

Africa struggles with MDGs

From News24

Summary

It's five years to go before the 2015 deadline set for the fulfillment of the Millennium Development Goals (MDGs). The MDGs are a set of targets established by the United Nations in 2000, aimed at responding to the world's development challenges, among them the alleviation of poverty. Of late, UN chief Ban Ki-moon has been calling for acceleration in the fulfillment of the MDGs but for most of the African continent, the dream to achieve the targets seems far from being realised as a number of countries continue to suffer political and economic instabilities.

The Regional MDG Policy Advisor for the United Nations Development Programme (UNDP) in South Africa, Osten Chulu, spoke to News24's Betha Madhomu about Africa's progress and challenges.

Africa struggles with MDGs

It's five years to go before 2015, the year set out as the deadline for the fulfillment of the Millennium Development Goals (MDGs). What progress would you say has been made so far towards the achievement of these goals in Africa?

Chulu: From a global perspective, considerable progress has been made in achieving some of the MDGs. For instance, the overarching goal of reducing absolute poverty by half is within reach for the world as a whole, but Africa, especially the sub-Saharan region is seriously lagging behind.

News24: Is it possible for you to give a breakdown of figures related to the general performance in as far as the achievement of these goals is concerned? You could also try and indicate Africa's efforts.

Chulu: Generally the figures show that primary school enrolment is at least 90%, the gender parity index in primary education is 95% or higher in six of the 10 regions, including the most populous ones.

Deaths from measles fell from over 750 000 in 2000 to less than 250 000 in 2006, and about 80% of children in developing countries now receive a measles vaccine.

The number of deaths from Aids fell from 2.2 million in 2005 to 2.0 million in 2007, and the number of people newly infected declined from 3.0 million in 2001 to 2.7 million in 2007.

Malaria prevention is expanding, with widespread increases in insecticide-treated net use among children under five in sub-Saharan Africa. In 16 out of 20 countries, the use of these nets has at least tripled since around 2000.

The incidence of tuberculosis is expected to be halted and begin to decline before the target date of 2015.

Some 1.6 billion people have gained access to safe drinking water since 1990; the use of ozone-depleting substances has been almost eliminated and this has contributed to the effort to reduce global warming; the share of developing countries' export earnings devoted to servicing external debt fell from 12.5% in 2000 to 6.6% in 2006, allowing them to allocate more resources to

reducing poverty; and, the private sector has increased the availability of some critical essential drugs and rapidly spread mobile phone technology throughout the developing world.

News24: Quite some interesting figures. But what would you say are some of the challenges Africa as a developing continent is faced with in its effort to try and meet the goals?

Chulu: Yes, let me say that, despite the advances made so far, a lot of challenges still remain and urgent action is required for us to have any meaningful impact.

For instance, the proportion of people in sub-Saharan Africa living on less than \$1 per day is unlikely to be reduced by the target of one-half. About one quarter of all children in developing countries are considered to be underweight and are at risk of having a future blighted by the long-term effects of undernourishment.

Of the 113 countries that failed to achieve gender parity in both primary and secondary school enrolment by the target date of 2005, only 18 are likely to achieve the goal. And talking about gender disparities, in one third of developing countries, women account for less than 10% of parliamentarians.

More than 500 000 prospective mothers in African countries die annually in childbirth or of complications from pregnancy; some 2.5 billion people, almost half the developing world's population, live without improved sanitation; more than one third of the growing urban population in developing countries live in slum conditions; Carbon dioxide emissions have continued to increase, despite the international timetable for addressing the problem, and this has serious negative implications for Africa; and developed countries' foreign aid expenditures declined for the period covering 2007-2009 and risk falling short of the commitments made in 2005.

News24: So in a nutshell, what would you say are some of the major constraints that are hindering Africa's success – what are the setbacks?

Chulu: In Africa by far, the greatest challenges lie in reducing poverty, achieving gender parity, maternal mortality and HIV and Aids. The reasons are many and include issues of accountability and transparent governance systems in the case of poverty and hunger, lack of capacities – both human and financial - in mitigating preventable causes of death among prospective mothers, and in HIV and Aids, we have seen an overemphasis on curative interventions at the expense of preventive ones. Indeed with HIV and Aids, a holistic approach is required at all fronts. Amongst the setbacks are non-responsive governance structures in many countries, complacency, the lackluster performance of development partners in releasing the much needed resources which have been pledged since 2002 at Monterrey through the commitments made in 2005 at Gleneagles and the recent re-affirmations in Accra and so on. The recent food price crisis, as well as the global recession have exacerbated the already dire situation currently facing the continent.

News24: Are there any pointers to the fact that some of these challenges can be overcome and that Africa as a continent can meet the 2015 deadline?

Chulu: The progress I have referred to earlier is an indication that with concerted efforts, some progress can be made in many of the MDGs that are now lagging behind. Firstly, with the Gleneagles scenario initiative (The G8 summit in Gleneagles made specific commitments of an additional \$50 billion a year by 2010 for fighting poverty. The resources have not been forthcoming on account of a general perception that recipient countries have no capacity to absorb these resources. The Gleneagles scenarios set out to demonstrate to the G8 that Africa is ready to receive the resources for the MDGs), we have demonstrated that most African states can be able to absorb scaled-up resources for MDG consistent programmes. In addition, with the current MDG Breakthrough strategy – which includes what we call the MDG Acceleration framework, efforts are being made to identify bottlenecks on a country-by-country basis and remedial quick-win solutions developed and implemented. The rollout of vaccines has gone a

long way in mitigating child and infant mortality, while the ARV rollout campaign is paying dividends in prolonging peoples' lives. Challenges are still there, but where there is a will, a way will be found.

News24: But why is it that Africa seems to be lagging behind when there is almost one standard of measuring the success? Asia, which is also a developing continent, for instance, seems to be doing well.

Chulu: The one standard of measuring progress is essential in that it is the only way in which we can actually tell who is lagging behind. Africa, as you rightly say, appears to be lagging behind in many of the MDGs. There are many factors which vary from country to country. Among the common ones, poor governance structures are to blame, and here, we distinguish between economic governance and democratic/political governance. Lack of transparency, poor accountability structures as well as the interlinkages between education, health, literacy and low productivity as well as various cultural impediments all combine to make it very difficult to make any headway.

News24: Are there any African states that can be said to be at least closer to achieving the goals and if so what mechanism have they employed to effect this?

Chulu: Indeed there are some countries which have significant strides in achieving the MDGs. Mauritius and Seychelles, Kenya, Ghana, Malawi, Botswana, Rwanda and Namibia all have made some strides in some of the MDGs. Again, public accountability, combined with governance structures have contributed. Some of these countries are natural resource rich, while others simply are serious with their development programmes and strategies. Resources play a key role in addressing some of the challenges mentioned earlier.

News24: When the targets were adopted in 2000, what would you say were some of the recommendations made towards achieving the MDGs? Just how were the countries supposed to meet the targets looking at the gap that exists in the accessibility of funds in different countries all over the world?

Chulu: The Millennium Declaration was adopted in 2000 and the Goals and their targets agreed to in 2001. Of course the recommendations were that Governments would spare no effort in striving to achieve the goals, while the richer countries would make resources available for the implementation of MDG-related programmes. The issues I have raised about accountability, transparency, good governance, respect of all forms of human rights were all packaged to try and ensure that the goals would be achieved, or that at least progress would be made towards their achievement.

News24: Obviously different sectors in different countries have a role to play in the achievement of the set goals. How would you describe the keenness of Africa's private sector in making this a reality?

Chulu: The trend in the past has been to leave matters such as the achievement of the MDGs in the hands of governments. It is now recognised that the private sector is critical in addressing the overarching goal of poverty reduction through the provision of employment as well as business opportunities to harness human potential to move out of poverty. Africa's private sector is willing – but a conducive environment has to be created by governments to enable the private sector to thrive. In many countries, there is now a move towards “Private sector-led poverty reduction strategies”.

News24: How has the recent economic downturn impacted on the efforts to meet the goals on the African continent?

Chulu: There have been serious reversals to some of the MDGs. Major advances in the fight against extreme poverty from 1990 to 2005, for example, are likely to have stalled.

News24: Of late the UN chief has been calling for an acceleration in the fulfillment of the MDGs – how achievable and realistic is this considering it's been 10 years since the targets were adopted?

Chulu: The acceleration called upon by the UN-SG is a call for all countries to build upon some of the successes so far realised and accelerate on those targets still lagging behind. It is in the form of a surge in implementation of quick-win solutions to identified bottlenecks. The call is based on the premise that a combination of right policies and actions, backed by adequate funding and strong political commitment, can yield results.

In the past 10 years, progress had been sluggish in some of the goals for various reasons – but mainly due to the slow disbursement of resources committed to the advancement of programmes for MDGs. It is envisaged that with renewed vigour emanating from the work done in the Gleneagles scenarios, in resource mobilisation, progress is likely to be accelerated.

News24: A summit on the MDGs is set to be held in September this year. What are some of the issues on the agenda?

Chulu: The issues are still being refined for the September Summit, but will include the MDG Breakthrough strategy and MDG Acceleration framework which will set the pace for national engagement on MDGs in the next five years. It will also focus on resource mobilisation and financing through the Gleneagles scenarios, Aid effectiveness and reaffirm alignment of development assistance to national MDG-based strategies and programmes.

News24: From what you've just said, it appears the aim is to boost progress towards the fulfillment of the MDGs. But what has been happening in the last 10 years? Is there likely to be anything new that will speed up progress before the deadline?

Chulu: It is up to world leaders to come up with innovative approaches. To reach the 2015 target, each nation will have important and immediate choices to make. The MDG breakthrough strategy is designed to ensure that the UN system effectively supports partners as they make those choices - in diagnostics that fully reflect reality, in determining which policies will yield the best impact, and in implementing programmes to ensure faster progress and sustain hard-won gains.

While there are important issues at the global and regional levels that relate to the MDGs, the pivotal action must be taken at the national level. Each nation is unique, with its own constraints and breakthrough opportunities. This strategy, therefore, is a framework to help each country to identify the obstacles to progress and to scale up the specific, high-value interventions that will make the biggest difference.

Nurturing leaders for positive change is at the heart of this work and essential for local and national breakthroughs. At the core of the Breakthrough Strategy is the need for 'business unusual', to address the outstanding challenges facing off-track MDGs between now and 2015. The Strategy avoids reinventing the wheel by leveraging experience gathered to date to better target UNDP interventions on the MDGs.

<http://www.news24.com/Africa/News/Africa-struggles-with-MDGs-20100408>