

Executive Summary

Learning from national policies supporting MDG implementation

Introduction

The launching of the Millennium Development Goals (MDGs) at the dawn of this century ushered in one of the most important initiatives undertaken by the United Nations. The implementation of this initiative formally expired in 2015 and the world is now set to embrace the 2030 Agenda for Sustainable Development. This Agenda succeeds the MDGs, includes the unfinished business of those Goals, and puts forth a set of sustainable development goals (SDGs). It is therefore incumbent upon the United Nations to draw policy lessons learned during the period of MDG implementation in order to support SDG implementation at the country level. This *Survey* aims to contribute to this endeavour.

The legacy of the past fifteen years

Concerted efforts at the international, national and subnational levels brought about significant progress towards achieving the MDGs between 2000 and 2015. Globally, the goals for poverty reduction and improved drinking water were reached five years ahead of schedule. Major progress was made with respect to primary education and the fight against AIDS, malaria and tuberculosis. However, some targets were not met, particularly those for reducing hunger, child and maternal mortality, improving gender equality, and environmental sustainability. Large gaps also remain in the delivery of global partnership commitments, particularly with regard to official development assistance (ODA). In addition, progress has been uneven across countries, among different population groups, and in particular regions within countries. Completing the targets set in the MDG agenda will be among the challenges of the 2030 Agenda for Sustainable Development.

Notwithstanding the remaining challenges, the world has climbed higher on the development ladder over the past fifteen years. At the same time, the global development agenda crystallized in the MDGs has been important for development thinking and practice, especially as evidenced in the following:

- The formulation of the MDGs shifted the emphasis from economic growth to a broader development agenda prioritizing issues related to poverty reduction, education, health and gender;
- The MDGs became a framework for development cooperation and a point of reference for the programmatic activities of multilateral institutions and regional development banks;

- The MDGs energized the intergovernmental process for development. The creation of a global partnership for development in MDG 8 was intended to create an enabling international environment of cooperation towards the achievement of MDG goals and targets;
- The MDGs became a point of reference to guide national policies towards priority development issues. The targets were formulated as global targets to be achieved through the combined effect of progress in all countries, but many countries adapted their goals, benchmarks, indicators and targets on the basis of specific national conditions;
- At the country level, the MDGs energized not only national Governments and organizations associated with them, but many non-State and non-governmental actors as well. These goals became a widely shared, multi-stakeholder effort;
- The MDGs became a powerful tool for advocacy and political mobilization around issues that are essential to people;
- The MDG monitoring framework helped to improve statistical capacity and data availability, prompted public support and funding for development, and informed development policy decision-making.

Given this legacy, countries are in a good position to build on the foundation laid by the MDGs as they adapt the new set of internationally agreed development goals contained in the 2030 Agenda for Sustainable Development. Learning from the implementation of policies to reach the MDGs will help to improve the integration of the SDGs in national development planning and financing frameworks.

Implementation of the SDGs will also require coherence and effectiveness of policies. This effort, in turn, will have to be rooted in good governance, community involvement and decentralization, periodic assessments, and adequate use of statistical capacity and available data.

Policy integration, coherence and effectiveness at the forefront

This *Survey* reviews economic, social, and environmental policies that contributed to the progress made towards achievement of the MDGs, as well as aspects of national governance and institutions that have been critical for policy implementation at the country level. In many instances, these policies resulted from long-term processes that predate the MDGs. At the same time, these policies confirmed countries' long-term commitments to poverty reduction and human development. It is difficult to know exactly whether the MDGs were the main motivators of many of these policies; ultimately, what matters most is whether or not these policies contributed to the progress made towards achievement of the MDGs. The success of these policies was defined by their effectiveness and the level of integration and coherence with other policies. The analyses of different types of policies under review support the following overarching lessons and policy recommendations:

First, a coherent and comprehensive policy framework that integrates economic, social and environmental interventions is critical to minimize trade-offs. Outcomes and spillover effects have generally resulted from pursuing policies in each of those three realms as discreet sectoral interventions, rather than as part of a coherent and comprehensive economic, social and environmental policy framework. In many instances, then, there have

been unfavourable trade-offs and unintended effects. Going forward, it will be critical to identify positive synergies and trade-offs and pay more attention to policy consistency to facilitate the simultaneous meeting of multiple development objectives.

Second, although economic, social and environmental policies will be grounded in a universal development agenda after 2015, the experience of the past fifteen years corroborates that no single policy approach is applicable in all circumstances. Policies will have to be appropriately situated within the broader development policy framework of each country and tailored to overcome specific constraints and enhance positive synergies in each country's and community's systems.

Third, in a similar vein, careful consideration of starting conditions and constraints will be important in determining what interventions and strategies can produce the best possible outcomes. In some contexts, the best known policies available are no longer effective because they have already run their course, or because the causes leading to such obstacles have changed and the policies no longer apply. Health care is a particular area where previously overlooked causes of disease and death become visible as a consequence of successful policies. When best practices are no longer producing sound improvements in outcomes, new practices and solutions become necessary. In some instances, it may just be a matter of ensuring that existing development-enabling laws are adequately reinforced and interventions are made effective.

Fourth, the potential for policies, especially in the social realm, to be fully exploited and effective will depend on whether they reach and are properly tailored to the poorest, underserved, and most vulnerable populations. This includes those groups that have been traditionally missed such as newborns, indigenous people, people with disabilities or those living with HIV/AIDS. Integrating communities into policy planning, organizing and implementation can improve effectiveness going forward.

Fifth, improving the quantity and quality of human resources for the provision of social service delivery will be critical for the achievement of the SDGs. There is a need for continued and expanded efforts to retain effective civil servants, including through competitive salaries and proper structuring of incentives and career development opportunities. However, this will not be enough. Stepping up investments in traditional (quality) education will be one of the most important interventions to bridge the relevant human resource gaps, especially in sectors such as health. Because these investments will take time to bear fruit, they will need to be complemented with more immediate training efforts, especially to increase the supply of public civil servants without compromising the quality of service.

Sixth, it will be important that countries undertake effective monitoring and evaluation of programmes and their outcomes to ensure policy coherence, effectiveness, and adequate outreach to targeted populations. Community involvement and decentralization should feature prominently in monitoring and evaluation efforts. Monitoring effectiveness will require periodic assessments to ensure that programmes are producing the intended results; such assessments should be facilitated by the statistical capacity and data availability inherited from the MDG monitoring framework and rooted in good governance and institutions.

Adaptation to changing economic conditions

This *Survey* also shows that economic policies and their capacity to adapt to changing conditions before, during and after the global economic crisis that erupted in 2008 greatly affected the likelihood of achieving the MDGs.

During times of economic prosperity, as in the period before the crisis, it is important to expand investment, both economic and development-related, and build robust countercyclical instruments to smooth shocks and deal with downturns. Fiscal rules and medium-term expenditure frameworks that are implemented under the proper governance structures are important to reduce the procyclicality of government spending. Properly executed expenditure frameworks contribute to improving policy coherence and limiting macroeconomic trade-offs, and macroprudential tools limit exposure to external volatility. In addition, social safety nets and other programmes that operate countercyclically should be established during times of robust growth so that they can act as automatic stabilizers in times of crisis. Later on, the combination of these policies allowed many countries to enact countercyclical fiscal policies to weather the global financial crisis. Thus, while policy space was more constrained during the crisis, the effect on the population and on the achievement of the MDGs was not as drastic as it could have been. Adapting policies to changing economic conditions will thus be a necessary condition for implementation of the new development agenda.

More broadly, the initial economic conditions for implementation of the 2030 Agenda for Sustainable Development are less encouraging if compared with those of the early 2000s when the MDGs were adopted. At the same time that policy space is more constrained, many developing countries did not make the most of the economic bonanza of the period 2000-2008; instead, many countries built important spending gaps for achieving the MDGs that are visible today. Against this backdrop, addressing the unfinished business of the MDGs going forward and further implementing the more challenging sustainable development agenda will necessitate robust and stable economic growth to boost private and public spending in key social sectors (which also makes this growth more inclusive). Policy coherence will be needed to allocate the resources in the most efficient way possible under a more constrained economic environment.

The experience between 2000 and 2015 points to the general need to take advantage of periods of robust growth, pursue adequate policies for macroeconomic stability, increase social investments, improve the fundamental bases for weathering economic shocks, introduce the appropriate policies to reduce procyclicality in general, and devise and carefully assess alternative financing strategies in order to bridge public spending gaps without jeopardizing growth, macroeconomic stability and long-term development.

Enabling the transition towards universal social protection

Economic and social policies are, in most respects, indivisible aspects of broader development policy. This *Survey* provides examples of both—social policies that are essential to achieving economic growth, and economic policies that bring about opportunities for social progress. Importantly, the MDGs provided a framework for scaling up social spending and implementing national policies to strengthen long-term development efforts. The experience of the 2000-2015 period is rich with regard to social policy efforts, including

their successes and failures as well as their potential to continue producing improved development outcomes.

The review of social policies begins with social protection, which features prominently in the 2030 Agenda for Sustainable Development. The SDGs foresee the implementation of nationally appropriate social protection systems for all, including social protection floors, and substantial coverage of the poor and the vulnerable. Social protection policies are also seen as an essential conduit for eliminating gender inequalities and improving equality in general. They are also expected to result in spillover effects for other goals. The expectation is that countries will transition towards universal social protection (USP) systems.

However, this transition will be a challenging endeavour for many developing countries, especially those where social protection systems have not yet been developed on the basis of a solid contributory system. A key conclusion is that the transition to USP systems will take time to unfold in many countries, especially in the least developed countries. The implication is that non-contributory social protection programmes can play a critical role in the transition.

Non-contributory social protection comprises assistance programmes that form the most important component of social protection in most developing countries. Many of these programmes have played a critical role in reducing extreme poverty, enabling progress in other MDG areas, and helping to mitigate the impact of crises on the MDGs. These programmes have typically been prioritized in countries where the state of the labour market and the overall economic and social situation does not provide enough opportunity. Therefore, the programmes are not necessarily designed to promote incorporation of beneficiaries into the labour market or the economy at large. Hence, for non-contributory social protection to be an enabler in the transition towards USP systems, effective implementation will have to take into account some of the following issues:

- The design of social protection programmes should be tailored to specific development and institutional conditions of individual nations. Conditional cash transfer programmes, for example, are effective in countries where proper monitoring and evaluation mechanisms are developed;
- Consolidation of small programmes into a single consolidated programme can reduce duplication and improve efficiency. This may include a unique registry system as well as biometric information to keep track of beneficiaries in order to improve coordination and consistency during implementation;
- Focusing on the family as opposed to the individual can help to address multiple dimensions of poverty and vulnerability, provided that a fair intra-household allocation of resources and consumption can be ensured;
- Supplementary supply-side interventions are also necessary to improve effectiveness. For example, conditional cash transfer programmes can boost enrolment in education and the demand for health services, but simultaneous efforts to increase education and health-care personnel are needed to avoid unintended consequences with regard to the quality of services;
- Social protection programmes should build greater consistency with labour market policies to improve earning opportunities for people and build the basis for developing a contributory system towards a truly universal system.

Scaling and upgrading proven interventions in education

In their efforts to meet the targets for universal primary education, developing countries have, by and large, focused to a much greater degree on enrolment as opposed to completion. Given the starting position of many developing countries, particularly those in sub-Saharan Africa, it is logical that there was greater focus on raising enrolment rates. Further raising the completion rate and improving the quality of education are the key challenges today.

Relatively modest increases in expenditures in primary education can have a significant impact on enrolment and completion rates. There is room for significantly improving education outcomes despite limited resources, particularly in low-income countries. Proven interventions, such as construction of schools, increasing the number of teachers, elimination of school fees and other educational costs to families, and adequate school feeding programmes, among others, do still pay off for the attainment of education goals. More and better spending should be aimed at upgrading these proven interventions as follows:

- Where school access and coverage is nearing sufficiency, upgrading existing schools' services and curricula should be the focus. Upgrading sanitation facilities and accessibility will be critical to bringing more girls and children with disabilities into school. Building schools in communities or villages generally boosts enrolment and reduces dropout rates—especially of girls—since less travel time is required;
- The new development agenda posits universal secondary education among its priorities. School fees and other educational costs to families—such as those associated with the purchase of textbooks, uniforms and other related materials—should be eliminated to the greatest degree possible not only in primary education but also at the secondary education level;
- Continued efforts are also needed to reduce opportunity costs for school attendance in primary as well as secondary schools by adjusting the school schedule and location to specific circumstances;
- The availability of good teachers will only rise if higher education improves and teacher training facilities are upgraded and expanded, including at the community level. Training programmes that teachers go through as part of the school cycle can help to raise the level of education of both teachers and students and result in greater teacher effectiveness. Effective teachers will ultimately be retained if their salaries and incentives for career development opportunities become more competitive;
- Monitoring and evaluation with the participation of community representatives needs to be strengthened across education systems in order to address a variety of issues including absenteeism, lack of effort by teachers, tracking out-of-school students (both those that have dropped out and those that never attended), and monitoring the effectiveness of education;
- Tightening the connections between education and the labour market is necessary, as many countries' economies are not equipped to absorb the increasing stock of better-educated workers, or school curricula is not adequately tailored to meet the needs of the labour market. There should be initiatives to give future job seekers the knowledge and skills demanded by the labour market. These challenges call for greater coherence between economic and social policies.

Strengthening the gender equality and development interface

Many regions have improved gender balance in key areas and overall gender parity in primary education is likely to have been achieved by 2015. This is the result of the many initiatives countries have implemented since the MDGs were adopted to bridge gender gaps and empower women. Such initiatives include those related to legislative changes, education, the labour market and the political realm, among others.

In spite of the progress, there are still large gaps between male and female enrolment at higher levels of education, particularly in sub-Saharan Africa, and substantial differences in the share of women employed outside the agricultural sector across different regions. Women are also much more likely to be in part-time employment compared to men and are seriously underrepresented in the political realm.

Going forward, approaches to gender equality should be designed and implemented not only for the sake of reducing gender gaps, but also for the beneficial synergies that exist between improved gender equality and achievement of other development-related goals, which can then have important feedback effects. Strengthening gender equality and the empowerment of women will strengthen development outcomes. At the same time, policymakers should make efforts to better understand the potential feedback between these approaches and ensure there is coherence between policies and women's rights. With this perspective in mind, the following policy pathways will be important:

- Further legislative measures and their adequate enforcement will be necessary to raise the participation of women in representative political bodies, on corporate boards, and in other economic, political and social organizations in areas where the normal pathways for advancement have been circumscribed by prejudice and discrimination. Legal changes enhancing women's right to ownership and inheritance have to be accompanied by programmes ensuring that the changes take root in the wider culture and become part of social conventions and norms of behaviour;
- Systematic steps will be necessary to guarantee that women's work is valued appropriately, regardless of the sphere of activity, including work in family farming, household activities and child-rearing, as well as work in informal sectors;
- More attention must be paid to potential conflicts in policy outcomes. For example, cash transfer programmes have resulted in families withdrawing girls from school to participate in family enterprises. Policies aimed at gender equality should be balanced across the different dimensions (including education, health, employment, ownership and political participation); better use must be made of interlinkages; and, ultimately, economic empowerment should be pursued through the promotion of formal and self-employment opportunities for women;
- Monitoring and evaluation will be particularly necessary for alerting stakeholders about potential conflicts in the outcomes of policies such as those mentioned above. Prompt action will be necessary to resolve any conflicts that may arise.

Health policy interventions and systems

Countries have made impressive headway towards the achievement of health-related MDGs. Progress on the most prominent fronts has led other previously overlooked issues to move to the forefront. For example, the reduction of deaths in children under five years of age but older than a month has highlighted the issue of neonatal mortality.

A number of preventive and curative policy interventions have contributed to this progress. Although most of these interventions existed before the MDGs were formulated, Governments have stepped them up more vigorously to pursue achievement of the goals. These interventions seem to have been more successful when featured as part of an integrated health strategy.

There are remaining challenges in neonatal mortality, infectious diseases and nutrition deficiencies. Policy interventions to tackle these challenges need no reinvention but they will need to be more coherent and effective, as follows:

- Some of the policy interventions of integrated health strategies have been seen to detract from others. For example, there have been instances of vaccination rates falling owing to higher costs of integrated interventions, longer service delivery times and other logistical issues. Addressing this policy incoherence is necessary to improve achievements on a variety of health development targets simultaneously. It will require an adequate interface between health policies and budgetary frameworks;
- The effectiveness of each policy intervention itself, even before it features as part of an integrated health strategy, is another important aspect to consider. The following aspects are worth considering: the relevance of the intervention in particular country contexts; the extent to which the intervention reaches underserved and vulnerable populations or, where relevant, whether it can be implemented on a large scale; cost issues; and, people's awareness of diseases and methods of prevention through healthy behaviours;
- Some health policies seem to be reaching their limits, as progress in health is achieved and the causes of disease and death change, particularly in middle-income countries. Going forward, it will be important to closely monitor the effectiveness of policies during implementation in view of changing conditions. In the area of health, progress may suggest that a policy is no longer as effective as before. When lack of effectiveness arises, it will be critical to reallocate resources to undertake new and innovative effective interventions tailored to country realities.

A variety of factors closely associated with the limitations of health systems have held back the effectiveness of policies aimed at improving people's health. Improving the outreach and quality of health systems will continue to be critical, but it will also be necessary to pay more attention to the quality of care and the positioning of health systems as core social institutions. Strengthening the health system in developing countries will demand the following:

- Motivating and retaining health workers will be important in addressing existing shortages of skilled health-care personnel. Strategies to reduce emigration of health-care personnel from countries that severely lack them will be critical. Nonetheless, even if health workers can be motivated and retained, the critical policy for overcoming the existing deficit of health-care professionals is to produce more of them, especially through long-term (quality) education;
- Short-term, broad-based training programmes for existing health-care professionals will be required while the pool of new professionals rises through long-term education. Broadening the recruitment pool and offering flexible career opportunities and non-traditional entry points for health-care workers will be important. Critical actors who typically require shorter periods of training and can be deployed quickly need to be formally integrated as part of a comprehensive primary health system. These include

traditional birth attendants (if appropriate in the cultural context), community health workers, health extension workers, and so on;

- More health facilities need to be built. These include maternal waiting homes as well as drop-in centres for testing, counselling, treatment and other medical interventions, in close proximity to communities and targeted populations. Incentives will be critical to creating demand for these less traditional health centres;
- Efforts for strengthening infrastructure should also cover transport, water and sanitation. Governments should rely on partnerships and local communities to ease transport constraints, targeting those populations that most need medical attention while also incentivizing their demand for these services;
- Health systems should be increasingly positioned as core social institutions that are deeply embedded in the social, political and economic context of local and national settings. Interventions should become people-centred and developed with the engagement of communities and front-line health providers. This will require adequate clinical and non-clinical quality of health care and a rights-based approach to policies and programmes;
- External assistance will have to continue and be increased for countries that do not have enough domestic resources to finance the investments and operating costs involved in improving the functioning of health systems. Vertical interventions should continue to be harmonized with the horizontal health system so that the former do not weaken the latter and instead strengthen it.

Environmental targets and policies

The MDG framework also embraced multidimensional efforts at both the international and national levels that were aimed at protecting the environment. A seventh goal was formulated to ensure environmental sustainability in recognition of a growing concern about current consumption and production patterns leading to an unsustainable use of natural resources. While other MDGs are directed to either developing countries (MDGs 1-6) or developed countries (MDG 8), the first two targets of MDG 7 were set for all countries, representing universality and the need for global cooperation—a feature that is more akin to the SDGs.

Progress has been made in some environmental areas since 1990: ozone-depleting substances have been virtually eliminated, and the ozone layer is expected to recover by the middle of this century; terrestrial and marine protected areas in many regions have increased substantially; 147 countries have met the drinking water target, 95 countries have met the sanitation target and 77 countries have met both; and the proportion of urban population living in slums in the developing regions fell notably.

Any analysis of efforts geared towards driving progress in such areas is challenged by the diversity of targets of MDG 7, which cover both human development and environmental issues without proper integration. Furthermore, none of the environment-related targets were quantitatively specified and some of them are not time-bound. The goal covers only a subset of the many challenging environmental issues that need to be addressed.

With regard to the environmental targets, national efforts in areas covering atmospheric issues; land, water, and biodiversity; forests; and drinking water, sanitation and slums improved countries' likelihood of making progress. Advances made in some

environmental areas have not been sustained and it has been difficult to trace the sluggishness of this progress in a timely manner without time-bound quantitative targets whose monitoring may have prompted policy action. Importantly, lack of progress towards achieving the environmental goals has also been the result of lack of policy coherence, which has prevented making proper use of the interconnections among various environmental goals themselves and between environmental and human development goals. The policy implications of the analysis concerning the aforementioned environmental areas and their targets are as follows:

- Implementing coherent policies that make use of the interconnections between various environmental goals themselves and between environmental and human development goals will require finding targets and indicators that capture these interlinkages in an integrated manner;
- The international community will have to make sure that the United Nations Framework Convention on Climate Change process gives way to necessary cooperation between developed countries and the large, fast-growing developing countries in order to meet CO₂ emission-reduction targets;
- Efforts to protect forests will have to be combined with sustainable production and consumption patterns. It must be acknowledged that deforestation is caused by factors beyond the forest sector's control, necessitating integral approaches. The special role of forests in the life and livelihood of people living in poverty and indigenous peoples should be given adequate attention;
- Protection of certain terrestrial and marine areas can simultaneously be helpful for the protection of forests, wetlands, biodiversity, water resources, fish stock, and so forth. This in turn is critical for avoiding economic hardships, social tension and conflicts. Addressing the issue of climate change should help in the protection of terrestrial and marine areas;
- Adequate drinking water and sanitation infrastructure can be built best through public initiatives, both at national and local levels, complemented by various community and non-governmental initiatives. Infrastructure should be environmentally friendly to avoid negative externalities that have emerged as access to drinking water and sanitation is expanded;
- The slums problem can only be solved through sustained, inclusive and equitable economic growth, grounded in sustainable patterns of production and consumption, sustainable urbanization, and deeper human development. Achieving this will take time; intermediate steps towards improving the lives of slum dwellers, such as granting tenure rights or expanding microfinance, will need to be taken in the meantime.

Governance and institutions for development

Having reviewed the policy efforts in the economic, social and environmental realms, this *Survey* turns to recognizing the significance of adequate governance and institutions to implement a coherent, accountable and well-integrated policy framework. Aspects of governance and institutions under review, such as leadership, accountability, decentralization and partnerships, among others, while not necessarily unique to the period of MDG implementation, were all equally important to the subsequent achievement of MDG targets. Messages emerging with regard to these issues are as follows:

- Successful policy implementation for SDGs will begin with leadership that possesses a clear vision of the desired outcomes and the potential policy pathways for achievement. There are examples of this type of leadership that, while they may predate the MDGs, led to progress on these goals later on, as well as efforts by leaders prompted more directly by the MDGs;
- National policy coordination has been a relevant factor in achieving MDGs in some countries, although lack of capacity has limited this in others. The use of information and communications technology will be critical to facilitating coordination and accountability as well as service delivery;
- Decentralization will continue to be important in contexts where central Governments are seriously constrained in reaching underserved populations. This has been a critical mechanism in engaging communities and ensuring more transparent governance. This in turn has facilitated MDG achievements, for example, through improving service delivery in education and health and raising gender awareness and gender coverage. Decentralization should therefore continue to be pursued where necessary;
- In situations where Governments lack the resources to provide key services for target populations, partnerships with a variety of non-governmental actors at global, national and local levels will also be a relevant avenue, both for enabling achievement of development goals and improving governance;
- Good governance requires accountability, which necessitates effective monitoring and evaluation. The use of supreme audit institutions will continue to be an important factor in tracking progress and ensuring efficient use of resources across all levels of government. More broadly, monitoring and evaluation systems will continue to be necessary to improve accountability while increasing coordination and coherence across institutions.