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Where are the green goals?

Analysis
By Richard Black
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How difficult is it to measure objectively whether someone is hungry, or how empowered they feel?

Perhaps not that easy. And that has been one of the criticisms levelled at the eight Millennium Development Goals (MDGs), the 18 targets into which they are broken down, and the 48 indicators that measure performance.

They look ever so neat on paper, but the real world is not a balance sheet.

Some indicators do allow for precise measurement, though, and among them - in theory at least - lie the environmental ones, including:

- the proportion of land covered by forest
- carbon dioxide emissions per capita
- the proportion of land protected to maintain biological diversity

They are included in Goal Seven, in case you are interested, not that you will have heard much about it in the speeches of Kofi Annan, George Bush, Tony Blair or other dignitaries here.

When the Millennium Goals have been mentioned, the context has almost always been along the narrow corridor of health, education and poverty.

Green foundations

The argument made by many non-governmental groups on the fringes of this summit is that all of these issues are underpinned by environmental concerns.

Good health is impossible without clean water, they maintain; environmentally degraded land produces poor societies, and education is difficult unless societies are adequately healthy and wealthy.

The indications are, though, that people at the highest levels of decision-making have not bought into the argument, perhaps because hard evidence and hard numbers have been lacking.

A new report launched here, Environment for the MDGs, aims to fill the gap.

"We've got all these bits of information in different institutions," the Director General of IUCN, Achim Steiner, told me, "and what we are trying to do now is look at them collectively.

"The problem is that the argument has not been made on the scale of national economies, and that is what we are trying to do."

IUCN, the World Conservation Union, is one of about 30 bodies making up the Poverty-Environment Partnership (PEP), the driving force behind the report; other members include the United Nations Development and Environment Programmes (UNDP and Unep) and the World Bank.

Big bang for bucks

Drawing on various studies around the world, the report finds that some investments in environmental initiatives can bring major returns:

- for sustainable use of timber in the Amazon, a return of between seven and 14 times the initial investment
- for sanitation programmes, a 14-fold return globally and a 35-fold return in the eastern Mediterranean region
- for switching from explosives to sustainable fishing in Indonesia, anything up to 50-fold

But hang on a minute, I can hear the hard-headed city accountant say; how real are these figures? Aren't they just dreamed up by a tree-hugging leftie in some think-tank somewhere?

At a packed fringe meeting called here to launch the report, the sober figure of Ian Johnson, vice-president for sustainable development with the World Bank, gave something of a challenge to this view.

"I can tell you that at least as much guesswork goes into industrial accounting as goes into environmental accounting," he said.

The World Bank was roundly applauded for its own report, Measuring the Wealth of Nations, which attempts to find ways to include environmental goods in national accounting, and to link them to the process of economic development, including the Millennium Goals.

"There is a belief that the health MDGs are all about building health centres," said Ian Johnson, "whereas 55% of infant mortality is down to poor drinking water and hygiene - environmental issues."

Poverty on the ground

Jane Weru from the Kenyan organisation Slum and Shack Dwellers gave the meeting a more personal account.

"What is poverty?" she asked rhetorically. "It is a lack of water and human dignity.

"In Kenya, we have houses where the daily water allowance may be 40 litres. In a household with Aids, that 40 litres has to clean the patient, wash their clothes - that's what poverty means.

"Only 1.7% of our land is covered by forest, our climate is changing, so the water is disappearing fast."

This is, of course, precisely the kind of situation that the MDGs are supposed to prevent.

So what is happening to the environmental indicators? What are they telling us about progress - or lack of it - on issues like deforestation and climate?

Such indicators may in theory be precise, but they are not always up to date; assessing trends takes time. But:

- tropical forest cover is declining - by 15 million hectares per year during the 1990s, according to the UN
- greenhouse gas emissions are rising in most nations, and the atmospheric concentration of carbon dioxide is also increasing
- more sites than ever before are protected - but species loss continues at between 100 and 1,000 times the normal rate

Crisis? What crisis?

"The problem is a lack of accountability," Peter Seligman, chair of the charity Conservation International told me.

"The goals are stated, but they're Utopian; no-one holds governments to account.

"The job of heads of governments, of presidents and prime ministers, is to see when there's a crisis coming and to respond to that, to say 'let's address it'; but all we hear is a big silence."

Like all the goals, meeting the environment pledges does carry a price-tag. According to Olav Kjørven, director of the Energy and Environment Group within UNDP, it is big but worthwhile.

"The cost of meeting MDG 7 by 2015 will be around US\$60bn to US\$90bn (£35-50bn) per year," he told the meeting here.

"But to put that in context, that is less than 10% of subsidies globally.

"And the rates of return on this investment will be competitive under the right conditions."

The implication from all speakers here is that the price of not investing in the environment will, in the poorest parts of the world, be business as usual - poverty, poor child and maternal health, and low levels of education.

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