

Challenges of achieving the MDGs in the Pacific

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In 2000, the international community committed itself to improving the living conditions of the world's poor. For the first time, agreement was reached on quantifiable targets for development outcomes and the timeframe in which these targets would be reached. These goals became known as the Millennium Development Goals (MDGs). The MDGs include

1. eradicating extreme income poverty and hunger
2. achieving universal primary education
3. promoting gender equality
4. reducing child mortality
5. improving maternal health
6. combating HIV/AIDS, malaria and other diseases
7. ensuring environmental sustainability
8. developing a global partnership for development.

All UN member states committed to achieving the goals by 2015 (using 1990 as a baseline).

The MDGs have received widespread support from governments, international donors and civil society. Higher global levels of foreign aid, as well as important policy reforms, provide evidence of the

commitment to the MDGs by donors and governments across the world. For a number of reasons, however, the enthusiasm for their achievement in the Pacific is not universal.

First, many of the MDGs (as originally conceived) might be considered too ambitious or unrealistic for the Pacific. Countries in the Pacific have small domestic markets with limited opportunities to experience economies of scale, volatile economic growth rates, a heavy dependence on imports, high degrees of export concentration, vulnerability to external shocks and, often, a lack of natural resources. They are also remote and isolated, being a long distance from major international markets. Given that Pacific countries face considerable constraints to their development, the MDG targets clearly need to be tailored to the specific circumstances of individual Pacific countries. In the absence of any tailoring, Pacific countries will be deemed to have failed to achieve the goals, even when progress towards some targets should be commended. This could undermine the future support for aid in donors and the stimulus for reform in recipients (Clemens, Charles and Todd 2007).

Second, the relevance of the MDGs in the Pacific context is sometimes challenged.

This relates to the nature of poverty in the region. Many Pacific countries prefer the term 'hardship' to 'poverty'. Social networks often prevent hunger and outright destitution. Instead, the nature of poverty in the Pacific often relates to a lack of access to basic services and a lack of income-earning opportunities. Development indicators not covered by the MDG targets can be very relevant for Pacific countries. Although HIV/AIDS, tuberculosis and malaria represent significant health concerns in the Pacific region, there has also been a rise in non-communicable or 'lifestyle' diseases such as diabetes and hypertension (ADB 2003). Further, rates of obesity and tobacco use are among the highest in the world (SPC 2004).

Third, the MDGs can be criticised for their reliance on averages. Pacific countries are characterised by high levels of inequality and averages mask this inequality in development across and within countries. The poor do not necessarily gain from average progress and progress towards the MDGs is likely to be very different for different social and ethnic groups within countries (Vandemoortele 2002).

Finally, the MDGs relate to quantitative rather than qualitative targets. Some of the target indicators for the first seven MDGs are measures focusing on the provision of activities without any analysis of the quality of outcomes or access to services. For example, higher enrolments in schools and greater access to health services might be matched by deterioration in the quality of education and health care. This issue is particularly relevant for Pacific countries, where educational standards are often said to be declining.

Despite these criticisms, support for the MDGs should not be undermined. Rather than reject the MDGs, the criticisms outlined above relate to issues that need to be considered when striving to achieve

them. The existence of development goals is important. The MDGs have already been successful in raising awareness of development issues and mobilising resources. They have gained unprecedented support from government and non-governmental bodies around the world and virtually all aid donors have now pledged to increase their aid. Moreover, international donors and governments have become more accountable for their performance in reducing poverty. Non-governmental organisations and civil society can monitor progress towards the goals, highlighting their failures and identifying areas needing more resources (Feeny and Clarke 2008).

Measuring MDG progress in the Pacific

The UN Economic Social Commission for Asia and the Pacific (UNESCAP), the Asian Development Bank (ADB) and the United Nations Development Programme (UNDP) found that, at the halfway mark, the Pacific islands were off track in achieving most of the MDGs (UNESCAP/ADB/UNDP 2007). Moreover, the UN Millennium Project (2005) found that the region was off track for nearly every goal, was falling back in some areas and that only sub-Saharan Africa was off track on more indicators. The current preoccupation with measuring each country's progress against each of the goals, targets and indicators is, however, a misuse of the MDG concept (Vandemoortele 2009). It is important that the MDGs be tailored to the specific context of each country, with the global MDGs informing but not dictating local goals. Progress towards the global goals should be measured only on a global average basis and individual countries should be measured only in terms of progress towards their tailored goals.

It is necessary when tailoring the MDG targets that the revised targets are ambitious but achievable. If they are not ambitious, they are unlikely to induce any significant policy reform or warrant additional financial resources. If they are overly ambitious, they are unlikely to gain widespread support and there will be little genuine effort to achieve them. Given the importance of ownership for successful development, tailored goals and targets should be devised by developing countries themselves and incorporated into their national development strategies. Feeny and Clarke (2009) provide detailed examples of countries that have already taken this lead with UN backing. For example, Papua New Guinea has tailored the goals by making some targets less ambitious but more realistic for the country to achieve by 2015 and extending the deadline for some of the targets to 2020.

Overview

This special section of the *Pacific Economic Bulletin* presents four articles presented at an international conference entitled Meeting the Millennium Development Goals: old problems, new challenges, co-hosted by the Australian Council for International Development and La Trobe University. The conference looked at what needed to be done to ensure momentum was not lost as we entered the final five years of the MDGs. The conference was shaped by three key concepts: learning, innovation and partnerships. An important feature of the conference was that it brought together a wide range of stakeholders, such as community representatives, academics, professionals from inside and outside the traditional development field and the corporate sector.

Reflection on innovation within the MDG sphere was an important aspect of the conference. Participants shared knowledge and perspectives to understand what the drivers and impediments to change were in different contexts. Emphasis was on new ideas and new angles, based on learning from different perspectives and sectors. Building on success also featured prominently in conference presentations. Participants shared success stories, best practices and failures as learning points. The emphasis of the presentations was on keeping the momentum of achieved success and what learning could be drawn from various contexts.

Four papers have been selected from the conference proceedings for this special section of the *Pacific Economic Bulletin*. Broadly, each article is concerned with the means of achieving the MDGs in the Pacific region.

The article by Feeny examines how the global economic crisis might impact on progress towards the MDGs in Pacific countries. At a macroeconomic level, the Pacific region as a whole has fared relatively well since the onset of the crisis. Impacts of the crisis are, however, continuing and vary greatly across Pacific countries. This further highlights a need to tailor the MDGs to individual country circumstances. The crisis has an impact on Pacific countries through declining exports, tighter government budgets, falling remittances and tourism receipts, and a loss in the value of trust funds. The article highlights, however, the problems in using macroeconomic data for the Pacific to make inferences regarding the impacts of the crisis on progress towards the MDGs. Specifically, the relationship between growth and poverty and government expenditures and various MDG indicators is shown to be weak. The article therefore indicates that economic growth and increases in government spending will be necessary

but not sufficient to assist with progress towards the MDGs in the Pacific.

The article by Willetts, Halcrow, Carrard, Rowland and Crawford provides an excellent example of how the MDGs are interrelated. Progress towards the achievement of one goal can assist with progress towards others. Willetts, Halcrow, Carrard, Rowland and Crawford argue that this is clearly the case for the targets relating to gender equality and improving access to water, sanitation and hygiene education. Since women and girls play key roles in the provision, management and safeguarding of water, gender equality is an important consideration in enhancing water, sanitation and hygiene. At the same time, advancing gender equality can be an important outcome of water, sanitation and hygiene interventions. There is a strong case for focusing attention on these two goals with less than half the population in the Pacific having access to improved drinking water and sanitation and the poor levels of gender equality prevailing across a number of areas. Findings from Fiji and Vanuatu demonstrate how improvements in water, sanitation and hygiene have successfully led to the advancement of gender equality. These improvements include greater respect for women's work, men taking an increased role in hygiene to support their wives and a reduction in violence at a household level.

The article by Cheer examines the potential for tourism in the Pacific to contribute to progress towards the MDGs. Tourism is an increasingly important source of foreign exchange and employment for many Pacific countries. Cheer, however, questions the extent that tourism is contributing to poverty alleviation in the region with expatriate investors and local elites being the main beneficiaries of tourism. The opportunities for the urban poor and those located in rural and outer-island communities to benefit from tourism are currently limited. While tourism has the potential to benefit many

in the Pacific, the sector needs to consider how its future development can translate into meaningful poverty reduction.

The article by Hauquitz provides an overview of a trial of the Millennium Village Project (MVP) in Papua New Guinea. The MVP concept is based on the work of the United Nation's Millennium Project and has already been implemented in 10 sub-Saharan African countries covering 400,000 people. The proposed MVP trial in Papua New Guinea includes four rural and one urban location and seeks to demonstrate that multi-sectoral rural investments can deliver practical, measurable development outcomes on the ground and assist the country with progress towards the MDGs. A set of interventions across agriculture, business and community development, education, health and infrastructure, including communications, water and sanitation, will be implemented in the trial locations. In the article, Hauquitz emphasises the important role of community participation and partnerships between government, community organisations, churches, the private sector and academic/research institutions.

Concluding remarks

Achieving the MDGs in the Pacific poses a considerable challenge. Not only should the targets be tailored to the Pacific, but the means of achieving the goals need to be carefully considered in the Pacific context. Improved data collection and monitoring systems are needed in order to assess progress properly and for the effectiveness of interventions aimed at achieving the goals. Making progress towards the MDGs in the Pacific also requires strong partnerships between governments, civil society and the international community. Attention will soon be focused on a new round of development targets after 2015.

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