



Defining ‘aspirational yet attainable targets’ for new goals post-2015

Global targets gave the Millennium Development Goals (MDGs) much of their mobilising power. However, at a national level, the use of the same targets has skewed our assessment of progress in many countries, particularly the poorest. Some countries have not achieved the targets despite impressive rates of progress on different outcomes, while for others the targets were irrelevant from the outset, given that their starting point was above the target level.

In response to this, a two-fold consensus is developing. On the one hand, post-2015 goals should be ambitious commitments to eradicate the worst deprivations and set the world on a sustainable course. On the other hand, the specific commitments which countries make towards these global ambitions, in the form of targets, will need to take a more nationally specific approach if they are to be useful as an accountability mechanism. A recent discussion at the Open Working Group on Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs) suggested that targets should be specific, measurable objectives that are ‘aspirational yet attainable; nationally relevant and adaptable, and evidence-based’.

Achieving this will be a difficult political and technical challenge. While there might be a global consensus on what is ‘aspirational’, the definition of ‘attainable’ will vary significantly for different countries, depending on their starting points. The evidence of the last 15 years demonstrates that improvements in people’s lives across different dimensions of progress occur at different rates across countries, depending primarily on countries’ starting positions on specific indicators.

Targets for the post-2015 framework

How can targets that are both aspirational and attainable be set in the real world? It is very likely that any new post-2015 goals will contain aspirations to ‘get to zero’ on different dimensions of poverty. This will be an inspiring global ambition, and one that can and should be met for as many elements of human development as possible. However, to assume that it can be met for all targets for all countries by 2030 is to set a large number of the world’s governments up for failure before the ink is even dry on the new goals. Targets will have to be set to reconcile ambitious global goals with national realities, and to indicate what might be recognised as good progress towards the goals within the timeframe of a new agreement.

The global targets in the MDGs were set by extrapolating global trends. In a similar way, extrapolating existing patterns of progress at the national level, and using these as reference points, would provide a more realistic way of calculating the extent to which new targets might be considered ‘attainable’. However, calculating patterns of historical progress for each country would be technically cumbersome, overly complex, and unlikely to be possible given data gaps. A simpler approach is needed.

The evidence suggests that it is possible to identify groups of countries for which similar rates of progress could be expected between 2015 and 2030, based on historical patterns of progress on different indicators. If this approach were to be used to inform target-setting for post-2015 goals,

attainable rates of progress for each group could then be identified, based on historical progress, plus a 'stretch' of say 10% to encourage ambition. This approach would have a number of advantages:

- **Universality:** a target could be calculated for all countries, not just those below a certain level.
- **Differentiation:** differentiation between countries on the basis of evidence and technical criteria would provide a clear and predictable set of targets, set in a transparent and rigorous way.

Defining what is 'attainable' on the basis of starting points for groups of countries, rather than setting individual national targets, would provide greater coherence to the target-setting process, avoiding unnecessary complexity and helping to compensate for data gaps.

This approach could be used in two ways: either as an agreed framework for determining targets or as a reference framework to use as a starting point for national-level target-setting. In each case, the groups would differ for the various targets. While two countries may have similar starting points on maternal mortality, for example, and thus similar rates of progress could be expected, their starting points on educational outcomes might vary, and thus their targets for an education goal would be different.

There may be reasons why individual countries would deviate from historical patterns and chose to be more ambitious in their national targets, but this approach could provide a starting point for a discussion about national-level rates of progress towards global goals based on a realistic approach to universality and differentiation.

Example: targets for a goal to end preventable maternal mortality

Evidence on rates of progress for groups of countries: Experience of the last two decades indicates that the rate of change in the maternal mortality rate (MMR) was relatively high for countries with higher initial levels of maternal mortality, relatively low for countries with median rates of maternal death, and higher again thereafter. On the basis of this evidence, reference points to assess attainable progress towards this goal between 2015 and 2030 could be:

Group 1: Countries with over 530 maternal deaths per 100,000 live births; reduce maternal mortality by 32% between 2015 and 2030.

Group 2: Countries with MMR between 110 and 530; reduce maternal mortality by 25% between 2015 and 2030.

Group 3: Countries with MMR between 28 and 110; reduce maternal mortality by 62% between 2015 and 2030.

Group 4: Countries with an MMR of less than 28 maternal deaths per 100,000 live births; Reduce maternal mortality ratio to below 13, trying to reach *zero preventable maternal deaths* by 2030.

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Background:

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