

The Arab States and the MDGs: no progress without social justice

The Millennium Development Goals (MDGs) will not be met in the Arab region by 2015 at the current rate of progress. The main reasons for this slow pace are the international community's weak support for Goal 8 concerning global partnerships for development, and the feeble political concern with achieving economic and social justice in the region. Other significant regional barriers to achieving the goals include lack of commitment to the notion of human rights and the principles of "good governance," fragile political stability and deficient democracy, and lack of a peaceful and sustainable framework for action.

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The year 2010 is very important for the Millennium Development Goals (MDGs) process because it marks 10 years since the adoption of the Millennium Declaration and five years before the end of the proposed implementation period. A preparatory review step has already taken place during hearings with civil society groups held by the UN in June 2010, and the entire process will be discussed by the UN General Assembly in September.

This is therefore an opportune time to objectively evaluate efforts to reach the goals, assess the processes, and come up with concrete recommendations aimed at redirecting efforts as necessary and including different stakeholders towards effective achievements. This is particularly true now that almost all the country-based analyses, even the most optimistic among them, affirm that the goals are unlikely to be met by 2015, at least with the current rate of progress and given the implications of the global economic crisis.

The global partnership agreed to under Goal 8, is a clear recognition of the need to enhance global commitments to complement the national and local efforts of developing countries. Nevertheless these global commitments have so far not been translated into concrete and explicit decisions and implementation policies. To begin with, a consistent lack of political will is clearly revealed through the decline in Official Development Assistance (ODA). Indeed, despite pledged commitments, ODA is still far behind the target. The most optimistic figures show that it does not exceed 0.31% of Gross Domestic Product (GDP).² For Least Developed Countries (LDCs),³ the percentage reached is 0.09% instead of the committed 0.15-0.20%.⁴ The two other main targets in-

cluded in Goal 8 – fair trade policies and debt relief – have not been met either.

More problematic is the narrow approach adopted by G-8 countries, together with some UN agencies and other international institutions, limiting the debates on MDG achievement to a discussion of money and aid, thus reflecting a highly contested vision of the development challenges. Instead nations' capacity for development should be the main objective. Yet there is also a lack of vision and capacity at the national level for a comprehensive and inclusive economic strategy, with transparent budgets that reveal proper mobilization of local resources and how they can best be used. Ideally nations' empowerment would enlarge their choices, improve their developmental performance and achievements, and secure a more adequate use of their resources.

The Gleneagles summit of the G-8 in 2005 concluded with a pledge to deliver USD 150 billion to fight poverty. However, the food, fuel and financial crises, as well as increased concerns about climate change, served as an excuse not to fulfill this commitment. These crises are a consequence of the current global system: on the one hand, it is unable to hold multinational corporations accountable and responsible; on the other hand, it is unable to adopt and implement relevant and effective solutions to the challenges of poverty, development and injustice around the world. This system is more focused on undertaking emergency measures to overcome the immediate impact of the crises than in long-term interventions to comprehensively address the root causes of unemployment, increasing poverty, and political, social and economic marginalization.

In late 2008 the heads of state that met during the review conference on Financing for Development in Doha failed to arrive at a comprehensive vision towards achieving the MDGs. Instead of addressing the core issues behind the global financial and economic crises, these leaders reiterated the G-20 "emergency" decisions focused on addressing the immediate impacts of the crises. Civil society groups participating in Doha criticized the outcomes, calling for a new deal to replace the Washington Consensus based on a comprehensive revision of current global policies by the international institutions and the G-8. The effort by the UN General Assembly to address this issue through the formation of the Stiglitz Commission and later the High Level Conference on the

World Financial and Economic Crisis in June 2009, also ended in a stalemate – reflecting the inability of the international community to agree on a holistic approach to development instead of protecting the interests of multinational corporations.

MDGs challenges in the Arab region

The *Arab Human Development Report 2009*, through a focus on the concept of human security, reveals that human development indicators in the region lag far behind the promises made.⁵ It underlines the economic challenges, highlighting that Arab countries' dependency on oil production has made their economies vulnerable to global changes in oil prices. An additional major economic challenge is their reliance on foreign investment, which greatly increases their vulnerability to global economic depressions such as the one experienced during the past few years. Furthermore, Arab economies are service-oriented, which means they have increasingly weakened their productive sectors.

Unemployment remains a major challenge. The Arab Labor Organization indicates that, in 2008, unemployment had risen to 14.4%, more than double the global rate of 6.3%. Although the rate varies from one Arab country to another, unemployment among young people is very high, exceeding 50% of the unemployed population. The average unemployment among youth in the region is 25.5%,⁶ which is the highest in the world. Moreover, persistent gender discrimination in the labour market has led to greater unemployment rates among women.

Equally pressing, aggregated poverty in the region now exceeds 39%, which means that almost 140 million Arab citizens are living below the upper poverty line and not enjoying their right to an adequate standard of living.⁷ National MDGs reports prepared by governments with technical assistance from UNDP indicate that the region will not be able to solve the challenge of famine. Estimations in 2004 showed that 25.5 million people

1 The author is grateful to Marc Van de Weil for his valuable assistance.

2 Organization for Economic Co-operation and Development (OECD), *Development aid rose in 2009 and most donors will meet 2010 aid targets*, Available from: <www.oecd.org/document/11/0,3343,en_2649_34447_44981579_1_1_1_1,00.html>.

3 Five Arab countries are considered to be LDCs: Comoros, Djibouti, Somalia, Sudan and Yemen.

4 Majed Azzam, *Assessing the MDGs in the Arab region: A Survey of Key Issues*, Arab NGO Network for Development (ANND), 2009.

5 UNDP Regional Bureau for Arab States, *Arab Human Development Report 2009: Challenges to Human Security in the Arab Countries*, New York, 2009.

6 Arab Labor Organization, 2003. See: <www.alolabor.org/>.

7 UNDP Regional Bureau for Arab States and League of Arab States, *Development Challenges in the Arab States: A Human Development Approach*, New York, May 2009.

faced famine and malnutrition, a significant increase compared to 1994.⁸ The report prepared by UNDP and the Arab League on development challenges in the region shows that, despite progress in Syria and Sudan on self-sufficiency in seeds, there has been no tangible progress in food security since 1990.⁹

ANND: the MDGs assessment

In 2000, 22 Arab leaders adopted the Millennium Declaration and pledged to achieve the MDGs by 2015. During the last decade, many political, economic and social developments have affected the reform processes in Arab countries. The “War on Terror” launched with the 2001 invasion and occupation of Afghanistan, the invasion and occupation of Iraq in 2003, the Israeli war on Lebanon in 2006, the continuous deterioration in the living conditions of the Palestinian people, especially after the siege of the Gaza Strip in 2007, as well as the internal conflicts erupting in countries such as Algeria, Lebanon, Somalia, Sudan and Yemen, have been among the main destabilizing events in the region. The situation is worsened by the devastating effects of the food crisis, climate change and the fluctuation in oil prices, negatively affecting domestic efforts to achieve development goals.

Despite these challenges, however, achieving the development goals is also the responsibility of existing national systems and institutions and, more specifically, the regimes and authorities currently in power. The ANND MDGs assessment therefore examined financing and development goals, gender issues and mainstreaming of the goals in national policies.

As far as financing and mobilizing resources for development and the MDGs is concerned, most Arab countries have failed to marshal local or regional resources as a result of ineffective policies oriented towards attracting foreign investments, aid and loans.¹⁰ Yet, foreign investments have not had the expected positive impacts so far; ODA was not allocated according to basic human needs and was quantitatively not sufficient to support governments in making the necessary progress to meet the goals. Moreover, countries lack public administrations that can manage the available resources. Ultimately, the impact of using loans to invest in non-productive sectors and economic activities led to an increase of the debt service in many Arab countries and was actually a setback to achieving the goals.

In regards to mainstreaming the MDGs in national policy-making and the overall evolution of MDGs processes at national levels, particularly the inclusion of various stakeholders and civil society organizations, slight progress has been achieved. However, the processes still lack adequate mechanisms for effective participation. Effective results are lacking due to the absence of functioning democratic institutions, high military spending, the burdens of demographic evolution, and economic policies that have led to increasing wealth disparities and mass unemployment. Within this context, governments in the Arab region have not integrated MDGs targets into their national development plans. Furthermore, global policies have contributed to squeezing their policy space, further constraining national efforts towards development.

Regarding the mainstreaming of a gender dimension into the MDG process, it must be noted that women in the Arab region remain generally excluded from political and economic life. At the root of this exclusion is the patriarchal structure of Arab societies and the influence of traditional and religious norms and values. One clear example is the number of significant reservations by all Arab states that have ratified the Convention on the Elimination of All Forms of Discrimination against Women (CEDAW), weakening its implementation. Excluding women from MDGs processes results in a waste of resources and opportunities for progress.

Thus, the economic models followed by Arab countries and the inadequate national strategies they put in place for social development are two major reasons behind the lack of progress on the MDGs front. Accordingly one of the recommendations for the future is institution building and extensive reformation of the political governance system in the region towards more transparency, accountability and responsibility.

Observations at the national level¹¹

Looking at the MDGs at the national level, a lack of governmental commitment to their achievement clearly surfaces. Although the declared official positions show a positive attitude towards the MDGs and highlight the necessity of their achievement, such positions remain strictly verbal and are not translated into actual governmental policies or into concrete national strategies or plans of action.

A comprehensive rights-based approach is lacking in economic and social policies. Poor governance practices are often the main underlying factors behind the ineffective use of resources. Moreover,

national contexts reveal weak political will to meet fundamental human needs and achieve progress on the provision of basic human rights. Instead, it becomes apparent that the various groups in power maintain a relation with citizens based on nepotism and the exploitation of unequal power relations, reinforced by their totalitarian and authoritarian nature. Four major factors are observed across various national contexts, and held to be directly or indirectly responsible for such problematic national contexts:

- The consistent lack of democracy, participation and good governance. This is reflected in weak political participation, opaque and unaccountable political systems, and unskilled, inefficient and unproductive public administrations. These are serious obstacles that prevent Arab countries from mobilizing and adequately using national resources, whether natural, financial or human.
- Systemic challenges related to the lack of transparency and integrity in public policies and in the delivery of social services. The absence of a human rights concept in national policy-making leads to a misunderstanding of the “State of rights.” Social protection and population well-being must be seen as intrinsic to human rights instead of as a gift from the politicians in power, which distorts the relation between the citizen and the state.
- A consistent lack of stability, security and peace in the region has contributed to structural instability and turbulence in development policies. This context has resulted in foreign investors’ limited interest in the Arab region, the waste of resources and means for development, and the low productivity rates caused by the mismanagement of time and resources.

The consistent lack of a rights-based approach in policy-making contributes to the lack of comprehensive national strategies for social development.

Additionally, the region shows a significant contrast between its economic and development indicators. Most oil-producing Arab countries have gone through a period of relatively positive economic growth due to the rise in oil prices. A spill-over effect of this is that the region, as a whole, has witnessed one of the best economic growth results in the world. However, this has not been reflected in progress on the development front, as most countries continue to show very low human development results. Indeed, given that the MDGs and development goals in general have not been a priority for Arab leaders, there has been no proper policy for wealth redistribution among countries as well as within countries in the region.

Despite such problematic contexts, many official MDGs reports have attempted to reflect a more

8 UNDP Regional Bureau for Arab States, *op. cit.*

9 UNDP Regional Bureau for Arab States and League of Arab States, *op. cit.*

10 See Ayah Mahgoub, 2009. Available from: <blogs.cgdev.org/global_prosperity_wonkcast/2010/03/09/cash-on-delivery-aid-ayah-mahgoub-on-cod-in-education>.

11 This section is based on reports by ANND members on the MDG process in Bahrain, Egypt, Jordan, Lebanon, Sudan, Tunisia and Yemen, which focused on national challenges and the relevance of the adopted policies, and highlighting a set of civil society recommendations to advance the MDGs.

positive situation. Consequently they have failed to formulate concrete and measurable indicators of governmental strategies, and often remain limited to abstract and normative recommendations for the future. In general, most official reports have falsely attempted to show the governments' commitment to allocating its resources to development targets and the MDGs. They have also tried to reflect confidence in attaining these goals by 2015. In doing so, they have failed to disclose the evident weaknesses in many national contexts.

Whereas most of the reports mention the inclusion of different stakeholders in the process of evaluating the MDGs, it is not clear to what extent this participation has been effective or what criteria have been used for including them. It is most likely that the tendency to include non-governmental partners from academia and civil society reflects the demands of UN and donor partners rather than genuine national participatory approaches.

Many reports over-emphasize the responsibility of donors for the inadequate level or conditional nature of their development assistance without at the same time addressing national policy-making and institutional performance problems. Examples are the Egyptian and Yemeni official MDGs reports.

The Saudi official MDGs report focuses only on achievements and fails to sufficiently identify existing challenges and weaknesses, nor does it put forward any recommendations for the future. The Bahrain report even avoids formulating any targets, claiming that Bahrain is not a "typical" developing country despite its clear commitment to addressing the challenges mentioned in its country report. An independent, neutral, and objective evaluation of the MDGs' monitoring process itself is commonly omitted, with the sole exception of the Palestinian report, which succeeded in depicting a more realistic account of the situation.

The official country reports for Bahrain, Lebanon, Jordan, Sudan, Yemen and the Palestinian Authority state that the MDG and related reporting processes are inclusive. Indeed, most of these reports result from the work of a technical committee supervised by the national ministries of planning (or other similar bodies) and have been technically and financially supported by the UN country offices, includ-

ing all relevant agencies. However the country reports for Egypt, Tunisia and Saudi Arabia were drafted by their governments with the support of UNDP alone. This raises questions about the relative neutrality, the accurate collection and representation of data, and the genuineness of the governments' attempts to achieve progress on the development front.

Observations from the Universal Periodic Review processes

Human rights in the Arab region are constantly violated by the states, an observation made in scores of reports including those issued by the UN and several international non-governmental organizations (NGOs) such as Human Rights Watch and Amnesty International. However, Arab states continue to insist on their reservations in relation to international human rights conventions, thus preventing any tangible developmental progress from materializing.

A particular problem is that social and economic rights in many Arab countries are not properly addressed by their governments. An analytical overview of the results from the Universal Periodic Reviews of several Arab countries undertaken under the auspices of the UN Human Rights Council reaffirms such observations.

In relation to the right to an adequate standard of living, including the rights to housing and to water, severe violations are seen in, for example, Egypt, Iraq and Yemen. The reviews concluded that more resources should be allocated to improve economic and social development measures, through policies to fight poverty, and to improve access to human rights.

In relation to the right to work, including working in adequate conditions, severe violations are seen in most Arab countries, particularly related to vulnerable working groups such as women and migrants. Child labour remains a challenge in addition to the high percentage of unemployment among young people compared to global levels.

As for the right to education, despite efforts undertaken, many Arab countries show limited access to basic education and high levels of illiteracy. While a number of them slightly improved quantitative education indicators, the quality of education with respect to the needs of the labour market remains a big concern.

As for the right to health although there has been an increase in governmental efforts to improve access to public health care, indicators do not confirm any relevant progress. This is probably due to the fact that the health sector in the region is largely concerned with implementing safety nets and targeting specific groups, and thus excludes a large number of people from health care programs and services.

Conclusions

In order to meet the MDGs by 2015, considerable additional efforts and political will are needed to enhance the adoption and implementation of developmental policies. Towards this end, concrete and measurable targets can serve as a tool to evaluate progress.

Enhancing the efficiency of public administrations remains a major challenge, and requires a number of concrete measures. Public servants should be trained to deal with people and their needs in a more respectful way, guided by a rights-based approach. Moreover, empowering public regulators and enhancing citizens' respect for these regulations is an important step towards improving the implementation of public policies and national strategies.

A sincere political commitment, reflected in concrete public policies and development implementation plans, should be based on integrity and transparency. Indeed, citizen participation through civil society organizations and other interest groups is an important factor to reach successful results. This calls for a reform of the administrative system in order to overcome the systemic character of corruption that weakens it. It is worth noting in this regard that the adoption and implementation of the UN Anti-Corruption Convention would contribute to reforming the system of public policy-making.

These recommendations are not easily achievable without explicit political commitment. There are three prerequisites for the above-mentioned recommendations: democracy for securing proper participation, accountability, and responsibility; good governance for securing appropriate resource mobilization and investment; and social justice for securing comprehensive and inclusive policies. Unfortunately, as these prerequisites are still missing, the region's inability to reach the MDGs by 2015 becomes only too apparent. ■