Millennium Development Goals: survey results

This is a summary of the findings drawn from the questionnaires returned to IIED on the Millennium Development Goals (MDGs).[1] Certain general points emerge from the responses:
1. Most respondents worked for organizations that have considered how the MDGs will influence their work, or have work programmes that already fall within the scope of the MDGs;
2. Respondents felt most confident that the MDGs would increase priority to lower-income nations and make aid focus on direct benefits to low-income groups; there was less confidence that they would increase the quantity or quality of aid.
3. Most respondents had some concerns either about the MDGs or about how a focus on the MDGs might mean too little attention paid to other aspects that are important for poverty reduction or for sustainable development.

Among the most frequently raised concerns were:
- The MDGs were too narrow/target driven/top down/donor driven.
- The MDGs focus too much on the symptoms of poverty rather than on underlying causes at international level (for instance, trade barriers), national level (lack of democracy and respect for civil and political rights, civil conflict) and local level (inequality, disempowerment, poor local governance/lack of rule of law and inadequate livelihoods).
- The MDGs focus too much on "what should be achieved" rather than on "how" (for instance, focusing too much on output goals and on delivery by external agencies rather than on how to meet these goals in each locality, including supporting community-based processes and better local governance).
- The emphasis on meeting time-bound goals may lead to a focus on countries and people that are more easily reached, neglecting the poorest groups and nations.

There were no clear distinctions in the concerns raised by respondents which related to the kind of organization in which they worked. It is also worth noting that many of these worries are not about what is omitted from the MDGs but, rather, about how they might be implemented.

The questionnaire: The questionnaire was available on IIED's website (www.iied.org/mdg/), and an e-mail was sent to around 2,100 people, inviting them to fill it in. The questionnaire could be filled in on-line or downloaded, filled in and returned by e-mail. There was also provision to send the questionnaire to those who requested it, and for it to be returned by post or fax. This review is based on the 138 completed responses to all questions.

Question 1: *How important are the MDGs for the work of your organization?*

The analysis below suggests that, for most respondents, the MDGs are significant for their work or have some influence, especially for bilateral agencies (virtually all responses from such agencies said the MDGs were highly significant). Local government respondents saw the MDGs as least important to their work.

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[1] This report, and the analysis on which it is based, was prepared by Bodil Nielsen, Diana Mitlin and David Satterthwaite. The full list of the qualitative responses to each question can be made available to those who are interested, although this would contain no details of the respondents or information that would allow their identification.

Type of organization	Number of responses	Average
NGO in one location	1	4.00
NGO in many locations	13	5.08
Local government	5	3.80
National government	6	5.33
Multilateral agency	10	5.10
Bilateral agency	11	5.91
International NGO	27	4.82
University or research group	32	4.31
Other (e.g. consultancy)	25	4.32
Not given or multiple responses	8	5.50
	138	4.76

Scored as: 6 = highly significant; 5 = significant; 4 = some influence; 3 = little influence; 2 = no significance; 1 = we have no information about these, so they have not been considered.

Question 2: *Has your organization considered how the MDGs will influence your work in the future?*

Sixty per cent of respondents reported that their organization had considered how the MDGs would influence their work.

Type of organization	Number of responses	Yes	No	No reply
NGO in one location	1	0	1	0
NGO in many locations	13	8	5	0
Local government	5	1	4	0
National government	6	4	2	0
Multilateral agency	10	9	0	1
Bilateral agency	11	11	0	0
International NGO	27	17	7	3
University or research	32	16	15	1
Other (e.g. consultancy)	25	11	13	1
Not given	8	6	2	
	138	83	49	6

For those who said yes, there were three sub-questions:
- How have the goals influenced your work?
- Which of the goals are of particular importance to your work?
- Which of the goals are of little importance to your work?

In regard to how the goals have influenced respondents' work, the most common response (17 out of 89 responses) was that the respondent's institution's work plan and agenda had adapted to the MDGs. The other most common responses were: "…our agency or our funders oblige us to take these on"; "…I have to know all of the MDGs because I am a consultant"; "…we have to respond to them because international agencies are changing their funding criteria"; "…our work area is already within the MDGs; it will help obtain increased funding from donors"; "…it sharpens the focus on results and measurements"; and, "…it is useful as it publicises goals we are already aiming for."

In regard to the goals which are of particular importance to respondents' work, 15 respondents said all of them were important. The goals and targets that received most support were:
- Water and sanitation.
- Significantly improve the lives of slum dwellers.
- Halve hunger/absolute income poverty.
- Ensure environmental sustainability.

Education, expanding opportunities for youth and Goal 8 were the least mentioned.

Many of the responses to this question revealed the respondent's familiarity with the MDGs, as the respondents simply listed the MDG goals that were their main focus by number (1 to 8) or by target (1-18).

In regard to the goals which are of little importance to their work, most respondents said that all were important, although many noted that their organization did not focus on all MDG areas (for instance, four respondents will not work on the "improve the lives of slum dwellers" goal because they work in rural areas).

Of the 49 responses from respondents whose organizations have not considered the relevance of the MDGs to their work, the most common reasons were either that the organization already had a clear agenda ("…we already have a clear mission and vision"; "…our work already focuses on realistic development targets") or that the work they were doing already fell within the MDGs. Only a few said that it was because they did not know about the MDGs – although two comments were interesting:
- "As a municipality (in South Africa), I doubt if anyone knows about them" (the respondent only became familiar with the MDGs when someone from a group at the local university sent them to the respondent).
- "In the US, MDGs are not widely known or discussed."

Several respondents considered the MDGs to be too blunt or too unrealistic for their work – or simply not appropriate for them (as a respondent from an NGO noted, they were for large official donors). As one respondent noted: "They are at once too narrow and too blunt to affect what we do. An example: in our work (which has to do with children and their environments) we would assume that universal access to education is essential ... but our contribution to this focuses more on the quality of the education that is made available. With regard to the quality of life for slum dwellers – again we would endorse this 100 per cent, but our work would be more likely to address the quality of the local environment, as it affects children's access to play or community life."

Several respondents mentioned that they, personally, were familiar with the MDGs, and that their organization had work that was relevant to them, but there had been no organizational discussion of the goals. One respondent noted that the question "Which of the goals is of particular importance to your work?" was difficult to answer because it was unclear as to whether the question was aimed at the respondent as an individual or as a member of an institution; and they added "I am personally interested but my organization is not."

One respondent noted that they had not considered the MDGs because "…it takes up too much time and the time spent does not justify the results. Previous experience with the UN International Year of Shelter for the Homeless (1987), the Habitat Agendas (that came out of the UN City Summit in 1996) etc. justify our view. Development is a local issue, and international agencies should understand local issues and programmes and support them rather than have their own plans."

In regard to those goals that are of little importance to respondents' work, most respondents said that all were important, although many highlighted how their organization's work was mainly within several of the MDGs (and on occasion focused on only one or two).

Question 3: *Please assess the following statements and place a score of between 1 [strongly disagree] and 5 [strongly agree] against each of them.*

The table below suggests that, in general, respondents agreed that the MDGs would contribute to these goals, although few respondents "strongly agreed" or "strongly disagreed". Interestingly, respondents felt least confident that the MDGs would increase the quality of aid and the quantity of aid, and were most

confident that they would increase priority to lower-income nations and make aid focus on direct benefits to low-income groups.

		Raise awareness of local challenges	Increase quantity of aid	Increase quality of aid	Increase priority to lower income nations	Make aid focus on direct benefits to low-income groups	Support locally applicable development goals	Strengthen local and national institutions	Improve livelihoods of poorest
NGO in one location	1	5.00	3.00	5.00	5.00	5.00	5.00	5.00	5.00
NGO in many locations	12	4.25	3.17	2.67	3.92	3.58	3.92	3.83	3.92
Local government	5	3.80	2.80	2.80	3.60	3.60	3.40	3.40	3.60
National government	6	2.83	2.33	3.50	3.33	3.67	3.83	3.17	3.17
Multilateral	10	4.30	2.30	3.00	3.80	3.90	2.50	2.80	3.60
Bilateral	11	3.91	3.45	3.18	3.64	3.91	2.73	3.27	3.45
International NGO	26	3.85	3.08	3.58	4.08	4.12	3.46	3.58	3.73
University or research	32	3.77	3.55	3.35	3.61	3.97	3.16	3.23	3.58
Other (eg consultancy)	25	3.36	2.80	2.80	3.20	3.32	2.88	2.76	3.12
Not given or multiple responses	8	3.71	3.43	3.43	3.43	3.83	3.67	4.00	4.00
Total	136	3.66	3.00	3.10	3.55	3.67	3.11	3.17	3.43

Question 4: *Do you have any worries about the focus of the MDGs (for instance, what gets left out, what receives too much emphasis?)*

Of the 127 comments, most expressed some worries about the focus of the MDGs. Seventeen responses stated that they had no worries, while a few others were unreservedly positive ("…I would love everyone to adopt these goals"; "…the higher the priority, the better; my main concern is with governments and donor agencies not giving sufficiently high priority to them"; "…it can only be a positive move in the direction of improved coordination between development partners").

Of the worries expressed, most fell under four general headings, with the MDGs:
- Being too narrow/target driven/top down
- Missing structural issues
- Not giving attention to local development processes
- Being too donor driven

Below are various quotes drawn from the returned questionnaires. Some include comments that could be listed under more than one heading, and there are obvious areas of overlap between the four headings.

The MDGs being too narrow/target driven/top down:
- Becoming obsessed by the numbers and not the quality and delivery of the goals.
- Danger of focusing on people who are among the better-off poor for easier progress, neglecting the very poorest and the harder to reach.
- The MDGs, like Poverty Reduction Strategy Papers, reflecting a top-down approach to target-oriented development. This agenda is not owned by civil society and when it fails, donor fatigue and faddishness over the latest approach will take over, undermining the long-term lesson-learning approach that is essential for sustainable development.
- Worry about top-down implementation by large corporations (e.g. Bechtel or Vivendi or Thames Water) vs. bottom-up implementation. The former could result in a disastrous round of privatisation of services and net decreases in access for the very poorest and most marginal households.
- May impose standard solutions to highly diverse expressions of common problems.

The MDGs missing structural issues

The responses typically pointed to: the MDGs ignoring the key elements of development or the real causes of poverty; the tendency to miss criteria that assess progress toward social justice and respect for people's rights; not assessing whether governments are creating an environment for democracy, good governance and human rights; and their failure to address peace building. Some examples of responses:

- Many bilateral agencies may use the MDG focus but have not delinked aid from trade nor implemented development–trade agreements which, in the long run, undermine the poverty alleviation actions.
- The lack of analysis of the mediating socio-political institutions that keep people poor, which is part of the non-political approach.
- Governments are only measured with respect to meeting MDGs but not with respect to creating an environment for democracy, good governance and human rights.
- An organization's eagerness to reach the goals means that they are prepared to take shortcuts and concentrate on "easy wins". This biases their strategies towards macro-economic interventions. It also tends to restrict our thinking towards getting people through the $ 1 a day hoop and then leaving them to their own devices, rather than thinking towards a just and diverse society. I am also deeply concerned about the absence of criteria to assess progress towards social justice, respect of people's basic rights and the move towards a just and equitable society, which are fundamental to human development.

The MDGs not giving attention to local development processes

The most common responses were that the MDGs**:** may impose standard solutions to highly diverse problems; are not supporting locally generated solutions; may exclude localised identification and prioritisation of other development issues; are too focused on donor agencies rather than on community processes; and the results are not monitored by local processes but by external groups. Some examples of responses:

- May exclude localised identification and prioritisation of other development issues.
- May focus attention on delivery by agencies rather than enabling community-based processes to take control.
- Danger that all strategies will aim to tick boxes that are quantitative rather than qualitative and sustained, and that all efforts will push towards a good result in 2015 at the expense of considering the longer-term future. Governments will be tempted to seek results by implementing schemes themselves rather than investing in the long process of building local capacity and responsibility for such issues, which can only happen when resources are genuinely devolved – which takes time. MDGs do not lend themselves to painstaking relationship building and building up trust in the local use of resources.
- The risk that process issues might be considered less important, leading to an approach to development that places too much emphasis on inputs and outputs, which, as we have already seen, has major flaws.
- Creating a framework that may not be congruent with locally generated needs, priorities and approaches.
- You cannot form global policy without locally nuanced understanding.
- Insufficient attention to local (national and below) agendas.

The MDGs being too donor driven

- It will lead (donors) to ignore key elements of development.
- Governments change their own development focus to "jump through hoops" set by international agencies.
- Government departments are apt to see these as isolated targets, and sometimes find it difficult to set them within the bigger picture and see them as "part of the day job" and not as another donor add-on.
- If the approach is top down, and marginalized communities "acted upon" rather than empowered.
- The biggest fear is that this process will be used to stimulate greater economic activities within donor countries through increased tendencies for sourcing personnel, goods and services from the developed world.

- There is little incentive to develop innovative policy and "thinking outside the box", because the MDGs inevitably become internal targets for development agencies.
- Programmes such as the MDG usually involve First World consultants and their Third World counterparts. They produce many reports, but there is a big gap between recommendations and ground realities.

Among the other issues raised by several respondents were the risk that failure to meet the MDGs would discredit development assistance, and that the link between the MDGs and poverty reduction strategies was not clear.

Question 5: *Do you have any other worries as to the possible negative implications of governments and international agencies giving a high priority to the MDGs?*

There was a lot of overlap between responses to Question 4 (*Do you have any worries about the focus of the MDGs – for instance what gets left out, what receives too much emphasis?*) and responses to Question 5. The wording of the questions was perhaps not precise enough since Question 4 was intended to gauge what might be left out if most development assistance focused on the MDGs, whereas Question 5 was intended more to gauge possible negative implications of a focus on MDGs by governments and donor international agencies (i.e. more on the negative implications of the "how" rather than "what was funded").

Twenty respondents stated that they had no worries, or their answer implied this. Several highlighted only positive aspects of the MDGs: "…there has to be some prioritisation and these really do capture the major challenges to human development"; "…the MDGs are people oriented and that is very good"; "…the MDGs as 'banners and headline grabbers', promoting the importance of development issues."

Among the worries expressed, most centred on one or more of five points, the first three of which received the most comments:
- The means for achieving them are not clear/not enough attention to local processes
- The focus on the MDGs does not address causes of poverty
- Too top down
- Too focused on quantity rather than on quality
- A need for nationally and locally driven goals rather than internationally driven goals

The issues raised by many respondents do not fall neatly into one of these categories, and clearly there are many overlaps between them.

The means for achieving the MDGs are not clear/not enough attention to local processes
Among the points most often stressed: The discussions of the MDGs neglects the means that are needed to achieve them; where are the plans to operationalize and finance them?; where is the support for local processes that are needed to achieve them?; and they may mean a focus on aid flows rather than on addressing other factors such as unfair trade rules, debt and armed conflict. Examples of responses include:
- Not enough emphasis on good local governance.
- Output goals not process goals (with particular worry about what gets left out e.g. democracy).
- The MDGs' emphasis on goals (on which everyone agrees) rather than on how to get there.
- The problem is not the goals but how to get there.
- The main weakness is the focus on goals rather than on the means of achieving them. The inference is that aid flows and delivery will help us reach the goals rather than address other factors such as unfair trade rules, debt armed conflict and so on.
- The MDGs, although providing an overall focus, do not focus on the "how", so aid may continue in similar forms (i.e. no real transformation), but under a new badge.
- MDGs as output goals, not process goals.
- Output goals rather than process goals do not ensure programmes will be implemented in inclusive or participatory ways, or through processes that will serve to strengthen the voice, power and capacity of marginalized people. We believe that the means are as important as the

ends, if the goals are to be institutionally sustainable and pursued in ways that are appropriate to local contexts.
- Does not capture local priorities.

The focus on the MDGs does not address causes of poverty

Among the points most often stressed: The MDGs show little recognition of the underlying structural issues that contribute to poverty and poor health; they do not deal with trade issues; the focus is on treating symptoms, not causes; there is a lack of attention to democracy and human rights; civil society is left out; programmes that are important but not central to MDGs will be left out, such as transport, energy and information; incomes and savings are given too little attention; and the private sector role is not given enough attention. Examples of responses include:
- Failure to tackle economic issues, adverse trade factors and a business environment in which poverty issues can be addressed.
- Not enough emphasis is placed on the empowerment of poor people in terms of access to local governance systems and a need to address inequality.
- Where are jobs and justice?
- We are concerned about the omission of democracy, human rights, unemployment, livelihoods, as well as hazard prevention, vulnerability and violence. Regarding violence, we are referring to urban violence (related to institutional insecurity and crime) as well as to the impact of war on the poor.
- Too easy for those trying to achieve the MDGs to focus on short-term or shallow issues – such as treatment of disease, rehydration salts to reduce infant mortality rates, etc. There is little recognition of the underlying structural issues that contribute to poverty/poor health.
- My main concern is that the goals are completely unrealistic and do not take account of the root causes of problems. They encourage a view of development that ignores the real political issues to be faced.
- I think there are two problems. First I don't think it is very helpful to have this type of goal without thinking through how you will achieve it. Second, it reflects a general Western prejudice to save the life of poor little children, without thinking through how these children will survive once they are adults.
- What is left out altogether is to reduce inequality, which is only possible by curbing the exponential increase in corporate salaries and consumption. This requires more restructuring of society than merely meeting delivery targets. There needs to be targets to reduce excessive consumption by the few (be it of land or other resources).

Too top down

- The MDGs are too top down and externally directed.
- They will encourage more top down externally directed interventions.
- Rather than "what" gets left out, have we considered "who" has been left out?
- They take us back to the 1960s and the push for modernisation: imposed targets from the top.
- There is no explicit focus on institutional development/strengthening at government and civil society level; this might encourage short-term project style solutions, predominantly driven and undertaken by external consultants.

Too focused on quantity rather than on quality

Among the points most often stressed: How will the measurables be defined as the target dates approach?; will quality be compromised by the rush for quantity? (two respondents were particularly worried that the quality of education will get lost in the rush to increase enrolment levels); too much emphasis on numbers/statistics, which may use unreliable indicators; worry that to achieve the targets, donor agencies will focus on countries that help achieve the targets and not on the poorest countries; within countries, a focus on meeting the targets will mean reaching those who are easy to reach, not those who are difficult to reach. Examples of responses include:
- The targets don't always ensure quality as well as quantity – we already have some UN colleagues saying that we should achieve the goals at all costs.
- Emphasis on quantitive inputs and not enough emphasis on distributional effects.
- Too much emphasis on numbers/statistics – which may use unreliable indicators – rather than quality of, for example, education.

- The numerical emphasis is worrying as it could lead to strategic behaviour (focusing only on India and China), with little recognition of how people become poor and what the structures of constraint they face to get out of poverty are.
- There is a real danger that policies will skew to reach those most easily affected in terms of numbers, i.e. those who are just below the perceived poverty line will absorb less effort than those who are far below it.
- Emphasis on goals (everybody agrees) rather than on how to get there (much more difficult).

In another part of the questionnaire, one respondent pointed to the dangers of setting quantitative targets, as shown by the experience in South Africa: "The laudable target of delivering 1 million houses in the first five years of ANC government has led to number chasing at the expense of other important aspects of housing production. Nine years later, there is a deeply entrenched institutional and political culture around the number chasing, which is difficult to reverse."

The need for nationally driven goals rather than internationally driven goals
Among the points most often stressed: The MDGs must focus on the needs of each country, with each nation developing and setting their own targets; a single framework is inappropriate for diverse nations; the MDGs do not allow for specifics for each location.

Among other comments made in response to Question 5:
- The MDGs seem to be promises without resources.
- Not enough on environment and sustainable development.
- Recommendations agreed at earlier UN Conferences diluted (three respondents emphasized how the reproductive health goals and the rights of women to be allowed to control reproduction had been left out of the MDGs).
- Concern about the urban aspects of the MDGs: three respondents worried that the urban aspects of the MDGs may get ignored, while two were worried that the MDGs may be too biased towards urban areas.
- The definition of poverty is restricted to cash income.
- The MDGs will be sidelined by the focus on the war against terror.
- Monitoring seems to be a big problem – some MDGs/targets/indicators seem to have been developed rather hurriedly. Some important areas of work are also rather hidden among the targets and indicators.
- The MDGs ignore the main pathway out of poverty for the bulk of poor Africans (agriculture) and, by focusing on a welfarist approach, undervalue sustainable development.
- Women and girls in the MDGs are seen as mothers or daughters; there is no indication of women in an economic role. Because women and girls are not recognized in the goals as economic agents or workers, there is little focus on empowering them in the work place or on creating opportunities for women in governance.
- Transport, energy, climate, biodiversity, agriculture, incomes and savings, equity and the role of the private sector are left out or given too little consideration.