

How business can help make healthy progress on the Millennium Development Goals

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The Millennium Development Goals (MDGs) was one of the main items on the agenda of the G8 conference this month in Italy, with discussions about how to meet the UN's ambitious targets for 2015, including eradicating extreme poverty and hunger, achieving universal primary education and halting the spread of HIV/AIDS.

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A mixed picture has emerged on the progress which has been made on the MDGs so far. Work to reduce global income poverty has proved remarkably efficient, while attempts to reach other targets such as reducing childhood malnutrition have been painstakingly slow. Much more work needs to be done, and part of this work must inevitably include a role for business and the private sector.

Fostering business interest

A recent report on the MDGs by the European Commission, published in September 2008 **(1)**, gives an indication of the extent to which fostering business interest is crucial in achieving development objectives.

In the long run, the most general lesson from development experience is probably to create an investment environment favourable to private investment,

the report says. "Much wealth in Africa and Latin America is still held outside the region, the result of capital flight. Part of it would come back if the investment climate and investment opportunities were to improve."

The important role that businesses can play in helping to reach global development goals such as the MDGs is supported by high-level organisations such as the UN Global Compact, an initiative which helps businesses align their operations and strategies with ten universally accepted principles in the areas of human rights, labour, environment and anti-corruption.

"The role of business in creating employment, wealth and services has been grossly overlooked in the entire MDG campaign, says Georg Kell, Executive Director of the UN Global Compact Office. "Most historians I think would agree that successful development can only happen if there is a broad-based collective will to bring improvements about, and this in turn can only happen once you unleash private investment and entrepreneurial activities."

The role of responsible business

Kell argues that reaching the MDGs will be dependent on the availability of employment opportunities and opportunities for sustained income which, he says can only come from responsible business investment in the right places. The fallout from the economic crisis has unfortunately led to many businesses withdrawing from poor markets and the closure of many corporate foundations, but Kell has observed among businesses a change in perspective which may prove advantageous in the long run:

"The financial crisis has driven home some core messages. Sustainable success cannot be based on the quarterly chase of profits; instead the premium must be on long-term value creation. There is a need to come up with forward-looking, risk management concepts which go beyond the financial bottom line. Markets need sound ethics and values. These messages are now much better understood than two or three years ago. The demand and the search for ethics and sustainability have moved up on the agenda significantly."

Health inequalities

Part of this new focus could be to consider what role business play in efforts to maintain a healthy labour force and therefore contribute to a healthy, sustainable economy. The importance of ensuring a better level of health for everyone was recently highlighted by UN Secretary-General Ban-Ki-Moon, who said that "Health is the tie that binds all of the Millennium Development Goals together. If we fail to meet our targets on health, we will never overcome poverty, illiteracy, achieve universal education and meet the other MDG challenges."

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The WHO has also drawn attention to the importance of working towards removing the existing inequalities in health, which occur as a result of the conditions in which people live and their access to money, power and resources.

Dr Kumanan Rasanathan, of the WHO's Department of Ethics, Equity, Trade and Human Rights, explains why these "social determinants" are important.

If we don't address the social determinants of health, it's very unlikely that we can achieve the MDGs in general

he says. "We have more knowledge, more resources, more experience, more money, but all those resources aren't being applied equitably, and that has meant that progress has been uneven. We have a much greater understanding of what is required, but the problem is that inequities have actually widened, because of this uneven progress, and what is required is a much more developed system of measuring those inequities and using intersectoral action to bridge them. Addressing the social determinants of health is something we haven't done enough of. "

If we can strive towards improving these conditions and tackling unfair differences in health, says Rasanathan, it will require us to work in a way which brings together all of these things we are trying to do across different groups of people. It helps us to focus on what it is we are aiming for overall, and this can be very useful towards accelerating progress on the MDGs. Kell agrees that supporting the collective goodwill is essential if businesses are to succeed at all.

"Businesses have gone global and are beginning to see that many of their basic assumptions of the traditional business models – global integration, supply chains, value chains – are seriously under threat if the collective good that supports market development is not nurtured and taken care of. Business has many of the solutions that are needed, and to mobilise these solutions is critical if we are to make real progress."

(1) "Millennium Development Goals at Midpoint: Where do we stand and where do we need to go?", accessed 29 June 2009 and available from [The European Commission](#)

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