

## Is another world possible?

It has been said that the story about the Millennium Declaration and the MDGs is a tale about ending poverty in our time. Not that it will happen, but that it can happen. The aim is ambitious, as it should be and the world has made significant progress towards achieving many of the goals. But advances have been far from

uniform worldwide and for individual goals. There are huge disparities across and within countries. Inside many countries poverty is greatest in rural areas, though urban poverty is also widespread, growing and poorly reflected by conventional indicators. Are the goals merely targets set but never met?

# Do global targets matter?

By **Jan Vandemoortele**. At the time of writing, Jan Vandemoortele was Director of the Poverty Group of the United Nations Development Programme. He is now UN Resident Co-ordinator in Pakistan. The views expressed do not necessarily reflect those of UNDP.

The first half of the 25-year period over which the millennium development goals are to be achieved can be summarised in three points: (a) global progress continued, (b) but it was slower than in the 1970s and 1980s, and (c) much of it bypassed the people and countries most in need. At mid-point, the world is not 'on track' for meeting the targets by 2015. Based on the most reliable indicators, the one-sentence summary of the various databases is that global progress should have been twice as fast since 1990.

After some false dawns and missed opportunities, it might be tempting to dismiss the millennium development goals as 'easily set but never met'. That would be a mistake. Global targets do make a difference, mostly by mobilising actors and advocates at all levels – global and local alike.

In 1966, for instance, the objective was set to eliminate smallpox, a target that was achieved in 1977. In the 1990s, an estimated 1 billion people gaining access to improved drinking water sources. The global use of ozone-depleting substances – such as CFC – has been reduced to one-tenth of the 1990 level. These examples show that remarkable progress can be achieved within relatively short periods of time.

Target-driven approaches that have made a difference share seven key elements for success.

First, they express development in an inspiring and measurable way. Fuzzily formulated targets are as unhelpful as they are un-measurable. Targets must be specific; they cannot rely on vague assumptions, faulty indicators or inaccurate data.

Second, they make the targets well known. Targets must address presidents, prime ministers, parliamentarians, preachers, primary school teachers, parents and the public – i.e. they must reach the kitchen table. The public's interest must be awakened and nurtured, its ambition stirred and expectations aroused. The media has

a critical role to play in keeping the eyes of the public on the prize.

Third, they tailor the targets to the national context. Global targets are meant to encourage all countries to strive for accelerated progress but, ultimately, their applicability can only be tested and judged against what is realistically achievable under country-specific circumstances. To be meaningful, target setting must be about adaptation, not about mindless adoption of global targets because targets must strike a judicious balance between ambition and realism. Tailoring is also essential for generating a sense of national ownership of the millennium development goals. A country might meet a target but miss the point due to inadequate ownership. At the same time, tailoring cannot become a euphemism for reneging on the political commitment to tackle human poverty in earnest.

Fourth, they formulate intermediate targets. Long-term goals will not guarantee immediate action because the deadline will not be on the watch of today's political leadership. They must be translated into targets to be achieved by the current

government. Therefore, they must be broken down into actionable propositions and specific reforms for the next 2-3 years; ranging from immunising children to iodising salt, training teachers and building schools, drilling boreholes and planting trees, treating Aids patients and distributing bed nets, enforcing laws against gender discrimination and child labour, abolishing user fees for basic social services, enlarging equitable taxation, restructuring budgetary spending in favour of the poor, and sequencing homegrown economic, financial and trade policies.

Fifth, they constantly monitor progress. Statistics not only document progress but also mobilise people and help design pro-poor policies based on hard evidence – not only on economic theory. Monitoring must use a few easy-to-grasp indicators. It cannot be confined to specialists and experts alone; it must inform political leaders, parliamentarians, journalists, NGO activists and the general public. Monitoring must go beyond averages and aggregates by unbundling progress for women and men; for rural and urban residents; for young and old; for poor and non-poor families; and for districts and provinces.

Sixth, they are championed by strong leadership. Political, religious and community leaders must drive the society towards the agreed target. Celebrities and public-private partnership – such as the Rotary Club against polio and the Carter Center against guinea worm – must constantly nag policymakers – both globally and locally – to stay focused on the target.

Finally, they emphasise that nothing speaks louder than financial commitments. Results do not come for free; targets do carry a price tag. While domestic resources will cover the bulk of the extra investment in human development, rich countries can make a difference by increasing and improving their assistance. But progress on aid, trade and debt relief has been deplorable. The trading regime as envisaged in the Doha development round remains elusive. Pledges to raise the quantity and quality of official development assistance have not been kept, albeit that the decline in foreign aid has been reversed in recent years. Advancement on debt relief has been more about hype than about HIPC – an initiative focused on the heavily indebted poor countries.

The seventh step is deliberately listed last. In practice, however, it often comes first. This sequence is ineffectual because

a partnership between the poor and the rich – be it local or global – that is focused on money will be inherently unequal, and therefore unstable and vulnerable. Experience shows that real change is ultimately an act of free will; it is seldom the result of compliance with conditionalities associated with foreign aid or domestic transfers. Change cannot be hurried for it is often the case that 'haste makes waste'.

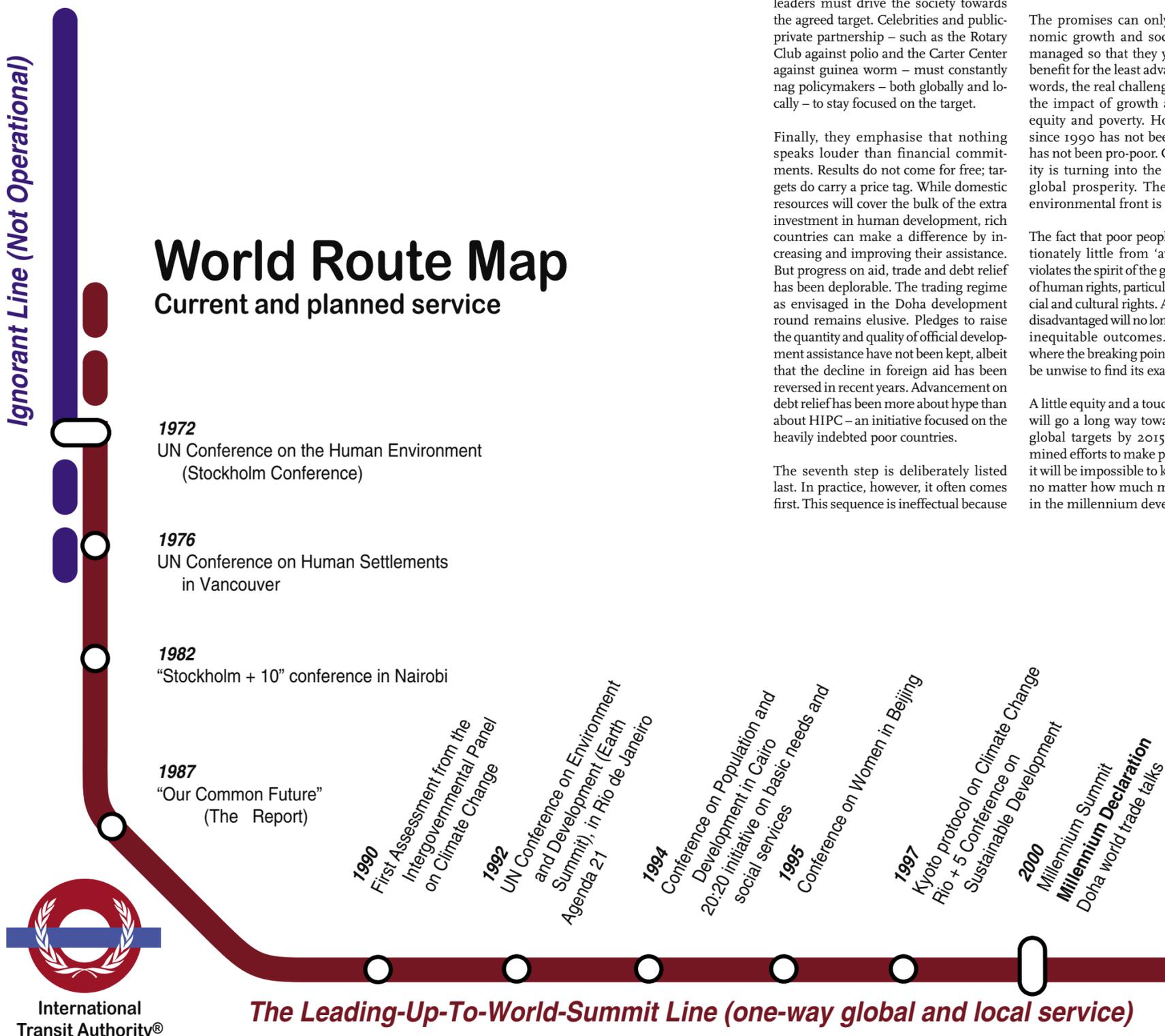
Achieving the global targets will require a radical overhaul of the partnership between poor and rich countries as well as between poor and rich people. Currently, the dimension of 'money changing hands' is dominant. Switching the partnership to the dimension of 'ideas changing minds' will demand that donors and domestic policymakers show an ability to listen and a readiness to unlearn and relearn.

As long as better-off people in developing and developed nations are unable or unwilling to change their theories, perceptions or preconceived notions, the global targets will remain elusive. Repeating standard recipes and defending entrenched views will only prolong the legacy of broken promises. Doing so with great confidence and subsequently complaining about poor implementation will do little to change the final outcome.

The promises can only be kept if economic growth and social progress are managed so that they yield the greatest benefit for the least advantaged. In other words, the real challenge is to maximise the impact of growth and progress on equity and poverty. However, progress since 1990 has not been sufficient and has not been pro-poor. Growing inequality is turning into the Achilles' heel of global prosperity. The picture on the environmental front is no exception.

The fact that poor people benefit proportionately little from 'average' progress violates the spirit of the gradual realisation of human rights, particularly economic, social and cultural rights. At some point, the disadvantaged will no longer accept grossly inequitable outcomes. Nobody knows where the breaking point lies and it would be unwise to find its exact location.

A little equity and a touch of imagination will go a long way towards meeting the global targets by 2015. Without determined efforts to make progress pro-poor, it will be impossible to keep the promise, no matter how much money is invested in the millennium development goals.





**One Planet, Many People: Atlas of Our Changing Environment**

The atlas provides a comprehensive, visual presentation of scientifically variable information, on changes in the global environment—both the good and the bad—acquired and assessed through state-of-the-art remote sensing technology. It is intended for environmental policy makers, non-governmental organizations, the private sector, academics, teachers and citizens. This colorful and approachable atlas contains photographs, satellite images, maps and narratives that provide insights into the many ways people around the world have changed, and continue to change, the environment. The main purpose of this hard-cover, 332-page, large-format atl

**Environment and the Millennium Development Goals: building common ground**

*“Our environment is many things, a classroom, a pharmacy, and a supermarket.”*  
Ruth Lilongula from the Solomon Islands

*“Environmental sustainability is the foundation on which strategies for achieving all the other MDGs must be built, because environmental degradation is causally linked to problems of poverty, hunger, gender inequality and health.”*  
UN Millennium Project, 2005.

The Poverty Environment Partnership (PEP) is a network of over 30 international development and environment agencies, which seeks to improve the coordination of work on poverty reduction and environmental management as part of international efforts to achieve the Millennium Development Goals. Current membership of the partnership includes the Asian Development Bank, the World Bank, the World Conservation Union, the International Institute for Environment and Development, the World Resources Institute, the World Wildlife Fund, the European Commission, a large number of donor governments, the Food and Agriculture Organisation, the World Health Organisation, UNDP and UNEP.

PEP members are convinced that the environment is central to achieving all the MDGs and not just MDG 7. They argue that investment in environmental management makes good economic sense for poverty reduction. In preparation for the 2005 World Summit PEP members decided to join forces, resolved to work together to offer compelling evidence and a robust set of strategic options to the 2005 World Summit and follow-up initiatives. This resulted in the PEP Environment for Achieving the MDGs Initiative. Through this initiative the PEP seeks to revitalise political interest in the environmental challenges central to achieving the MDGs.

The initiative targets three main outputs. Two analytical studies are being prepared that will consolidate and communicate the best analytical thinking on MDGs and the environment. One focuses on economic assessment and investment issues, demonstrating priority areas for improved investment towards MDG 7 and the environment components of the other MDGs. The other concentrates on MDG 7, Target 9, more specifically on indicators and assessment tools that offer effective ways of measuring progress towards environmental goals that also provide benefits for poor people.

A summary document will highlight the key messages of the two studies, making the case for investment in the environment. It will highlight the returns for poverty reduction from environmental management, for example related to water supply and sanitation. According to WHO research the costs of meeting the MDG target on water and sanitation amount to \$11bn per annum, whereas the benefits in terms of better health, lower death rates, and improved education and worker productivity are far greater, totalling about \$84bn per annum. Even higher returns can be obtained with more ambitious coverage, due to economies of scale.

Another example concerns energy for households that rely on biomass for cooking and heating. Wood and dung are the principal energy source for many poor people, mainly accessible because women and children spend long hours collecting fuel, then suffer ill-health due to indoor air pollution. Measures to improve the efficiency of biomass fuels or facilitate fuel-switching are consequently a priority. Substituting kerosene for the biomass energy used by 500 million people would cost about \$11bn per annum. Potential health benefits from the reduction of indoor air pollution alone may be sufficient to justify this investment. But there are additional benefits in time saved (collecting fuel) and environmental services (relieving pressure of fuel wood cutting from natural forests, and freeing farmers to apply animal dung to their fields, instead of burning it).

Apart from making the case for investments in environmental management this summary document will also provide the elements of a global response strategy to strengthen environmental contributions to the MDGs:

- Mobilising resources, in part through the aid system and private sector;
- Encouraging a bottom-up approach, principally through local and national institutions;
- Encouraging investment in the pro-poor productivity of environmental assets, and enabling better access by the poor to the benefits;
- Boosting capacity to integrate poverty-environment links in national development processes; and
- Broadening partnerships and coalitions, building on the growing poverty-environment “movement”.

The two analytical studies and the summary document constitute the first major output of the PEP initiative. The second one is a high profile event on 14 September 2005, the first day of the 2005 World Summit and also the day of the launch of this issue of the Poverty and Environment Times. This event will consist of a high-level policy debate in the afternoon and a dinner for Heads of State in the evening. The policy debate will feature Nobel prize winners, top policy makers, representatives of industry and practitioners. It will highlight the importance of the environment in achieving the MDGs. The subsequent dinner should signal growing political support for a scaled-up role for environment in achieving the MDGs, providing a high profile forum for major announcements by governments, PEP partners and coalition members.

Finally the initiative seeks to pursue and build on existing momentum, recognising that the action and involvement of all stakeholders are necessary at different levels. This joint action will help to ensure that MDG-based poverty reduction strategies take environmental dimensions into account.

For more information on the work of the Poverty and Environment Partnership see [www.undp.org/pei/aboutpep.html](http://www.undp.org/pei/aboutpep.html)

**Getting the targets and indicators right**

One of the most important innovations of the MDG approach is its ability to make governments more accountable for their performance in improving human well-being. By stating goals and measuring progress in clear, straightforward language, the MDGs make it easy for civil society groups to evaluate progress toward human development goals and to issue a public “report card” on a government’s success or failure. Unfortunately the lack of clear, comprehensive targets and indicators for measuring the capacity of ecosystems to provide sustainable environmental income for the poor means that the “accountability effect” of the MDG approach is not yet applicable to the world’s environmental goals. Until the environmental framework of the MDGs is fixed, short-run progress towards the other goals is at risk of being unsustainable. Realigning the MDG framework to correct its environmental shortcomings begins with an acceptance of ecosystems as the key to environmental income, the

most direct way that nature affects the poor. This realignment should be guided by the recent findings of the Millennium Ecosystem Assessment, a four-year study conducted by more than 1,300 scientists from 95 countries to ascertain the consequences of ecosystem change for human well-being. The scientists determined that in all regions, and particularly in sub-Saharan Africa, the condition and management of ecosystems is a “dominant factor” affecting the chances of success in fighting poverty. They concluded that the degradation of ecosystems is already a “significant barrier” to achieving the MDGs. In fact, many of the regions facing the biggest hurdles in reaching the MDGs coincide with those experiencing significant ecosystem degradation.

From World Resources 2005: The Wealth of the Poor – Managing Ecosystems to Fight Poverty. Washington, DC: WRI. World Resources Institute (WRI) in collaboration with UNDP, UNEP, and the World Bank, 2005.

**Table 4: Suggested rewording of MDG 7, Target 9**

| Targets   | Indicators   |
|---|--|
| <b>Target 9</b> (original wording). Integrate the principles of sustainable development into country policies and programmes and reverse the loss of environmental resources  | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Proportion of land area covered by forests</li> <li>• Ratio of area protected to maintain biological diversity to surface area</li> <li>• Energy use per \$1 GDP</li> <li>• Carbon dioxide emissions (per capita) and consumption of ozone-depleting chlorofluorocarbons</li> <li>• Proportion of population using solid fuels</li> </ul>                           |
| <b>Target 9a</b> (reworded). Maintain or restore the capacity of ecosystems to provide critical ecosystem services, and integrate the principles of sustainable development into local, national, and international policies and programmes | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Extent and condition of communal fisheries (coastal and inland)</li> <li>• Extent and condition of forested areas held in common</li> <li>• Watershed conditions on communally held lands (e.g. vegetative cover; water availability; groundwater trends)</li> <li>• Soil fertility on private farmlands</li> <li>• Land degradation</li> </ul>                     |
| <b>Target 9b</b> (new). Ensure the poor access to environmental resources and decision-making   | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Proportion of rural households with access to secure tenure</li> <li>• Proportion of rural households with access to environmental information (e.g. extension services; pollution or environmental health alerts; environmental impact studies on proposed concessions or developments)</li> <li>• Participation in local environmental decision-making</li> </ul> |

