

# **What Needs to Be Done: The U.N. Millennium Goals**

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It is difficult to imagine a world free of all social and political atrocities. Nevertheless, the United Nations has set out to do just this. With the Millennium Development Goals, aimed to eradicate poverty, end diseases, provide primary education, and promote gender equality and environmental sustainability, the U.N. has generated a list of tangible steps to fulfill its objectives. However, tackling these issues and “fixing” the world is not this simple. As we have learned this semester, numerous factors, specific to each impoverished region, can positively or negatively affect the economic and social prosperity of its citizens. With new, innovative forms of aid and the continuing evolution of social dynamics, the goals previously hindered by geography and culture will be attainable within my lifetime. However, if political instability and corruption are not addressed, the eradication of poverty will remain impossible to achieve.

Although it has been ten years since the Millennium Development Goals were established, the sheer number of people who are suffering from poverty or who do not have access to education remains inconceivable. A total of 2.7 billion people, nearly forty percent of the world population, live off less than \$2 a day.<sup>1</sup> With only \$2 to spend, citizens in undeveloped countries cannot afford to feed or provide health necessities for their families. For this reason, many children fall victim to the consequences of poverty. Three hundred million children are malnourished and six million a year die from diseases that can be cured by simple medications or basic sanitation.<sup>2</sup> Yet, because these families cannot afford or do not have access to any health necessities, bacterial and viral diseases spread rapidly throughout these countries. With the attention turned towards keeping their families alive, parents often cannot send their children to school, causing half of the children

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in impoverished regions to be denied the opportunity to attend primary school.<sup>3</sup> Furthermore, countries stricken with severe poverty have little energy to focus on promoting gender equality. Statistics state that educated women are significantly less likely to die of AIDS and more likely to take care of their children, but only sixty percent of girls in Africa actually have access to primary education.<sup>4</sup> The sheer numbers and percentages representing the amount of poverty in the world often discourage organizations and individuals from believing that policies and programs can bring change. However, these statistics prove the importance of the Millennium Development Goals, and they reinforce how vital such targets are in improving the overall condition of the world.

Although geography, and other such immutable forces, prevents people in many impoverished communities from accessing medical facilities, the goals directed towards improving global health are achievable nonetheless. The United Nations has set a high value on improving world health with three out of the eight Millennium Development Goals directed towards addressing medical needs. Firstly, the U.N. aims to reduce the mortality rate of children under the age of five by two-thirds and maternal mortality by three-fourths. Additionally, the U.N. aims to stop the spread of HIV/AIDS, malaria, and other major diseases by creating universal access to health facilities and medication.<sup>5</sup> Currently, the geography in rural areas makes it difficult for sick citizens to visit the few hospitals established in developing countries. Without proper infrastructure, such as roads, these people, weakened by sicknesses or malnutrition, are challenged to make the long journey to healthcare facilities in rough or mountainous terrain. In a Millennium Village report on the Koraro community in Ethiopia, Nicholas Kristof states, "The limiting factor for better health is less about medicine and more about infrastructure."<sup>6</sup> Although receiving sufficient medical supplies is simple, the real problem is the lack of infrastructure to landlocked, isolated villages, where geography does not promote the creation of roads. In Nigeria, meningitis victims are physically incapable of walking to hospitals and receiving antibiotics.<sup>7</sup> The difficulty of accessing hospitals discourages many struggling communities from seeking professional healthcare, resulting in the spread of more diseases, as well as a higher mortality rate.

To address these health problems perpetuated by geography, the United Nations and non-government organizations must focus on creating more health centers within different regions of undeveloped countries. If more hospitals are established, families will not have to travel as far to seek medical attention, which will subsequently improve the health in these regions. One innovative method of spreading healthcare is to establish basic health clinics, with vitamins and simple medicines, in association with schools. Currently, hospitals in rural regions in the Developing World have difficulty maintaining a constant workforce due to the difficult conditions and low wages for the employees. Hopefully, an established school will attract nurses and doctors to careers in the associated health facilities. Additionally, children will be more likely to receive basic healthcare since they will already be attending school. With the overall improvement of child health, medical facilities will be able to prevent the spread of diseases, rather than simply treating them. Furthermore, by adding medical centers to schools, parents and adults will feel less intimidated to seek professional aid since the schools are already entrusted with the well-being of the community's children. By building more hospitals and clinics, communities in rural areas will have the opportunity to receive medical services, further reducing child mortality, improving maternal health, and combating the spread of diseases.

Similarly, the Millennium Development Goal aimed towards spreading universal primary education is attainable, as long as the United Nations can limit the obstacles of geography. Just as geography limits communities from receiving medical attention, many children in undeveloped regions do not have access to schools. In rural areas, where every community does not have an education facility, children must travel long distances to reach the nearest available school.<sup>8</sup> In an article about education in Zimbabwe, Nicholas Kristof wrote about a boy, Abel, who walked a total of six hours every day to attend school. Although some children, like Abel, are willing to travel such long distances to receive an education, many others are discouraged by such a walk. Natural disasters in countries without established infrastructure also prevent students from attending school. In 2010, Pakistan experienced detrimental flooding throughout their country, destroying over 10,000

schools.<sup>9</sup> Due to the flooding, over 1.3 million children are still unable to receive an education because their schools and transportation systems were destroyed and not replaced. Although geography and weather are uncontrollable, these obstacles prevent children from attending school in developing regions around the world.

The geography of a region influences the economies of various countries, preventing children from receiving an education. Many communities, isolated from cities and industrial jobs, turn to agricultural work to supply an income and feed their families. Whether the geography limits the success of the farmers or enhances it with nutrient-rich terrain and good weather, an agricultural economy requires a large workforce to plant and harvest crops. Often, families rely on the children to contribute to the income by working in the fields or pursuing other jobs. In Kosovo, children in both rural and urban areas are pressured to work as farmers or factory laborers to help support their families.<sup>10</sup> Since the children are expected to work all day, they do not have the opportunity to attend school. As these children grow older, their lack of education will limit their job opportunities, subsequently trapping them and their future families in this perpetual cycle of poverty.

Even though geography currently places a substantial limitation on the spread of universal education, the U.N. and NGOs can achieve their goals by making schools more accessible and appealing to families. One approach to improving education rates is to build more schools in regions around the world, reducing the distance children must travel. However, simply building more schools will not automatically spread universal primary education. Along with having a facility, governments and NGOs must provide school supplies and employ a permanent teaching staff. The United Nations and non-government organizations must be willing to allot resources towards buying sufficient learning materials and encouraging teachers to work at schools in impoverished areas. Free the Children, a non-profit organization, focuses on eradicating poverty through education in rural areas. Through its emphasis on “children helping children” around the world, Free the Children has created an innovative way of attracting American and Canadian support to end international social injustices. They have built

650 schools in seven different countries, helping over 55,000 children receive an education.<sup>11</sup>

A second approach to making schools more accessible for children is to provide a mode of transportation for the students. Although providing transportation for every child is a daunting task, innovative methods of getting students to and from school can increase the education rates in rural areas. Abel, the boy in Zimbabwe, wanted a bike to reduce the time he spent traveling to school.<sup>12</sup> After Kristof's article was published, an American organization, the World Bicycle Relief, sent 200 more bicycles to Abel's village, dramatically increasing the attendance at the local school. If schools around the world invested in innovative techniques of transportation, such as bikes, children would be able to travel to school, further increasing universal primary education rates.

Another tactic to make education more appealing to children and their families is to offer free lunches for the students. A school in an Ethiopian Millennium Village experimented with providing a meal for the students and saw that "the school feeding program is an effective way to attract and keep students; after all, children will be more likely to attend classes if they get a meal out of the deal."<sup>13</sup> Not only will providing a meal keep children more focused on learning, but it will also offer an economic incentive for parents to send their kids to school. A free lunch relieves parents from having to buy more food for their children and ensures that the kids will receive an adequate meal during the day. If the U.N. and other NGOs continue to develop innovative ideas on making schools more accessible and appealing to families, the goal of universal primary education can be reached.

The Millennium Development Goals aimed towards promoting gender equality and empowering women are attainable due to the diminishing social stigma against women.<sup>14</sup> Doubtless, within the world today, there are still many obstacles for women. Many cultures and religions do not consider women equal to men. In Saudi Arabia, women are openly and legally discriminated against because they are seen as inferior to men in the Islamic tradition.<sup>15</sup> Women in these countries have restricted legal rights and are forced to be dependent on men. The government's

rejection of equal opportunities for women perpetuates the stigma that females are undeserving of the most basic human rights. In addition, women are objectified in many countries of Southeast Asia, where prostitution has become socially accepted in recent years. In indigent regions of Thailand, women turn to prostitution for their only source of income, making it a growing portion of the national economies in these regions.<sup>16</sup> With so much revenue pouring from these illegal activities, government, desperate for money, neglects to enact and enforce laws restricting prostitution.

Nevertheless, if the U.N. and NGOs focus on empowering women the gender dynamics in the world will eventually shift and accept women's equal role in society. Specifically within Muslim countries, NGOs, such as the Muslim Women's League, advocate for gender equality by generating a political movement of young women for equal domestic rights.<sup>17</sup> By educating women in Muslim countries and other patriarchal nations about the political and social rights they deserve, NGOs will generate more internal pressure, from both women and politicians, to allow girls to go to school or women to have domestic rights. Similarly, women will be able to overcome many cultural restrictions if we, as an international community in a modern and developing world, take a stand against gender inequality. Rather than ignore social injustices to maintain peaceful relations with a nation, the governments of developed nations need to prioritize human rights over economic gains.

Another approach to promoting gender equality throughout the world is to empower women to take a larger role in the economy. In the *Women's Crusade* article, Saimi, a housewife from Pakistan, was previously suppressed and beaten by her husband, a socially accepted punishment. However, after taking out a microfinance loan and creating her own business, Saimi gained the respect of her community and superiority over her husband.<sup>18</sup> By having a steady income for her family, Saimi was able not only to feed her children and send them to school, but also alter the cultural views of her community to accept independent women. Educational foundations, like CARE International and Camfed, have created a new way of viewing the benefits of education. Rather than only striving to educate children, these organizations teach

young women about the business world and how to start a sustainable company. Microfinance, a new and innovative form of lending money to citizens around the world, has transformed businesses in developing countries by making loans widely available to both women and men. Microfinance organizations, such as Kiva and Namastedirect, provide women with the loans needed to enter the economy, while not creating a system of dependency on foreign aid. By promoting women to make money and subsequently not be dependent on their husbands, social stigma restricting women's rights will eventually fade, enabling the U.N. to achieve its goals of gender equality.

Although many modern industries are dependent on ecologically harmful technology, the U.N. Millennium goals focused on creating environmental sustainability are achievable. The U.N. aims to improve the environment by promoting sustainable development in order to reverse the loss of natural resources and to protect biodiversity.<sup>19</sup> However, the United States, where we pride ourselves on the early use of new technology and innovations, is one of the greatest contributors to CO<sub>2</sub> emissions. Part of our country's environmental damage is a result of our society placing greater value on convenience than concern about our ecological impact. We prefer driving to work over riding our bikes, or take a plastic grocery bag instead of using a reusable one, all because it is *easier*. The main dilemma in our country is that the "convenient" mentality has been ingrained in our society, making these actions socially acceptable. The Millennium Development Goals commission reported that the amount of CO<sub>2</sub> emissions had decreased since 2008 due to the American economic crisis. With gas prices higher, Americans were less willing to drive cars and opted to use public transportation in order to save money. However, the U.N. estimates that "unless decisive action is taken, emissions will again rise rapidly as the world economy reboots."<sup>20</sup> It has taken a devastating economic crisis to improve America's environmental effects, proving that industrial and capitalist countries must enforce environmentally friendly lifestyles to improve the worldwide environmental status.

In order to change this consumer mentality and its harmful effects on the environment, NGOs and governments must educate the population

on our current ecological impact and motivate every citizen to be more “green.” One program, called Generation Waking Up, specifically attempts to enlighten adults and students on the declining state of the environment and how to end such atrocities. Although Generation Waking Up is a relatively small effort focused on initiating local change, governments around the world can create similar, large-scale organizations and incorporate them in the public school system. If governments support highly publicized efforts to teach about global warming, pollution, and deforestation, more people will be inspired to create local change within individual communities around the world. In the meantime, governments need to implement laws restricting environmentally damaging behavior. In California cities, such as San Francisco and San Jose, local governments have banned grocery stores from using plastic bags in an effort to reduce plastic waste.<sup>21</sup> Although waste restrictions have caused citizens and companies to initially complain about the new government regulations, our society has the capability to adapt and accept these laws over time. With a worldwide, united effort towards reversing the current ecological state, the environmental Millennium Development Goals are attainable.

Although the majority of the United Nation’s goals are obtainable, the most difficult challenge of eradicating global poverty is ending government instability. The United Nations strives to eradicate fifty percent of extreme poverty by achieving universal employment and ending hunger.<sup>22</sup> However, many governments in undeveloped countries are unwilling to take action to aid their own citizens. Instead, these corrupt governments are focused on pocketing money for their individual benefit, while ignoring the impoverished state of their citizens. In President Obama’s message to Ghana in 2009, he stated that, “No country is going to create wealth if its leaders exploit the economy to enrich themselves...No business wants to invest in a place where the government skims 20 percent off the top.”<sup>23</sup> Obama explicitly warned that if governments neglect the economic and social state of their country, they will never be able to eradicate poverty. Developing countries similarly cannot rely on foreign aid from the United Nations and NGOs to improve the state of their nation. In Obama’s message to Africa, he said that “American aid must be matched by Africa’s



responsibility for its own problems.”<sup>24</sup> Ultimately, governments of impoverished countries must take responsibility for their citizens and focus on implementing each Millennium Development Goal within their nation.

Additionally, political instability perpetuates cycles of poverty due to internal conflicts and genocide. In the documentary *The Reporter*, Kristof travels to the Democratic Republic of the Congo to investigate the effects of ongoing conflict on the mass population.<sup>25</sup> With armed and undisciplined soldiers traveling throughout the country, the internal warfare puts women and children of the Congo in danger of sexual and physical abuse. Even though the conflict exists between two different ethnic groups fighting to altruistically help the Congolese people, over 5.4 million citizens have been killed due to this violence. Furthermore, internal conflict indirectly impacts the population because the government’s attention is turned towards ending the violence, rather than feeding their citizens or providing education and employment opportunities. Although the war groups consider themselves to be the “liberators” of their country, they are the main reason their nation is trapped in a never-ending cycle of poverty. If the governments of these conflict-stricken areas take action to control war groups and prevent further violence, it is possible for developing countries to begin the process of eradicating poverty.

As I evaluate the probability of the Millennium Development Goals being reached within my lifetime, I am generally optimistic. If the United Nations, NGOs and individual governments can work together and implement each goal in one region at a time, the geographical, cultural, and governmental obstacles can be overcome. The key requirements to meet these objectives are the development of innovative sources of aid to improve health and primary education, as well as the empowerment of women through employment and political opportunities. The ultimate factor in determining the success of developing countries will

depend on the governments of these regions. If these governments take the responsibility of protecting and aiding their citizens, the global eradication of poverty may be achievable. Lastly, the rest of the world holds the responsibility of maintaining hope that a world free of poverty and social injustice is possible. As Leana Wen from *The Reporter* said, “We, as an international community, need to maintain hope, for hope is what will initiate change.”<sup>26</sup> ●

### Notes

1. “Fast Facts: The Faces of Poverty,” Millennium Project, <http://www.unmillenniumproject.org/documents/3-MP-PovertyFacts-E.pdf> (accessed December 12, 2010).
2. Ibid.
3. Ibid.
4. Ibid.
5. “Millennium Development Goals,” 2010, United Nations, <http://www.un.org/millenniumgoals/> (accessed December 13, 2010).
6. Nicholas Kristof, “Health issues in a Millennium Village,” January 10, 2010, *New York Times*, <http://kristof.blogs.nytimes.com/2010/01/16/health-issues-in-a-millennium-village/> (accessed December 3, 2010).
7. Alex Tom and Leyla Nielson, “Meningitis in Nigeria” (presentation, Menlo School, Atherton, CA, November 12, 2010).
8. Nicholas Kristof, “A Boy and a Bicycle(s),” September 15, 2010, *New York Times*, <http://www.nytimes.com/2010/09/16/opinion/16kristof.html?ref=nicholasdkristof> (accessed December 15, 2010).
9. “Children in Pakistan,” December 2010, Unicef, [http://www.unicefusa.org/assets/pdf/PakistanDec10\\_ENG\\_opt.pdf](http://www.unicefusa.org/assets/pdf/PakistanDec10_ENG_opt.pdf) (accessed February 19, 2011).

10. Alex Tom and Birtu Belete, "Education in Kosovo" (presentation, Menlo School, Atherton, CA, October 14, 2010).
11. "International Programs," 2010, Free the Children, <http://www.freethechildren.com/whatwedo/international/> (accessed February 19, 2011).
12. Kristof, "A Boy and a Bicycle(s)."
13. Nicholas Kristof, "The Food Program in a Koraro School," January 25, 2010, *New York Times*, <http://kristof.blogs.nytimes.com/2010/01/25/the-food-program-in-a-koraro-school/> (accessed December 3, 2010).
14. "Millennium Development Goals."
15. Caitlin Peltz and Leyla Nielson, "Saudi Arabia" (presentation, Menlo School, Atherton, CA, November 8, 2010).
16. Yishan Lin and Zoe Aron, "Sex Trafficking and Prostitution in Thailand" (presentation, Menlo School, Atherton, CA, November 8, 2010).
17. Peltz and Neilson.
18. Nicholas Kristof and Sheryl Wudunn, "The Women's Crusade," August 23, 2009, *New York Times*, <http://nytimes.com/2009/08/23/magazine/23Women-t.html> (accessed October 1, 2010).
19. "Millennium Development Goals."
20. United Nations, "The Millennium Development Goals Report 2010," press release, June 23, 2010.
21. "San Jose City Council approves plastic bag ban," December, 14, 2010, *San Francisco Chronicle*, <http://www.sfgate.com/cgi-bin/article.cgi?f=/n/a/2010/12/13/state/n221220S69.DTL> (accessed December 13, 2010).

22. “Millennium Development Goals.”

23. Peter Baker, “Obama Delivers Call for Change to a Rapt Africa,” July 12, 2009, *New York Times*, <http://www.nytimes.com/2009/07/12/world/africa/12prexy.html> (accessed December 16, 2010).

24. Ibid.

25. *The Reporter*, DVD, directed by Eric Daniel Metzgar, 2009 (New York, NY: Reporters Stick Figure Productions, 2009).

26. *The Reporter*.

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