2.2 Implementing the MDGs at national level

All 189 UN member countries signed the Millennium Declaration, which committed countries to the achievement of the MDGs. Progress towards the MDGs is measured using 60 indicators. Drawing on statistical data, countries report back on their progress once a year. However, as you might expect, data availability and reliability have been a serious challenge in many countries. In some countries and for some indicators, there were no 1990 data to set a baseline against which progress could be measured. Many countries also lack administrative reporting systems to compile data on indicators such as the number of people with access to secure tenure or to affordable essential drugs.

Take a look at the indicators and choose the two you think are the easiest to monitor and the two you think are the hardest to measure.

The United Nations set up the Millennium Project (later replaced by the MDG Support Facility) to assist signatory countries who requested assistance in developing MDG-based national development strategies. These strategies could be benchmarked against the global MDGs or, alternatively, countries could set goals and targets appropriate to their local context.

In aid-dependent countries it is common for the national Poverty Reduction Strategy Paper to focus on actions that are designed to achieve particular MDGs within the country concerned.

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Consider the country in which you live or work (if it is a low- or middle- income country) or, alternatively, another country with which you are familiar. Reflect on the progress (or lack of it) with national development and poverty reduction that the country has made since 2000. In what way, if at all, have the MDGs contributed to this? Or, to put the same question the other way round, what difference in performance might you have observed if the MDGs had not existed?

Check your answer

Broadly speaking, the MDGs may have achieved an impact on national development or poverty reduction at country level through one of three routes:

- national leaders personally 'owned' the goals to which they had signed up and, as a result, directed the efforts of the state to meeting the goals
- aid donors reoriented their lending and support activities towards the pursuit of the MDGs in the countries in which they work. This in turn influenced the types of public investments made in these countries during the 2000s
- the existence of the MDGs, plus data on progress towards them at national level, provided 'ammunition' for the advocacy efforts of civil society organisations, which were, therefore, better able to hold governments and donors to account for their performance in public investment and service delivery

It is possible that none of these mechanisms was effective in some countries. For example, in some Asian countries, the state was already committed to rapid economic growth and investment in public service delivery, even without the encouragement of the MDGs. Few Asian countries are heavily donor dependent, so changing donor priorities probably had little effect in such places, and civil society organisations may also be weak. (Strength of civil society organisations varies from country to country).

Progress with democratisation notwithstanding, civil society organisations still have limited influence in many African countries, too. In a few such countries, national leaders have genuinely championed investment in pursuit of the MDGs. However, in some, the main mechanism through which the existence of the MDGs has affected in-country processes has probably been through the impact of the MDGs on donor priorities and investments.

Financing the MDGs

You might be asking yourself how poor developing countries can afford to raise the resources necessary to invest not only into growth strategies but simultaneously into health and education. However, recall that one of the drivers behind the development of the MDGs was the ambition of the DAC to renew commitment to international development assistance amongst donor countries. The MDGs as a whole have thus formed a basis on which to mobilise international resources for investing in poverty reduction and human development.

More specifically MDG 8 committed developed countries to contribute to the achievement of the MDGs by substantially increasing aid flows to developing countries. Unfortunately, unlike goals 1–6, goal 8 did not establish time-bound commitments or quantifiable indicators.

2.2.1 Regional breakdown of donor assistance to finance the investment needed to meet the MDGs

(In billions of 2003 US$)

	2006	2015
East Asia and Pacific	11.1	8.9
Europe and Central Asia	2.0	2.9
Latin America and Caribbean	0.7	1.3
Middle East and North Africa	0.9	1.4
South Asia	22.4	36.8
Sub-Saharan Africa	36.4	83.4

Source: UN Millennium Project (2005)

Does this seem a lot to you? Sachs (2005) argued that even though financing the MDGs would require a doubling of official development assistance (ODA), this amount would be less than the 0.7% of the GNP that developed countries were already officially committed to. However, although aid flows have increased, they have still been far from meeting the amounts specified in 2.2.1. The impact of the post-2008 financial and economic crisis in many donor nations has not helped here.