

# Arguments over interpretations of the UN's goals for development

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A reader accuses the Guardian of consistently overstating the achievements of the millennium development goals



United Nations secretary general Ban Ki-moon. Photograph: Don Emmert/Getty

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**A**s we welcome the SDGs, the sustainable development goals settled just over a week ago at the UN to improve the lives of the poor and hungry, so farewell to their predecessors, the MDGs. That stands for the millennium development goals, and is another ponderous abbreviation for a set of noble aims (*full disclosure: I am chair of Concern UK, a subsidiary of Concern Worldwide, an organisation that tackles hunger and extreme poverty*). The goals are close to the Guardian's heart, and have been written about a great deal by its journalists. However, one reader believes that the Guardian has (with others) misrepresented the MDGs.

As examples he cites a sidebar published as a piece of analysis on 7 July with the headline Why SDGs will be a harder sell than MDGs, and an editorial published on 20 July with the headline Global poverty has dropped but much remains to be done.

The reader says that the commitments made in the millennium declaration in 2000 committed to improvements based on that year, but when the MDGs were announced in 2001 the “goalposts” had been moved, he claims. The goals in 2001 were based on 1990 baselines and thus easier to achieve.

The reader wrote after the article on 7 July: “Yesterday’s story reads ‘Fifteen years after world leaders gathered in New York to agree an unprecedented global assault on poverty, disease and inequality, the final report is in on the eight millennium development goals they set ... if progress on the MDGs has been mixed ... their architects can at least claim that progress on ending extreme poverty has been spectacular: between 1990 and this year, the number of those living in extreme poverty has fallen from 1.9 billion to 836 million.’

“‘The final report is in on the eight millennium development goals they set’ is not correct. The report is on the MDG targets. The leaders in 2000 agreed to cut child and maternal mortality by the same proportions as in the later MDGs, but from ‘current rates’.”

After the editorial he wrote again: “I am afraid the Guardian has made the same mistake again: ‘In 1990, nearly half of the population in the developing world lived on less than \$1.25 a day’, and the ‘proportion of undernourished people has fallen by almost half, from 23.3% in 1990. The UN report might of course be discarded as just a self-serving vindication for some of the ambitions that the organisation set itself at the launch of the MDGs back in 2000, when promises were made’.

“The MDGs were not launched in 2000. The ambition for the promise made in 2000 is to achieve the targets from a 2000 baseline, as the report below correctly states - not a 1990 baseline. The MDG framework proposed in 2001 has the generally easier 1990 baselines.”

The interpretation of “current rates” is the issue. Nowhere in the millennium declaration is there a reference to a date. Liz Ford, the deputy editor of the Guardian’s Global development website, who has written extensively about the goals, but did not write the leader, said: “The comments about reducing maternal and child mortality rates refer to ‘current rates’, but what the UN would define as a current rate in 2000 is debatable. If they looked, their current rates would likely be 1990. The millennium declaration was always the aspiration, and it then fell to others to actually formulate targets that were measurable.”

The millennium declaration set out a broad framework for eradicating poverty in 2000 and the MDGs that followed a year later grew out of that declaration. While it is certainly true that the MDGs were based on 1990 and not 2000, one of the reasons is that was the first reliable set of data that would enable measurement in 2015, although there may well also have been some political expediency involved. However, neither Guardian article suggested that the MDGs were based on a baseline of the year 2000.

The reader is right that the MDGs came in 2001 after the millennium declaration of 2000 and in that regard there is a minor error in the editorial, which talks of the “launch of the millennium development goals back in 2000”. But that does not reach the threshold of a “significant” error as set out in the editorial code, which would require amendment and correction. I reject the complaint.

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