Global poverty

Are we nearly there yet?
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Mid-way through, the UN's drive against poverty remains half crusade and half charade

MAKE poverty history is a compelling slogan. Halve it by 2015, in contrast, is a measurable commitment. That is the logic behind the Millennium Development Goals (MDGs), a host of targets in the struggle against global deprivation, disease and illiteracy, set by the world's leaders at a United Nations jamboree in 2000.

The goals claim to convert campaign slogans into bankable pledges, complete with a number and a date. The world has, for example, resolved to cut the rate at which mothers die from childbirth by three-quarters from 1990 to 2015. The percentage of people without safe water will fall by half; infant mortality by a third. Quick to spot a resonant date in the calendar, the UN has declared July 7th (07/07/07, you understand) the official halfway point towards these 2015 deadlines.
The 2000 summit was unprecedented in its pulling power, attracting more bigwigs than ever before (even the reclusive North Koreans tried to make it, although they turned back in a huff after an undiplomatic airport search). But many of the targets were a bit old hat, recycled for the second or third time. The 1980s were supposed to bring water and sanitation to the great unwashed; the 1990s were supposed to provide "education for all". Surely, then, no one would take the MDGs all that seriously? Surely, they would quietly fade in the memory like so many other turn-of-the millennium follies and fantasies?

In fact, they have remained surprisingly conspicuous, becoming a kind of secular scripture for the aid fraternity. The UN family, of course, cherishes them. But the goals have also converted the organisation's rivals in the aid business. The World Bank invoked the goals last month when pitching for an infusion of $32 billion from its richer members. Pascal Lamy, head of the World Trade Organisation, invoked them in his plea this week to save the Doha round of global trade talks. Even the IMF, which knows an inconvertible currency when it sees one, pays them solemn respect.

As a result, the MDGs can justly claim to generate a bit of buzz about duties a government might otherwise neglect. After all, ministers in poor countries have a lot on their plate—fending off rivals, putting down insurgencies, distributing the spoils of office. Saving mothers from eclampsia or children from diarrhoea does not always command their full attention. The goals ensure some international recognition for politicians who can make progress on such things.

Sadly, however, they cannot do what they purport to do, which is to provide credible benchmarks against which governments can be judged. Set for the world as a whole, the numerical targets do not fit any country in particular. China had all but met the target of halving poverty from its 1990 levels by the time it was set a decade later. Sub-Saharan Africa, on the other hand, will fall short of all of the goals, even though its economy is growing quicker than it has for a generation and it is putting children in school faster than any other region.

Some goals cannot be met, others cannot even be measured. Poor countries collect no reliable numbers on deaths from malaria or from childbirth—although the goals are helping to stir a welcome interest in generating better figures. And sometimes what is measured (number of children enrolled in school) is not what counts (the number who learn anything).

The goals are supposed to be everyone's responsibility, which means they are no one's. Poor countries can blame rich ones for not stumping up enough cash; rich governments can accuse poor ones of failing to deserve more money.

Some MDG zealots think the responsibility for achieving them is more clear-cut. They work out what needs to be done to meet the goals; add up the costs; then demand that the world's rich governments foot the bill. Only a lack of generosity separates poor countries from the 2015 targets, they argue.

But foreign cash does not always produce results; and some results do not require much money. Brazil is four times richer than Sri Lanka, but its children are more than twice as likely to die before their fifth birthday. Improving sanitation is about breaking habits as much as building latrines. And although aid money can send a doctor to the boondocks, it cannot make him show up to work. The social progress envisaged in the 2015 targets requires the kind of nationwide nannying that only an accountable domestic government, not a distant foreign donor, can sustain (see article).

Can the MDG exercise be salvaged? Researchers at the Centre for Global Development, a Washington think-tank, argue that donors should commit themselves to make “payments for progress”, giving a fixed sum of money to a poor country only after it has shown independently audited progress towards a goal. Donors could, for example, provide $100 for every child who completes primary school, or passes a literacy test, over and above a 2000 baseline. The payments would provide sharper incentives, as well as extra resources. No developing country could claim money was not on the table, and no donor could claim the results were not there to see.

The millennium bash secured global agreement on what matters. That is not nothing. But impoverished countries have to start where they are, not where summiteers might wish them to be. Aid money cannot bridge that gap, and the custodians of the MDGs should not pretend otherwise. But nor should a lack of foreign cash stop countries inching their way out of poverty by their own efforts—which is the only way any nation has ever done it. To make poverty history, you have to understand how history is made.