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Fragile Progress

The Record of the Millennium Development Goals
in States Affected by Conflict, Fragility, and Crisis

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Introduction and summary

“Peace is the greatest weapon for development that any person can have.”

– Nelson Mandela

The United Nations’ Millennium Development Goals, or MDGs, are a set of voluntary global goals designed to accelerate progress over a 15-year span in key areas, such as health, education, and the environment. Since they were launched in 2000, the MDGs have helped secure historic achievements. For example:

- The number of people living in extreme poverty has been reduced by 700 million people.
- An estimated 3.3 million deaths from malaria have been averted.
- By 2012, all developing regions had achieved, or had nearly achieved, gender parity in primary education.¹

These and other areas of progress represent an extremely valuable advancement of the basic human condition around the globe. The MDGs’s eight development goals and 21 targets—which range from halving the rate of extreme poverty to reducing the mortality rate by two-thirds for children younger than age 5—have formed a blueprint to help the world’s poorest people.² As the MDGs have been sufficiently successful, U.N. member states are currently negotiating a successor set of global development goals and targets that would run from 2016 to 2030, most often referred to as the Sustainable Development Goals, or SDGs.

Yet, the enthusiasm surrounding the MDGs faced a sharp challenge with the release of the World Bank’s “2011 World Development Report,” which focused on the nexus of conflict, security, and development. The World Bank found:

No low-income fragile or conflict-affected country has yet achieved a single MDG. People in fragile and conflict-affected states are more than twice as likely to be undernourished as those in other developing countries, more than three times as likely to be unable to send their children to school, twice as likely to see their children die before age five, and more than twice as likely to lack clean water. On average, a country that experienced major violence over the period from 1981 to 2005 has a poverty rate 21 percentage points higher than a country that saw no violence ... The average cost of civil war is equivalent to more than 30 years of GDP growth for a medium-size developing country. Trade levels after major episodes of violence take 20 years to recover. In other words, a major episode of violence, unlike natural disasters or economic cycles, can wipe out an entire generation of economic progress.³

The World Bank's findings were nothing short of an alarm bell and suggested that the 1.5 billion people living in conflict-affected and fragile states, as well as countries suffering unusually high rates of violent crime, were at risk of being left behind in the global effort to end extreme poverty. The World Bank report also highlighted the fact that many of the countries in this cohort faced repeated cycles of violence and instability, noting that 90 percent of the prior decade's civil wars took place in countries that had already experienced a civil war in the previous 30 years.⁴

The report also represented a significant breakthrough in that the World Bank pinpointed the role of institutions and governance as a central determinant in whether or not countries veered toward conflict. The World Bank had traditionally viewed the role of governance and its links to economic growth largely as a matter of technocratic competence, and much of the organization's work prior to the "2011 World Development Report" made it seem as if sound economic policies were the strongest determinant of a country's relative progress. Tellingly, the World Bank often remained quiet in cases where mal-governance was likely to drive instability and eventual economic disruption. For example, the World Bank did not immediately suspend lending to Nepal when former King Gyanendra seized absolute authority and effectively outlawed political parties in 2005.⁵

Clearly, new approaches would be required if the benefits of global prosperity were to reach into conflict-affected and fragile states. Yet, the outlook was not completely bleak. By 2014, the Organisation for Economic Co-operation and Development, or OECD, found that 35 countries considered fragile were likely to

achieve at least one of the MDG targets.⁶ As discussed later in this report, there is no standard definition for country fragility. However, that OECD study used World Bank data, not U.N. data, which produced a lower number of countries meeting such targets, as discussed in more detail below.

On balance, addressing extreme poverty in conflict-affected and fragile states has only become more crucial as the locus of extreme poverty has shifted over time. In the 1970s, the largest concentration of individuals in extreme poverty, defined as those living on less than \$1.25 a day, was found in stable, low-income countries.⁷ But today, the U.S. Agency for International Development, or USAID, estimates that roughly one-third of the world's extreme poor—about 400 million people—live in conflict-affected and fragile states, and that percentage will only rise as we move closer to 2030.⁸ Indeed, with both China and India making rapid economic progress, it is clear that the final battle to end extreme poverty in the next 15 years will be carried out overwhelmingly in conflict-affected and fragile states.

This report consists of several elements: First, it discusses the process of determining how countries are designated as being affected by conflict, fragility, or crisis, and the lack of agreement surrounding that process. It analyzes the cohort of conflict-affected and fragile states during the 2000–2015 period with an eye to exploring how the world tracks such countries and which of these countries made better or worse progress on the original MDGs.

Second, the report compares the progress of these different countries against data on a variety of other factors—such as socioeconomic conditions, corruption levels, trade volumes, resource flows, type of governance, and other data—to explore if certain broad conditions were more or less correlated with relative progress on the MDGs.

Third, to supplement this data-driven analysis of the MDGs in fragile states, the report's authors develop several practical case studies from countries that were relatively high performers on the goals to see if there are particular interventions, programs, or approaches that are effective in promoting development advances in settings of conflict and fragility.

Lastly, the report advances a series of policy recommendations based on the authors' findings to help shape the ongoing negotiations about the SDGs with the aim of making them more sensitive to the needs, capacities, and realities of fragile and conflict-affected states. The recommendations highlight how the global

community can best assist governments in fragile and conflict-affected states in building capacity and developing inclusive and transparent institutions as a useful bulwark against continued or renewed violence. These findings should also help inform the proceedings of the 2016 World Humanitarian Summit, where a new agenda for the future of humanitarian action will be agreed upon and where one of the primary topics will be how to best serve the needs of people in conflict. These findings can also help inform the World Health Organization, or WHO's, Global Strategy for Women's and Children's Health, which is currently being reformulated to include a specific focus on improving health for women and children in humanitarian settings.

A number of observations and conclusions were central to the findings of this report and include the following:

The process of establishing countries deemed to be affected by conflict, fragility, or crisis remains surprisingly ad hoc. Many countries are eager to be removed from such lists as quickly as possible—or avoid appearing there altogether—despite the fact that successfully emerging from the danger of conflict is a decidedly long-term venture.

The World Bank's Harmonized List of Fragile Situations is circumscribed in its formulation to such a degree that it excludes some obvious candidates and includes some counterintuitive entrants in its annual categorization of fragile states. This is a situation that is less than ideal given that the list is the closest thing the international community has right now to an official monitor of crisis-prone states.

It would be helpful to label conflict-affected and fragile states as *priority strategy countries*, signaling that an appearance on the World Bank's list is not pejorative, but rather a clarion call for concerted international action to collaboratively improve fundamental conditions within a country. While countries obviously wish to emerge from fragility, many countries currently believe being labeled as fragile results in less access to funding, not more.

There is strong agreement among all of the respective fragility and conflict lists about the most severe conflicts, such as Syria or the Central African Republic. The real challenge with the MDGs is to not only make progress in these incredibly difficult situations, but also to shore up and accelerate progress in more borderline cases so that the pool of protracted conflicts shrinks over time. Indeed, fragility is probably best viewed as a spectrum rather than a binary choice between fragile and stable.

States affected by conflict, fragility, or crisis have made distressingly little progress on the MDGs. Of the 55 states examined in this report, even the best-performing country, Nepal, met just slightly more than half the MDG targets. Cambodia, the second-highest performer, has currently met 8 of the 15 targets that applied to developing countries.

Thirty-seven countries achieved 2 or fewer of the 15 total targets or were so incomplete in official U.N. data that it was impossible to determine their progress. The average result across the 55 countries was to meet two targets, slightly better than 13 percent of the total.

The most commonly met targets, in order of likelihood of being met, were eliminating gender disparity in primary and secondary education; halving the proportion of people without sustainable access to safe drinking water and basic sanitation; and reducing by two-thirds the mortality rate for children younger than age 5.

The least likely targets to be met were achieving full and productive employment and decent work for all, including women and young people; integrating the principles of sustainable development into country policies and programs and reversing the loss of environmental resources; and achieving by 2010 universal access to treatment for HIV/AIDS for all those who need it. This suggests, looking forward to the next round of SDGs, that more sharply drawn, realistic, and measurable targets are far more likely to drive actual progress in fragile states where priority setting is essential, progress is difficult, and capacity is limited.

Interestingly, of the 23 lowest-performing countries or countries lacking data, 9 were least-developed countries and 14 were middle-income countries—underscoring the point that fragility and conflict are not purely a low-income country problem.⁹

In looking at which conditions and factors were associated with greater or lesser progress on the MDGs among the cohort of fragile states, some findings were intuitive while others were not. As numerous others have found, increased levels of corruption appeared likely to depress levels of development. Interestingly, a decline in population growth was associated with a general improvement in development outcomes and had a particularly significant relationship with extreme-poverty levels, the ratio of boys to girls in school, and child and maternal mortality rates. High levels of remittances—the transfer of money from foreign workers back to family and friends in migrants’ countries of origin—showed a surprisingly

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strong relationship with poor development outcomes, suggesting that populations remain highly dependent on such remittances when political and development progress stalls. Looking at remittance levels, corruption indicators, and levels of population growth may show promise in offering a quick snapshot of the direction a fragile state is headed.

The case studies explored in this report were diverse and made clear the risks of over-generalizing the very specific contexts of fragile and conflict-affected situations. However, several themes stood out. First, even in countries that have shown some of the highest levels of progress based on report findings—such as Nepal, Sierra Leone, Afghanistan, and Cambodia—this progress remains brittle, and subject to rapid setbacks. In Sierra Leone, for example, the Ebola virus has undone years of rapid progress. In Nepal and Afghanistan, significant development gains have taken place, but the political situations remain deeply unresolved, albeit in very different ways. Cementing progress remains challenging, and development progress ultimately remains hostage to political and institutional stability.

The second notable trend from the case studies was the fact that rapid progress often seemed to occur when specific and appropriate interventions were targeted at traditionally underserved or vulnerable populations. For instance, lowering health fees, providing midwife services, or tailoring outreach to communities with low enrollment rates were types of services that tended to bode well for achieving progress.

In terms of implications for the future SDGs that would run from 2015 to 2030, it is clear that fragile and conflict-affected states are not in a position to manage a large and complex set of development goals. The United Nations is currently considering a list of 17 goals and 169 targets for the SDGs—a level of ambition that seems remarkably challenging for countries struggling to meet their citizens' most basic needs. Indeed, fragile states' performance on the existing goals and targets suggests that enormous work remains to be done in achieving the MDGs. In short, U.N. member states are at risk of designing an agenda that leaves behind a whole cohort of countries struggling with weak institutions, persistent threats of conflict, and significant lingering social tensions.

However, a focus on ending poverty remains the right top-line effort for the SDGs, and progress on reducing extreme income poverty is correlated with success in other areas, including reducing infant and maternal mortality and increasing access to clean water and sanitation.

The push to “leave no one behind”—the notion that the SDGs need to do far better than the MDGs in reaching traditionally marginalized populations—is also crucial.¹⁰ These marginalized populations are particularly impacted when they live in conflict-affected and fragile states, where discrimination tends to be more extreme and even violent. More effectively connecting these populations to the social, economic, and political lives of their societies is the best means to help them climb out of extreme poverty and remain there. Moreover, doing so would be a boon for conflict-prevention efforts as well.

Bolstering the capability and effectiveness of institutions remains crucial to ending conflict and promoting durable stability. It is no accident that corruption and weak governance were some of the factors most heavily associated with the failure of fragile states to make progress against the specific targets examined in this report. Special attention needs also to be given to new democracies as they make their transition given that they are particularly vulnerable to slipping back toward conflict. Such an effort should entail more steadfast and predictable support from the international community and recognition that an enduring ability to govern and share power are the true hallmarks of democracy, rather than the ability to have just one successful election.

Clearly, the SDGs need to pay special attention to financing and the means of implementation in fragile states. There needs to be greater emphasis on inclusive growth and jobs in post-conflict settings. The time is ripe to consider if special mechanisms, such as risk insurance or first-loss guarantees, could be better utilized to help attract private investment in such states and bolster domestic markets and enterprises without diverting traditional support for such countries. In addition, there has been discussion of making a commitment within the SDGs to guarantee that a set percentage of Official Development Assistance is targeted at least-developed countries. While not all fragile states are in the least-developed country category and not all least-developed countries are fragile, this deserves consideration. This report’s analysis also suggests that funding for fragile states needs to more predictable, maintained over a longer period of time, emphasize long-term structural reforms, and be more cognizant of the political climate, which ultimately aids or deters development progress. There also needs to be special emphasis on programs reaching children and youth, given that the OECD estimates that close to 40 percent of people living in fragile states are below age 15—while in states considered stable, this demographic makes up an average of 25 percent of a country’s population.¹¹

While many of the conversations around the SDGs have called for a data revolution to unleash the power of information on the development challenge—which is most certainly a laudable ambition—it is clear that the challenge in fragile states is really one of establishing some rudimentary benchmarks of social and economic progress. There should be a major push to ensure that the basic set of indicators from the original MDGs are measured in every country, everywhere.¹²

More on the global development agenda

This current report is one of a number of reports by both Save the Children and Center for American Progress focused on the Millennium Development Goals, Sustainable Development Goals, and the future of the global development agenda. Select publications include:

“The Lottery of Birth: Giving all children an equal chance to survive,” Save the Children (2015).

“Emerging Consensus: Building Agreement for the Post-2015 Agenda,” Save the Children (2014).¹³

“Applying Universal Goals to the United States,” Center for American Progress (2014).¹⁴

“Leaving No One Behind: Embedding equity in the post-2015 framework through stepping stone targets,” Save the Children (2014).¹⁵

“Framework for the Future: Ending poverty in a generation,” Save the Children (2014).¹⁶

“What the Millennium Development Goals Have Accomplished,” Center for American Progress (2014).¹⁷

“Getting to Zero: How we can be the generation that ends poverty,” Save the Children (2013).¹⁸

“Inclusive Economic Growth: Increasing Connectivity, Expanding Opportunity, and Reducing Vulnerability,” Center for American Progress (2013).¹⁹

“The Right to Learn: Community participation in improving learning,” Save the Children (2013).²⁰

“The Role of the U.S. Government in Promoting Private-Sector Development Solutions,” Center for American Progress (2013).²¹

“We can end poverty, but the methods might surprise you,” Center for American Progress (2013)²²

“The World in 2030,” Center for American Progress (2013).²³

“Youth Q&A on the U.N. High-Level Panel on the Post-2015 Agenda Report,” Center for American Progress (2013).²⁴

“Ending Poverty in Our Generation: Save the Children’s vision for a post-2015 framework,” Save the Children (2012).²⁵

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