Consequential omissions

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The formulation of new development goals must pay more attention to demographics. This is the conclusion reached by the study *Consequential omissions*, authored by researchers from the United Nations Population Fund (UNFPA) and the Berlin Institute for Population and Development.

The 15-year time limit set for the realization of the global development agenda by the Millennium Development Goals (MDGs) runs out this year. The MDGs were intended to provide the international community with clear guidelines for improving the living conditions of their populations. The newly published report shows that attaining the MDGs has scarcely made people’s lives better in many countries and regions, in fact in some cases it has merely stopped the situation getting worse. The reason for this is that when decision-makers formulated the development agenda back in 2000 they failed to take continuing rapid population growth in the poorest countries into account – with serious consequences.

“Mali, for example, has succeeded in achieving the first development goal, halving the share of its population living in poverty from more than 80 per cent to around 40 per cent. Because, however, population growth has kept pace with the reduction of poverty, there are still 7.5 million Malians living on less than 1.25 US dollars a day, only 500,000 fewer than in 1990”, Ruth Müller, a researcher at the Berlin Institute, explains. In her view, achieving the MDGs does not automatically mean successful development. “You can only find out reliably whether the world has changed for the better if you factor population data into development indicators”, adds Michael Herrmann, UNFPA consultant and publisher of the study.

Lessons for the SDGs

The authors are therefore urging those responsible for formulating the new global development goals, the Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs), to give more weight to foreseeable demographic trends. The SDGs will replace the MDGs at the end of this year and will likewise run for a period of 15 years. More than 180 countries and several hundred interest groups from a broad spectrum of areas are involved in formulating the SDGs. Debate on what the new development goals should be is therefore heated. Currently, their number looks set to more than double, from eight MDGs to 17 SDGs. The new development agenda would then be much broader than its predecessor, covering the whole spectrum of issues from poverty to sustainable consumption and climate change. Final agreement is expected in September.

The Least Developed Countries are likely to experience huge demographic changes over the next few years. Their populations will continue growing rapidly and ever more people will aspire to move to the cities. These changes in themselves represent an enormous challenge for the poorest countries. If they are not only to fulfil all the goals discussed to date – food security, healthcare, education and full employment – but also to take measures to combat the increasing pressure on the environment and try to promote green growth, they are likely to fail. These countries first need to undergo social development in order to curb their very high population growth before they can set about achieving
goals formulated more with the world’s developed and wealthy states in mind – i.e. the full spectrum of SDGs. “We are talking here about several hundred thousand children being born every day. They require good healthcare, and soon they will need a decent education and then a job – otherwise they will be unable to escape poverty”, says Michael Herrmann.

The authors of the report therefore call for the new development goals to place greater emphasis on demographic development. The importance of this is underlined not least by the long list of renowned development experts who have signed the UNFPA-funded report.

Moreover, the report emphasizes that demographic change – a slowing of population growth, the increasing concentration of people in urban areas and the ageing of the population – also offers opportunities for sustainable social, economic and ecological development.


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The Berlin Institute for Population and Development is an independent think tank concerned with regional and global demographic change. More information at [www.berlin-institut.org](http://www.berlin-institut.org)

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