criticisms has been that there is a lack of accountability for the achievement of the goals or, more specifically, that 'nobody is individually responsible for doing anything for any one result'. As I'll explain, that is not entirely true. However, it is important to acknowledge that there *will* be accountability challenges associated with any long-term, global plan. Heads of state will change during the life of the MDGs; humanitarian emergencies will demand immediate assistance; and creative strategies will be essential if communities are to hold their governments accountable over an extended period of time.

Yet, if we recognise that the accountability challenges associated with the MDGs arise primarily because they represent a long-term, global plan, we must ask ourselves what the alternative is. Not to have a plan at all? Or to focus solely on local or short-term initiatives? This would do little to change the global causes of extreme poverty such as unfair trade rules which help to entrench poverty in many communities. Neither would it address the issue of climate change and its disproportionate impact on the world's poorest communities.

Despite the many challenges associated with co-ordinating international action, it is clear that extreme poverty can only be eradicated through a sustained and concerted effort on the part of all members of the international community. The MDGs are based on the recognition that extreme poverty is a global issue with global causes and global implications. It is precisely for this reason that combating poverty requires a global strategy.

This strategy must, of course, be applied locally and long-term plans must be broken down into short term initiatives. This is already being done by many countries, as outlined in their Poverty Reduction Strategy Papers. For example, Bangladesh has embarked on a number of initiatives aimed at meeting the MDGs, including a five-year school lunch program to encourage school attendance, combat hunger and improve nutrition.

Despite the criticisms regarding accountability, the MDGs have succeeded in eliciting a greater level of accountability than previously existed. Some developed countries have incorporated the MDGs into their aid programs, reporting progress against them annually (unfortunately the Australian Government is yet to do this), while developing countries are incorporating the Goals into their poverty reduction strategies.

In addition, governments and other agencies are increasingly exploring strategies to provide opportunities for people living in poverty to hold donors and governments to account.

And, the process of compiling the United Nations' annual report on the MDGs has highlighted the need for improved data collection and reporting – demonstrating the intractable link between accountability and accurate monitoring processes.

While the goals may not expressly confer any responsibility for their achievement, they were agreed to by world leaders, acting on behalf of their nations. As such, it is national governments which have the responsibility to ensure the goals are achieved. It is for this reason that the goals have been interpreted as country goals – indeed, 'this is the spirit in which they are pursued the world over'.

If the MDGs are essentially country goals and national leaders are responsible for achieving the MDGs, then citizens need to hold them accountable. If there is an accountability gap, then we as citizens should be taking responsibility for at least part of that gap.

Of course, strong democratic processes are essential to effective accountability and, for this reason, countries with no, or highly compromised, democratic processes present a particular challenge. Yet, the millions of citizens around the world – like Australians - who do live in democracies have the power, the opportunity and the responsibility to ensure their representatives pursue the MDGs relentlessly.

This is already occurring in some countries. For example, Oxfam has successfully supported citizen groups in developing countries to hold their governments accountable for the appropriate expenditure of debt relief. Local citizens have established 'Poverty Monitoring Committees' to help ensure debt relief is paid into local schools and health clinics.

Perhaps the most compelling criticism of the MDGs is that they do not go far enough. After all, the objective of goal one is not to 'make poverty history' but simply to halve the number of people living in extreme poverty and suffering from hunger. In addition, many of the MDGs represent setbacks on earlier international commitments – for example, the gender equality MDG is a setback on commitments made by governments at the UN Conference on Women in Beijing.

Accepting that the MDGs do not go far enough provides does not provide a reason to abandon them. Rather, it provides a compelling reason to ensure they are achieved on time, so that further work can continue. Conversely, if we acknowledge they are simply the first step towards eradicating extreme poverty, failing to achieve them will be unforgivable.

I want to look now at the cost of achieving the MDGs because this is one of the issues that critics often focus on.

The UN Millennium Project estimates that the total cost of meeting the MDGs in all countries will be around \$121 billion in 2006, rising to \$189 billion in 2015 and the amount of official development assistance required to meet the MDGs is around \$135 billion this year, rising to \$195 billion in 2015. This equates to 0.54 per cent of donors' national income by 2015.

However, these estimates exclude aid which is not directly targeted at meeting the MDGs – for example, infrastructure and governance initiatives – therefore donor countries will need to commit to reaching 0.7 per cent of GNI by 2015 if the MDGs are to be achieved.

While this cost is utterly affordable a number of rich governments, including the Australian Government, are seriously lagging on their aid commitments and have not provided timetables to meet the 0.7 per cent target. It is essential that donors meet this target if the MDGs are to be achieved.

Of course, all the money in the world will not be enough to meet the goals if it is not spent effectively – aid must be properly targeted. In Oxfam's experience, developing country governments must take responsibility for providing essential services such as health care, education, water and sanitation in order to achieve the MDGs.

While civil society organisations and private companies can make important contributions, they must be properly regulated and incorporated into strong public systems, and not seen as substitutes for them. Only governments can reach the scale necessary to provide universal access to services that are free or heavily subsidised for poor people and geared to the needs of all citizens.

When governments invest in essential services, progress is made against the MDGs; when they fail to do so, progress lags and, in some cases, can be undone. For example, in one district of Nigeria the numbers of women dying in childbirth doubled after fees for maternal health services were introduced.

By contrast, in Sri Lanka where more than one-third of the population lives below the poverty line, maternal mortality rates are among the

lowest in the world. When a Sri Lankan woman gives birth, there is a 96 per cent chance she will be attended by a qualified midwife. If she or her family need medical treatment, it is available free of charge from a public clinic within walking distance of her home, which is staffed by a qualified nurse. Her children can go to primary school for free, and education for girls is free up to university level. This has resulted in a literacy rate of 88 per cent among adult women and an increase in the average age of marriage.

Rich governments need to help developing countries provide these essential services by providing sufficient, long-term, predictable aid, which is channelled through public systems and national budgets.

Another priority is to ensure that aid is working effectively to meet the needs of women and promote their wellbeing. Proven strategies include working with women's movements, changing laws to combat discrimination and protect women's rights and promoting women leaders and workers.

Promoting women leaders can help to put women's concerns on the political agenda. For example, in India, local councils which have a majority of women tend to spend more on public water facilities and latrines for low-caste groups.

Having concluded that the world can afford to achieve the MDGs, the pivotal question is: what will it cost *not* to achieve the goals?

Most importantly, failure will cost the lives, wellbeing, livelihoods and education of millions of women, men and children.

The projections are staggering. For example, missing the MDG target on sanitation alone will cost 10 million children's lives. Yet, achieving this goal will require the utmost determination, since one in three people in the world has no access to a toilet or latrine.

Similarly, the international target to halve the proportion of people who have no clean drinking water is far off-track and, in total, will fail 210 million people. On current progress, Africa will not meet the goal until the year 2105. More than one billion people still live without

clean water and water-related diseases cause three million deaths a year.

In addition to the enormous human impact, failing to achieve the MDGs is likely to be costly in financial terms. Perhaps it is this message which the G-20 finance ministers most need to hear.

As an Oxfam International paper released earlier this week demonstrated, well-targeted initiatives to combat poverty can ultimately save money. For example, for every \$1 invested, another \$3–\$4 is saved on health spending or through increased productivity. Conversely, failing to provide water and sanitation will cost developing countries \$84 billion per year in lost lives, low worker productivity, higher health-care costs, and lost education opportunities.

So, it is a little ironic that the enormous cost of meeting the MDGs is so often trotted out as an excuse for inaction. While rich countries continue to languish in their self interest, the reality is that global wealth could actually be increased through targeted investment to achieve the MDGs.

In closing, it is clear that the cost of not achieving the MDGs is far greater than the eminently affordable cost of achieving them. In fact, the cost of failure is so far-reaching that it is simply not an option.

Unless urgent action is taken to ensure the goals are achieved, millions of women, men and children will pay with their lives. Moreover, we will face a more insecure and inequitable world.

It is for this reason why the G-20 needs to take immediate steps to get the MDGs back on track this weekend.