Note: Ban Ki Moon wrong on water MDG

Author: Stephen Howes and Jonathan Pryke
Date: August 12, 2012

Earlier this year the UN Secretary General (SG) reminded us in his preface to this report of the MDG target for drinking water: “reducing by half the proportion of people without sustainable access to safe drinking water”. And then he proudly announced “that, as of 2010, the target for drinking water has been met.”

Unfortunately, this is wrong or, at best, misleading. As Roger Harrabin explains here, there is no reliable data on safe drinking water. The UN report [pdf] for which the SG wrote the preface shows that it is in fact the proportion of people without improved water supply which has fallen in half. Improved and safe are very different. As a recent Global Water Forum post explains, water is often piped but untreated.

The UN report doesn’t hide the fact that it is measuring changes in improved rather than safe water. Why it still talks about meeting a safe water target, and gives the SG a misleading preface to sign is a mystery. And water is not the only MDG to be plagued by data problems, as recently argued in this Devpolicy post, progress towards the health MDGs is also immeasurable.

Stephen Howes is Director of the Development Policy Centre. Jonathan Pryke is a Researcher at the Centre.