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Priorities in Meeting the MDGs: Lessons from Evaluation

1. **It has been ten years since world leaders met in New York to adopt the Millennium Development Goals (MDGs)—for poverty reduction, human development and environmental sustainability, and global partnerships, inter alia.** Now, ten years later, leaders are preparing to meet again, this time to assess progress and agree on future directions. Numerous papers have been prepared for the occasion, providing a wealth of detail on the MDGs and related issues**.** This brief note aims to complement them—drawing on lessons of evaluation from the World Bank Group's Independent Evaluation Group (IEG) and others—on how performance on the MDGs might be strengthened and sustained. [1]

Progress to date

2. **Early indications point to significant but uneven progress on the global targets for the MDGs.** Available data and estimates suggest that the global MDG target for poverty reduction—reducing by half the number of people in developing countries living in absolute poverty—will be met; that the MDG health goals will generally not be met; and that the other MDG goals, education, the environment, gender, will be in between, but with considerable variation across indicators. The global economic crisis is widely presumed to have reversed progress in many countries, albeit to an as yet unknown degree.

3. **These global results are driven notably by achievements in middle-income countries of East Asia, especially China, where rapid economic growth has lifted large numbers of people out of poverty.** In most other regions, progress on poverty reduction has also been good, likewise mirroring growth trends. Growth has been less of a driver of the other MDGs, on which progress has been slower even in East Asia, including on child and maternal mortality where shortfall risks are highest. Otherwise, there is considerable diversity, with strong performance against most MDG targets among many middle-income countries and much weaker performance in many low-income countries, especially in post-conflict and other fragile states, where much remains to be done. Notwithstanding the significant advances among middle-income countries, there remains scope for greater progress, especially in poorer areas.

Evaluative Lessons

4. **The lessons of recent evaluations point to three priority areas where performance on the MDGs and related goals can be improved in many country contexts.** Such improvements will require leadership and actions by the authorities of developing countries and support from their partners, including the World Bank Group and other development agencies.

[1] This note has been distilled from IEG evaluations, and a brief (forthcoming), which documents the lessons of evaluation for how support for achieving the MDGs and related goals can be improved.

5. ***Private Sector Foundations of Growth:*** **The first priority concerns interventions on the supply-side foundations of growth in areas where poverty reduction is lagging**. A stronger effort to improve investments is essential, especially in agriculture, given its importance for income generation, employment, and food security, including in Sub-Saharan Africa, where evaluations point to previous neglect of the sector for many years.

6. **There is emerging evidence in a number of low-income country programs such as for Ghana, Mali, and Uganda—of support for the needed measures for improving investments, although their cost effectiveness and sustainability have yet to be systematically evaluated.** Pre-dating the food crisis, one trend bridging private sector development and agriculture is the increasing focus on public-private partnerships and other linkages with agro-businesses, including through small-holder connections to upstream and downstream supply chains.

7. ***Targeting:*** **The second priority relates to the need for greater use of pro-poor targeting and analysis of poverty and social impacts in program design.** Evaluations have found a strong focus on human development interventions as part of country poverty reduction strategies. But they have not found much pro-poor targeting or tracking of outcomes by income level, so there is often little information on how well such programs actually reach the poor. Nor have they found sufficient integration of the findings of poverty and social impact analysis in the design of low-income countries' policies and programs supported by external agencies.

8. **But there have been important exceptions, which provide good-practice examples and lessons.** For instance in Ethiopia, poverty and social impact analysis helped to shape the rollback of electricity subsidies, and in Yemen a participatory poverty and social impact analysis contributed to the design of the government's water sector strategy. Meanwhile, the larger point remains that there is considerable scope for improvement in the degree of pro-poor targeting of spending and pro-poor protections on policy initiatives, based on poverty impact analysis.

9. ***Linkages:*** **The third priority relates to the need for greater utilization of multi-sector approaches.** Such approaches can be effective in achieving the gender and other human development MDGs—as in Peru where increased availability of transportation was associated with increasing numbers of pregnant women seeking medical help. But to work in this way, multi-sector approaches must be designed with the cross-sectoral objectives in mind, which evaluations have found to be relatively rare, as many staff remain wedded to "their" sector.

10. **Multi-sector approaches are also relevant to the linkages between the public and private sectors in the delivery of health care and other services.** Over half of MDG-related mother and child health services in Sub-Saharan Africa and South Asia are privately provided. Public-private partnerships offer new approaches to service delivery, although evaluative evidence on institutional and financial sustainability is still limited at this stage.

Challenges for sustainability

11. **Looking to 2015 and beyond, sustainability constitutes a critical challenge—one where the international community can and should do more.** Recent events and evaluations demonstrate that threats to sustained progress increasingly come from factors outside developing countries' control—from natural disasters, to the environment and climate change, to global economic crises—requiring country and external agency actions to minimize and mitigate adverse impacts. They also demonstrate the continuing adverse impacts of conflict.

12. ***Natural disasters:*** **Many developing countries face natural disasters that exact major tolls in lives, livelihoods, and foregone progress on the MDGs.** Some 50 such countries face recurrent earthquakes, mudslides, floods, hurricanes, and droughts—with flooding in Pakistan but the latest mega-disaster, following on Haiti's earthquake earlier in the year. Though such disasters cannot all be prevented—or accurately predicted—they can be better prepared for.

13. **But countries and external agencies often do not recognize these recurrent risks as a systematic threat to their programs and sustainability.** Indeed, almost half of the countries borrowing from the World Bank and others for disaster response did not mention prevention and mitigation in their pre-disaster development plans. Disaster risks need to be integrated into development programs, including through better design of emergency-response facilities.

14. ***Climate change*****: Developing countries—by virtue of their geography—are among the most vulnerable to rising temperatures, rising seas, and expanding deserts.** Recent evaluations foresee major risks if business-as-usual approaches to carbon emissions and the environment continue. Citing the experience of countries such as Ukraine and Romania, where energy price adjustments led to large gains in public revenues and energy efficiency and declines in the intensity of carbon emissions, they highlight the efficacy of win-win policies.

15. **To be sure, developing countries also have a role to play on global climate change and the environment—subject to adequate burden sharing.** To enable them to take actions beyond the point of benefit to national welfare—and to contribute more broadly to the global effort on climate change—greater financing from the advanced economies will also be needed.

16. ***Economic vulnerability*****: Economic and financial crises pose major threats to poverty reduction and human development—with many examples of severe crises having previously wiped out years of progress.** Though developing countries and development agencies cannot prevent global crises originating in the advanced economies, both can take actions to prepare for them. For countries, the need is to have in place credible macroeconomic policies and effective social safety nets and other program mechanisms to protect vulnerable populations—as in Mexico's pro-poor cash transfer *Oportunidades* program.

17. **For agencies, the need is to have instruments, country and sectoral knowledge, and financial capacity to respond quickly to requests.** But early warning systems—including mechanisms for forecasting, revising, and disseminating revised forecasts widely and quickly—are also vital for an effective response, as seen in the run-up to the global economic crisis.

18. ***Conflict and post-conflict:*** **Most at risk of missing the MDGs, post-conflict and other fragile states often face major reform and investment backlogs, with limited local resources and capacity for meeting them**. But many externally supported programs have faced avoidable sustainability risks owing to insufficient sensitivity to the conflicts' underpinnings—and possible solutions—and inadequate prioritization in light of capacity limitations on the ground.

Going Forward

19. **To improve performance during the final round of the MDG campaign, developing country and external agency managers could draw on evaluative lessons, tailoring them to countries' contexts.** Priorities include: (i) effective support for agriculture and its linkages to other sectors including agro-business, preparedness for environmental, climatic and economic vulnerabilities, and strategically selective post-conflict support; (ii) pro-poor targeting and effective use of the analysis of program and policy impacts on poor people; and (iii) utilization of multi-sector approaches to the human development and other MDGs—both within the public sector and between the public and private sectors.

20. **These efforts can be enhanced by investments in results-based management systems.** Such systems provide tools for articulating results chains and mechanisms for informing civil society about successes and failures as an input into public sector accountability. Their efficacy can also be enhanced by the provision of improved staff incentives for achieving measureable outcomes for the MDGs and related goals, including through the use of multi-sector approaches.

21. **It is country policies that will determine progress on the MDGs—coupled with the global economic, financial, and environmental context.** Developing country policies and actions have been vital in driving the gains achieved over the past decade. They also explain much of the differences in the size of those gains across and within country groupings. But the results have also been shaped in important ways by the policies and actions of the advanced economies—including on the quantity and quality of aid—and by global trends in which the advanced economies have played such major roles.

22. **These considerations elevate the significance of the discussions in New York.** Given that all countries, developed and developing, will participate, the discussions will provide a forum both for discussing the delivery on previous commitments on the MDGs and their financing, and for forging a common view on the underlying responsibilities and accountabilities —including for the costs of adverse impacts of global climate change and global economic crises, especially those not foreseen when the MDGs were adopted ten years ago.