

Johannesburg, 20 January 2011 - A decade after world leaders adopted the eight Millennium Development Goals (MDGs), there is no consensus on what impact they have had on global poverty.

The academics, policy-makers, civil society activists and development workers who gathered in Johannesburg on 16-19 January for a summit on global poverty agreed that the MDGs have made a difference, but have fallen far short of the ambitious targets on poverty, education, health, gender equality and global partnership that 189 countries committed to achieving by 2015.

An estimated one billion people around the world regularly go to bed hungry and between 1.5 and two billion are thought to be living in poverty. HIV continues to claim thousands of lives every day and there has been little improvement in infant and maternal mortality rates. Meanwhile, inequality within and among countries has widened and foreign aid levels have declined during the past two years of the global financial crisis.

That is the glass-half-empty view of the MDGs. However, David Hulme, executive director of the University of Manchester's Brooks World Poverty Institute, which organized the summit, takes a glass-half-full view. He argues that if countries and the international community accelerated their efforts on development over the next five years, the glass could reach three-quarters-full by 2015.

"The idea of the MDGs as a failure is definitely wrong, there has been progress," he told journalists on 19 January.

Globally, there have been gains in terms of poverty reduction, life expectancy and education over the past decade, although it is unclear whether those gains can be attributed to the MDGs or to massive economic growth in countries like China and India.

However, a number of promises made by developed and developing countries to reduce poverty have not been kept and the mechanisms for holding leaders accountable are weak. Hulme and several other speakers commented on the over-emphasis on the role of aid as a driver of development.

"The focus ... needs to be on national development goals and supporting governments to reduce poverty, not just through funding but through knowledge exchange," Hulme told participants.

Sakiko Fukudo-Parr of the New School University in New York described the MDGs as a valuable instrument for drawing attention to priorities, but cautioned that the eight goals ignored many pressing developmental priorities such as the need for structural transformation, job creation and to narrow the growing equality gap.

Another speaker, Sophie Harman of City University in London, agreed that while goal setting

was important, “some things you just can’t measure”. The goal of gender equality, for example, could not be achieved by simply counting the number of female appointments in an organization.

With just four years to go, Hulme said it was time to begin discussions about what form a new set of goals might take. “The MDGs were a bare minimum,” he said. “We need another vehicle for the next decade with grander ambitions.”

In a statement, delegates called for the process of defining post-2015 goals to be led by the UN but to include participation from civil society, governments and the poor themselves. Fukudo-Parr said the new goals would need to reflect global concerns that have emerged over the last decade such as climate change, and correct elements missing from the previous goals, for example, mechanisms for holding governments to account.

Speaking to IRIN on the sidelines of the summit, Hulme said the MDGs had not fundamentally changed the way people thought of poverty as an inevitable feature of the world and that a global call to action was needed to change such thinking.

“Philanthropy will help,” he said, “but national governments have to do it.”

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