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The Impact of United Nations Millennium Development Goals on Sub-Saharan Africa

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Abstract
The Millennium Development Goals (MDGs) provide an international framework that builds commitment and cooperation towards poverty reduction. Since its adoption in 2000, several strides have been achieved in reducing human impoverishment across regions and countries. Despite the limitations associated with the framework, the ramifications and evidences continue to show its potential for poverty reduction. In this paper, the progress of implementation and the targets of MDG 1 for five developing countries in Sub-Saharan Africa have been examined namely: Ghana, Liberia, Nigeria, Rwanda and Uganda. The challenges in implementation were also examined. While Ghana may have halved the proportion of the population living in poverty by 2006, several challenges of funding persist. The review shows that building national capacities for implementation, political and economic stability, increased agriculture productivity and production, and increased international aid are critical avenues by which the attainment of the MDG 1 can be hasten.
Keywords: MDGs, poverty reduction, Sub-Saharan Africa

1. Introduction

In September 2000, after several decades of United Nations conferences and summits, leaders of developed and developing countries came together at the United Nations Headquarters in New York to adopt the United Nations Millennium Declaration. This committed their nations to a new global partnership that established far-sighted goals to tackle extreme poverty, hunger, illiteracy and diseases. These goals were set out in a series of time-bound targets with a deadline of 2015. These goals are together known as the Millennium Development Goals (MDGs).[1]

After the adoption of the Millennium Declaration, considerable efforts and resources have been expended toward the achievement of the MDGs. Already, the MDGs "have helped to lift millions of people out of poverty, save lives and ensured that children attend school. They have also helped to reduce maternal deaths, expanded opportunities for women, increased access to clean water and freed many from debilitating diseases" (United Nations, 2011: 3). Nonetheless, "there have also been redoubtable counter developmental forces constraining these efforts, to the extent that progress has been agonizingly slow, unpredictable and starkly uneven across regions and countries" (Owusu-Ampomah, 2011: 3).

In developing countries, more especially Sub-Saharan Africa, the success stories of the MDGs have been mixed. Vandemoortele (2011) aptly describes it to be good, bad and ugly. For instance, United Nations (2010) staff estimates indicate that the proportion of underweight children in Africa declined by four percentage points between 1990 and 2008, compared with five point decrease for all developing countries. Primary school enrolment increased faster in Africa than other developing regions. The proportion of birth in Africa attended by skilled health personnel increased slowly (5% points) than in all other developing regions. Unemployment tends to be a next door neighbor to many Africans while extreme poverty also continuously raises its ugly head in all parts of the continent. Although there is strong political support for the MDGs both within and outside the region, it considerably lags behind all the other regions of the world.

As the deadline for achieving the targets of the MDGs gradually approaches and with most developing countries particularly countries in Sub-Saharan Africa lagging behind the targets, a school of thought has suddenly emerged which is of the view that the MDGs are not realistic and therefore would not be achieved. However, an optimistic school of thought that believes in the achievement of the MDG targets provides alternative arguments. They argue that the claim that Africa's performance is worse than other regions is incorrect. The main difference they further contend is that Sub-Saharan Africa started from a lower level of human development and will, therefore not meet the global targets because of its low starting point. This argument is well illustrated by Vandemoortele (2011: 12), that "in sports players with initial disadvantage invariably get compensation so they can play against each other on somewhat equal terms. An amateur golfer, for instance, gets a handicap but the case is not so according to the conventional interpretation of MDGs which ignores the importance of initial conditions. This leads to the often repeated statements that Africa is missing the targets, whereas it is the statement that is missing the point; namely Africa will not, cannot, and need not meet the MDGs for the world to meet them."

Unlike these two schools of thought, who have centered their arguments on whether or not the MDGs could be achieved before the 2015 deadline, this paper considers the impact that the MDGs is having on developing countries particularly countries in Africa who have been the focus of such heated debates. The paper focuses on MDG 1, the goal of eradicating extreme poverty and hunger. In assessing the impacts this goal is having on developing countries, the paper answers three different but interrelated questions: What progress has been made in achieving the targets of MDG 1 by Sub-Saharan Africa countries? What challenges remain to be addressed? And what more could and should be done?

2. Methodology

The approach adopted for the study was basically a review of secondary data. Secondary data were obtained from sources which include MDG reports prepared by the United Nations over the years, the MDG country progress reports, Internet, relevant magazines, scholarly journal articles, and other relevant documents. The researchers explored how the MDGs have impacted developing countries with a focus on five countries in Sub-Saharan Africa. These countries are Ghana, Liberia, Nigeria, Rwanda and Uganda. The paper places emphasis on the MDG 1 of eradicating extreme poverty and hunger. The targets and indicators under these goals were assessed to determine the extent to which these goals have impacted the countries in question.

3. An Overview of the United Nations Millennium Development Goals

The MDGs is a collection of eight goals that developing countries together with their development partners aim to achieve by 2015 in responds to global development challenges. The MDGs are born out of the "Millennium Declaration that was adopted by 189 nations – and signed by 147 heads of state and governments during the UN Millennium Summit in September 2000".[2] The eight MDGs break down into eighteen quantifiable targets that are measured by forty-eight indicators that recognize the interrelationships between growth, poverty and sustainable development. The goals also acknowledge the role "democratic governance, rule of law, respect for human rights, peace and security" play in development outcomes.[3] The eight goals according to the United Nations (2005) are;

- Goal 1: Eradicate Extreme Poverty and Hunger
- Goal 2: Achieve Universal Primary Education
- Goal 3: Promote Gender Equality and Empower women
- Goal 4: Reduce Child Mortality
- Goal 5: Improve Maternal Health
- Goal 6: Combat HIV/AIDS, Malaria and other Diseases
- Goal 7: Ensure Environmental Sustainability
- Goal 8: Development a Global Partnership for Development

3.1 MDGs and Poverty

The concept of poverty does not lend itself to any easy definition. It has been defined in many different ways by scholars and practitioners from several fields of study. Watt (1968) defined poverty as lack of command over commodities in general. The definition could be interpreted differently to mean not having access to basic goods such as food, clothing, and housing to mention but a few. In a different perspective, the famous economist and Nobel recipient, Amartya Sen also argues that poverty could be seen as "lack of capability to function in society".[4]

The perspectives of poverty have evolved over the past few decades. Currently, poverty is seen from three main perspective; absolute, relative and multidimensional. Absolute and relative poverty measures or perceive poverty from the capacity of an individual or household to acquire for themselves the basic attributes of life; shelter, education, food, health, among others and is widely used by international agencies and literature (White, 2008). According to Todaro and Stephen (2009) this perspective establishes a specific minimum level of income needed to satisfy the basic physical needs to ensure continued survival. Thus income and expenditure are the fundamental indicators of measurement for economic capabilities of individuals, households and communities as against internationally accepted standards of human consumption. This international standard according to Todaro and Stephen (2009) measures poverty as anyone living on less than US$1 a day or US$2 per day in purchasing power parity dollars. This standard emerged in the 1990 when in an attempt to define poverty operationally, "the World Bank in 1990 adopted a rule-of-thumb measure of US$ 370 per year per person at 1985 prices (the "dollar a day" poverty line) for poor countries" (Townsend, 2006: 22). This definition has been critiqued severally as being arbitrary and not reflective of the poverty condition of people (Chambers, 2006). Supporting this observation, Townsend (2006: 16) argues that the "multiplicity and severity of different types of deprivation can constitute those criteria" used to define and measure poverty.

The result of this has been the current appreciation of the concept of multidimensional poverty. Despite the concept emerging mostly as qualitative arguments for deprivation in accessing basic needs of individuals or communities, there are now indices for measuring this type of poverty (United Nations Development Program [UNDP] 2010). This measures multiple indicators of impoverishments of welfare by examining several aggregated welfare indicators simultaneously. Thus, it is a measure of the intensity of deprivations (Asselin, 2002; UNDP, 2010). Nonetheless, whether this is a better measurement of poverty is a moot point. As Ruggeri et al. (2006: 10) explains "empirical evidence shows that poverty rates vary a lot when different concepts and measures are used". According to the authors, studies of India and Peru found different outcomes depending on which poverty approach was adopted (Ruggeri et al., 2006). The multidimensional approach is complex and requires lots of data. As such, its feasibility and adoption as a worldwide measure is critically challenging.

It is obvious that the United Nations and the countries that adopted the MDGs appreciate the multidimensionality of poverty and development. From the declaration and resolution, they asserted that: "we will spare no effort to free our fellow men, women and children from the abject and dehumanizing conditions of extreme poverty, to which more than a billion of them are currently subjected. We are committed to making the right to development a reality for everyone and to freeing the entire human race from want" (United Nations, 2000: 4).

This clearly suggests their conviction to improving the welfare of individuals and communities. The limitations of the singular measure of poverty in the MDG 1 are complemented by the other goals. Thus MDG 1 can be seen as an aggregated measure or indicator for success in all the other goals. The relevant implication of the declaration of the MDGs in relation to poverty is the explicit awareness of the problem of human impoverishment and the need for commitments and imminent action. It also demonstrates on an international level the effort and the conviction through partnership to ameliorate the low welfare of individuals around the world. Particularly, the inherent principle that "national governments could be held accountable by their people, just as the international community could be held accountable by national governments" was seen as relevant to pool efforts to tackle world poverty. This is despite the fact that "accountability was limited, because the constituencies, poor people or poor countries," had no clear mechanism for sanctions (Nayyar, 2011: 3).

Several limitations have been identified with the MDG framework; that is the overall idea of mitigating international impoverishments through the goals. Nayyar (2011) espouses a missing link between the goals and actual framework for actualization of the goals. Nonetheless, offering a pre-designed framework may render the process insensitive to the national context of poverty and the policies needed to mitigate these challenges. It is important to realize that despite it semblance to most national goals, the MDG framework and targets caused increased investments and commitments by nations to mitigate global poverty situations. As Poku and Whitman (2011: 7) rightly put it, "the MDGs do not make development work simpler, but they have made it more central, more integral to thinking about international and global security." After the adoption of the Millennium Declaration, considerable efforts and resources have been expended toward the achievement of the MDGs. There have been successes. The 2012 Millennium Development Goal report indicates that,

> "the target of reducing extreme poverty by half has been reached five years ahead of the 2015 deadline, as has the target of halving the proportion of people who lack dependable access to improved sources of drinking water. Conditions for more than 200 million people living in slums have been ameliorated—double the 2020 target. Primary school enrolment of girls equaled that of boys, and we have seen accelerating progress in reducing child and maternal mortality…. For the first time since poverty trends began to be monitored, the number of people living in extreme poverty and poverty rates fell in every developing region—including in sub-Saharan Africa, where rates are highest. The proportion of people living on less than $1.25 a day fell from 47 per cent in 1990 to 24 per cent in 2008— 2008—a reduction from over 2 billion to less than 1.4 billion" (United Nations, 2012: 3).

The simplicity and openness of the framework has offered far more innovation and creativity as well as increased government ownership of development efforts that has been spear-headed from the international level compared to past decades. Critically, the opportunity for continuous monitoring and evaluation of growth through annual reports and country reports has offered a mechanism for learning and relearning within and between countries as well as across regions.

Questions as to whether the framework offers equal grounds for comparison has also come to the fore. Because of the varying degrees of poverty levels and capacities of countries, some authors argue that judgments of improvements may be arbitrary. Gaiha (2003) and Reddy and Heuty (2008) argue that the aim of reducing the proportion of people living in poverty depends as much on the initial level of their national capacities and thus these aspirations may be set too high for some and too low for others. This is especially true when halving the number in population and the degree to which countries can achieve the target differs in terms of absolute population. A country may have reduced the number of people living in poverty by a million whereas another country may have done so by a hundred thousand. The former may reflect a reduction of say 10 per cent whereas the latter may reflect a reduction of 20 per cent. Adding to these limitations, Seshamani (2005) argues that there are limitations in measuring income levels and poverty situations in rural areas.

Despite these observations, the paramount issue is whether the attainment of the various targets of poverty under the MDG 1 in 2015 puts an end to the problem. Contrary, poverty is a persistent and evolving state of human impoverishment and countries should be made aware of the need for similar and much greater commitments beyond 2015. Similarly, the international commitment in terms of aid flows and technical support should reflect such realizations.

3.2 A Global Perspective of the Millennium Development Goal 1 – Eradication of Extreme Poverty and Hunger

There are two major targets in achieving eradication of poverty and hunger. They are: target (1) to halve the proportion of people living under less than a dollar a day; target (2) to reduce by half the proportion of people who suffer from hunger. To assess whether these targets set under this goal are being achieved, there are five different indicators which were developed to monitor the progress attained under this particular goal for each of the targets– three and two indicators for target 1 and target 2 respectively. Amongst these indicators include; the proportion of people living below one dollar ($1) per day, poverty gap ratio, share of the poorest quintile in national consumption, prevalence of underweight children under five years of age, and the proportion of the population below dietary energy consumption. In this section, the impact of MDG 1 at the global scene is assessed. This has been done by focusing on the targets under these goals and the progress achieved so far globally.

3.3.1 Target 1: Halve the Proportion of People Living under Less than a Dollar a Day

According to the 2012 MDG report, for the first time since the World Bank started to monitor poverty trends, both the number of people living in extreme poverty and poverty rates fell in every developing region- including Sub-Saharan Africa, where rates are the highest. The report points out that in developing regions, the proportion of people living on less than $1.25 a day fell from 47 per cent in 1990 to 24 per cent in 2008. More so, it was revealed in 2008 that, 110 million fewer people than in 2005 lived in conditions of extreme poverty. The number of extreme poor in the developing regions fell from over 2 billion in 1990 to less than 1.4 billion in 2008. A preliminary World Bank estimate – based on a much smaller survey than the global update – indicates that the global poverty rate at $1.25 a day fell in 2010 to less than half its value. However, these results have not yet been confirmed. If these results are confirmed by follow-up studies, the first target of the Millennium Development Goals that is cutting the extreme poverty rate to its 1990 level will have been achieved on a global level well ahead of 2015 deadline.

3.3.2 Target 2: Reduce by Half the Proportion of People who suffer from Hunger

The 2012 MDG report indicates that the Food and Agriculture Organization’s (FAO) most recent estimate of undernourishment for the period 2006-2008 set the mark at 850 million which corresponds to 15.5 per cent of the world’s population. This estimate of the global picture on undernourishment was not stark as might be originally expected. This according to the FAO’s report is partly due to the economic growth rates that remained high in many developing countries. The prevalence of hunger, the report noted, remains uncomfortably high in Sub-Saharan Africa. This trend of event does not correspond with the recorded reductions in income poverty especially in Eastern Asia since 2000. This trend was associated to increase in food processing and inadequate restrictive policies and safety nets that are available in countries of Asia.

In terms of underweight children, the MDG progress for 2012 indicates a decline from 29 per cent in 1990 to 18 per cent in 2010. The 2012 results show that progress has been recorded in all regions where comparable data are available but is insufficient to reach the global target by 2015. Unfortunately child nutrition continues to be a low priority in many developing countries and rural and urban disparities continue to be staggering. The report also uncovered that poor children are almost three times likely to be underweight as are children in the wealthiest 20 per cent of the households. This disparity is greatest in Southern Asia, where the prevalence of underweight children in the poorest quintile of the household is 2.8 times that of children from the richest 20 per cent.

The second indicator also showed that there has been modest achievement in reducing the proportion of the population below the minimum level of dietary energy consumption. Worldwide, there was a decline of 16 per cent to 13 per cent with the greatest achievement in South Eastern Asia. Between 1990 and 2008, the region recorded a 41.67 per cent decline in the proportion of the population below the minimum level of dietary energy consumption whereas Sub-Saharan African experienced a decline of 12.9 per cent which is below the average for all developing countries of 25 per cent. In this regard, Sub-Saharan African seems to be performing poorly as calls for a critical look at the regions food security situation and challenges increases; that is if the target is to be reached by 2015. More than fifteen out of the bottom twenty-one countries performing poorly under this target are within Sub-Saharan African (Overseas Development Institute [ODI], 2010). This is so because of the prevalence of armed conflicts within the region that has increased refugee situations. Apparently, “countries that have suffered from war and displacement have experienced several setbacks”. They include Democratic republic of Congo, Somalia, Sudan and lately Egypt (ODI, 2010: 22).

4. Review of Case Studies on the Millennium Development Goal 1 – Eradication of Extreme Poverty and Hunger

Ghana, Liberia, Nigeria, Uganda, and Rwanda have made varied strides to attaining the MDG 1 by 2015. Ghana in 2006 achieved the target of halving the proportion under poverty. In this section, each of the targets examined at the international level is discussed across these five countries to determine the extent of progress.

4.1 Ghana

Since 1992 when Ghana re-embarked on democratic principles of governance, several strides have been made towards reducing poverty and promoting national development. From the preparation of Ghana Vision 2020 and subsequent poverty reduction policy frameworks (GPRS I & II) and lately, the Ghana Shared Growth and Development Agenda, different programs have been implemented towards human development. The ramification of this has been the declined of poverty levels between 1990 and 2006 by 50 per cent. The Ghana Statistical Service (2008), according to the National Development Planning Commission ([NDPC] 2010: 9), indicate that "the overall poverty rate has declined substantially over the past two decades from 51.7 per cent in 1991/92 to 28.5 per cent in 2005/2006, indicating that the target could be achieved well ahead of the 2015 target of 26 per cent... and the proportion of the population living below the extreme poverty line declined from 36.5 per cent to 18.2 per cent over the same period against the 2015 target of 19 per cent." Several factors have been attributed to this including political and macro stability that have been enjoyed in Ghana for over 20 years.

A mixture of social and economic interventions has ensured this attainment. The NDPC (2010) explains that the Livelihood Empowerment Against Poverty (LEAP), Capitation Grant, and the Ghana School Feeding are examples of government run programs that have yielded dividends in reducing poverty levels in the country. In addition, the agency identifies that the introduction of Microfinance and Small Loans Scheme (MASLOC) by government, the National Youth Employment Program (now Ghana Youth Employment and Entrepreneurial Development Agency) and the commercialization of agriculture through financing, irrigation for rice, mango, cotton farming in the north and improved land administration to promote large scale agriculture have complemented the social efforts. Rural and urban road construction and the general improvement in roads such as the increase in the rehabilitation of roads from 65.4 per cent in 2007 to 76.0 per cent in 2008 are all factors that have successful facilitated the achievement of halving population in poverty by half.

Nonetheless, there are daunting challenges to sustaining these achievements. The continual dependence of the Ghanaian economy on primary products and limited diversification makes the economy highly vulnerable to internal and global shocks. In addition, the heavy dependence on international aid reduces the countries capacity to institute and sustain social safety programs as these flows are erratic. Building a strong economy that is self-sustaining is increasingly evident with increase challenges of the global recession (Gamo, 2009). The oil find offers a new opportunity. Nonetheless, how this reflects in enhancing the livelihoods and the drive to achieve the MDGs leaves much to be seen.

Little evidence exists in measuring the targets on nutrition. Available evidence indicates that the negative consequences of malnutrition are declining. By implication, it can be assumed that there are positive trends in this direction. The Ghana Demographic and Housing survey in 2008 suggests that the incidence of wasting has declined from 11.4 per cent to 5.3 per cent between 1993 and 2008. In addition, the incidence of underweight also declined from 31 per cent to 13.9 per cent between 1988 and 2008 (Ghana Statistical Service et al., 2009). All these are indications that the issue of hunger and its attendant challenges are being reduced in Ghana.

The community-based health and nutrition services package for children under the age of two and for pregnant and lactating women; the introduction and scaling-up of community management of severe acute malnutrition, subsidies on fertilizers for small-holder, the National Plan for Action for Food and Nutrition, and other nutrition programs as well as the School Feeding Program have helped reduce the level of malnutrition amongst children in the country (NDPC, 2010). The challenges have been funding, which is affecting the sustenance of these programs. As such, any increase in government financial flows and donor support will facilitate more strides in achieving this target by 2015.

4.2 Liberia

The trajectory of poverty in Liberia has not been consistent. In 1997, the proportion of population living on less than US$ 1 per day (at PPP) was 55.1 per cent. This proportion increased to 76.2 per cent in 2004 and subsequently declined to 63.81 per cent. This is far away from the 2015 target of 27.55 per cent while the share of poorest quintile in national consumption in 2007 of 6.44 is also half way from the 2015 target of 3.2. More so, the poverty gap ratio at 1.25 a day (at PPP) in 2007 was 40.78 as against the target of 20.39 (Ministry of Planning and Economic Affairs [MoPEA] 2010).

In terms of malnutrition, two statistics were available namely the prevalence of underweight children (moderate or severe) under five years of age and proportion of population below minimum level of dietary energy consumption. According to the MoPEA (2010), 14.8 per cent of children under five years were underweight children in 1997, 22.8 per cent 2000, 18.8 per cent in 2007 as against the target of 7.4 by 2015 while for the same period the proportion of the population below the minimum level of dietary energy consumption was 39 per cent in 1997, 46 per cent in 2000, 38 per cent in 2004 against the 2015 target of 19.5 per cent.

Despite government's efforts and commitment to combat the poverty problem, the task still remains a hefty challenge. The long political and economic instability that reduced the nations capacity to manage most part of the country has rendered the economy fragile and in need of massive investments. It is not surprising that the government identifies peace building, security and rule of law as critical factors needed for rapid economic growth and development in Liberia (MoPEA, 2010). In addition, the "lack of absorptive capacity of government institutions, due to low skilled base human resource personnel and inadequate infrastructure are factors impeding the creation of a sustainable agro-based industry in Liberia" (MoPEA, 2010: 10). These factors among the financial crisis and HIPC restrictions have limited government efforts to spending more on poverty programs.

4.3 Nigeria

The target to halve, between 1990 and 2015, the proportion of people whose income is less than one dollar a day seems unattainable in Nigeria. Current available statistics indicate that the proportion of the population living on less than $1 (PPP) per day as at 2006 was 51.55 per cent as against 21.4 per cent which is the target for 2015. The poverty gap declined marginally between 1990 and 2005 from 32.1 and 29.6 per cent while the share of poorest quintile in national consumption declined from 5.0 and 5.1 per cent (Government of the Federal Republic of Nigeria [GFRN] 2010).

In the context of halving the proportion of people who suffer from hunger between 1990 and 2015, there was a decline for all the indicators. The prevalence of underweight children under five years of age declined from 35.7 per cent in 1990 to 23.1 per cent in 2008 as against a target of 19.96 per cent. More so, the proportion of population below minimum level of dietary energy consumption (consuming 2,900 calories or less daily) declined from 39 per cent in 1990 to 32.83 per cent in 2009 against a target of 14.5 per cent in 2015. While the former target is assessed as being slow, progress on the latter was also deemed slow as at 2007 (GFRN, 2010). Despite these trends, the 2010 MDG country report suggest that despite great economic strides in the country over the past decades, this has not brought about the desired reduction in poverty. As a result more capacity development efforts need to be initiated to enhance small medium scale enterprises as well as enhance agriculture production and productivity (GFRN, 2010).

4.4 Rwanda

Poverty at the national level has consistently declined since 2001, from 60.4 per cent to 56.9 per cent in 2006. Despite this, the number of people in poverty increased from 4.8 million in 2001 to 5.4 million in 2006. These trends are emerging despites great efforts at national development where the GDP growth increased from 5.3 per cent in 2004, to 7.2 per cent in 2005. Programs that ensured this continuous economic growth and decline in poverty levels include the adoption and implementation of poverty reduction strategy papers in the last decades (National Institute of Statistics of Rwanda [NISR] 2007). According to the agency, in the 2007 Rwanda MDG Country Report, the poverty strategic paper encompass a growth and export program that is aimed at building a strong private sector led growth and a competitive business environment, Vision 2020 Unmurenge Program, that aims directly at poverty reduction and governance program with emphasis on peace and security as well as international cooperation. NSIR (2007) identifies that several challenges are limiting the country's effort at reducing poverty and these include low utilization of agriculture inputs such as fertilizers and seeds to increase productivity, high population growth rate to a manageable level, and low agricultural productivity and production.

In examining the hunger component of the MDG 1, the proportion of underweight children declined from 29 per cent to 24 per cent from 1992 to 2000 and further declined to 22.5 per cent in 2005. In addition, consumption poverty decreased from 41.3 per cent in 2001 to 36.9 per cent in 2006. Education of mothers and increased awareness programs has contributed significantly to improving the situation in Rwanda. The challenges however have been to increase the income level of poor people, increase agriculture production and productivity, and increasing awareness on the need for the consumption of high value nutrition products (NISR 2007).

4.5 Uganda

As at 2010, Uganda was on track to achieving the MDG 1 target 1(A) which is halving, between 1990 and 2015, the proportion of people whose income is less than one dollar a day and Target 1(C): halving, between 1992 and 2015, the proportion of people who suffer from hunger. The country has witnessed a relative decline in the proportion of the population below the poverty line since 1992. From 56 per cent, poverty declined to 34 per cent in 2000, increased to 39 per cent in 2002 and then reduced to 34 per cent in 2006 compared to the target of 25 per cent by 2015 (Ministry of Finance, Planning and Economic Development [MoFPED] 2010). The poverty gap declined from 21 per cent in 1992 to 9 per cent in 2006 while the share of the poorest quintile in total household consumption declined from 6.9 to 6.4 per cent in 2006 (MoFPED, 2010). Factors that induced this decline have been associated to the growth of the country's GDP between 1992 and 1997 (Office of the Prime Minister, 2008). In addition, programs directed at increasing agricultural production, employment in ICT and industry as well as physical and economic infrastructure development influenced these changes (MoFPED, 2004 and MoFPED 2010).

The prevalence of underweight children under-five years of age also declined from 26 per cent in 1995 to 16 per cent in 2006 against the 2015 target of 10 per cent (MoFPED, 2010). Despite these modest gains and the continuous efforts by government, the threat of political instability provides critical worries for achieving the MDG 1. In addition, the MoFPED (2004) identifies that "Uganda's high fertility rate presents a challenge to poverty reduction in its own right. Larger families are more likely to be poor, to fall into poverty, and children in them are at much greater risk of dying young." In addition, low capacities and erratic international aid flows are hampering progress. Nonetheless, the government is optimistic of achieving the MDG 1 by 2015.

5. Findings

The key findings that emerged from the study relates to the state of poverty, challenges and the potential for reducing poverty levels.

Firstly, Ghana is the first country in Sub-Saharan Africa to have achieved the target of halving the proportion of populations in extreme poverty as at 2006, well ahead of the target date. While the poverty rate in Ghana and Uganda declined substantially over the past two decades, it was shown to be increasing in the case of Liberia, Nigeria and Rwanda. As was evidenced in the Ghana experience, the various social interventions and resources through poverty reduction programs enhanced this attainment. Thus countries aiming to reduce poverty should emphasis social mitigation measures while at the same time improving economic livelihoods of their citizens.

Political stability, national policies as well as improved funding have facilitated poverty reduction in these countries as well as enhance child nutrition. This therefore demonstrates that with increased commitment to international aid flows and national capacity to increase revenues, more could be attained in achieving the MDGs.

As Liberia has shown, building national capacities to utilize resources is relevant for achieving poverty reduction. In this regard, national agencies and development partners should make capacity building a critical part of international aid and technical support to ensure that resources for poverty reduction efforts are well optimized.

More so, focus should be channeled at improving agriculture productivity and production. In all the countries studied that experienced declines in poverty, agriculture production played a key role. Thus, the challenge of agriculture productivity and production if mitigated would provide a strong avenue for reducing poverty levels in Sub-Saharan Africa.

6. Conclusion

This paper has examined how the MDG 1 has impacted five selected countries by considering the progress made so far with their MDG implementation efforts as well as the challenges they are facing. It is clear from the findings of the study that although some of the countries have made significant strides in their implementation efforts, others are still lagging behind. Sub-Saharan African governments and their development partners should therefore focus on national empowerment on appropriate resources and tools to be able to address the challenges they are currently facing to take advantage of the MDGs.

Overall, global development discourses and many academic literatures has centered on why poor countries continue to wallow in abject poverty and deprivation. This study has provided some answers to such effects. Particularly, in addressing such issues, scholars have put forward varying explanations as to why this phenomenon is the case but one that has widely dominated such attempts has been "the Concept of Development Trap" which has been around for ages but recently been attributed to the work of the renowned Economist, Jeffery Sachs.[5] In the "Bottom Billion", the famous development economist and former director of development research at the World Bank, Paul Collier, succinctly discusses four of these traps that contributes to and/or aggravate the plight of poor countries but yet has received less attention (Collier, 2008). Amongst these include, the conflict trap, the natural resources trap, the trap of being landlocked with bad neighbors, and the trap of bad governance in a small country. The findings from this study encompassing building national capacities for implementation, political and economic stability, increased agriculture productivity and production, and increased international aid relate to these thinking. It is important to state that most of Sub-Saharan African countries commonly find themselves in these traps that collier aptly discusses, which the findings from this study also confirms. These continuously hinder their developmental progress. The problems all go a long way to prevent Sub-Saharan African countries from working toward the attainment of the MDGs. Therefore to enable Sub-Saharan African countries accelerate efforts at achieving the MDG targets, there should be a global clarion call to arrest some of these traps or else the vicious cycle of poverty will continue to prevent them from meeting the targets.

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Notes

1. See the United Nations MDGs website. http://www.un.org/millenniumgoals/bkgd.shtml
2. See the United Nations website. MDGs in Uzbekistan. [Online] Available: http://unic.un.org/imucms/baku/11/481/millennium-development-goals.aspx (April 11, 2013)
3. See United Nations Development Program (2005)
4. See pp. 10 of Van der Berg, Servaas (2008). Poverty and education. Education policy series 10. [Online] Available: http://www.iiep.unesco.org/fileadmin/user_upload/Info_Services_Publications/pdf/2009/EdPol10.pdf (April 11, 2013)
5. See Collier (2008:5)