

The litmus test of governance: progress on achieving the MDGs in the Commonwealth¹

Economic Affairs Division, Commonwealth Secretariat

This paper provides a short overview of global progress towards achieving the Millennium Development Goals (MDGs) and then proceeds to review progress by goal within the Commonwealth.

Global progress on achieving the MDGs

Although substantial progress towards achievement of the MDGs has been made by developing countries, including many Commonwealth developing countries (CWDCs), many targets still remain off track and some goals are unlikely to be met by the close of the MDG timeframe at end 2015. The 2012 UN MDG Progress Report states that three important targets have been met ahead of the completion date for the MDGs. These comprise the targets for poverty reduction, drinking water, and improving the lives of slum dwellers. Moreover, gender parity has been achieved in primary school enrolment. The 2012 progress report also reports the following: falling extreme poverty in every region; accelerating progress in reducing child and maternal mortality; significant progress towards universal primary education, especially in sub-Saharan Africa; progress towards universal access to HIV treatment; a significant decline in global malaria deaths; and halting and beginning to reverse the spread of tuberculosis.

Nevertheless, approximately one billion people will live in extreme poverty by 2015. The majority will live in sub-Saharan Africa and in South Asia, both regions with large numbers of CWDCs and with a large share of the total population of Commonwealth citizens. Considerable challenges also remain in meeting the targets on decreasing vulnerable employment, reducing maternal mortality, halving hunger and gender equality.

Much of the substantial progress especially with respect to poverty reduction has been due to the fast and significant economic growth in China. A more nuanced assessment that takes this factor into account reveals a considerable variability in progress across and within countries and regions. Furthermore, progress has also slowed for some MDGs after the global economic crisis, with increasing inequality and fiscal constraints posing further challenges for achieving goals on poverty and health.

Progress in achieving the MDGs in the Commonwealth³

The Commonwealth Secretariat has undertaken an analysis of MDG progress within the Commonwealth based on data available from the UN MDG database and the World Bank Global Development Finance database. Table 1 summarises the findings of the analysis, and shows that Commonwealth progress on the MDGs displays a similar pattern to that at the global level.

The analysis reveals that, on average, CWDCs are off track in meeting 63 per cent of the MDG targets. This percentage increases to almost 70 per cent for the Commonwealth's Least Developed Countries (LDCs) and sub-Saharan African members. The best performing region among CWDCs is Latin America and the Caribbean, where countries are, on average, on track to meeting 63 per cent of the MDG targets.

Overall, CWDCs are most off track for achieving the following targets: reducing hunger; generating decent and productive employment; reducing maternal and child mortality; and achieving gender parity in national parliaments. Best performing targets are as follows: achieving universal primary education; achieving gender parity in primary education; reducing the spread of HIV/Aids; improving access to drinking water; and dealing with the debt problems of developing countries. These trends, however, mask considerable variability among regions and countries.

Goal 1: Reducing extreme poverty and hunger, and achieving productive and decent employment

Table 1 shows that, on average, CWDCs remain off track or seriously off track in meeting this goal. Only three out of the 11 CWDCs for which data is available are on track to achieve the target of halving extreme poverty since 1990. In three CWDCs the proportion of people living on less than US\$1 a day has increased since 1990, and nine out of 17 CWDCs for which data is available have over 40 per cent of their population living in extreme poverty in 2010. This suggests that the outlook on poverty is considerably worse when disaggregating the data by country.

In Latin America and the Caribbean, South Asia and sub-Saharan Africa, 17 out of 30 countries are seriously off track in reducing hunger by half. The proportion of the population that is undernourished even increased in nine of these countries between 1990 and 2010.

For the 13 CWDCs where data was available, six countries had significantly large proportions of employed people living below \$1 a day, suggesting slow progress in achieving decent work.

Goal 2: Universal primary education

Although most CWDCs are on track for achieving universal primary education, eight of the 14 sub-Saharan African countries for which data is available are off track in reaching this goal. Furthermore, several CWDCs in Latin America and the Caribbean have seen a decline in primary school enrolment ratios between 1999 and 2010⁴.

Goal 3: Gender equality

Most CWDCs are on track for meeting the targets of gender parity in education and non-agricultural, waged-employment but are off track in gender parity in politics. Many Commonwealth countries, including developed countries, have relatively low rates (under 25 per cent) of seats held by women in national parliament. Here, the poorest performing regions are East Asia and the Pacific, and South Asia. Sub-Saharan Africa has the largest proportion of women in national parliament among CWDCs, with seven countries on track to achieving or exceeding the levels in donor countries.

Goal 4: Reduce child mortality

Child mortality has decreased significantly in CWDCs between 1999 and 2010 (on average by 39 per cent);

Table 1: MDG progress in the Commonwealth²

<i>Goals and targets</i>	
Goal 1: Eradicate extreme poverty and hunger	
Reduce extreme poverty by half	Population below \$1/day (PPP) % change 1990–2010
Productive and decent employment	% of employed people living below \$1/day (PPP)
Reduce hunger by half	Population undernourished (% change 1990–2010)
Goal 2: Achieve universal primary education	
Universal primary education	Total net enrolment ratio in primary education %
Goal 3: Promote gender equality and empower women	
Promote gender equality	Gender Parity Index in primary level enrolment % of women in wage employment in non-agricultural sector % of seats held by women in national parliament
Goal 4: Reduce child mortality	
Reduce child mortality by two-thirds	Under-5 mortality rate per 1,000 live births (% change 1990–2010)
Goal 5: Improve maternal health	
Reduce maternal mortality by 3/4	Maternal mortality ratio per 100,000 live births (% change 1990–2010)
Access to reproductive health	Unmet need for family planning %
Goal 6: Combat HIV/AIDS, malaria & other diseases	
Halt and begin to reverse spread of HIV	People living with HIV, 15–49 years old %
Halt and begin to reverse spread of TB	Tuberculosis death rate per year per 100,000 population
Goal 7: Ensure environmental sustainability	
Halve % of population without improved drinking water	% of population using improved drinking water sources (% change 1990–2010)
Halve % of population without sanitation	% of population using improved sanitation facilities (% change 1990–2010)
Improve lives of slum dwellers	Slum population as % of urban population (% change 1990–2010)
Goal 8: Develop a global partnership for development	
Deal with debt problems of developing countries	Debt service (% of export of goods and services and net income)
Access to new technologies	Internet users per 100 population
ODA	Net ODA as % of GNI

however, CWDCs remain off track, especially in sub-Saharan Africa and parts of South Asia⁵.

Goal 5: Improve maternal health

On average, CWDCs are off track in meeting the targets for reducing maternal mortality. Declines in maternal mortality have been slow across the Commonwealth, and mortality rates have even increased in eight CWDCs between 1990 and 2010. In 2010, the maternal mortality rate was over 200 per 100,000 live births in 19 CWDCs, and over 400 per 100,000 live births in eight CWDCs⁶.

Access to reproductive health is mixed, and an average of 24 per cent of women in CWDCs had an unmet need for family planning in 2010. However, in most countries where data is available, it has decreased since 1990⁷.

Goal 6: Halt and begin to reverse the spread of HIV/AIDS, TB, malaria and other diseases

On average, CWDCs are off track in meeting the targets for combating HIV/AIDS, malaria and other diseases. A large number of sub-Saharan African Commonwealth countries have a high incidence of HIV/AIDS, and on average 9.9 per cent of 15–49 year olds are living with the disease in the region. Although other regions show a low incidence of HIV/AIDS, of the 22 CWDCs for which data is available, 17 have seen increases in incidence rates since 1990.

Most CWDCs have made significant progress in reducing TB death rates since 1990. However, the proportion of deaths is still relatively high in all regions except Latin America and the Caribbean.

Commonwealth developing country regions					All Commonwealth		
Developing countries (all)	East Asia & Pacific	Lat Am & Carib	South Asia	Sub-Saharan Africa	CSVEs	Least developed countries	Developed countries (OECD)
-23			-44	-11		-14	
34	20		29	41	20	47	
-18	-43	-17		-13	-11	-14	
89	98	92	90	86	91	89	99
0.97	0.98	0.97	0.94	0.97	0.98	0.99	1.00
36	39	42	22	37	43		49
16	5	14	12	21	13	22	25
-39	-44	-44	-55	-31	-38	-43	-40
-25	-27	4	-67	-23	-18	-43	18
24	28	29	20	24	25	25	
7.1	0.5	1.7	0.2	9.9	6.8	6.3	0.2
20	17	4	24	28	12	34	0
23	10	16	16	31	16	31	
28	15	14	51	28	19	35	
-18		-40	-28	-14	-20	-14	
6	3	13	7	3	8	3	
17	15	35	11	11	27	7	79
10	22	4	3	9	9	12	

Goal 7: Ensuring environmental sustainability

While many CWDCs have managed to meet the MDG target of improving access to drinking water, there are some exceptions. This includes inter alia several sub-Saharan African countries⁸, where less than 60 per cent of the population have access to improved drinking water.

In comparison to the other environmental indicators under this goal (drinking water and slum dwellers), CWDCs on average are further behind in improving access to sanitation facilities. This is particularly the case in South Asia (excluding Maldives and Sri Lanka, which are on track to meet the target) and sub-Saharan Africa, where on average less than 45 per cent of people have access to improved sanitation.

Although overall, the proportion of slum dwellers (as a percentage of urban population) has decreased in CWDCs since 1990 and CWDCs on average are on track to meet the slum dwellers target, their numbers have increased and levels remain greater than 50 per cent of the urban population in ten out of the 17 countries for which data is available.

MDG Goal 7 also includes a target to integrate the principles of sustainable development into country policies and programmes, in order to reverse the loss of environmental resources. Data is not readily available to assess progress on this issue and further analysis would be required.

Goal 8: Developing a global partnership for development

Goal 8 is less well formulated as the targets and indicators are not quantified. What follows is a brief commentary on some of the targets identified in Goal 8, where data and information is readily available.

Trade

The prospect of concluding a development-oriented Doha Round in the near future remains highly uncertain.

Official development assistance

Globally, the delivery of official development assistance (ODA) has fallen short of the Gleneagles targets set for 2010. Between 2005 and 2010, ODA did increase at an unprecedented rate, by some \$27 billion a year in real terms, but this rise fell some 40 per cent short of the overall pledge, with Italy, Germany and France accounting for most of the gap. Aid to Africa also grew faster than before, but similarly fell short of a further regional goal. In the period ahead, fiscal consolidation in donor countries could put resource availability under further pressure. Findings from the OECD's latest survey on donors' forward spending plans suggest that ODA is expected to stagnate from 2013 (OECD, 2012b).

Debt problems

Available data shows that debt service levels have decreased since 1990 in many Commonwealth low income

countries (LICs), the latter who have benefited from the heavily indebted poor country (HIPC) and multi-lateral debt relief initiatives (MDRIs). All Commonwealth HIPCs have completed the HIPC and MDRI processes. However, there is an emerging debt problem in Commonwealth Small Vulnerable Economies (CSVEs)⁹, especially in the Caribbean. These small states face particular economic challenges and as a result, many lack economic resilience. One consequence is that although the headline measure of living standards is relatively high by international standards, the challenges and risks to economic growth are disproportionately high and the ability to participate and benefit from globalisation to foster growth and development is impeded. Currently, the international community recognises the particular circumstances of small states in greater flexibility in some of its policies. However, this flexibility has not extended to debt relief.

Currently, only two¹⁰ out of 29 CSVEs are eligible for comprehensive debt relief provided under international debt reduction initiatives. Three further CSVEs – Lesotho, Samoa and Vanuatu – have seen part of their multilateral debt service paid by donors to assist poverty reduction in these countries. For other CSVEs, measures to address debt servicing challenges whether domestic or external are more constrained. Although the variety of approaches has increased in recent years with a greater prevalence of commercial debt buy backs and the development of the Paris Club's Evian Approach, there is scope for more comprehensive and innovative ways of providing relief to tackle both unsustainable debt burdens and temporarily high debt service in these countries.

Access to new technologies

There is also mixed progress on access to new technologies. For example, while internet use is increasing steadily, only 7 per cent of the population are internet users in the least developed countries, compared to 79 per cent in Commonwealth donor countries. On average, only 11 per cent of the population in South Asian and sub-Saharan CWDCs are internet users.

Further challenges: the global economic crisis

The on-going financial crisis and economic slowdown in the major developed economies and the current Eurozone crisis pose further challenges in addressing the lack of progress in meeting the MDGs for many CWDCs. In particular, increased rates of under-employment and vulnerable employment in many CWDCs present a serious risk in reducing poverty and hunger¹¹. Fiscal and monetary measures have been critical in addressing shocks and preventing more severe downturns in developing countries, however public debt levels are approaching critical levels in many CWDCs¹². Greater job and income insecurity together with the weakening of government spending on social services may further reduce access to education, health services, drinking water and basic sanitation.

Conclusion

In summary, much has changed since 2000, there has been strong economic growth in much of the developing world which has lifted millions out of poverty. There have been marked improvements in the health and education outcomes for millions of people, but progress in poverty reduction is uneven and many MDGs are not on track to be met by 2015 – both globally and within the Commonwealth. Major inequalities persist and in many instances have been exacerbated (UN 2012A). Thus much remains to be done and a post-2015 framework will need to address this deficit.

Acknowledgement

With thanks to Dr Cyrus Rustomjee, Director, Economic Affairs Division, Commonwealth Secretariat.

Endnotes

- 1 This is a shorter version of an original paper (written to provide background information for Commonwealth Senior Finance Officials at their meeting in Tokyo on 9 October 2012) containing data on MDG indicators by Commonwealth country. For more information, see: www.thecommonwealth.org
- 2 Data from UN MDG database and World Bank Global Development Finance. Assessment is based on Commonwealth Secretariat staff calculations.
- 3 The analysis in this section is based on available data from the UN MDG database and World Bank Global Development Finance. It should be noted that data was not available for all countries and for all indicators that would impact the accuracy of the analysis.
- 4 Particularly St Kitts & Nevis and Jamaica.
- 5 A moderate–high under-5 mortality rate defined as between 60–100 deaths per 1,000 live births, and high is over 100 deaths, based on the classification used by 2012 UN MDG Progress Chart.
- 6 A high maternal mortality ratio classified as over 200 deaths per 100,000, and very high if above 400 deaths as per the 2012 UN MDG Progress Chart.
- 7 Except for India, where there was a marginal increase of 1 per cent.
- 8 These are Kenya, Mozambique, Nigeria, Sierra Leone and Tanzania.
- 9 A special Ministerial meeting will be convened at CFMM 2012 on this issue.
- 10 Guyana and Gambia have both benefited from HIPC and MDRI relief.
- 11 See CFMM 2012 paper on Unemployment, Inequality and Growth.
- 12 See CFMM 2012 paper on CSVE debt.