Making the Millennium Development Goals matter for India

By

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In September 2000, over one hundred and eighty leaders from around the world gathered in New York for the first meeting of the United Nations in the 21st century. A new era was upon the world and the mood was hopeful and optimistic. Under the leadership of the UN Secretary-General Kofi Annan, world leaders signed up to what became known as the Millennium Declaration- an articulation of new hopes that the world's most daunting challenges could be met and together, great strides could be made to improve human wellbeing. While the Declaration was far-reaching in its scope, covering issues like security, human rights and UN reform, an important focus of the document was on economic and social development.

The Millennium Declaration brought together many previous goals and commitments and organized them in two important ways: first, it simplified them from a bewildering array of objectives to eight easily understood dimensions of a decent life-poverty and hunger reduction, universal education, gender equality, reduction in child and maternal deaths, stopping the spread of infectious diseases, improving environmental sustainability and doing all of this together in a partnership between rich and poor countries. Second, it attached quantified and time bound targets to each of the goals, making it easy to track progress. Known as the Millennium Development Goals (MDGs), these goals have become a central guiding framework for development.

The hard work began after the Summit- what did the MDGs mean to world leaders after the pomp and ceremony of the UN summit was over? How would the MDGs alter national decision-making and how would international development work change to reflect these commitments? Was there a way of holding governments accountable for promises made, or where the MDGs just that-- high sounding promises?

The MDGs are far from perfect. The goals are often called simplistic; there are complaints that the accompanying targets and indicators are limiting and fail to take account of important goals and targets agreed to in the past decades. Many of these criticisms are real- measurement and monitoring challenges are significant and there will always be disagreement on the "right" set of international targets. However, despite these imperfections, the MDGs have already been critical in bringing a sense of coherence to often confusing and myriad processes and projects in international development. They provide, for the first time, an entry point for goal-based planning, where promises and actions are tied closely to outcomes and results.

MDG-based strategies

But the MDGs will only succeed if they move from being aspirations to being central to government decision-making. Business as usual will defeat their raison d'etre. How does this transition happen? The UN Millennium Project was tasked in 2002 by the United Nations Secretary-General, Kofi Annan to recommend operational strategies to achieve the MDGs. The main recommendation of the Project was a direct response to this challenge- to urge all countries to integrate the MDGs into their ongoing policy programs and develop what the Project called MDG-based development strategies.

If done right, these strategies would:

- Be ambitious enough to achieve the goals
- Be broad enough in scope to cover all of the relevant areas needed to achieve the goals
- Be based on sector strategies that in turn derive from country needs, or the full set of actions needed in each area
- Be situated in a long term context and
- Be accompanied by adequate financing and linked to annual budgets.

A "needs based" approach to planning

An MDG-based strategy is important primarily because it provides a "needs based" approach to budgeting. This is a clear departure from traditional budgeting practice-in the case of many countries; for example, current year budgets are simply calculated as last year's budgets with a small premium to account for inflation. Development budgets are therefore, based on historically set patterns. Development challenges on the other hand, evolve based on changing demographic, social and economic trends. The result is an often-unbelievable chasm between real, on-the-ground needs and policy responses. For example, average public health spending in low-income African countries ranges between $3-7 per capita. The cost of provision of a basic, no-frills public health care package has been estimated at approximately $34-40 per capita- an order of magnitude higher!

The MDGs are important because they provide a bridge across this chasm. They are the world's first internationally agreed goals, accepted by rich and poor countries, by the Bretton Woods Institutions (BWIs) and the UN system. This means that the "needs" of a country to achieve the MDGs are defined by the MDGs. As shared objectives, therefore, they allow countries to plan around the MDGs, and enable the BWIs and the UN system, and donor countries to program their support around the MDGs.

In practical terms, this means that the fundamental question policy makers ask is "what will take for my country to achieve the MDGs?" rather than the current question which guides them, that is "how far can my country make progress, based on existing resource constraints?" At a fundamental level, this pivotal shift assumes that an effective framework of international cooperation exists that can support ambitious development strategies. How reasonable is this assumption?

The work of the UN Millennium Project has calculated that the MDGs are achievable within the existing commitments of the rich world- the OECD countries have repeatedly committed to increasing development assistance to 0.7 percent of Gross National Income. Well-directed assistance to all low-income countries to achieve the MDGs, in addition to increased domestic resource mobilization in these countries would amount to 0.54 percent of the rich world's income by 2015, making the MDGs entirely affordable.

India--an opportunity and a challenge

Where does India stand in such a discussion? The enviable economic performance of the last two decades has created a dilemma—on one hand, the economy is amongst the world's largest and fastest growing, leading to rapid decreases in aggregate rates of income poverty, and a rise in income levels of a growing section of the population. On the other hand, India still has the dubious distinction of lagging behind on many of the MDGs- it is home to 221 million undernourished people (the highest in any single country). Child mortality rates of 93 per 1000 live births in 2001 are not falling fast enough to meet the MDG. Maternal mortality rates of 407 per 100,000 are also too slow to achieve the three quarters reduction necessary to achieve the MDGs. India is home to nearly 25 percent of the world's Tuberculosis (TB) cases, amounting to nearly 2 million cases annually of a disease that is entirely curable. HIV/AIDS remains a serious challenge and public policy responses so far have been far from adequate. Sustainable access to safe drinking water and sanitation facilities remains a pipe dream for over 40 percent of the rural population. So while the economic success of the country is creating new and exciting opportunities for progress on all of these fronts, success is not inevitable. It will require a concerted effort to address the health, nutrition and infrastructure challenges, especially for the approximately 260 million people below the poverty line.

In this context, the MDGs are both a challenge and an opportunity—they are a challenge because they compel the country to mobilize and direct resources towards problems that it has been struggling with for decades, and increasingly, problems that are unfashionable to talk about. The UN Millennium Project estimates that despite the rapid growth and increased domestic revenues, India will continue to need external assistance for specific social and infrastructure investments for some years to come. Estimates made by a study conducted by the UN Millennium Project in collaboration with the Indian Institute of Management, Ahmedabad, showed that in the three states with the largest pockets of poverty (Madhya Pradesh, Rajasthan and Uttar Pradesh), meeting the MDGs would cost approximately between $110-$115 per capita annually from 2005-2015. There has been no corresponding analysis to show if these resources can be mobilized domestically- the UN Millennium Project aggregate estimates suggest that this is unlikely in the immediate term (though if the economy continues to grow upwards of 6 percent per annum, India would graduate from needing ODA by 2015). For many people, the idea of foreign aid is increasingly unpalatable and jars with the image of India as an emerging economic super power. Further, goal-based planning is not new for India; generations of 5-year plans have set ambitious targets (often more so than the MDGs) and programmed government spending around them.

So why are the MDGs an opportunity? For one, because they put the international spotlight on government efforts, especially in comparison to progress being made elsewhere. Second, they provide a common framework for international cooperation around efforts to achieve the Goals. They enable the government, NGOs, and development partners to direct collective effort towards improving social and economic outcomes for the underprivileged sections of the population, thereby beginning an attempt to spread the fruits of India’s economic success. Third, they provide clear, measurable benchmarks for progress, enable reasonable estimates of resources needed, thus making it easier to use “needs-based planning” to tie policy decisions and investments to real, on-the-ground outcomes.

The MDGs are not ambitious objectives-they represent the very minimum set of acceptable conditions for decent human existence. There is no technical reason for any country not to achieve them by 2015. For India, they offer a real opportunity to decisively shift upwards, the trajectory of social development especially in those areas where progress is slow. Just as India is demonstrating leadership and dynamism in its economic performance, it should systematically develop and implement a strategy for achieving the MDGs, riding on the momentum of its economic performance to ensure that all Indians, irrespective of caste, income levels, gender or region, have the opportunity to benefit from it.

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