

The Millennium Development Goals

The Millennium Development Goals (MDGs) are the most determined effort in history to galvanise international action around one set of development targets. The goals themselves are no-brainers: basic rights for all by the year 2015, with clear targets to be reached along the way.

However, we are just seven years from the 2015 MDG deadline. As the credit crunch and rising prices threaten to distract leaders from their global commitments, now is the time to regroup around the MDGs, looking beyond 2015 and changing direction if necessary.

There has been some progress, particularly in countries where commitment from the top is backed by strong policies and public expenditure. Examples include Vietnam, a one-party state, and Ghana, a multiparty democracy. Progress is also enhanced when efforts are made across a number of mutually reinforcing goals. Improvements in girls' education, for example, can boost demand for reproductive health services, and both can dent intergenerational poverty.

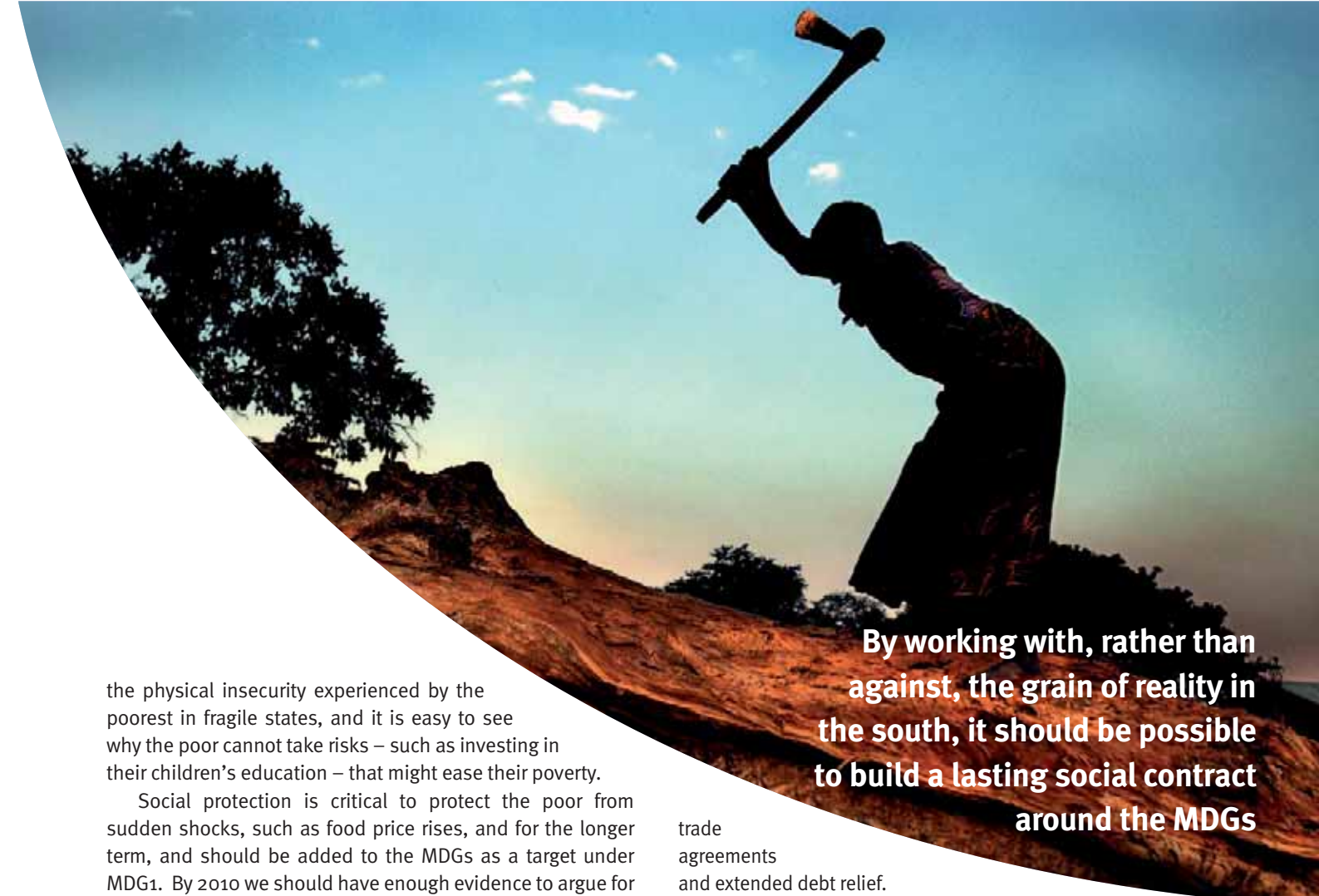
Economic growth helps, and could put the world on track for the MDG target of halving the proportion of people living on less than one dollar a day. Growth means more tax revenue and resources for public expenditure, if the politics of public expenditure permit.

However, the challenges remain formidable. They include rising food and oil prices and accelerating climate change, as well as the continuing threats of chronic poverty, growing inequality, poor governance and the extreme problems facing the most fragile states, where the necessary leadership – and the basics of development – are often lacking.

Less discussed are southern perceptions of who 'owns' the MDGs. With national priorities being shoehorned into MDG compliance, the goals are often seen as 'northern', and debate is relatively muted in the south. Reviving the southern debate may require a shift in focus away from sweeping global targets to strong local indicators showing the reality on the ground. Global goals are all well and good, but countries need to be able to set their own targets. What is important is a vibrant public debate about progress, informed by indicators that are backed by solid data.

Maternal mortality rates, for example, are scandalous. But their stubborn refusal to budge by more than a fraction in many countries shows that underlying issues are at play, and that we should look beyond the global rates for answers. Action research around boosting the proportion of women in political representation may tell us more about gender discrimination and have a bigger impact.

By working with, rather than against, the grain of reality in the south, it would be possible to build a lasting social contract between donors, national governments, business and local citizens, rooted in social protection. As the 2008 Chronic Poverty Report says, chronic poverty goes beyond low income. It means deprivation across the board – lack of food, water, sanitation, health care and education and lack of prospects. Add to this



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the physical insecurity experienced by the poorest in fragile states, and it is easy to see why the poor cannot take risks – such as investing in their children’s education – that might ease their poverty.

Social protection is critical to protect the poor from sudden shocks, such as food price rises, and for the longer term, and should be added to the MDGs as a target under MDG1. By 2010 we should have enough evidence to argue for this addition, with targets that could be expressed in numbers of ‘protected people’ rather than, for example, percentage of expenditure or GDP.

In addition to social protection, a long-term strategy for fragile states is needed to close the gap between humanitarian and development action. Fragile states often exist in a kind of international limbo – between the uncertain safety nets provided by humanitarian action, and the reluctance of the international community to invest in a long-term development agenda. We need to ask what it takes to convert today’s humanitarian system into a social protection umbrella. Without a long-term combined development and humanitarian approach, insecurity and conflict will continue to undermine and unravel development efforts.

And we need to look further ahead, to work on the post-2015 MDG agenda. This could include a new commitment to post-primary education, which fuels economic growth and adds to the attraction of primary education. For many countries this cannot wait until 2015.

Then there is the funding. Estimates from the Millennium Project suggest that meeting the MDGs will require a doubling of current overseas development assistance (ODA) to gross national product (GNP) ratios. Donors should certainly aim to hit the promised target of 0.7% of GNP by 2015, but more funding, while welcome, will not guarantee results. We need resources to lift the poor out of poverty, and a wider ‘cast list’ to include new partners, particularly business, in building national social contracts around the MDGs. It is likely that domestic issues will be more important to the MDGs than international aid. The rich north needs to continue its search for pro-poor

trade agreements and extended debt relief.

Talking is good, and Summits, such as the UN’s Call to Action, reinforce commitment. But cynics fear that big meetings generate little but dates for the next big meetings. There is talk of batons being passed, from Japan to Italy, from Ghana to Qatar. Let us hope that we are not still circling the track in 2015. The point of a relay is that someone eventually wins.



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