

Millennium Development Goals in 2008 More Important Than Ever

If the countries are going to succeed in achieving the [Millennium Development Goals](#) — eight time-bound and measurable goals for reducing poverty, hunger and disease while improving gender equality, education and environmental sustainability—2008 is a make or break year. The Goals are more important than ever. Here is why:

Why do the MDGs matter? The MDGs are the most broadly supported, comprehensive, and specific poverty reduction targets ever established. They have galvanized interest in the needs of the poorest countries from all walks of society—from governments and heads of state, to civil society, the private sector, religious groups and individuals—around common definition of basic, minimum conditions for a decent life. Their strength lies in their interconnected nature and the fact that they are the only internationally agreed goals that address multiple challenges simultaneously. What's more, they're completely achievable.

Why should we care? Whatever one's motivations for fighting extreme poverty, whether it be for saving hundreds of millions of lives because it is not only possible but the right thing to do; creating opportunities for economic growth to avoid mass migration; maintaining stability and avoiding conflict; or preserving global ecosystems because the sustainability of our planet depends on it, the solutions are the same.

How are we doing so far? Globally, the world is on track to achieving MDG 1 of reducing extreme poverty by half. However, progress differs dramatically by region; progress in sub-Saharan Africa has been the slowest. Yet, **the MDGs remain achievable in most countries.** One key reason why the MDGs were originally adopted was because regions like sub-Saharan Africa were significantly lagging behind global averages. The MDGs therefore call for accelerating progress in these countries—something that is utterly feasible provided the developing countries put in place good policies (which many have) and receive more support (which most have not yet).

What is happening this year? Urgent and much needed progress toward achieving the MDGs is driving the United Nations and other development organizations' efforts around the key development meetings in 2008. These include the Tokyo International Conference on Sustainable Development ([TICAD IV](#)) in May, the G8 Heads of State Summit in [Japan](#) in July, the UN General Assembly MDG Summit in September, the [International Conference on Financing for Development](#) in November, and the ongoing work of the [UN MDG Africa Steering and Working Groups](#). Crucial investments in agriculture, education, health and infrastructure are needed to provide the framework for Africa to capitalize on the tremendous growth the continent has been averaging over the past decade.

Why is 2008 historic? For seven years now the G8 and other donors have promised to turn their eloquent words into concrete action and on-the-ground investments. But halfway to the 2015 deadline, governments in Africa are still waiting for the follow-

through on what has [already been committed](#): a doubling of aid from \$25 billion to \$50 billion to the continent by 2010. With just two years to go, Official Development Assistance (ODA), excluding one-off debt relief and emergency assistance, has not increased since 2004. As a result, countries can't plan for increased investments because they don't know if the increased ODA will materialize.

What would happen if the G8 and donor community followed through? They must! The world will be out of time to achieve real progress if 2008 doesn't precipitate action. Already, small scale successes on the continent are pointing to how increased financing and investment could be expanded. For example:

- Malawi's [voucher program](#) for fertilizers and seeds has led to a doubling of **agricultural productivity** during the 2006/7 growing season.
- Kenya's near ten-fold increase in the number of young children sleeping under insecticide-treated mosquito nets **resulted in 44% fewer deaths** than among children not protected by nets, prompting the World Health Organization to issue [guidelines](#) for the mass distribution of free insecticide-treated bed nets.
- Ghana is successfully implementing a **national school feeding program** using locally produced foods that is reaching about a million children.
- Malawi, Tanzania, Uganda, Kenya, and many other countries have **abolished fees for primary schools** resulting in dramatic increases in enrolment rates that have, for instance, reached about 85 percent in Tanzania. These countries are currently improving their teacher training and classroom capacity.
- In 2006 Zambia cancelled fees for basic rural health services and Burundi **introduced free medical care for mothers and children** with a view to improving use of preventative medicine.
- With support from the Red Cross Red Crescent, WHO, UNICEF, and the Center for Disease Control, African countries, such as Niger, Togo and Zambia, have successfully launched **national campaigns for measles vaccination and distribution of long-lasting insecticide-treated malaria bed nets**.
- In Niger, hundreds of thousands of people in **rural communities greatly improved their livelihoods and reduced their vulnerability to droughts** through large-scale reforestation propelled forward by reforms that included transferring ownership of trees from the State to the community level.
- Senegal is on track to achieving the **water and sanitation goals** through a national investment program financed with donor support.
- The [Millennium Villages](#) are demonstrating that community leadership and a combination of integrated interventions in health, education, agriculture, gender equality, basic infrastructure, and improved environmental management can transform impoverished communities in a short period of time. Many African governments with support from a growing number of

donors are now launching “Millennium Districts” and taking the lessons of the Millennium Villages to national scale.

Most of the success stories above are the result of carefully planned national programs that are co-financed through ODA and implemented with technical support from the donor community.

What’s the bottom line? Success is possible, but 2008 is the critical year where all committed stakeholders need to come together and take action. The MDGs have put the appropriate accountability mechanisms in place at the country-level. Success is already afoot, but needs to be accelerated. 2008 can be a historic year if we collectively choose what is possible over what might have been.