

A decorative graphic consisting of a grid of grey dots of varying sizes, with several dots highlighted in red. The dots are arranged in a pattern that roughly outlines the shape of a world map.

Lagging Behind

Lessons from the Least Developed Countries for a Development Agenda Post-2015

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- The Least Developed Countries (LDCs) are unlikely to meet most of the Millennium Development Goals (MDGs), despite progress with regard to some of the goals in different LDCs.
- Progress remains slow and uneven across the LDCs. Rwanda is in the top position, followed by Bangladesh and Cambodia. At the bottom of the list are three African countries: Somalia, Equatorial Guinea, and Sudan. Four countries are unlikely to meet any of the targets: Mozambique, Sierra Leone, Somalia, and South Sudan.
- Not all LDCs have accelerated progress towards attainment of the MDGs in the post-2000 period. This re-emphasises the fact that some LDCs' success with the MDGs is largely due to the head start they had — i. e., policy initiatives undertaken before 2000 — and not efforts after the adoption of the MDGs in 2000.
- It is becoming increasingly obvious that the post-2015 international development framework and its goals will be »universal« in nature. It remains to be seen how, in an uneven world, a universal framework can accommodate the specific concerns and interests of countries with special needs — including the LDCs. As we move towards 2015, we must consider the actual state of delivery of MDGs in the LDCs, and address the abovementioned issues in order to realise the international political commitment to »leave no one behind«.

In 2000 the General Assembly of the United Nations introduced eight development targets known as the Millennium Development Goals (MDGs). As the terminal year (2015) of the MDGs draws near, the state of actual delivery on these development targets has become a matter of renewed and intense debate. The national governments, as well as the international development community, are preoccupied with generating the »final push« towards accelerated implementation of the MDGs. At the same time, an explicit understanding seems to have emerged that the MDGs will continue beyond 2015. This particular aspect has created enhanced demand on the lessons to be learnt from the MDG implementation experience.

In this context, the state of attainment of MDGs in the 49 poorest or least developed countries (LDCs) remains a matter of special developmental concern. Apart from this, scrutiny of the implementation status of the MDGs in the LDCs is supposed to provide important insights regarding the articulation of the successor goals and targets of the MDGs. Curiously, there are hardly any exclusive studies available on LDCs regarding the delivery of MDGs. This policy brief attempts to provide a detailed, analytical look at the MDG progress in the LDCs.

Progress of LDCs Towards Attaining The MDGs

LDCs are among the countries that recorded the slowest progress towards achieving the MDGs. One reason for this could be that the MDGs are inherently biased against countries that started at low levels. However, it is also partly because all of the internationally agreed support measures have not been implemented. The 2011 report by the MDG Gap Task Force clearly states that intensified efforts in bridging the gaps between expectations and delivery are needed to ensure that these countries are able to achieve the targets set by the MDGs. The new global partnership for development must prioritise the LDCs in order to support them in leaving their poverty traps. Moreover, there should be focus on building resilience for long-term sustainable development.

Progress of LDCs as a Group

MDG implementation have been especially uneven in the LDCs, and they are unlikely to meet any of the 14 MDG

indicators¹ examined in this study (Table 1).² For three indicators — namely, employment-to-population ratio (1.5), HIV prevalence among the population aged 15–24 years (6.1), and land area covered by forest (7.1) — the group is »off track«, meaning that the situation in these cases has deteriorated since 1990. Incidentally, in the cases of HIV prevalence and forestation, determination has been observed across the three regional groups, whereas the off track progress in the employment-to-population ratio for the Asian LDCs has pulled down the group average. On a welcome note, for most of the other indicators (11 out of 14), LDCs as a group have made positive movement, even if the targets were not fully achieved.

The projection based on linear progress suggests that among 13 indicators,³ the achievements could be more than 95 per cent of the target in six cases: maternal mortality ratio; HIV prevalence among population aged 15–24 years⁴; under-five mortality rate; infant mortality rate; net enrolment ratio in primary education; and ratio of girls to boys in primary education. This implies that with an enhanced effort, LDCs may achieve these targets by 2015.

Progress in the Asian LDCs

The Asian LDCs are likely to meet two indicators: proportion of population below USD 1.25 (PPP) per day, and under-five mortality rate. For six other indicators, the progress could be very close to the target — i.e., more than 95 per cent of the target. These are: maternal mortality ratio; proportion of population using an improved drinking water source; HIV prevalence among population aged 15–24 years; infant mortality rate; maternal mortality ratio; ratio of girls to boy in primary education; and proportion of population below

1. United Nations. (2013). *United Nations Millennium Development Goals Indicators*. Retrieved August 13, 2013, available at: <http://mdgs.un.org/unsd/mdg/data.aspx>.

2. For the extended version of the study, see Bhattacharya, D./Khan, T.I./Salma, U./Uddin, G.J. (2013): *Attaining the MDGs: How Successful are the LDCs?* available at: <http://cpd.org.bd/wp-content/uploads/2013/09/Attaining-the-MDGs-in-LDCs.pdf>.

3. Indicator relating to forestation has been dropped from the projection as there is no corresponding empirical target.

4. It should be noted that the target with regard to HIV prevalence was holding it to the 1990 level. Although it is close to the 1990 level, the higher prevalence means that LDC as group is off track considering this indicator.

Table 1: Summary of Progress Regarding Selected MDG Indicators in the LDCs (by Region Group)

MDG Targets No.	Indicators	African LDCs	Asian LDCs	Island LDCs	All LDCs as a group
1.1	Proportion of population below USD 1.25 (PPP) per day	Slow Progress	On track	Slow Progress	Slow Progress
1.5	Employment-to-population ratio	Slow Progress	Off track	Slow Progress	Off track
1.9	Proportion of population below minimum level of dietary energy consumption	Slow Progress	Slow Progress	Off track	Slow Progress
2.1	Net enrolment ratio in primary education	Slow Progress	Slow Progress	Slow Progress	Slow Progress
2.3	Literacy rates of 15–24 year-olds, women and men	Slow Progress	Slow Progress	Slow Progress	Slow Progress
3.1	Ratio of girls to boys in primary, secondary and tertiary education	Slow Progress	Slow Progress	Slow Progress	Slow Progress
4.1	Under-five mortality rate	Slow Progress	On track	On track	Slow Progress
4.2	Infant mortality rate	Slow Progress	Slow Progress	Slow Progress	Slow Progress
4.3	Proportion of one-year-old children immunised against measles	Slow Progress	Slow Progress	Off track	Slow Progress
5.1	Maternal mortality ratio (per 100,000 live births)	Slow Progress	Slow Progress	Slow Progress	Slow Progress
6.1	HIV prevalence among population aged 15–24 years	Off track	Off track	Off track	Off track
7.1	Proportion of land area covered by forest	Off track	Off track	Off track	Off track
7.8	Proportion of population using an improved drinking water source	Slow Progress	Slow Progress	On track	Slow Progress
7.9	Proportion of population using an improved sanitation facility	Slow Progress	Slow Progress	Slow Progress	Slow Progress

Source: Authors' calculation based on United Nations (2013)

minimum level of dietary energy consumption. Attainment of these targets by the Asian LDCs may not be out of reach. As mentioned earlier, the Asian LDCs are off track in two particular areas — employment-to-population ratio, and proportion of land area covered by forest.

Progress in the African LDCs

The African LDCs are likely to miss all the targets among the 14 indicators studied in this paper. The group is, however, very close to attaining six targets: maternal mortality ratio; HIV prevalence among population aged 15–24 years; infant mortality rate; net

enrolment ratio in primary education; ratio of girls to boys in primary education; and under-five mortality rate.

Progress in the Island LDCs

Island LDCs are likely to meet only two targets. These are: proportion of population using an improved drinking water source, and under-five mortality rate. In five other indicators, the progress is closer to the target: maternal mortality ratio; HIV prevalence among population aged 15–24 years; infant mortality rate; proportion of population below USD 1.25 (PPP) per day; literacy rates of 15–24 years old; and ratio of girls to boy in primary



Table 2: Country Performance Based on MDG Progress Index (MPI)

MPI (Best and Low Performing Countries)		
LDCs	Index Score	Rank
Rwanda	0.5000	1
Bangladesh & Cambodia	0.4286	2
Bhutan	0.3846	4
Lao People’s Democratic Republic & Nepal	0.2857	5
...		
Lesotho & Chad	-0.2857	45
Sudan	-0.3333	47
Equatorial Guinea	-0.4167	48
Somalia	-0.5556	49

Source: Authors’ calculation based on United Nations (2013)

education. The group is off track in the case of proportion of population below minimum level of dietary energy consumption.

Country Rankings Based on MDG Progress

Looking at the available data on progress towards achieving the MDGs, Rwanda is at the top of the country rankings (Table 2). Indeed, Rwanda is likely to meet eight out of the 14 targets under review, and has made progress in five other areas. However, in one area — employment-to-population ratio — the country is off track, implying that situations have deteriorated since 1990. Following Rwanda, two Asian LDCs — Bangladesh and Cambodia — are both in second position. Both of these countries are likely to attain eight out of the reviewed 14 targets, while in four other areas, they are progressing but the targets are not within reach. Bangladesh is off track in two indicators: employment-to-population ratio, and proportion of land area covered by forest. Similarly, Cambodia is off track in the areas concerning HIV prevalence and forestation. Among other Asian LDCs, Bhutan has secured fourth position, while Lao People’s Democratic Republic and Nepal share the fifth position.

The five countries at the bottom of the list belong to the African group. In Somalia, out of nine indicators for which data are available, five show that the country is off track; while in the other four, the country has made

progress but is unlikely to meet the targets. Equatorial Guinea is in the second position from the bottom, despite having per capita GDP of a middle-income country (USD 10,013). Although the country is likely to graduate soon from the LDC status, it is off track in six areas and may attain only one MDG target — maternal mortality ratio. Sudan is also off track in three areas and made some progress in the other six. Data for Chad is available for 13 indicators, out of which the country may achieve only one MDG target — maternal mortality ratio. It should be noted that both Somalia and Chad are countries in conflict. On the other hand, Lesotho is off track in six areas, despite being on track in proportion of population below USD 1.25 (PPP) per day.

At the country level, 46 out of 49 LDCs will achieve at least one target among the 14 indicators studied here. The four countries that are unlikely to meet any of the targets are Mozambique, Sierra Leone, Somalia, and South Sudan. This does not mean, however, that these countries did not make any progress towards the 14 indicators.

Progress Across Indicators

If the number of successful countries is considered in terms of attainment of a target, then proportion of population using an improved drinking water source tops the list, with 20 out of 49 LDCs (42 per cent) likely to attain this target. Poverty and gender parity in primary

Table 3: Country Performance Based on Unbiased Rate of Progress Method (URPM) Index

URPM Index (Best and Low Performing Countries)		
LDCs	Index Score	Rank
Niger	0.75	1
Sierra Leone	0.73	2
Angola	0.70	3
Ethiopia	0.69	4
Nepal	0.67	5
...		
Liberia	18.18	44
Kiribati	14.29	45
Solomon Islands	12.50	46
Samoa	10.00	47
Lesotho	9.09	48

Source: Authors' calculation based on United Nations (2013)

education come second and third respectively. Regarding proportion of population below poverty line, 16 LDCs out of 40⁵ (40 per cent) are on track. However, since 10 LDCs (25 per cent) are off track, the indicator remains in the middle in the ranking order. It is not surprising that targets with regard to employment-to-population ratio, HIV prevalence, and forest area were most often off track.

Acceleration Towards MDGs Attainment

The progress towards attaining MDG targets does not necessarily imply that these countries have accelerated this progress since the launching of the MDGs in 2000. Most notable acceleration (where more than half of the countries accelerated) can be observed in five indicators: HIV prevalence among population aged 15–24 years; maternal mortality ratio; proportion of population below USD 1.25 (PPP) per day; proportion of land area covered by forest; and use of safe drinking water. These findings do not always correspond with the earlier findings regarding progress towards attainment of MDG targets; this has largely to do with the benchmark situation (1990) and its development up until 2000.

5. Only 40 out of the 49 LDCs were part of the sample for this particular indicator.

Regarding acceleration of progress towards attainment of MDGs, African LDC Niger tops the list at the country level, followed by Sierra Leone, Angola, Ethiopia, and Nepal (Table 3). On the other hand, among the weakest performers, Lesotho is at the bottom, followed by Samoa, Solomon Islands, Kiribati, and Liberia. This implies that many of the LDCs may reach their MDG targets because they had a head start supported by their achievements in the 1990s — i. e., before the MDGs were adopted.

Lessons For Post-2015

The present study has attempted to ascertain how successful the LDCs have been so far in achieving the MDGs, by taking a closer look at each of the three geographically different LDC groups. The paper has also sought to project the degree of success that the LDCs may achieve in realising the MDGs by 2015. In this context, the following conclusions may be highlighted. First, the LDCs as a group may not achieve any of the 14 targets covered in this paper. Second, although the LDCs as a group may not attain any of the targets, they have generally made some progress in most indicators. Third, progress in achieving MDGs by 2015 have remained uneven across countries and across indicators. Fourth, with a »final push«, some countries may attain more targets by 2015. Thanks to their head starts before MDGs

were adopted in 2000, a number of countries may attain a greater portion of targets. Fifth, the countries that have managed to accelerate their progress in certain indicators may perform better compared to the countries that had neither a head start nor managed to accelerate their progress.

In view of the above findings, a number of issues that have implications for the ongoing discourse on the post-2015 international development framework should be noted.

Productive Capacity and Gainful Employment

One of the critical fault lines of the MDGs relates to the lack of indicators concerning productive capacity development and gainful employment generation. Indeed, our analysis reveals that the delivery of the indicator in the form of employment-to-population ratio remains off track in the LDCs. Moreover, sustainability of the relative progress attained in social sectors, including education and health, has to be underwritten by a steady flow of income backed by the creation of new and decent jobs. Thus, the post-2015 international development framework has to put due emphasis on goals and targets concerning employment and income.

Quality of Outcome

While it is true that many LDCs have made significant progress in attaining human development related indicators of the MDGs, many of these targets concern inputs, rather than access and outcome. For example, a higher enrolment rate in schools does not guarantee quality education for the students. Accordingly, outcome-related indicators have to be given due importance in the post-MDGs framework.

Multidimensional Inequality

The issue of inequality has figured quite prominently in the recent debates on post-MDGs. It is widely acknowledged that progress of a country on the MDG trajectory may not be coupled with reduction of inequality, deprivations, and discrimination. Moreover, are we talking about inequality of opportunities or inequality of out-

comes? Thus, part of the problem of articulating an inequality-related indicator concerns capturing the multidimensionality of the concept. Further, as we embark upon a universal international development framework, should we not also think about intra-country inequality along with inter-country inequality?

Resources for Post-MDGs


The discussions on resource requirements for a set of ambitious post-MDG targets have brought clarity on two aspects. *First*, development finance in the future has to extend beyond official development assistance (ODA), and should include domestic resource mobilisation, remittances, foreign direct investment (FDI), innovative finance, and South-South cooperation. *Second*, this is not to say concessional finance flow is not important. Global commitments made regarding disbursement of ODA will have to be met. One may recall that the flow of ODA to the LDCs has fallen in real terms in 2012.

Countries with Special Needs

It is now becoming increasingly obvious that the post-2015 international development framework will be »universal« in nature. Thus, it remains to be seen how, in an uneven world, a universal framework will accommodate the specific concerns and interests of the countries with special needs — including the LDCs. One wonders to what extent specific targets for the LDCs with concomitant promise of global support will feature in the post-2015 framework.

Reforming Global Rules

A truly international development framework cannot but concern itself with the global governance and rules that inhibit realisation of the core priorities of the post-MDGs. Access to productive technologies or life-saving drugs is often impeded by the prevailing global regime of intellectual property rights. Concurrently, stalled Doha negotiations of the World Trade Organization (WTO) are impeding fuller market access for the LDCs. The recent global economic crisis has once again alerted us to the need for better international financial architecture. As the illicit outflow of financial resources



from the LDCs grows, one expects an early launch of a modern international taxation regime that will do away with tax havens. The question is to what extent the post-2015 will be able to take these issues on board to create a more just world. Efficiency gains from the reforms of the global rules may provide additional support towards underwriting post-MDGs.

Implementation Challenges

Our analysis of the experience of MDG implementation in the LDCs and the ongoing discussion on the post-2015 framework have brought to the fore the delivery challenges of the global goals and targets in the national and regional context. At issue here is not just the need for better coordination and coherence among the international actors, but also the capacity of the national institutions to implement the agreed priorities, principles, and targets. It is also about mainstreaming at the right pace and sequencing the global goals and targets in national plans and programmes; as well as integrating the non-state actors, particularly the private sector in the implementation process. All of these issues have greater significance in the case of the LDCs, where »performance deficit« is often predicated by their »capacity shortfall«. A »data revolution« is also critical for being able to monitor progress at the disaggregate level in real time.

As we move towards 2015, we will have to pay close attention to the actual state of delivery of MDGs in the LDCs, and address the abovementioned issues — among others — to realise the international political commitment regarding »Leave No One Behind«⁶ where success will be defined by the lowest denominator's level of achievement.

6. Amina J. Mohammed, UN Special Adviser on Post-2015 Development Planning: *Leaving No One Behind: Towards a Post-2015 Development Agenda*, available at: <http://post2015.iisd.org/guest-articles/leaving-no-one-behind-towards-a-post-2015-development-agenda/>.



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Extended Version of the Study

You can find the extended version of the Study and further information on the project at:
<http://www.fes-sustainability.org/en/fokus-post-2015/mdgs-least-developed-countries>

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