

1

Introduction

This booklet discusses the changes in the policies and practices of governments and international agencies that are needed to achieve the Millennium Development Goals (MDGs). It draws on the work of the International Institute for Environment and Development (IIED) over the last 30 years.⁽¹⁾

Any discussion of development assistance has to consider the relevance of the MDGs for at least two reasons: most governments and international agencies have publicly committed themselves to meeting them; and many are making changes in their institutional structures that they hope will increase their effectiveness in meeting these goals. In addition, if all the goals are met by the dates specified (mostly by 2015), this would represent a significant change in the effectiveness of partnerships between development assistance agencies and governments in low- and middle-income nations. It would bring about major

1. This includes the work not only of IIED staff but also of its many partners, since much of the Institute's work is undertaken through partnerships with individuals and institutions in Africa, Asia and Latin America.



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improvements to the health of many of the poorest groups in most low- and middle-income nations, and significant reductions in poverty.

The Millennium Development Goals contain much of what IIED has been promoting for 30 years. At their core is a strong and explicit commitment to reducing poverty and to integrating the principles of sustainable development into all nations’ policies and programmes. This has always been at the centre of IIED’s work. In 1972, the Institute’s President, Barbara Ward, pointed to the need “...to clearly define what should be done to maintain the earth as a place suitable for human life not only now but also for future generations.”⁽²⁾ During the 1970s, IIED sought to persuade the international agencies to make explicit commitments to many of the goals that are now among the MDGs.⁽³⁾ In 1979, IIED specified what a commitment to sustainable development would imply for international agencies.⁽⁴⁾ Throughout the 1980s, IIED fought to keep the principles of sustainable development alive, as interest waned among both governments and international agencies – and this included our work to support the Brundtland Commission and its 1987 report on *Our Common Future*, as well as preparations for the UN’s Earth Summit in 1992.⁽⁵⁾

But IIED has always sought to base its promotion of poverty reduction and sustainable development on knowledge gained from local engagement, working with partners in Africa, Asia and Latin America – for instance, through its work on sustainable livelihoods in agriculture and forestry (including a special focus on drylands and on biodiversity), on provision for water and sanitation, and on community-driven development in urban areas. Such a local engagement allows a check on whether global goals

2. See the Introduction by Barbara Ward in Ward, Barbara and Rene Dubos (1972), *Only One Earth: The Care and Maintenance of a Small Planet*, Andre Deutsch, London, 304 pages.

3. See, for instance, the chapter entitled “The cost of justice”, in Ward, Barbara (1976), *The Home of Man*, W W Norton, New York; also IIED’s involvement in getting the United Nations to set explicit targets for improved provision for water and sanitation, as described in Cross, Nigel (editor) (2003), *Evidence for Hope; The Search for Sustainable Development; The Story of the International Institute for Environment and Development*, Earthscan Publications, London, 238 pages.

4. Stein, Robert E and Brian Johnson (1979), *Banking on the Biosphere?*, Lexington Books, D C Heath and Company, Lexington and Toronto, 203 pages.

5. See Cross (2003), *op. cit.*



actually deliver what they promise. It also helps identify what changes are needed to make sure that they do.

With regard to the theme of the Conference for which this booklet provides the background:

- ◆ How can international agencies and national governments support the local processes that are needed to deliver most of the MDGs “on the ground”? How might they best support a multitude of local institutions (including local governments and those of civil society), working effectively with them in necessarily diverse ways, and channelling useful resources through them? Achieving most of the MDGs depends on more effective and accountable local institutions.
- ◆ What changes are needed in monitoring progress towards meeting the MDGs? As several chapters in this booklet note, some of the indicators chosen for monitoring the goals have serious deficiencies while, for others, the data on which they are based are of such poor quality as to be of very limited value.
- ◆ If governments and international agencies focus more on the MDGs, what might get left out or marginalized – perhaps especially with regard to civil and political rights, decentralization and democracy? And might the focus on the MDGs divert attention from changing a world economic system that currently locks many low- and middle-income nations into poverty?

Underlying these is a concern that while the MDGs may have broadened the set of outcomes by which “development assistance” will be judged, there has been too little reflection on the processes that need to change to ensure that these outcomes are achieved. As discussed in Chapter 2, most of the commitments within the MDGs are not new, and several decades of development assistance have failed to deliver many of them. For instance, virtually all rural and urban populations were meant to have good provision for water and sanitation by 1990, according to a commitment agreed by virtually all governments and

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international agencies in 1976 and 1977. This commitment had been formally endorsed by the UN General Assembly.⁽⁶⁾ Chapter 2 notes just how far from this target the world currently is.

We hope that this booklet makes clear how important it is for us all that the MDGs be realized – and, hopefully, even exceeded. As a smallholder or a squatter struggling to feed their family might ask: are we part of “the half” who, according to the MDGs, will no longer suffer from hunger by 2015?⁽⁷⁾ This booklet does not seek to be comprehensive in its discussion of the MDGs, but concentrates on those for which the findings of IIED’s work with its partners has relevance.

But this booklet and the issues it raises have relevance far beyond development assistance agencies, because achieving the MDGs depends on far more than an increase in development assistance and more effective development policies. At the Millennium Summit where the heads of state from most of the world’s nations committed themselves to the MDGs:

- ◆ Did heads of state from high-income nations leave the Summit really intending to remove the trade barriers that take several hundred billion dollars a year from producers in low- and middle-income nations (see Chapters 6 and 8)? Did they recognize that their commitment to ensuring environmental sustainability meant major changes in domestic policies, especially in reducing greenhouse gas emissions and changing the consumption patterns that underlie them?
- ◆ Did heads of state from lower-income nations leave the Millennium Summit really intending to make the institutional and governance changes on which poverty reduction and greater equity depends?

6. UN-Habitat (2003), *Water and Sanitation in the World’s Cities; Local Action for Global Goals*, Earthscan, London, 274 pages.

7. Bissio, Roberto (2003), “Civil society and the MDGs”, *NGLS Roundup 105*, July, pages 1–2, reporting on a comment by a Brazilian NGO.



We need to ask whether the heads of state have any possibility of acting on these concerns, even if they recognize the need and bring a commitment to doing so. Arif Hasan's commentary on the difficulties facing Pakistan (Chapter 9) has relevance for most low- and middle-income nations; within the current world system, it is difficult to see how such nations can develop an economic base that helps reduce poverty and provides a stable basis from which the MDG targets can be addressed.

