



## Millions Killed by Clever Dilution of Our Promise // Thomas Pogge

We know it is possible to kill millions of people. The wars of the twentieth century serve as examples. But is it possible to kill millions of people secretly, without being noticed? And can one do that while being widely celebrated as benefactors of humankind? This seems like an impossible challenge. But some bright and resourceful people are on track to pull it off nonetheless.

### Key points:

- The world's governments have, on our behalf, made three similar-sounding promises to halve extreme poverty by 2015. The *Rome Declaration* promised that the *number* of undernourished people would, in 2015, be no more than half of what it was in 1996. The later *Millennium Declaration* promised instead that the *fraction* of world population living in extreme poverty would be, in 2015, no more than half of what it was in 2000. This was reformulated as the *First Millennium Development Goal (MDG-1)*, which promises that the *fraction* of the population of the developing countries will be, in 2015, no more than half of what it was in 1990.
- Using the latest World Bank statistics about the evolution of extreme poverty in the world, we can gauge the significance of the revisions. Relative to the promise of Rome, the *Millennium Declaration* adds 165 million to the number of people whose extreme poverty in 2015 will be deemed morally acceptable; and MDG-1 adds another 331 million on top of that. Promoted or willfully ignored by many politicians, experts, poverty campaigners, and the media, these changes add about 6 million to the number of annual deaths from poverty-related causes — relative to what this death toll would be, had we fulfilled the promise of Rome.
- While we are congratulating ourselves on how successful we all are in the fight against poverty, the FAO reported in 2009 that the number of chronically undernourished people has broken above 1 billion for the first time in human history. This was allowed to happen despite the fact that the income shortfall of the poor is tiny: in 2005, the collective deficit of the 1,376.7 million extremely poor people amounted to merely one-sixth of one percent of world income.

### Half of humankind is poor

Half of humankind is poor. They have less than 3 percent of global household income as against 69 percent captured by the top tenth. Even on the narrowest conception of (“extreme”) poverty, the number of poor is somewhere around the one billion counted as chronically undernourished (2009)<sup>1</sup> or the 1,376.7 million counted in 2005 as living below the World Bank’s international poverty line of \$1.25 per person per day at 2005 purchasing power parities.<sup>2</sup> About one third of all human deaths — 18 million per annum — are due to poverty-related causes, mostly diseases that cause little or no damage among more affluent populations.<sup>3</sup>

The World Bank quantifies the collective shortfall of all those living in extreme poverty at 0.33 percent (at purchasing power parities) of the sum of all gross domestic products.<sup>4</sup> At currency exchange rates this shortfall would be even smaller: about one-sixth of one percent of world income or \$76 billion or about one-ninth of current US military spending.<sup>5</sup> Surprisingly, the world poverty problem — so unimaginably large in human terms — is also tiny in economic terms.

At the 1996 World Food Summit in Rome, the 186 participating governments declared: “We pledge our political will and our common and national commitment to achieving food security for all and to an ongoing effort to eradicate hunger in all countries, with an immediate view to reducing the number of undernourished people to half their present level no later than 2015.”<sup>6</sup> An “immediate” view that allocates 19 years to achieving a tiny shift in the global income distribution is remarkably unambitious. But at least the pledge seemed determinate and firm.

The promise to halve world poverty by 2015 was renewed in the *UN Millennium Declaration* of the year 2000, when the 191 UN member states committed themselves to the goal “to halve, by the year 2015, the proportion of the world’s people whose income is less than one dollar a day and the proportion of people who suffer from

hunger.”<sup>7</sup> But closer examination of the two texts reveals a subtle but important shift. While the earlier *Rome Declaration* spoke of halving by 2015 the *number* of undernourished, the later *Millennium Declaration* speaks of halving by 2015 the *proportion* of people suffering from hunger and extreme poverty.

Substituting “proportion” for “number” makes a considerable difference. The relevant proportion is a fraction consisting of the number of poor people in the numerator and “the world’s people” in the denominator. With world population expected to increase by 2015 to about 120 percent of what it was in 2000,<sup>8</sup> a reduction in the number of poor to 60 percent of what it was in 2000 suffices to cut the proportion in half. The *Rome Declaration* promises a 50 percent reduction in the number of poor by 2015. The *Millennium Declaration* promises only a 40 percent reduction in this number.

In highlighting this revision, I attach no importance to whether governments focus on the *number* of poor people or their *proportion*. My concern is with the dilution of the 2015 goal and with the effort to obscure this dilution. The dilution can be expressed in either idiom: the number of poor is to be reduced by 50 percent according to the *Rome Declaration* and by only 40 percent according to the *Millennium Declaration*. Or: the proportion of poor is to be reduced by 58.33 percent according to the *Rome Declaration* and by only 50 percent according to the *Millennium Declaration*. Either formulation makes apparent that the goalposts were moved.

### **An increase in morally acceptable poverty**

The significance of the dilution can be gauged in terms of the World Bank’s current poverty statistics. These figures show 1,656 million extremely poor people in 1996,<sup>9</sup> and the *Rome Declaration* thus promised that this number will be no more than 828 million in 2015. The same figures show that there were 1,665 million extremely poor people in 2000<sup>10</sup> — 27.2 percent of world population then. And the *Millennium Declaration* thus promised that this number will be no more than 993 million in 2015 – 13.6 percent of the expected world population in 2015.<sup>11</sup> The subtle shift in language quietly adds 165 million to the number of those whose extreme poverty in 2015 will be deemed morally acceptable – an extra 165 million human beings unable to meet their most basic needs. This dilution was successfully obscured from the public, and kept out of the media, by opaquely switching from “number” to “proportion” while retaining the language of “halving poverty by 2015.”

Shortly after its adoption, Article 19 of the *Millennium Declaration* was re-written at the UN as a set of eight Millennium Development Goals (MDGs). This revision involved further dilution of the poverty promise in two respects. The current UN statement and tracking of MDG-1 express the poor not as a “proportion of the world’s people,”

but as a “proportion of people in the developing world.”<sup>12</sup> This change is significant because the population of the developing world grows faster than that of the world at large. Because such faster population growth accelerates the rise in the denominator of the ratio, a smaller reduction in the numerator suffices to halve the proportion.

The other change is that the current UN statement of MDG-1 backdates the baseline to 1990, thus envisioning that the halving should take place “between 1990 and 2015”<sup>13</sup> rather than between 2000 and 2015. This change is significant because, lengthening the period in which population growth occurs, it further inflates the denominator and thereby diminishes even more the needed reduction in the number of poor. The population of the developing countries in 2015 is expected to be 146 percent of what it was in 1990.<sup>14</sup> Therefore a reduction of the number of poor to 73 percent of what it was in 1990 suffices to cut that proportion in half.

It is worth noting that the creative accounting is not confined to MDG-1. The annual MDG reports state generally that “the baseline for the assessment is 1990, but data for 2000 are also presented, whenever possible, to provide a more detailed picture of progress since the Declaration was signed.”<sup>15</sup> The year “1990” occurs hundreds of times in these reports but not one single time in the entire *UN Millennium Declaration*. As the UN is now phrasing MDG-4 and MDG-5, they require us to “reduce by two thirds, between 1990 and 2015, the under-five mortality rate” and to “reduce by three quarters, between 1990 and 2015, the maternal mortality ratio.”<sup>16</sup> What the UN General Assembly had actually agreed to promise is rather different: “By the same date [2015], to have reduced maternal mortality by three quarters, and under-five child mortality by two thirds, of their *current* rates.”<sup>17</sup>

One remarkable consequence of the UN’s backdating of the MDG baselines is that China’s massive poverty reduction in the 1990s — the number of Chinese living in extreme poverty reportedly declined by 264 million during that decade<sup>18</sup> — can now be counted as progress toward achieving the MDGs. The revision of MDG-1 thus led UN Secretary-General Kofi Annan tragically to report to the General Assembly that for the world’s most populous region – East Asia and the Pacific – the 2015 poverty target was met already in 1999, a full year before this goal had even been adopted.<sup>19</sup>

How do the dilutions of the poverty promise affect the allowable number of extremely poor people in 2015? According to the current World Bank statistics, there were 1,813.4 million extremely poor people in 1990 (43.8 percent of the 1990 population of the developing countries).<sup>20</sup> The new target for 2015 is therefore to reduce the number of extremely poor persons to 1,324 million (21.9 percent of the 2015 population of the developing countries).<sup>21</sup> By revising MDG-1, the UN has thus raised the number of those whose extreme poverty in 2015 will be deemed morally

acceptable by 331 million (from 993 to 1,324 million).

	World Food Summit	MDG-1 as adopted	MDG-1 as revised
Baseline year	1996	2000	1990
Baseline number of poor*	1,656	1,665	1,813
Promised reduction by 2015	50.0%	40.4%	27.0%
Target for 2015*	828	993	1,324
Required annual rate of reduction	3.58%	3.39%	1.25%
Target for 2005*	1,193	1,401	1,501

\* number in millions

Drawing on the official World Bank figures,<sup>22</sup> the nearby table summarizes what the dilutions mean in human terms. Compared to the 1996 promise of Rome, MDG-1 as now stated by the UN raises the number of extremely poor people deemed morally acceptable in 2015 by 496 million (from 828 to 1,324 million) and thereby *shrinks* by more than half (from 828 to 332 million) the reduction in this number which governments pledge to achieve during the 1996–2015 period. Had we stuck to the promise of Rome, our task for this period would have been to reduce the number of extremely poor by 828 million or 50 percent. MDG-1 envisages a reduction by only 20 percent or 332 million: from 1,656 million in 1996 to 1,324 million in 2015.

With the World Bank's 2005 estimate already down to 1,376.7 million,<sup>23</sup> there is little doubt that the world's governments will be able to proclaim in 2015 that MDG-1 has been achieved. It will not be noticed in the celebrations that the promise of Rome was not achieved, although it easily could have been. The difference between the two promises — 496 million additional human beings living in extreme poverty from 2015 forward — entails about 6 million additional annual deaths from poverty-related causes. Millions of people are killed by the clever substitution of MDG-1 for the promise of Rome. Does anybody care?

### Notes

- 1) FAO (Food and Agriculture Organization of the United Nations). "1.02 Billion People Hungry." News Release. June 19, 2009. [www.fao.org/news/story/en/item/20568/icode/](http://www.fao.org/news/story/en/item/20568/icode/) (accessed July 31, 2010).
- 2) Shaohua Chen and Martin Ravallion. "The Developing World Is Poorer than We Thought, But No Less Successful in the Fight against Poverty," World Bank Policy Research Working Paper WPS 4703 (Washington DC, 2008), <http://econ.worldbank.org/docsearch>. The World Bank now defines extreme poverty as living on less, per person per day, than what \$1.25 could buy in the US in 2005. The UN follows this definition.
- 3) WHO (World Health Organization). *The Global Burden of Disease:*

2004 Update (Geneva: WHO Publications 2008), table A1, pp. 54–9.

- 4) Chen and Ravallion (n.2), p. 27, data for 2005.
- 5) Thomas Pogge. *Politics as Usual: What Lies behind the Pro-Poor Rhetoric* (Cambridge: Polity 2010), pp. 69–70.
- 6) Rome Declaration on World Food Security. November 1996. [www.fao.org/wfs](http://www.fao.org/wfs).
- 7) UN General Assembly. *United Nations Millennium Declaration*. A/res/55/2, September 8, 2000. [www.un.org/millennium/declaration/ares552e.htm](http://www.un.org/millennium/declaration/ares552e.htm). Article 19.
- 8) UN Population Division. *World Population Prospects: The 2008 Revision*. 2009. <http://esa.un.org/unpp/index.asp?panel=2> (accessed July 31, 2010).
- 9) Chen and Ravallion (n.2), Table 7, p. 44.
- 10) Ibid., calculated by interpolation.
- 11) UN Population Division (n.8).
- 12) United Nations. *The Millennium Development Goals Report 2008* (New York: UN Department of Economic and Social Affairs 2008), p. 6.
- 13) Ibid.
- 14) UN Population Division (n.8).
- 15) United Nations (n.12), p. 50.
- 16) Ibid., pp. 20 and 24.
- 17) *UN Millennium Declaration* (n.7), Article 19, emphasis added.
- 18) Chen and Ravallion (n.2), Table 7, p. 44.
- 19) *Implementation of the United Nations Millennium Declaration: Report of the Secretary-General*. A/57/270, July 31, 2002. [www.un.org/millenniumgoals/sreport2002.pdf?OpenElement](http://www.un.org/millenniumgoals/sreport2002.pdf?OpenElement), pp. 8 and 22.
- 20) Chen and Ravallion (n.2), Table 7, p. 44, and UN Population Division (n.8).
- 21) UN Population Division (n.8).
- 22) Chen and Ravallion (n.2), Table 7, p. 44.
- 23) Ibid.

### Further reading

- Chen, Shaohua & Martin Ravallion (2008) "The Developing World Is Poorer than We Thought, But No Less Successful in the Fight against Poverty," World Bank Policy Research Working Paper WPS 4703, Washington DC, <http://econ.worldbank.org/docsearch>.
- FAO (1996) *Rome Declaration on World Food Security*, November 1996, FAO, [www.fao.org/wfs](http://www.fao.org/wfs).
- Pogge, Thomas (2010) *Politics as Usual: What Lies behind the Pro-Poor Rhetoric*, Cambridge: Polity, chs. 3-5.
- UN General Assembly (2000) *United Nations Millennium Declaration*, A/res/55/2, September 8, 2000, [www.un.org/millennium/declaration/ares552e.htm](http://www.un.org/millennium/declaration/ares552e.htm). Article 19.
- UN (2008) *The Millennium Development Goals Report 2008*, New York: UN Department of Economic and Social Affairs.
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