



EDITORIAL

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Council of Science Editors Task Force on Science Journals, Poverty, and Human Development

In September 2000, nearly 200 world leaders formulated the Millennium Development Goals (MDGs), a set of ambitious objectives to promote international social justice. Fundamental directives were established in eight main areas: poverty and hunger, education, women's equality, child mortality, maternal health, disease, environmental sustainability, and global development partnerships. All United Nations member countries agreed to meet the MDGs by 2015.

Many global institutions, most notably the World Bank, the International Monetary Fund, and the Organization for Economic Cooperation and Development, have also pledged support for the MDGs. However, the United Nations reports that progress reaching the specific targets has been slow and uneven. The global body has therefore restructured implementation of the goals and given priority to country-level monitoring that stresses advocacy, practical assistance, local expertise, and additional financial resources.

In the international effort to achieve the MDGs, scientific journals have an important role to play promoting the goals within each discipline and fostering cross-disciplinary discussions. Reaching across intellectual boundaries is particularly critical to understanding the relationships among the different MDGs, to advancing scientific knowledge, and to encouraging policy decisions that harmonize sustainability with economic development.

A chief objective of the MDGs is to cut in half the one billion people who currently survive on less than US\$1 per day. It is devastating to think that even if this were to occur, by 2015 more than 500 million people will still be living in extreme poverty.

Equally compelling is the aim to "ensure environmental sustainability." The impact of contemporary lifestyles on the global environment can certainly be ameliorated by 2015 if we are able to sustainably bring the global population of nearly 6.5 billion people up the development ladder. However,

there is little question that science and discipline will need to conquer apathy and greed if we are to enjoy broader prosperity without imposing huge burdens on global biogeochemical systems. We should not underestimate the enormity of this challenge. William Ruckelshaus (1989), the founding administrator of the Environmental Protection Agency in the United States, posed the question nearly two decades ago in the following terms:

Can we move nations and people in the direction of sustainability? Such a move would be a modification of society comparable in scale to only two other changes: the Agricultural Revolution of the late Neolithic and the Industrial Revolution of the past two centuries. These revolutions were gradual, spontaneous, and largely unconscious. This one will have to be a fully conscious operation, guided by the best foresight that science can provide. If we actually do it, the undertaking will be absolutely unique in humanity's stay on earth.

The Council of Science Editors (CSE) has formed a task force to define the role of scientific journals in alleviating poverty and promoting human development. Clearly, as the arbiters of formalized scientific knowledge, science publishers and editors have an enormous role in achieving the MDGs and in ensuring that success in meeting the development-oriented objectives does not overwhelm efforts toward environmental sustainability. In this context, it merits noting that CSE has recently broadened its focus from serving as a professional association for the biological sciences to representing the broader community of science editors. This widening of mission is reflected in the organization's name change from the Council of Biology Editors. Contemporary concerns such as Avian Flu, Severe Acute Respiratory Syndrome (SARS), and HIV-AIDS highlighted

the need to transition science beyond its traditional disciplinary boundaries.

The task force was energized at its inception by working with Jeffrey Sachs, the Director of the Earth Institute at Columbia University and Special Advisor to the United Nations Secretary-General Kofi Annan on the MDGs. The efforts of the task force in its first year have been directed at the following issues:

- Fostering research and publishing capacity in the developing world
- Raising awareness of poverty and the role scientific journals can play in combating its consequences
- Identifying existing programs involving the scientific publishing community and issues pertaining to poverty
- Establishing a statement of principles describing journal editors' responsibilities to the developing world

The task force is anxious to amplify existing programs to build publishing capacity in the developing world within the context of initiatives such as the International Network for the Availability to Scientific Publications (INASP) (<http://www.inasp.info>) and to help disseminate scientific knowledge regarding the developing world through such tools as SciDevNet (<http://www.scidev.net>). The task force is additionally seeking to enhance the availability of free or reduced-cost research resources, such as the World Health Organization's Health InterNetwork Access to Research Initiative (HINARI) (<http://www.who.int/hinari/en/>) and the United Nations Food and Agriculture Organization's Access to Global Online Research in Agriculture (AGORA) (<http://www.aginternetwork.org/en/>). It has also assisted in launching a series of other projects such as AuthorAid (<http://www.jphp.umb.edu/documents/Authoraid.pdf>), an initiative to mentor scholars from developing countries prepare studies for local or international publication.

World leaders often look to science to solve intractable human problems. Scientific journals play a key role in this process, as publication in respected venues validates investigation and generates professional credentials for further research. Editors have a responsibility to the MDGs and should honor this obligation by examining issues of the developing world, by increasing developing-world membership in their author and peer-review pools, and by encouraging local research and publication.

References

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About the Author

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