
MPS SPEAK OUT

A glimpse into parliamentarians' perceptions of the Millennium Development Goals

The Inter-Parliamentary Union (IPU) surveyed 20 members of parliament (MPs) with the aim of gauging their private perceptions of the Millennium Development Goals (MDGs).¹ The survey consisted of a 16-question form, which took approximately 1 hour to complete through face-to-face interviews with IPU representatives during the 122nd IPU Assembly (March 2010). The questionnaire had 3 parts: 1) a general appraisal of the MDGs as a global development tool; 2) an appraisal of the MDGs in relation to parliaments; and 3) a consideration of the MDGs and parliaments in the future.

Participation in the survey was voluntary. The survey sample was selected at random so as to include MPs from a variety of backgrounds instead of limiting participation to MPs from development-related committees. To the extent possible, measures were taken to ensure gender balance and the involvement of countries from different levels of social, political and economic development.

The results of the survey were subsequently analyzed alongside the MDG-related messages within the 115 speeches delivered by Speakers at the Third World Conference of Speakers of Parliament, which was organized by the IPU in July 2010. This paper reviews the results of the IPU survey and provides an insight into the real-life experience of MPs in relation to the MDGs.

There was considerable accord between the results of the survey and the analysis of the speeches delivered at the Speakers' Conference. Both exercises indicate that parliamentarians find the MDG framework to be a useful tool for advancing development goals, whilst suggesting that actions within parliaments in support of the Goals are limited. Another general conclusion is that the 8 Goals establish important benchmarks that help MPs measure achievements in development and identify areas for further action.

MPs are unanimous in their opinion that the global financial crisis has significantly impeded progress towards the MDGs. As countries turn inwards in order to grapple with ballooning budget deficits, high unemployment and a whole host of governance challenges, including corruption, there is a fear that international development aid will be redirected away from the MDG targets. The majority of parliamentarians feel that of the 8 Goals, those related to health are currently the most difficult to achieve. Furthermore, a number of priority areas were identified which have an impact on development yet fall outside the scope of the MDG framework. In particular, these included terrorism, migration, and the trafficking of humans, drugs and arms.

¹ AKBARY, Mohammad Noor (Afghanistan) ; MARTINS DA SILVA, Bernarda (Angola) ; MUBARAK, Aysha (Bahrain) ; TSHERING, Dorji (Bhutan) ; MOLATLHEGI, Kagiso (Botswana) ; GUIGMA DIASSO, Mariam Marie Gisèle (Burkina Faso) ; TRAORE, Mélégué (Burkina Faso) ; MOUNDZALO, Jacqueline Solange (Congo) ; REGUEIFEROS LINARES, Yenielys (Cuba) ; (Anonymous) (Indonesia) ; BASTAMAN, Syarif (Indonesia) ; CONTINI, Barbara (Italy) ; AKHAMOUNTRY, Koukeo (Lao PDR) ; JARA, Salomón (Mexico) ; BOUAYAD, Zoubida (Morocco) ; DAHIRU, Umaru (Nigeria) ; SANI Saudatu (Nigeria) ; VIEGAS, Maria Terezinha (Timor-Leste) ; LUBINDA, Given (Zambia) ; GAULE, Believe (Zimbabwe) ; MADZIMURE, Willias (Zimbabwe).

The survey at a glance

- 19 of the 20 MPs (95%) asserted that a common framework for development goals does help global development.
- 15 of the 20 MPs (75%) considered the translation of the MDGs into national targets within their respective countries to be successful.
- 14 of the 20 MPs (52%) perceive the health-related MDGs to be the most challenging, and in particular those related to HIV/AIDS.
- 15 of the 20 MPs (75%) maintain that the MDG framework assists parliamentarians in the adoption and oversight of development programmes and budgets. The MPs emphasised the importance of parliamentary oversight and recommended that further attention is paid to the strengthening of this function.
- Half of the MPs interviewed do not believe their colleagues follow the progress or achievement of the Goals.
- 16 of the 20 MPs (80%) desire an increase in their parliament's involvement in and support of the MDGs.

PART 1

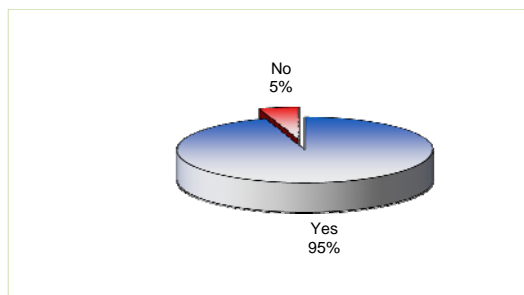
A general appraisal of the MDGs as a global development tool

The global MDG framework is a useful tool for development

19 of the 20 parliamentarians hold the view that a common international framework of development goals is a useful tool and helps facilitate global development. The majority of these MPs believe that the existence of a common international agenda encourages a focus on development, which might have been lacking otherwise.

Question 1

Do you think that the constitution of a global framework of development goals such as the MDGs will help advance global development?



“Although the MDGs are presented as a global framework, they put the spotlight on the developing countries. This in turn puts international pressure on third-world leaders to focus on sustainable development.”

- Willias Madzimore
Chair of the African Parliamentarians'
Network Against Corruption;
Deputy Chairperson of Committees,

Many parliamentarians have the opinion that the MDG framework creates a set of international benchmarks that can be used to measure the achievements and failures of national efforts. However, numerous MPs disagree, stating that the global targets do not sufficiently take into

consideration specific national contexts'. It is said the MDGs rely too heavily upon aggregate figures, which hide inequities between sub-national population groups. From this perspective, the use of the MDGs' framework as a tool for assisting global development efforts is seen as limited.

"Such a framework must take into account the reality of each country's situation."

- Maria Terezinha Viegas
Vice-President of the National Parliament, Timor-Leste

"The MDGs are a good idea. The problem is that rich countries are not on the same page as poor countries. Northern MPs are not sufficiently informed about the MDGs. There are only few MPs who may have expertise."

- Barbara Contini
Member of Parliament, Italy

Good progress is being made to translate the MDGs into national targets

Of the 20 parliamentarians interviewed, 15 agreed that the MDGs are successfully being translated into national targets within their respective countries. In the vast majority of the countries sampled, clear links exist between national development policies and the global MDGs. In some countries, for instance Bhutan, all of the MDGs have been incorporated into the national plan. In Bahrain, Botswana and Burkina Faso, national priorities, such as education or women's empowerment, have been identified and appropriate national policies have been created in accordance to the respective MDG targets. During the Speakers' Conference, MPs from an additional 14 parliaments explained that in their respective countries certain MDGs have been translated into national targets, and programmes have been created accordingly.

However, 5 of the interviewed parliamentarians stated that national circumstances, such as political agendas or a lack of economic resources, have acted as obstacles to the use of the MDGs as national targets. This perception was echoed in the speeches that were delivered by speakers from across the world. Some speakers raised the concern that the MDG framework was created without sufficient consideration of the unique national contexts within which every parliament operates, and that consequently the framework does not provide very useful benchmarks. Nonetheless, only 1 MP of the 20 interviewed maintained that the global targets were too far removed from national realities to provide an effective guidance to policy-makers.

Health-related Goals, particularly HIV/AIDS, identified as most challenging

16 of the MPs pinpointed the health-related Goals (MDG 4 - child mortality; MDG 5 - maternal mortality; and MDG 6 - HIV/AIDS, Tuberculosis and Malaria) as the greatest challenge to their parliament. 7 of these parliamentarians made specific reference to the difficulties they face in the fight against HIV/AIDS.

Comments received in the course of interviews and in the speakers' speeches underline a concern that the increasing population density within countries exacerbates epidemics and risks stretching already inadequate health systems past their response limit. Some countries are attempting to reform their health sector and provide universal coverage, although parliamentarians fear that this will not have been completed by 2015. MPs fear that maternal health is the goal towards which the least progress has been made, due, in part, to cultural opposition to MDG 3 – the promotion of gender equality and the empowerment of women.

“In spite of efforts, maternal mortality remains high. Women’s health is vital to the fight against poverty. Government policies are often weak on gender issues because of long-standing cultural biases against women.”

- Mariam Marie Gisèle
Second Vice-President of the National Assembly
Burkina Faso

PART 2

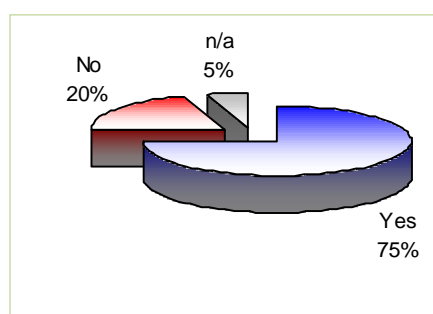
An appraisal of the MDGs in relation to parliaments

Three-quarters of the MPs surveyed feel the MDG framework assists parliamentarians in the adoption and oversight of development programmes and budgets

The majority of parliamentarians claim the international Goals from the MDG framework provide a useful benchmark and facilitate parliaments' identification of achievements and failures in essential areas.

Question 4

Do you think that the MDG framework helps parliaments adopt and oversee development plans and budgets?



Only 4 of the 20 respondents reported that they do not consider the MDG framework to be helpful in the adoption and oversight of development plans and budgets. This was partly because their parliaments tend to have a limited role in adopting and overseeing development plans and budgets in general. Therefore the MDG framework provided more use to the executive branch of government and the international community than to parliament.

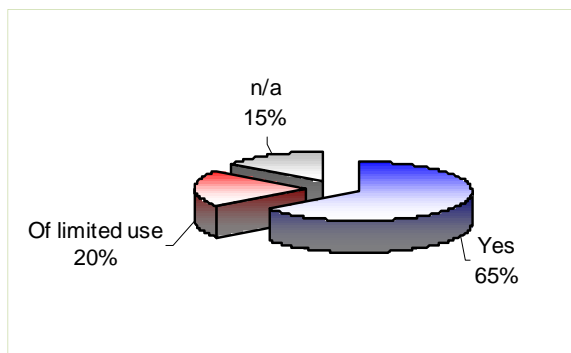
Another concern raised was that the 8 goals are not comprehensive enough, and do not capture many other pressing issues on the national agenda. During the Speakers' Conference, a significant number of MPs made this point, stating that their priorities were less focused on the MDGs, and more focused on issues of conflict, proliferation of nuclear weapons, migration, privatisation, and the trafficking of people and goods. In such cases, the distinct feeling is that the MDG framework cannot be used to help MPs adopt development plans or budgets related to their national priorities.

For the majority of parliamentarians, the MDG framework assists them in exercising their oversight functions

The MDGs have helped all MPs, although to varying extents, in their oversight functions related to development issues. On one hand, 13 of the 20 MPs agreed that the existence of the MDGs has assisted them greatly in their oversight function. On the other hand, 4 MPs consider the MDG framework to be of limited use, although this is usually attributed to their parliaments' weak oversight function rather than to a flaw in the MDG framework.

Question 5

Did the existence of the MDGs assist you in your oversight function with regard to development issues?



"The MDGs provide MPs with a framework for dialogue on development policy, which is crucial because governments do not release enough reports on the specific issue of development."

- Willias Madzimore
Chair of the African Parliamentarians'
Network Against Corruption;
Deputy Chairperson of Committees,
Zimbabwe

Reporting procedures strengthen the parliamentary oversight function

Access to reports and updates on the MDGs strengthen parliaments' oversight function by helping parliamentarians question the executive in areas related to development.

Of the MPs interviewed, 12 stated that government ministers or MDG taskforce members had appeared before parliamentary committees at least once to provide updates on national progress towards the Goals. However, this practice is not systematic and is often not supported by a reporting procedure. 7 of the MPs reported that, as far as they were aware, there is no regular reporting on progress towards the MDGs by the executive. Only 4 MPs declared that the MDG reports are tabled annually in their parliaments, and only 6 MPs stated that MDG policy briefings are held before discussions on the national budget.

More systematic reporting would strengthen parliaments' ability to support the MDG effort by ensuring that all parliamentarians are aware of the Goals, by providing further information on the MDG process, and by encouraging parliamentarians to work towards the achievement of the MDGs.

Raising public awareness of the MDGs should be a priority for MPs. 95% of the MPs interviewed are in favour of the MDG framework, and the majority confirmed that the Goals assist them in their duties as parliamentarians. However, half of the MPs interviewed believe many of their colleagues do not follow progress towards the achievement of the goals. As parliamentarians often have 2 jobs, they declare they do not have the time to monitor the progress. Nevertheless, this is not the case for all MPs, and the results of the questionnaire indicate that 45% of MPs do think that their colleagues are following progress towards achieving the goals.

Nonetheless, 6 of the MPs were under the impression that their colleagues lack sufficient awareness of the MDGs and held that the government does not do enough to inform parliamentarians of the MDGs or stimulate debate on the issue. Some MPs believe that the achievement of the MDGs falls under the remit of the executive, rather than that of parliament.

Supporting the MDGs requires close collaboration between parliament, the government and civil-society organisations

Achieving the MDGs requires close collaboration between the legislative, judiciary and executive branches of government, civil society, and citizens. MPs are first and foremost representatives of the people; they are best placed to identifying what their constituencies need. Among parliamentarians there is an acknowledgment that collaboration between themselves and civil society is central to achieving the MDGs.

Parliamentarians frequently obtain positive results when working directly with civil society organisations. Some best practices include the establishment of parliamentary caucuses, interactive public forums, public consultations on legislation, and women's networks on the MDGs.

PART 3

The MDGs and parliament in the future

The MDG framework outlines clear development priorities, defined by measurable targets. There is a desire amongst the vast majority of MPs for an increased involvement of their parliaments in the work towards achieving of the MDGs. As we approach the 2015 MDG deadline, parliamentarians identified the following priorities to strengthen parliamentary support for the Goals:

A) Provide continuous capacity building to parliamentarians on the MDGs

According to parliamentarians, there must be an increased awareness amongst MPs of what the MDGs entail, how the MDGs are interlinked and incorporated into national policies, and how parliamentarians can enhance their analytical capacity of development plans and budgets. MPs also feel that the regional and international exchange of MDG knowledge and practices amongst parliamentarians would assist them in their MDG-related work.

Parliamentarians stressed the provision of 'continuous' capacity building, pointing out that in each electoral mandate there are new parliamentarians.

B) Strengthen parliament's oversight function

Achieving the MDGs is not the responsibility of the executive branch of government alone. Part of parliament's crucial function is to hold the executive accountable and to ensure the executive fulfils its mandate. The fulfilment of these functions is imperative to the achievement of the MDGs. While recognizing the leadership role of the executive, the parliamentarians stressed that in development issues where ownership is essential parliament provides an inclusive platform that makes the development agenda a truly national one.

C) Improve cooperation and coordination across sectors

Parliamentarians believe that achieving the MDGs will require strong partnerships between members of the executive and parliament, civil society, and the international community. In this regard, parliamentarians expressed their confidence in the IPU.