

Disaggregation counts: Why progress towards MDGs in Sub-Saharan Africa is slow ?

At the United Nations World Summit, held in New York in 2000, 189 countries adopted the Millennium Declaration, in which they committed to securing a world with fewer people afflicted by poverty, hunger, diseases, ignorance and environment degradation. These aspirations were operationalized into goals, targets and indicators all forming what is known as the Millennium Development Goals (MDGs). These goals lie on measurable and time-bound indicators at the aggregate level which facilitate the monitoring, evaluating and reporting on the progress toward these aspirations. However, equality of rights and opportunities, which formed part of the Millennium Declaration, was not clearly converted into a measurable goals, targets and indicators.

Yet the Millennium Development Goals (MDGs) have become the touchstone for assessing socio-economic progress across the developing world. In addition, the donor community is ever more using MDG-related targets to allocate development assistance and assess aid effectiveness. The sum of these processes is that there is a growing material and symbolic importance of the goals and targets set in the MDG project. It become therefore of interest to interrogate the analytical coherence of the MDGs and identify the needed changes if the full potential of the MDG project is to be reaped.

The Millennium Declaration 2000 stipulates that “no effort will be spared to free men, women and children from the abject and dehumanizing conditions of extreme poverty” and that by 2015 the people living on less than \$1 a day should be halved. The progress towards poverty reduction (Goal 1) especially in Sub-Saharan Africa (SSA) has been slow, and most reports indicate that, by the current trends, most SSA countries will not reach most of the goals by the target date. Within-country disparities on progress towards the MDGs in particular across socio-economic gradient and location constitute a significant constraint towards achieving the targets. One illustration is that children from lower socio-economic segments of the society and from rural areas are more likely not to be enrolled in primary schools (UN 2007). More specifically, a ten-country study on health equity suggests that in Ethiopia and Chad, both of which have the lowest figures women receiving delivery assistance from a health professional merely 3% of women of the poorest quintile have access to delivery assistance from a health professional as opposed to at least 50% from the richest group in the same countries(UNECA 2009). Arguably, the disaggregated figures point to unequal access to public services, which have demonstrable impact on the rate of progress toward the targets of the MDGs.

The inequitable access to public services is driven in part by increasing income and asset inequality, despite moderately good economic growth rates in SSA from 2000 to 2007. SSA is a highly unequal continent and the recent good economic rates translation into poverty reduction has been hampered by initial inequality and the distribution neutral path of such growth. This raises concern over the pace, features of economic growth recorded in much of Africa in recent years and the ability to translate strong economic performance, if any, into meaningful poverty reduction.

Studies have shown that on average real GDP of sub-Saharan Africa would need to grow at 7% per annum, at least, to meet the target of halving poverty. Obviously, this growth rate was relatively high, particularly when set against the economic performance recorded over the past four decades. Moreover, even when growth occurs, its impact on poverty is not automatic. The degree with which growth translates into poverty reduction, as well as the sustainability of the process depends on how inequality evolves. This is confirmed by Bigsten and Shimeles (2003) in a study on four SSA countries, where they made two hypothetical growth scenarios. The first scenario posits that income inequality remains unchanged (or Distribution Neutral Growth, DNG), while the second scenario assumes that the additional income is equally distributed (or Equally Distributed Growth, EDG). In each case, the reduction in poverty is substantially greater under EDG than DNG: 10% points more in Ethiopia, 12% points more in Mozambique, 13% points more in Uganda and 9% points more in South Africa. This would have a bearing on the time required to halve poverty, on important MDGs. In Ethiopia, for example, growth could have reduced the poverty headcount by some 31 per cent from 1981 to 1995. Yet, because of changes in the distribution that contributed to a 37 percent increase in poverty, the final effect has been a net increase in poverty of 6 per cent (Bourgignon 2004).

Further, while the received evidence suggests that practically nothing happens without growth, depending on the extent of initial inequality, growth spells may either come to a grinding halt, get completely reversed, or instead could be the trigger for a virtuous circle from growth-to reduced poverty-to improved equality-to further sustained growth in the future.

The driver of economic growth, without which progress towards the MDGs is impossible, in most SSA economies is commodity-based and therefore positive growth spells due to international price hikes do not result sustainable MDG gains. The “enclave” economies with little forward and backward linkages to

local productive activities have the effect of confirming high initial inequality through a neutral distribution type of economic growth.

The MDG project has been a “game changer”. The MDGs have generally redefined development objectives by operationally identifying close correlates of poverty in education, health, empowerment of women into time-bound targets. They have also recasted a global partnership for human development based on a multidimensional definition of development and the realization of fundamental economic and social rights.

However, the MDGs were designed without analyzing the structural features of low-income countries, particularly in SSA where in fact progress towards achieving the MDGs is the slowest. The efforts to achieve the MDGs were largely framed within a context of narrow considerations of macroeconomic stability and modest increases in social spending. And more importantly, equity concerns both as an outcome and determinant of economic growth and as a guiding principle for development assistance allocation to achieve the MDGs have not been part and parcel of the development agenda. Factoring in equity concerns into the policy debate is an underlying axiom of transforming growth into poverty and achieving the MDGs.

Against a backdrop of limited progress toward the targets of the MDGs, the Outcome Document of the 2005 World Summit urged developing countries, in particular the poorest, to “adopt, by 2006, and implement comprehensive national development strategies to achieve the internationally agreed goals and objectives, including the Millennium Development Goals”. It is believed that forty-one countries had developed MDG-consistent poverty reduction strategies or national development plans, although of varying comprehensiveness and efficacy (UNECA, 2008).

The formulation and implementation of this second generation of PRSP or national development plans provides an opportunity to address both the equity and developmental concerns that have not been fully taken on board by the MDGs. The potentials of these new frameworks will not be adequately reaped unless countries have the policy space required to articulate a national vision and the underlying pro-growth and pro-poor policies needed.

Indeed, the experiences of many successful countries indicate that a wide range of policies lead to meaningful economic and social progress. Hence, there is a need for countries to have enough national policy space required to develop a national

vision and choose among this set of policies those that are in line with their needs and institutional environments.

Spending in health, education, social protection, infrastructure along with measures that generate decent employment and economic diversification are among those policies. Although sounding more like a ‘déjà vu’, the recommended social spending measures depart from what has been implemented recently. The MDG-consistent poverty reduction strategies or national development plans open a window of opportunity to frame social expenditures as investments that raises the productivity of the working force, particularly the less favoured segments of the society, and not only instruments that help address only some short-term distributional consequences of economic growth.

The future of the MDG paradigm or rather the acceleration of the progress towards meeting the MDG targets by and beyond 2015 rests on strategies that deliver pro-poor growth along with pro-poor social policies. Sufficient national policy space enables countries to choose the path that are in line with local conditions and national priorities.

The above signifies that the MDGs operationalization should be at the grassroots level, wherein the identified limited progress towards the MDGs can be closely monitored and effectively addressed. Consider a situation where primary school enrolment is low and driven in large by the performance of lower socio-economic group. In such a context, improving equity in the provision of primary education would constitute an effective way to scale up progress.

