

A Natural Partnership

Why the environment is crucial for achieving the MDGs

Ruth Fuller and Joanna Phillips highlight why it must be central to a successful outcome from the review summit in September.

“Without a sustainable environmental base, we will have little hope of attaining our objectives for reducing poverty and hunger and improving health and human well-being.”¹ Ban Ki-moon, UN Secretary-General

Ensuring environmental sustainability is the overall goal of MDG 7. It encapsulates a broad array of environmental issues including biodiversity loss, air pollution, forests, climate change, fish stocks, clean drinking water, sanitation and improvement of slums. Progress towards much of MDG 7 is desperately off track, and this has major implications for the other MDGs that all directly or indirectly rely on the natural environment.

Without environmental sustainability, any gains in the MDGs will be transitory and inequitable.

MDGs in a changing environment

Throughout human history we have depended on nature for sustenance, well-being and development. We have, however, consumed natural resources faster than they renew, living beyond our means environmentally. Consequently we are heading into an ‘ecological credit crunch’ and are now beginning to see the implications of failing to safeguard our natural resource base.

Climate change is the starkest example; it has risen hugely up the global agenda since the MDGs were agreed. The United Nations Development Programme call it the defining human development challenge of the 21st Century.² The poorest countries and most vulnerable people are suffering the earliest and most damaging setbacks, even though they have contributed least to the problem. Climate change impacts play out first through changes in the natural world, and understanding the links between natural systems and human wellbeing is a key part

of building climate resilience. It is vital for both mitigation and adaptation.

Pollution and degradation threaten resources

Freshwater and marine resources are increasingly stressed and polluted. Demands on rivers and groundwater resources for agriculture and industry already use about 90% of the world’s freshwater. Soils are degraded, depleted of nutrients and increasingly lost to erosion.

Biological diversity is also in rapid decline, and there has been an overall 30% decline in species populations since 1970.³ If this trend continues, the functioning of ecosystems will be severely compromised, with drastic consequences to human societies. We all rely on ecosystem goods and services such as freshwater, food, timber, fibre, fuel, medicine, water purification, air and soil quality, pollination, pest control, climate regulation and flood control. Already, at least 60% of the essential services provided by ecosystems are degraded and used unsustainably.⁴

The impact of environmental degradation is felt most directly by the world’s most vulnerable people, and without access to key natural resources such as clean water, food, soil, they cannot break out of the poverty trap and prosper.

Environmental sustainability – progress and challenges

“Efforts to accelerate progress towards the MDGs must take account of the rapidly changing development landscape transformed by ecosystem decline including the challenges posed by climate change”⁵. We must not fail in this.

Accelerated progress is needed in several areas, including giving greater priority to preserving our natural resource base and addressing climate change.⁶ MDG 7 often



• A woman helps harvest maize, the staple crop of Africa, on a relative's farm © Brent Stirton / Getty Images / WWF-UK

gets sidelined, particularly the aspects concerning biodiversity and ecosystems. It is vital that the importance of biodiversity and healthy ecosystems are recognised, effectively valued, and incorporated into development.

In the MDG framework, environmental sustainability is both a sector and a cross-cutting theme. Environmental goods and services link to the MDGs concerned with hunger, education, gender, child mortality, health, disease.⁷ The vital underpinning role of the environment in development needs to be embedded in the MDG review and summit, with actions to ensure effective environmental mainstreaming.

Communicating the role of ecosystems and biodiversity in poverty reduction is challenging given the complexity of the systems involved. Developing meaningful metrics and indicators that resonate with development audiences is difficult. However, these challenges should not be an excuse for continuing to undermine the basic support systems of life on Earth.

Written by Ruth Fuller at WWF-UK and Joanna Phillips at RSPB.

For more information: RFuller@wwf.org.uk or Joanna.Phillips@rspb.org.uk

For more information about the Development and Environment group: bond.org.uk/groups

1 UN Secretary-General Ban Ki-moon’s message for International Mother Earth Day on 22 April

2 Human Development Report 2007-8, UNDP

3 WWF (2008) Living Planet Report

4 Millennium Ecosystem Assessment. (2005) Ecosystems and Human Well-being: Biodiversity Synthesis. World Resources Institute, Washington, D.C.

5 UN Secretary General (2010) Keeping the promise: a forward-looking review to promote an agreed action agenda to achieve the Millennium Development Goals by 2015

6 United Nations (2009) The Millennium Development Goals Report

7 www.unpei.org/PDF/Making-the-economic-case-primer.pdf