

- **Woman's Hour, Radio 4, 31 December 2014**

The complainant asked the Editorial Standards Committee to review the decision of BBC Audience Services to close down the complaint at Stage 1b.

Background

189 member states of the United Nations adopted the Millennium Declaration in 2000:

<http://www.un.org/millennium/declaration/ares552e.pdf>

This included a series of commitments for example:

- to have reduced under-five child mortality by two thirds, of their current rates by 2015
- to ensure that, by 2015, boys and girls will be able to complete a full course of primary schooling and that girls and boys will have equal access to all levels of education.

In the following year, 2001, the UN published a Road Map to implement the declaration:

<http://www.un.org/documents/ga/docs/56/a56326.pdf>

It identified eight goals.

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

These eight goals became known as the Millennium Development Goals (MDG).

The Road Map also set targets to measure progress. In terms of under-five child mortality the Road Map noted that:

“Worldwide, under-five mortality rates are declining: under-five mortality decreased from 94 to 81 per 1,000 live births between 1990 and 2000. However, approximately 11 million children under five still die annually in developing countries, mostly from preventable diseases.”

The target that was set in the Road Map with regard to under-five mortality was to:

“Reduce by two thirds, between 1990 and 2015, the under-five mortality rate.”

It can be seen therefore that by changing the base line for measuring the reduction of under-five child mortality deaths to the year 1990, the target set in 2001 was a less demanding commitment than that made in 2000.

In terms of education the targets set in the Road Map were to:

“Ensure that, by 2015, 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, preferably by 2005, and to all levels of education no later than 2015”

The complaint

The complainant emailed three members of the *Woman's Hour* production team on 28 January 2015. He raised his concern that the programme on 31 December 2014, and the iPlayer page, gave an impression that world leaders at the Millennium Summit in 2000 had committed themselves only to MDG targets with baselines of 1990.

The complainant made the following points:

- He said the date 1990 did not appear in the Millennium Declaration. The mortality pledges were from “current rates”. The MDG targets with the easier 1990 baselines were proposed after the leaders had already made those pledges.
- The number of child deaths fell by several million between 1990 and 2000. So over the period 2000-2015, it was clear that the pledge was more ambitious than the MDG target by several million child deaths.
- He did not believe it was correct for BBC Audience Services to state that the programme correctly referred to the MDG targets. He said it was obvious that there was a genuine error in the programme, as a result of institutional failure.

Audience Services made the following points:

- They reminded the complainant of the correct procedures for making complaints. In particular, they explained that all complaints should be submitted to the centralised BBC Complaints department as correspondence sent elsewhere had the potential to result in duplication and confusion, thus leading to delay and wasted TV licence fee resources.
- With regard to the substantive complaint, they said they had reviewed the programme and discussed the complainant's points personally with the *Woman's Hour* producer responsible. They advised that neither the programme itself, nor the accompanying text information made any reference to anything to do with “1990”. The BBC believed it had correctly referred to the UN's Millennium Development Goals.

Appeal to the BBC Trust

The complainant contacted the BBC Trust on 20 April 2015 asking for a review of his complaints to date, including “the unanswered complaints sent to the Editorial Complaints Unit”. He said that his substantial complaint was of a “widespread, major error over many years to the same effect”.

He argued that it was wrong for *Woman’s Hour* to say that the MDG targets were set, developed and adopted by the UN in 2000. He argued that this error was likely to have given a significant proportion of the audience an impression, or reinforced an impression, that the easier targets were what the leaders promised.

The Committee’s decision

Trustees noted the complainant’s concern that the edition of *Woman’s Hour* broadcast on 31 December 2014 gave a misleading impression of the UN Millennium Development Goals.

They also noted his concern that the BBC had made similar errors over many years and that these had been the subject of other complaints submitted to the BBC by the complainant. This, in his view, was a matter of institutional failure.

Trustees agreed that the point they should consider was whether the appeal against the decision by BBC Audience Services not to correspond further with the complainant regarding his complaint about *Woman’s Hour* broadcast on 31 December 2014 was admissible. They noted that the complainant had other unresolved complaints outstanding with the Editorial Complaints Unit (ECU), but these would not be part of the Trustees’ considerations as the BBC had not yet finished responding on these matters. Trustees understood that the ECU would be writing separately to the complainant regarding the matters that were still with them. Similarly, the Trust was unable to consider any appeal related to complaints handling until they had been raised with the Executive in the first instance.

Trustees acknowledged that the complainant believed *Woman’s Hour* had broadcast a misleading inaccuracy with regard to MDG targets.

Trustees noted that the item had not mentioned child mortality but had covered a pledge to get primary school children into education and had reflected on the situation today with regard to girls’ education. Trustees also observed that the item covered where a MDG target had not been set, in relation to violence against women, for example. Trustees noted that the programme made the point that the goals set by the UN with the aim of eradicating global poverty and human suffering within 15 years had not proved achievable, and had not addressed certain issues adequately; these goals were about to be replaced with Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs).

Trustees noted that the presenter introduced the item with the words:

“Next year, 2015, is the deadline for the millennium development goals – remember them? Eight targets set by the UN in 2000 with the aim of eradicating global poverty and human suffering within 15 years.”

Trustees appreciated that the actual goals and targets were not finalised in 2000 although they sprang out of the Millennium Declaration made in 2000. However, Trustees considered that this was not a material error in the context of this item and that if they took this complaint on appeal they would be likely to conclude that the wording was duly accurate in context and that the complaint had not engaged the Editorial Guidelines.

Trustees noted that no information was given about the base line for the targets and that child mortality was not mentioned in the item. They also agreed that if this point were to be taken on appeal they would be likely to conclude that the omission of such information was a matter of editorial judgement and did not engage the Editorial Guidelines. Trustees noted that one interviewee described the targets as “extremely ambitious”. They agreed this was her view and she was entitled to express it.

Trustees noted that the Royal Charter and the accompanying Agreement between the Secretary of State and the BBC draw a distinction between the role of the BBC Trust and that of the BBC Executive Board, led by the Director-General. The “direction of the BBC’s editorial and creative output” is specifically defined in the Royal Charter (Article 38, (1) (b)) as the responsibility of the Executive Board, as is ensuring compliance with all legal and regulatory requirements placed upon the BBC (Article 38, (1) (d)). The Royal Charter also explains that the Trust must not exercise or seek to exercise the functions of the Executive Board (Article 9, (3)). Trustees agreed that the responsibility for editorial decisions about the content of *Woman’s Hour* rested with the BBC Executive rather than the Trust.

The Committee considered that Audience Services had provided a reasoned and reasonable response to the complainant’s concerns. He had not raised an issue concerning a possible breach of the Editorial Guidelines and there was nothing to suggest that Audience Services had been wrong to close the correspondence.

The Committee therefore decided that this appeal did not qualify to proceed for consideration.