



## Half Way to Nothing? MDGs in the Pacific.

As the mid-way point for the Millennium Development Goals approaches, Simon Feeny argues that there is much to be done in the Pacific if the goals are to be met.

In 2015 it is very likely that the governments of the Pacific island countries, together with their major aid donors, will be heavily criticised for a lack of serious action on the Millennium Development Goals. This will further weaken the support for aid, and may undermine other important reforms being undertaken by these countries - outcomes which must be avoided. So what can Australia do to help these countries achieve the goals?

The Millennium Development Goals (or, as they are commonly known, the MDGs) are a set of development targets, agreed to by 189 members of the United Nations in 2000, which seek to improve many of the dimensions of extreme poverty including income poverty, education, gender equality, health, and environmental sustainability. They are to be achieved by 2015, and use 1990 as a baseline. July 7th, 2007 marks the halfway point towards their achievement.

At a global level it is likely that the headline MDG, of halving global income poverty by 2015, will be achieved. This is due to the remarkable progress made by just two countries: China and India. However, at a national level it is becoming painfully clear that many countries are so far off-track that they have no hope of achieving the goals by 2015. These countries include many in Sub-Saharan Africa but also some of our Pacific neighbours.

So why are so many countries unlikely to achieve the goals? Two explanations are usually provided. Firstly, aid donors are often blamed for not honouring their commitments to substantially increase the level and quality of foreign assistance, relieve debt and provide greater access to their domestic markets for goods and services. The second explanation blames the countries themselves. Poor governance, corrupt bureaucracies and inadequate policy reform seriously hamper efforts in most developing countries. There is certainly truth in both of these explanations, and both issues need to be addressed.

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### POLICY RECOMMENDATIONS

#### 1. HELP PACIFIC COUNTRIES TO TAILOR THE MDGs TO THEIR INDIVIDUAL CIRCUMSTANCES

Australia must support Pacific island countries to turn the Millennium Development Goals into something achievable. Revised targets should be devised by developing countries in the Pacific and incorporated into their long term development strategies. These targets should be the focus of donor activities, and donor policies and programs should be measured against them.

#### 2. DONORS MUST FOCUS ON RURAL DEVELOPMENT

People in isolated rural communities are often difficult to reach, but these areas are home to the majority of the poor. Australia and other donors should focus their efforts on the rural parts of countries, and in particular their poorest provinces.

#### 3. IMPROVE TRANSPORT INFRASTRUCTURE

Improving transport infrastructure in rural areas will help to make aid programs more cost effective at reaching poor communities. Countries cannot achieve universal primary education until schools are accessible in all areas of the country, and the provision of health care to improve infant and maternal mortality cannot be provided without reasonable access to medical facilities.

#### 4. AUSTRALIA MUST HELP PACIFIC COUNTRIES TRACK THEIR MDG PROGRESS

Australia and other donors need to provide considerably more assistance to Pacific countries for the collection and analysis of accurate and reliable statistics. The results of this analysis must be widely published, so that citizens of Pacific countries can hold their governments and donors accountable for achievements against the goals. If this does not happen, governments will continue to provide poor services unchecked by the democratic process.

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Another explanation is that the goals, as they stand, are quite simply too ambitious for many Pacific countries. Given the numerous constraints faced in the Pacific, achieving the goals over a relatively short time period is impossible, even with large increases in aid.

In Pacific countries where it is clear that the MDGs cannot be met, Australia should support countries to turn the goals into something achievable. Development goals are important, and, rather than abandon the MDGs, the answer lies in adapting them to specific country scenarios. By making the goals more specific and achievable, country governments will make greater efforts to reach them. The MDGs need not be the same for China and Tonga – two very different countries facing very different challenges. Instead, they should reflect countries different situations and development constraints, and aim to make the revised targets ambitious but realistic. If they are not ambitious, they are unlikely to lead to any significant change. But if they are overly ambitious, they are unlikely to gain domestic and international support. Revised targets should be devised by countries and incorporated into their long term development strategies. These targets should be the focus of donor activities, and be explicitly incorporated into donor policies and programs. There is no excuse for not backing country owned, ambitious but realistic development targets.

Some countries have led the way on this, with United Nations backing. In our region, Papua New Guinea has tailored the goals to make some targets less ambitious but more realistic for the country to achieve by 2015. In contrast, Thailand is expected to achieve all of the goals before 2015, so its government has tailored the goals to be more ambitious. Thailand's tailored goals include reducing poverty to less than 4 per cent by 2009 and achieving universal secondary (as well as primary) education by 2015. Cambodia has included an additional goal for zero impact from landmines by 2015.

Secondly, Australia and other donors should focus efforts on the rural parts of countries, and in particular their poorest provinces. There is a large and sometimes growing disparity between rural and urban areas in Pacific countries, and unfortunately aid is often focused on the “middle-class” regions. People in isolated rural communities are often difficult to reach, but these areas are home to the majority of the poor.

Improving transport infrastructure in rural areas will help to make aid programs more cost effective at reaching such communities. Countries cannot achieve MDG2, the goal of universal primary education, until schools are accessible in all areas of the country.

Moreover, it can actually be cheaper to reach development targets, such as reducing child mortality, in rural areas where mortality rates are high. Because more children die from easily preventable diseases in rural areas, a rural intervention will have a bigger impact than one in urban areas which have already reduced mortality rates to some extent through better access to healthcare.

Finally, Australia and other donors need to provide considerably more assistance to Pacific countries for the collection and analysis of accurate and reliable statistics. The lack of data for Pacific countries makes tracking progress towards the MDGs virtually impossible. The absence of reliable and widely accessible information makes it impossible for NGOs and civil society to hold governments accountable for their actions. It also makes it difficult to identify the geographic areas and groups of the population in most need. Better data and statistics will lead to evidence-based policy making and more effective aid. It will also make the democratic process stronger by holding governments accountable for the services they do (or do not) provide to their citizens.

Well designed development targets can lead to substantial results. Let's not forget that the MDGs have already been successful in raising awareness of development issues and mobilising resources. They have gained unprecedented support from government and non-government bodies around the world, and virtually all aid donors have pledged to increase assistance to the world's poor. Moreover, international donors and governments have become more accountable for their performance at reducing poverty.

2015 is inevitably going to be a year of finger pointing and blame allocating when many countries fail to achieve the MDGs. But unless countries are working towards realistic goals, there is a risk that governments which have made substantial, but not target-hitting, improvements will not be given their due. Too much of the public discussion will obsess over ineffective aid strategies and poor governance. Tailored targets for some countries that are ambitious but realistic can help resolve this problem - and lead to far greater incentives for action. Australia and other aid donors must be part of this action, honouring their commitments to increase their levels of aid and to improve its quality and focus on poverty reduction. Australia can take the lead in the Pacific by helping countries target and achieve realistic goals. At the same time, Australia must help the public understand the difficulties faced by many of its partner countries, to ensure that public expectations of aid are realistic, and that public support for aid doesn't wane in the future.