

## **From the United Nations: Development Achievements and New Goals**

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Surprisingly, given the terrible news we read daily and the barbaric images we see on TV, there is good news. All over the world, extreme abject poverty has decreased sharply. In 1990 almost half the population in developing regions was extremely poor. The rate of poverty has dropped to about 15%. Almost a billion people have been lifted out of extreme poverty. This is an historic achievement from the time when living on the margins of subsistence was the norm.

In conjunction with the dramatic fall in extreme poverty there is a rising global middle-class. The Brookings Institution estimates about a billion people in the middle class, expected to grow to 3 billion by the end of the decade and to 5 billion by 2030. For example, in Brazil poverty decreased from almost 40% of the population in 2001 to around 25% in 2009, 31 million joined the middle class. Today 52% in Brazil is middle class. There is also substantial growth in the rest of the emerging world, in Latin America and in Africa.

Sales of refrigerators, TV sets, mobile phones, automobiles have surged in many African countries. For example, in Ghana possession of cars and motorcycles has increased by 80% since 2006. The rising middle class can create political problems because of rising expectations which governments may not be able to handle. Also, the middle class is likely to adopt western life styles, which will impact negatively on the environment and climate change.

In 2000, one hundred heads of states, the largest meeting of world leaders in history, gathered in New York for the United Nations Millennium Summit to set ambitious goals known as the Millennium Development Goals (MDG). There were eight goals to be achieved by 2015. These Goals, for the world's well-being, are designed to free a major portion of humanity from the shackles of extreme poverty, hunger, and gender inequality. Also to increase primary education; reduce child mortality; promote maternal health, sanitation, and clean water.

These goals have galvanized much public support and have achieved notable successes. For example, Goal 1 was to reduce the rate of extreme poverty in developing countries by half compared to what it was in 1990. This goal was achieved in 2010. Another goal was to halve the portion of the world's hungry. In 1990, 25% of those living in the developing world were starving. By 2012 this figure had fallen to 12%. It should be noted that feeding the world is not a question of growing more food. The Food and Agricultural Organization has reported that the world produces twice the amount its population needs. Hunger is due to poverty. Even in the US, many go to bed hungry not because there is no food but because they don't have the money to buy it.

The likelihood of a child dying before age 5 has been nearly cut in half over the last two decades. That means about 17,000 are saved from death every day. However one has to be careful with averages. There is wide variation in child mortality. For example children born in Angola are 84 times more likely to die before they turn 5 than children born in Luxembourg. Globally, the maternal mortality rate has dropped, but far too many women still die in childbirth, which is mostly preventable with proper care. Reflecting the prevailing terrible condition of women, nearly half of all pregnant women do not see a doctor during their pregnancy. This goal was not met.

The UN is currently discussing the post-2015 development agenda. The MDGs were aimed at improving the well-being of the world's poorest people. The new agenda aims to be universal. This new agenda referred to as the "sustainable development goals" (SDGs) will be negotiated at a major International Summit in September 2015 to be effective through 2030. The current discussions have led to a list of 17 goals. Some continue the MDGs. Goal 1 is to end poverty altogether. Is this possible? This is very ambitious. One notable fact about poverty nowadays is that well over half of the one billion people with very low income are living in middle-income countries, with the financial and technological means to address their remaining poor, as Brazil and China have done in recent years. It is a political problem. What are new environmental concerns as well as ensuring sustainable consumption and production patterns. Another important goal is action to deal with climate change.

The MDGs were reasonably easy to state and fitted well on one poster. The 17 goals will be difficult to market. Where else but the UN could one envision such an ambitious agenda for the well-being of the world's population. The MDGs have been mostly successful so we can hope. The UN was founded after the devastation of World War 2. One primary aim was to prevent another world war. Such a war has not happened.

The UN has often legitimately been accused of being ineffective such as in Syria, the Ukraine, terrorism, the Sudan Congo and Gaza. The political arm of the UN is the Security Council. It often can't function because of the veto. The right of the veto has enabled the permanent members to reject actions, which go counter their strategic interests. France and Britain both support the idea of limiting the veto power in cases of mass atrocities. This proposal has unfortunately been rejected by China, Russia, and the United States.

Is the world a more dangerous place? Surprisingly, the number of armed conflicts is down by more than one third since the end of the cold war. By 2008 high-intensity wars were down by nearly 80%. Since most conflicts since the cold war have been within countries rather than between countries they have been less lethal. However, since the advent of saturation video and media coverage of the news, overall impressions of peace and war can be misleading. The world still faces serious problems...but would we be better off without the UN?