

Can the UN campaign against global hunger still succeed?

By [Bruce Duncan, C.Ss.R.](#)

An outstanding practical example of what social justice means are the UN [Millennium Development Goals](#) (MDGs), agreed on by practically every government in the world in 2001 to halve the extent of hunger and the worst poverty in developing countries by 2015.

Even before the current financial crisis, progress towards achieving the Goals was slow and unsteady. Most of the progress in lifting millions out of severe poverty occurred in China, a communist country, with little help from international financial institutions. The question now is how much the financial crisis will damage the UN campaign around the MDGs.

Significant economic advances to achieving the MDGs have also been occurring in India and some other parts of Asia, but sub-Saharan Africa in particular had made only limited progress, or in some countries was going backwards. Much depended on the politics and circumstances of individual countries, but further progress has been severely hampered by the lack of funds and the failure of wealthy countries to deliver on their earlier pledges of financial aid.

At the special UN forum on the MDGs in September 2008, the UN [Secretary General, Ban Ki-moon](#), said that no

African country would achieve the MDGs by 2015, but the Goals were still achievable if funding were forthcoming. The MDG Steering Group assessed that \$US72 billion a year was needed to achieve the Goals by 2015. However, as another speaker at the special UN forum pointed out, the G8 nations had only provided \$2.4 billion since 2004.



The [UN Millennium Development Goals Report 2008](#) stated that official development assistance had dropped from a high of \$107.1 billion in 2005, to \$104.4 billion in 2006 and \$103.7 billion in 2007. 'This was mainly as a result of a decline in debt relief grants. Adjusting for changes in prices and exchange rates, aid disbursements fell by 8.4 per cent in 2007 compared to 2006. Excluding debt relief grants, net aid rose by 2.4 per cent in constant dollars.' In 2005, the developed nations pledged to lift ODA from \$80 billion to

\$130 billion by 2010 at 2004 prices.²

In the English *Guardian*, [John Hilary](#) wrote that the UK Labour government when first in office in 1997 had promised to give aid at 0.7 per cent of GNI at the end of its first

term, but in 2008 it had only reached 0.36 per cent. Hilary called for reform of the rules of trade so developing companies could have greater access to international trade, greater debt remission, and reforms to prevent multinational companies avoiding paying taxes in developing countries, amounting to \$250 billion a year, enough to pay for the entire MDG program.³

A major effort to reduce maternal mortality in sub-Saharan Africa has largely failed to make progress since 2000. The maternal death rate in sub-Saharan Africa is one hundred times that in developed regions. About 1 woman in every 22 dies from preventable complications related to childbirth.⁴ Yet elsewhere, as in Sri Lanka, there have been great improvements, due in part to the training of enough midwives. The point is, the lives of many thousands of women could readily be saved if the resources were available.

On the down-side, recent figures from the World Bank dismiss earlier suggestions that the numbers of people in absolute poverty had fallen below 1 billion, and instead estimated the number at 1.4 billion, a quarter of all people in the developing world. Rising food prices are thought to have added a further 100 million to that estimate.

But the situation is not hopeless. Jeffrey Sachs pointed out that many poor farmers could double or even triple their food production if they had access to simple technologies, improved seed, credit and fertiliser. Using these means, Malawi had doubled its food production in three years. The World Bank was now supporting these practices, and hoped to double food production in many poorer regions within five years.⁵

The news was also brighter in the fight against malaria. On 25 September, world leaders in New York announced they were backing a plan aiming to end the one million annual deaths from malaria by 2015 with funding of \$US3 billion. The Gates Foundation added \$168.7 million to improve a vaccine now in the final stage of trials. It was hoped that the new vaccine, known as RTS,S, would be approved by 2013. In trials it had reduced malaria cases by 30% and halved the number of children severely affected by malaria. Work is continuing to develop a vaccine to give babies total immunity to malaria.⁶

At the end of the UN General Assembly meeting, richer countries pledged a further \$16 billion to fund the MDGs,⁷ far from enough, but in the circumstances public opinion will have to maintain strong pressure on governments to ensure even this minimal is delivered.

Despite the setbacks to the Millennium Development Goals, it is critical that public opinion becomes better informed, and understands that significant and rapid progress is still possible.

1. *UN Africa and MDGs High-level Events Bulletin*, Vol. 153, No. 5, 28 September 2008.
2. United Nations Department of Economic and Social Affairs, *The Millennium Development Goals Report 2008*, (New York: August 2008), 44.
3. John Hilary, *The Guardian*, 25 September 2008.
4. United Nations Department of Economic and Social Affairs, *The Millennium Development Goals Report 2008*, (New York: August 2008), 25.
5. Jeffrey D Sachs, 'A new deal for poor farmers', in *Project Syndicate*, 2008.
6. Sarah Boseley, *The Guardian*, 26 September 2008.
7. 'Developing Development', *The Guardian*, 27 September 2008.