

15 million success stories under the Millennium Development Goals

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This weekend, more than 150 world leaders will gather at U.N. headquarters to adopt the [Sustainable Development Goals](#) (SDGs) for 2030. In the lead-up to the summit, many independent analysts are taking stock of the Millennium Development Goals (MDGs), the global guide star for anti-poverty efforts over the period from 2000 to 2015. Several of them, including journalists, have been asking me whether any MDG success stories exist to help inform the new [global goals](#).

In my view, there are three key parts to answering this question. First, we can point to at least 15 million success stories, measured in lives saved. Second, these victories are global, but the majority have taken shape in sub-Saharan Africa. Third, in order to understand the nature of the successes since 2000, we need to look beneath the crucial but ultimately crude benchmarks of MDG target achievement.

1. Tallying the successes: 8.8 million children and over 7 million AIDS survivors

In their [annual progress reports](#), organizations like the U.N. have historically focused on presenting the absolute levels of change. For example, they might compare the number of children who die in one year with the number who die in a later year, and count the difference as the measure of the world's success. A different way to measure success is to look at pre-existing trends and search for accelerations in the *rate* of progress. [Last year I published such a study](#), estimating the *incremental* number of children's lives saved due to *accelerated* improvements in child survival since the launch of the MDGs.

The methodology estimates the number of incremental lives saved under two counterfactual scenarios for children under-5 mortality rates (U5MR). "Counterfactual A" extrapolates each country's average annual rate of progress from 1990 to 2000, and extends the same trend to the most recent year (in 2014 the U.N. provided data through to 2013). "Counterfactual B" is more conservative, and extrapolates the rates of progress from 1996 to 2001, recognizing that the early 1990s were worse than the late 1990s for many countries, and also that global MDG policy efforts only really started to get off the ground in 2002.

Earlier this month, [the U.N. released new estimates of all countries' under-5 mortality rates](#) for both 2014 and 2015. This allowed me to update my estimates accordingly. Figure 1 shows the core results, and how the world has been "bending the curve" downward on child deaths.

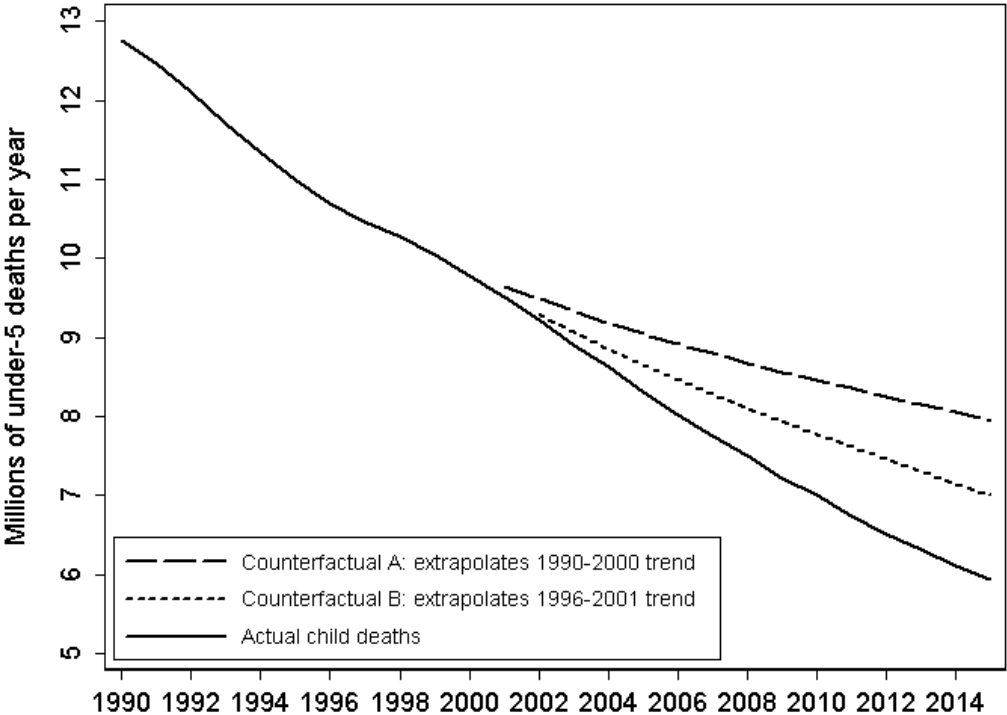
Under Counterfactual A, using rates of progress from 1990-2000:

- 17.3 million more children under-5 are alive today than would have been otherwise;
- Overall U5MR for developing countries would have been 16 points higher in 2015, at 62 deaths per 1,000 live births rather than 46 per 1,000.

Under Counterfactual B, using rates of progress from 1996-2001:

- 8.8 million more children under-5 are alive today than would have been otherwise;
- Overall U5MR for developing countries would have been 9 points higher in 2015, at 55 deaths per 1,000 live births rather than 46 per 1,000.

Figure 1. Aggregate under-5 deaths 1990 to 2015 (in millions): Actual vs. Counterfactuals A and B



Crucially, it’s not just children under-5 whose lives have been saved since 2000. The next biggest category of lives saved is probably for people with AIDS who now receive life-saving antiretroviral medicine. Back in 2000, there were no international efforts to provide AIDS treatment at a time when 25 million people were estimated to be HIV infected in Africa alone. Thanks to the successful launch and scale-up of global policies and institutions—especially through the Global Fund to Fight AIDS, TB, and Malaria and the U.S. Presidential Emergency Program for AIDS Relief—[an estimated 7.8 million AIDS-related deaths have been averted](#). These efforts have been underwritten by roughly a tripling of development assistance for health over the period. Official data do not count exactly how many of the 7.8 million lives are for children under-5, but a back-of-the-envelope calculation suggests it adds up to a few hundred thousand.

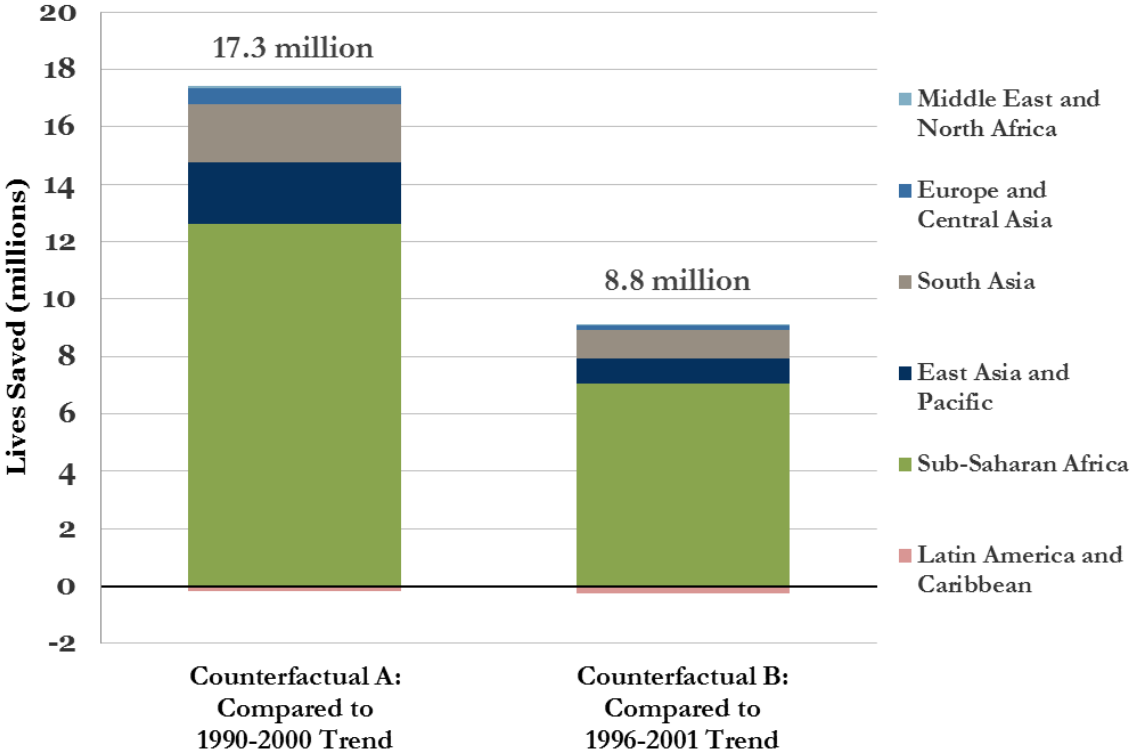
Some simple arithmetic shows that, under the most conservative estimates, at least 15 million people (8.8 million under-5 plus at least 7 million AIDS survivors) and perhaps as many as 25 million people (17.3 million plus at least 7 million) are alive today thanks to dramatically accelerated global efforts since 2000. Each of these lives saved is a global success story.

2. The greatest gains are in Africa.

Many people believe that China and India are responsible for most of the world’s development success stories over the past generation. Figure 2 shows why that simplistic narrative does not hold. At least in terms of child survival—arguably the most objective and resonant measure of development in all corners of the world—sub-

Saharan Africa is responsible for the lion’s share of accelerations in progress. Note that even China and India saw accelerations in U5MR declines since 2000, but Africa is responsible for 80 percent of the gains under the more conservative Counterfactual B, and 73 percent under Counterfactual A.

Figure 2. Incremental lives saved for children under 5



Sources: Analysis based on McArthur (2014); data from UN IGME 2015 and World Bank regional groups

3. The full story lies deeper than achieving MDG targets.

One of the paradoxes of the MDGs is that many of the countries that have achieved the greatest gains under the MDGs—defined as accelerations in progress—have not actually achieved the MDGs. And many of those accelerations might well be a product of the world’s simple reiteration of the MDGs as objectives among countries and their international partners—day after day, month after month, year after year.

Table 1 shows that, under Counterfactual B, only 20 countries were responsible for more than 92 percent of the children under-5 lives saved. Only nine of them, less than half, are estimated to be achieving the MDG target of a two-thirds reduction in U5MR between 1990 and 2015. The countries with the largest number of incremental lives saved, Nigeria and India, will both fall short of the target: Nigeria has reduced U5MR by 49 percent since 1990, and India has reduced by 62 percent. But both have registered important accelerations in progress.

It is noteworthy that 18 of the 20 countries in Table 1 are in sub-Saharan Africa. Nigeria is especially notable at the top, since it has been such a prominent MDG proponent. In 2005 the country received a major debt relief deal on the condition that the savings would be allocated towards domestic MDG investments. [Amina J. Mohammed](#) was given a senior ministerial-level portfolio to figure out how to translate the resources into

results on the ground. The MDGs for health and education framed the core of the task. Ms. Mohammed held that role for a previously-unheard-of tenure spanning three successive presidents, prior to being appointed, in 2012, as the U.N. Secretary-General’s special adviser to help coordinate the global post-2015 agenda.

Table 1. Children under-5 lives saved under Counterfactual B (compared to 1996-2001 trajectory)

Country	Achieved MDG?	Incremental under-5 lives saved, 2002-2015	Average Rate of Progress 1996-2001	Average Rate of Progress 2001-2015
1 Nigeria		1,028,657	2.4%	3.6%
2 India		951,172	3.6%	4.3%
3 China	Yes	915,761	5.5%	8.0%
4 Ethiopia	Yes	691,557	3.8%	5.9%
5 South Africa		632,787	-3.6%	4.5%
6 Uganda	Yes	461,731	3.3%	6.6%
7 Congo DR		428,832	2.1%	3.3%
8 Kenya		367,422	2.0%	5.2%
9 Tanzania	Yes	327,193	4.5%	6.4%
10 Burkina Faso		296,875	1.5%	5.0%
11 Mali		247,675	2.4%	4.3%
12 Cameroon		239,236	1.1%	3.5%
13 Zambia	Yes	234,594	2.8%	6.1%
14 Rwanda	Yes	233,486	3.5%	9.6%
15 Senegal	Yes	222,238	2.2%	6.9%
16 Niger	Yes	215,701	4.0%	5.7%
17 Angola		178,670	0.9%	2.2%
18 Zimbabwe		177,593	-1.3%	2.8%
19 Cote d Ivoire		151,248	1.3%	3.0%
20 Malawi	Yes	139,900	4.4%	6.4%
All developing countries		8,830,127		
Top 20 share		92.2%		

Can success beget success?

The new SDG agenda is daunting in its scope and ambition. It is also of critical importance. As the world approaches the relevant complexities, we should heed the experience of people like Ms. Mohammed and so many of her colleagues across Nigeria, and indeed around Africa and the rest of the world. They confronted business-as-usual to develop new pathways to success in many of the places where it was least expected. In doing so, they have provided us all with millions of success stories to draw from. As we look at the challenges to 2030 and beyond, we undoubtedly need countless millions more.