The Millennium Development Goals and Africa

Is Africa in danger?

Africa in danger? Seldom has a question mark appended to an outspoken title been so superfluous. Given the HIV/AIDS infection rates, ongoing conflicts and acute breakdown of government in certain countries, the title should really be «Africa in Danger!» This is also true when applied to the Millennium Development Goals. Sub-Saharan Africa is the region in the world that will fail to meet most of these goals by the year 2015.

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Photo: Betke

«Good governance» and operational institutions are a vital foundation for development in Africa.

In September 2000, the Member States of the United Nations agreed unanimously to adopt the Millennium Declaration which sets out the UN's vision for peace, security and disarmament, development and poverty reduction, environmental protection, human rights, democracy and good governance, the special protection of the «vulnerable» (i.e. in particular women, children and refugees), meeting the needs of Africa and strengthening the United Nations.
The comprehensive nature of this declaration was increasingly pushed to the sidelines, however, with the so-called Millennium Development Goals (MDGs) moving to centre stage and thus to the heart of international debate. The MDGs were taken from paragraph 19 of a total of 32 paragraphs in the declaration and, following consultation with international organizations, were acknowledged by the UN General Assembly in 2002.
The MDGs consist of eight main goals (see box). Soon after they were set out, interest homed in on the implementation of six, more or less measurable sub-goals («targets»):

- Halve the proportion of people whose income is less than one dollar a day;
- Ensure that children everywhere, boys and girls alike, will be able to complete a full course of primary schooling;
- Eliminate gender disparity in primary and secondary education;
- Reduce mortality rates in the under-fives by two thirds;
- Reduce maternal mortality rates by three quarters;
- Have halted and begun to reverse the spread of HIV/AIDS.

If present trends continue, sub-Saharan Africa will be unable to achieve even one of these six goals by 2015 (see diagram). Indeed, the one goal the donors consider the most important of the six – namely poverty reduction – will very probably be the greatest let-down. Not only will this

goal not be met, but the proportion of poor in the African population will actually increase by the year 2015.

How can this be explained?

Even whilst the MDGs were being drawn up, most of the actors involved ought to have been aware of the fact that they were being rather unrealistic in expecting the goals to be realized in sub-Saharan Africa. The poverty goal in particular could only have been achieved through an enormous increase in financial transfers to Africa from industrialized countries or through a sustained, high level of economic growth in this region. The World Bank calculated that Africa would need an average annual growth rate of seven percent through to 2015 to meet this economic criterion whilst in countries with extremely high levels of poverty, the growth rate would have to be even higher. In contrast, however, economic growth in sub-Saharan Africa fluctuated between 3.1 and 3.3 percent in the period from 2001 to 2003, and was much lower in the years before. Expressed in terms of per-capita income, growth rates are around 1.8 percent. In 2003 only four countries experienced a growth rate in excess of seven percent: Angola, Chad, Equatorial Guinea and Mozambique. In three of these countries, higher growth was the upshot of the rise in oil prices.

Development cooperation also failed to increase on the scale that would have been necessary to establish the framework conditions for MDG achievement. In 2001 the flow of official assistance to sub-Saharan Africa did increase slightly over the previous year – from 18.5 billion US dollars (USD) to USD 19 billion. However, this is way below the USD 30 billion achieved in 1990.

These figures are striking proof of the enormous gap between the targets laid down in the MDGs, and specifically the goal of poverty reduction, and the likelihood of their ever being achieved. Development policy does not have a monopoly on the emergence of this kind of incongruity, but it is particularly unfortunate in its case, in view of the credibility problem brought about by decades spent debating the failure to achieve the 0.7 percent goal and the relatively meagre advances development policy has wrought in Africa especially. As laudable as it is to set quantitative targets for political initiatives, we must make sure that there is a viable chance of actually achieving them.

The donor community's focus on the goal of poverty reduction has led to two other problems. Virtually all bilateral donors and numerous international organizations have declared poverty reduction to be the overarching goal of their development policy in recent years. This, however, seriously distorts the relationship between donors and African beneficiaries. After all, can this relationship really be expected to be based on partnership – yet another formal goal of the Millennium Declaration – if one side essentially only wants to enter into a dialogue about the other side's poverty? By focusing on the theme of poverty, it is quite probable that traditional donor-recipient structures become even more ingrained.

The second problem associated with this focus on poverty reduction has even more serious implications in that it narrows down the presentation of such a complex process as development to just one cause of underdevelopment, namely poverty. And yet there is great contention as to whether poverty is the cause of developmental deficits or their result. At this juncture, advocates of the poverty-reduction strategy would point out that this task demands an extremely broad-based approach. The national strategy papers on poverty reduction deal with numerous aspects with indirect links to poverty, such as participation and corruption. However, if these issues are really such serious obstacles to development, why do efforts to promote or contain them have to be justified via poverty reduction? Furthermore, if the concept of poverty reduction has to be understood in such comprehensive terms that it becomes more or less identical with the concept of development itself, what is the point in this use of terminology?

The eight main MDGs

- Eradicate extreme poverty and hunger,
- Achieve universal primary education,
- Promote gender equality and empower women,
- Reduce child mortality,
- Improve maternal health,
- Combat HIV/AIDS, malaria, and other diseases,
- Ensure environmental sustainability,
- Develop a global partnership for development.

These eight goals comprise 18 targets and 53 indicators. The deadline set for MDG implementation is 2015, the reference year for the purpose of indicator assessment is 1990.

Why have the MDGs failed?

The overrated emphasis of the MDG on poverty reduction is undoubtedly a problem in development cooperation, but it is certainly not the reason why Africa is expected to fall short of the Millennium Goals. Even if the poverty-reduction objectives had been a little less ambitious and other goals had shared more of the lime-

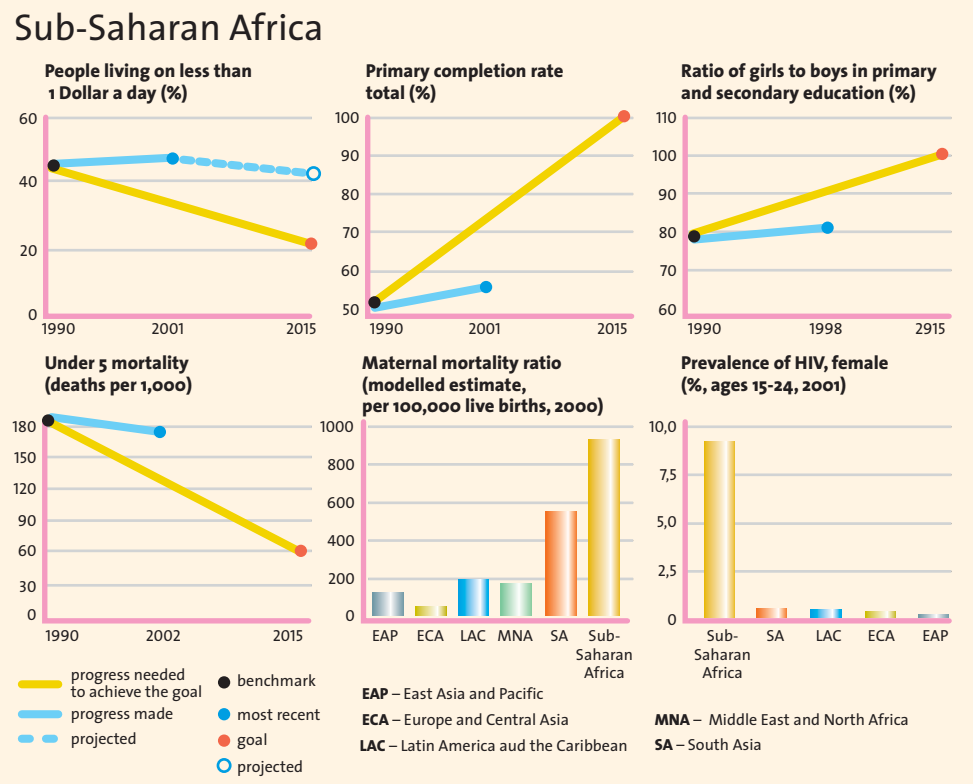

Photo: Becker

Achieving economic growth and fulfilling the MDGs is a long term process in most African countries.

light, it is still not to be expected that, in the African context, they would have been attained by the year 2015. On the contrary, the percentage of the population affected by poverty is actually on the rise.

The reasons are many and varied, often depend on the specific case at hand and are difficult to assign to a clear cause-and-result chain. Whether and under which conditions development does or does not take place is due to extremely complex processes which academia has been trying to unravel for generations now. It would be presumptuous to try and do justice to this complexity in such a short article. Instead, the aim here is to outline certain elements of a theory as to why poverty reduction is not succeeding in Africa.

Two direct reasons why MDGs have failed are inadequate economic growth and the ineffectiveness of the political efforts undertaken to achieve the goals. These two factors are tightly interwoven. Why does growth remain so meagre? On the one hand, this is undoubtedly due to the distortions in WTO regulations and Africa's position as a supplier of raw materials – although in the recent past African countries have enjoyed higher growth rates in comparison with the 1980s and 1990s precisely because of the increase in the price of raw commodities. On the other hand, however, the key factors that are stopping companies from developing to capacity and preventing economies from harnessing their full potential include Africa's poor infrastructure and education status and the low level of productivity of the African workforce, coupled with widespread political instability and legal insecurity.

These three factors are, however, the direct responsibility of the respective national governments and not – as sometimes incorrectly presumed – the responsibility of the international donor community. This also applies to the African states' excessive debt burden which is frequently cited as an obstacle to development. Certainly, in the seventies, international financial organizations and banks were rather too quick to grant loans to African borrowers. However, the lenders cannot, in turn, be blamed for the fact that these loans were not invested in such a way as to generate the profit required to service the debt.

Two states with high economic growth rates are good examples of the minor extent to which low economic growth can be held solely responsible for the failure to achieve the MDGs. In Angola and Equatorial Guinea in particular the national income generated by oil exports is used almost exclusively to line the pockets of the political elite. Little is siphoned off for poverty reduction and other development goals. Moreover, the potentially rich oil state Angola expects the international donor community to provide the funds for such activities. Thus, if economic growth is to help realize the MDGs, another element is needed, namely good governance. Africa's track record here remains as poor as ever. In spite of improvements in the field of human-rights protection and political participation by the people, African states always bring up the rear in the indices listing compliance with criteria such as the rule of law, transparency, non-corruption and accountability of government action, effectiveness of state institutions, efficient use of public funds and appropriateness of government policy directives.

A central factor here is the neo-patrimonial character of the majority of political systems in Africa. Personal, informal connections take precedence over formal state institutions and procedures which are instrumentalized so as to maintain a hold on power and sustain an inner circle of clients. Key functions in the state administration are not filled on the basis of merit, but in line with ethnic origin or family ties. Likewise, development projects are not implemented in those places where they promise to generate the greatest economic profit or where they would make the most sense in socio-political terms, but in places where powerful regional rulers, middlemen and potentially violent groups exert the most pressure. Franchises and state contracts are not issued to the most efficient and favourably priced bidder, but to the company that is willing to pay the most to receive them. This neo-patrimonial system of leadership is highly effective in political terms, but extremely inefficient from an economic angle, massively obstructing the emergence of any concepts for target-oriented policy to be implemented by viable institutions. The same holds true for those political projects that are intended to help achieve the MDGs directly.

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Outlook

The situation outlined above might lead us to believe that Africa is not just in danger, but is bereft of all hope. Indeed, there are some who claim that the region has no capacity for development at all, insisting that central obstacles, such as the neo-patrimonial system, are a permanent fixture. However, in so doing, they are overlooking the fact that these characteristics are not exclusive to Africa, but are also present in many «developed» countries too, including European ones. The difference is that, by strengthening formal institutions, neo-patrimonialism has been successfully curbed here. External assistance and pressure from within society are vital contributing factors in this context. Only an educated, self-confident, organized and conflict-competent population can develop this kind of pressure. And such a population evolves wherever literacy and urbanization have initiated not necessarily a process of development but one of social modernization: This is the case in countries such as Ghana, Kenya and Senegal, not to mention South Africa. Social modernization and the strengthening of state institutions are very long-term processes which, in places, can only be advanced in very small steps. Affixing deadlines and targets to them, as do the MDGs, does not make much sense.