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Measuring MDG Achievements:

Rate of Progress Matters Most

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Progress on the Millennium Development Goals (MDGs) is often monitored in terms of *levels* of indicators, based on how "on track" or "off track" the indicators are from their 2015 targets. This One Pager, by contrast, introduces a method for evaluating the *commitment* of countries, as measured by their *effort* to accelerate MDG progress. It compares the rate of improvement of indicators before and after the adoption of the MDGs (see Hailu and Tsukada, 2011).

Since the MDGs were based on global trends, they tend to place at a disadvantage those countries whose starting point was far from the indicators' maximum boundaries (Vandermoortele, 2007). For instance, "halving the proportion of the poor population" would require a higher level of performance from a country that started with 80 per cent of its population below the poverty line than from a country where only 20 per cent of the population was initially poor.

Natural constraints also make it harder to improve targets further as the indicators approach the maximum possible boundary. Raising the rate of primary-education enrolment from 40 to 50 per cent may be easier than raising it from 90 to 100 per cent. The target pupils may become difficult to reach—because of spatial reasons, for instance.

Our method introduces two innovations: (i) it recognises that progress is not constant (linear) across time; and (ii) it accounts for effort appreciation, understanding that MDG targets are harder to achieve when a country's baseline indicator is already approaching its upper or lower limits.

We analysed the performance of 40 indicators for 98 countries between 1990 and 2008. Four broad results deserve attention. First, a significant number of sub-Saharan African countries have substantially improved the rate of progress on the MDGs. Of the leading 10 countries whose MDG progress accelerated, eight are from the region. Burkina Faso made progress on 91.3 per cent of the indicators, while Angola and the Central African Republic accelerated progress on 90 per cent of them (for which data are available).

Second, progress among least developed countries (LDCs) accelerated faster than among non-LDCs. Eight of the 10 best performers with a higher rate of MDG progress are LDCs. Most are in sub-Saharan Africa, but the rate has also improved significantly in Nepal and Myanmar.

Third, most progress was made towards Goals 1, 2, 4, 6 and 8. On Goal 1, more than 78 per cent of the countries in our sample accelerated the reduction of the proportion of people living on less than US$1.25 (PPP) per day. On Goal 2, primary completion rates have accelerated in 70 per cent of the countries. About 93.5 per cent of the countries made significant progress on Goal 6, reversing "HIV prevalence among young people". On Goal 8, official development assistance (ODA) to basic social services and small island states increased noticeably. Debt relief committed under the Heavily Indebted Poor Countries (HIPC) initiative and the Multilateral Debt Relief Initiative (MDRI) also increased. But only 56 per cent of the landlocked countries received higher ODA disbursements.

Fourth, least progress was made towards Goals 3, 5 and 7. On the indicator "ratio of female-to-male enrolment in primary school" of Goal 3, progress has decelerated in 47 of 82 countries in the post-MDG period. Goal 5 also calls for more effective interventions: in 16 of the 21 countries for which data are complete, progress on reducing maternal mortality slowed down. This coincides with disappointing progress on births attended by skilled personal. On Goal 7, "ensure environmental sustainability", in 51 of 95 countries progress slowed on decreasing "CO_2 emissions (metric tons per capita)" in the post-MDG period.[1]

Moving away from comparing indicator *levels* across time to a methodology based on the rate of progress is a step towards recognising the *commitment* of countries to furthering advances in attaining the MDGs. It is essential to account for different starting points (countries that start at a low level but are trying hard) and proximity to upper boundaries (countries that start at a high level but are facing challenges). This approach avoids labelling countries as "failures", lest they fall short of meeting the target levels by 2015.

References:

Hailu, D. and R. Tsukada (2011). 'Achieving the Millennim Development Goals: A Measure of Progress', *Working Paper* 78. Brasilia, International Policy Centre for Inclusive Growth.

Vandermoortele, J. (2007). 'MDGs: Misunderstood Targets?' *One Pager* 28. Brasilia, International Policy Centre for Inclusive Growth.

Note:

1. Deceleration, however, does not necessarily imply that an indicator's level has declined, but rather that the rate at which it is growing after commitment to MDGs is slower than the rate of growth in the period beforehand.

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