

Millennium Success: The World Gets Healthier, Richer

By JEFFREY KLUGER Thursday, Jun. 24, 2010



A woman lies on a hospital bed in Rwinkwavu, Rwanda

Jose Cendon / AFP / Getty Images

The United Nations has no shortage of critics — indeed, it often seems it has nothing but critics. It's slow, feckless and largely pointless. It's anti-Israel (unless you think it's anti-Arab), a tool of the big powers (unless you think it's been hijacked by small states), anti-U.S. (unless you think it's in America's pocket). There are people who don't even like its flag.

But say this for the U.N.: when it gets something right, it really gets it right. And, as two reports issued this week indicate, one of the things it may have gotten very right is progress toward what are known as the Millennium Development Goals (MDG), a set of global health and prosperity objectives agreed to by 192 countries and 23 international organizations in 2000. The MDG resolution set a hard target of 2015 to achieve a range of specific quality-of-life benchmarks everywhere on the planet, but especially in its poorest, most undemocratic corners. And the U.N. — yes, that U.N. — seems to be on track to get the job done. **(See a photo gallery on life expectancy around the world.)**

The MDG was divided into sections, with signatories committing to make progress in eight areas: hunger and poverty, education, gender equality, child health, maternal health, environmental sustainability, economic and government reform, and combating HIV/AIDS and other diseases. The goals were framed so that they would apply to rich and poor countries alike — mandating that signatories reduce by half the number of people who suffer from hunger or HIV/AIDS, for example, or slash by two-thirds the under-5 mortality rate or by three-quarters the maternal mortality rate. Whether those things are big problems or small problems in any one country, there's always room for such incremental improvement. In addition, rich countries agreed to help the poor countries achieve these goals through economic and other aid, and poor countries agreed to submit to global oversight so that money and resources didn't vanish into the pockets of corrupt officials. **(See a special report on the battle for global health.)**

With the U.N. planning an MDG-update summit in New York City in September and the G-20 meeting in Toronto later this week, it is a good time to step back and assess how much progress is being made toward meeting the goals. And on the whole, analysts from the first of this week's two reports — issued by the U.N. and the Overseas Development Institute, a U.K.-based think tank — had some happy numbers to announce.

Currently, about 1.4 billion of the world's 6.7 billion people live in extreme poverty, which seems like anything but happy until you consider that before the millennium development program was launched, the figure was 1.8 billion. That's a 22% improvement rate and is all the more impressive considering that it's been achieved in the face of a global population that's growing. Nearly 45% of signatory countries are on track to meet their goal of halving

childhood hunger rates by 2015, and 75% have succeeded in bringing the number down in the critical under-5 group. A whopping 95% of all countries have improved their under-5 mortality rate, with the worldwide figure falling from 101 deaths per 1,000 live births to 69. Maternal mortality rates have not fallen as dramatically, but there has been at least some improvement in 80% of countries. The biggest indicator of success in this category is whether a qualified nurse, doctor or midwife is present during a birth. These numbers are all over the map — literally — from a low of 6% in Ethiopia to highs 93% in parts of the Caribbean and nearly 100% in parts of the developed world. Still, the trend lines overall are at least up.

"We should be celebrating the real progress that has been made in the lives of millions of people," said Salil Shetty, director of the MDG campaign, in a statement.

The second report was issued by the McKinsey consulting group, which focused on Africa and did not look specifically at the MDG, but rather at the continent's overall economic stability. Fiscal health, however, is almost always a knock-on effect of a population's physical health — not to mention its education level — and the MDG planners expected that as one set of numbers started to rise, the others would too. That's what seems to be happening.

In 2008, the 1 billion people in Africa spent a collective \$860 billion — surpassing India, with a population that is 20% larger. Nearly 32% of Africans now own a cell phone. The continent's individual national economies have mostly ridden out the worldwide recession and have doubled their rate of growth from 20 and 30 years ago. Of the 30 largest African economies, 27 have expanded in the past decade.

"GDP growth picked up and then bounded ahead, rising faster and faster through 2008," the McKinsey report concluded. "Today, while Asia's tiger economies continue to expand rapidly, we foresee the potential rise of economic lions in Africa's future."

But like all lions, Africa's economies are going to have to fight to survive. Even with the good MDG news, hunger rates on the continent are still dragging down the world's overall score, and while the share of Africans who are considered undernourished has fallen from its high of 31% before the goals were implemented, it hasn't moved by much — just to 28%. Worse, some countries have fallen off the table entirely, like the Democratic Republic of Congo, which has doubled its hunger rate from 38% to 76%. And while the continent's poverty rate has declined from 52% to 40%, that still means 4 out of every 10 Africans are poor. **(See one woman's story of maternal mortality.)**

Political instability and intractable civil wars also make continued progress uncertain. So too do tight budgets and stumbling economies in the developed world, which reduces giving and can lead even the best-intentioned governments to renege on MDG aid promises.

"The leaders and taxpayers of G-8 countries must now keep their aid commitments," urged Shetty, "with the confidence that their investment is making a tangible and large-scale difference." The key is for all rich countries to remember that in an increasingly globalized world, progress in the poorest places means progress everywhere.

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