



[MDGs Yardstick Too Generic, Critics Say](#)

by Abra Pollock

WASHINGTON, Feb 7 (IPS) - Benchmarks used by the Millennium Development Goals (MDGs) are misrepresentative of the progress made by African countries and contribute to an international stereotype of "African failure", according to a study presented this week at the Brookings Institution, a public policy think tank.

"You've got this MDG machine that turns African good news into African bad news," said the study's author, William Easterly, a New York University economist and visiting fellow at the Brookings Institution's Programme on Global Economy & Development. "Africa has enough problems without international organisations and campaigners downplaying African progress when it happens."

A key point raised by the study is the fact that the United Nations originally established the MDGs as a set of benchmarks to measure global progress -- not the progress of countries or regions, Easterly said. This skews the results of individual countries' development achievements when their progress is measured up against global indicators.

In agreement with these findings is Jan Vandemoortele, a U.N. officer who co-chaired the inter-agency group that compiled the MDGs in 2001.

"[A]ssessing whether progress is 'on track' for meeting the 2015 targets can only be done at the global level," Vandemoortele wrote in a 2007 essay for the U.N. World Institute of Development Economic Research. "It cannot be done for any specific region or particular country because the quantitative targets were set in line with global trends, not on the basis of historical trends for any particular regional or specific country."

Yet this is precisely how the MDGs have been applied in recent years, said Easterly, who presented his results here Wednesday at a research seminar.

Indeed, U.N. annual reports on progress on the MDGs are offered by region and by country. According to the 2007 U.N. report on Africa and the Millennium Development Goals, "At the midway point between their adoption in 2000 and the 2015 target date for achieving the Millennium Development Goals, sub-Saharan Africa is not on track to achieve any of the Goals."

This conclusion does not account for the lack of a "level playing field" among disparate countries, Easterly said, insofar as the MDG benchmarks pose a disproportionately higher challenge for poorer nations than for those nations that start with higher development baselines.

According to the study, one example of this lies in the fourth MDG, which focuses on reducing child mortality by two-thirds. This benchmark can pose a daunting challenge to a country that has a baseline rate of 150 deaths per 1,000, as compared with a richer country whose initial rate may lie at 24 deaths per 1,000. The former is faced with the task of reducing its rate by 100 deaths, while the latter needs only to reduce its rate by 16 in order to meet the same two-thirds benchmark.

In addition, the first MDG -- which aims to reduce extreme poverty by 50 percent -- can likewise be much more easily achieved in a country that has a lower percentage of poverty to begin with.

Two countries with the same gross domestic product (GDP) growth rate over the same period of time could end up with significantly different percentage reductions in poverty, depending on the original percentage of their populations in poverty, the study said.

Africa's GDP grew at the "eminently respectable" rate of 5.4 percent in 2006, according to the study -- a rate which, were it to be sustained over a 10-year period, would place Africa in the top fifth of all 10-year GDP growth rates in all countries during the period from 1965 to 2005.

Yet world leaders have criticised African countries for falling "far short of the seven percent annual growth that needs to be sustained to make substantial inroads into poverty," as reported by the Africa Progress Panel, a group chaired by Kofi Annan and organised by Tony Blair following the 2005 G8 Summit on Africa.

A growth rate of seven percent, called for by the panel, would place African countries among the top tenth of all 10-year GDP growth rates recorded worldwide since 1965, the study said.

"You're asking Africa to do something that is almost historically unprecedented," Easterly said. "This is a good way to take success and call it failure."

What is needed instead is "a descriptive model of positive change" in Africa, said Michael Clemens, a research fellow at the Centre for Global Development, which co-sponsored Wednesday's research seminar.

Current examples of positive change in African development include not only the region's impressive GDP growth rate in 2006, but also huge improvements in child health over the past 30 to 40 years, according to Charles Kenny, a senior economist at the World Bank.

In the case of the second MDG -- which calls for universal primary and secondary school enrollment by 2015 -- Africa's strides in primary enrollment would be better represented by a percentage enrollment increase, instead of an "absolute" goal, Easterly said. When adjusted to demonstrate percentage change over time, Africa's enrollment rate is rapidly converging with that of other developing countries.

These hidden indicators of progress could be better drawn out if each country or region were able to set its own, customised development goals instead of measuring itself against what were intended to be globally aggregated benchmarks, Vandemoortele pointed out.

Cambodia, for instance, has its own "CDGs" (Cambodia Development Goals), which are a more modest adjustment of the MDGs based on Cambodia's particular circumstances, while Vietnam's VDGs set the bar even higher.

"No stigma should be attached with setting national targets that are less ambitious than the MDGs," Vandemoortele stated.

Still, some experts question whether the current MDGs should be disparaged for using benchmarks that accentuate Africa's weak points, since it is this very type of attention that attracts the most funding for aid.

According to Danny Leipziger, vice president of Poverty Reduction and Economic Management at the World Bank, "The complication is that the MDGs, for better or for worse, have really enabled some aid groups to increase their development packages."

MDGs benchmarks that point to a gloomy forecast for African countries could motivate these aid groups to fund more projects in the region, he said.

Regardless of the outcome, experts such as Easterly worry that the current benchmarks

perpetuate a negative image of Africa's development. Measuring the region's progress using these indicators "could have real consequences" in terms of demoralising African leaders and activists and discouraging private investment, he said.

This unintended consequence could do more harm than good -- which is why Easterly is calling for the international community to take a second look at how the MDGs are measured, and to consider factors such as the uneven playing field and customised development goals according to country or region.

A key next step would be to acknowledge that the benchmarks currently in place misrepresent the situation, Easterly said.

"When you're in a hole, the most important thing to do is stop digging," he said.