Should global goal setting continue, and how, in the post-2015 era?

Sakiko Fukuda-Parr

Abstract

The Millennium Development Goals (MDGs) were introduced to monitor implementation of the United Nations Millennium Declaration which set out a vision for inclusive and sustainable globalization based on human rights principles. This paper critically assesses the MDG experience including their policy purpose, ethical commitments, political origins, and consequences. It proposes that post-2015 goals should be based on principles of equity, sustainability and human security and address key contemporary challenges such as climate change, unemployment, inequality and global market instability.

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Keywords: MDGs, development cooperation, poverty, equity, sustainability, security, global goals.

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Contents

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This paper was originated as a contribution to the work programme of the Committee for Development Policy (CDP), a subsidiary body of the United Nations Economic and Social Council, on the United Nations development agenda beyond 2015. This research effort aimed at analyzing and proposing alternative development models that could contribute to a sustained improvement in human well-being worldwide. While the views expressed here do not necessarily coincide with those of the CDP or the United Nations, the paper has benefitted from the discussions conducted at various workshops and plenary meetings of the Committee. Additional information on the CDP and its work is available at http://www.un.org/en/development/desa/policy/cdp/index.shtml.

Introduction

The 21st century began with an unprecedented commitment to a new consensus on ending poverty as the central purpose of international development. World leaders from 189 countries, including 147 Heads of State and Government, gathered at the United Nations General Assembly to define the central challenges for the new century. They adopted the Millennium Declaration (UN 2000 (A/RES/55/2)) which stated their determination to work towards development and poverty eradication, peace and security, environmental conservation, democracy and human rights. They pledged to 'spare no effort to free our fellow men, women and children from the abject and dehumanizing conditions of extreme poverty' (paragraph 11). They further emphasized that the global reach of these commitments went beyond their own national borders to people worldwide, notwithstanding the primary responsibility that Governments have for their own citizens.

The Declaration was a visionary document that reiterated the shared values of solidarity, equality, dignity and respect for nature as the basis for their consensus and was exceptional for its clear vision and articulation. It was also particularly powerful because it went beyond vision and values and included a concrete action plan by setting ambitious and measurable goals with a clearly defined deadline. One year later, the Secretary-General published his implementation plan, the Road Map document (A/56/326), which contained, in an annex, a list of goals derived from the Declaration. These were structured and elaborated as 8 goals, 18 targets and 48 indicators and packaged with a new catchy name, the Millennium Development Goals (MDGs)[2]. The purpose of this list was to 'harmonize reporting on the Millennium Declaration' (p.55, paragraph 1).

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2   In 2005 the list was expanded to include 21 targets and 60 indicators.

The expiration of the MDGs in 2015 raises several questions: should they expire, be renewed with an extended deadline, or be replaced with a new set of global goals?

The objective of this paper is to argue for the last option. The expiry is an opportunity to correct some of the deficiencies of the MDG approach, and to set new goals that more adequately reflect the equitable growth and human rights-based development strategy set out in the Millennium Declaration. The paper begins with a critical review of the MDG experience, highlights its importance in development debates and outcomes, and its flaws in composition and implementation. The subsequent section details the MDG experience by explaining their goals as a normative instrument rooted in human rights and their origins in the controversies of the 1980s and 90s. The paper then proposes an approach to setting post-2015 goals based on the ethical commitments of the Millennium Declaration. The final section concludes.

The MDG Experience: 2001-2011

The importance of MDGs

Poverty as a global priority

According to Weiss, Jolly and Emmerij (2009), the MDGs were among the most important UN ideas that changed the world. Like most UN resolutions, the MDGs could have been forgotten within a few weeks or months of their introduction, but they continue to dominate international debates on development. As one of the architects of the MDGs remarks, 'The conceivers of the MDGs never expected the support to spread so wide and so deep' (Vandemoortele, 2009). The MDGs have become the standard reference point around which international debates on development revolve. They are used as a proxy to judge progress in tackling global poverty. The UN, the World Bank and numerous other international bodies monitor MDG implementation and issue annual reports with detailed data. The staff of the International Monetary Fund (IMF) systematically include data on MDG targets in their country reports, along with key macroeconomic performance indicators. UN meetings to review progress in achieving MDGs have become both frequent and high-profile political events that are significant for a country's prestige and international standing. Political leaders make speeches defending policy initiatives with the warning: 'without such and such action the MDGs will not be achieved'. Economists write research papers on macroeconomic policy choices and evaluate them against contributions to achieving MDGs. Local NGOs advocate national budget reforms 'to achieve the MDGs', however critical they may be of these goals, because the MDGs are the accepted standard to evaluate policy. Media reports on poverty refer to failure to achieve MDGs as a demonstration of pervasive abject poverty. In other words, MDGs have become a convenient shorthand of development and poverty alleviation..

The MDGs have raised awareness of ending global poverty as an urgent challenge and a priority for global action. They have helped to maintain development as a priority, not only at the UN, but also in other fora such as meetings of the G-8 and G-20. But their importance in shaping international development debates goes further. Since their introduction in 2001, the MDGs have become increasingly accepted and consolidated as the legitimized framework for debates on international development. Even those who initially opposed them or hesitated to embrace them now use them.[3] In so doing, MDGs have shaped the international development debates in several ways.

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3   For example, initially many NGOs were hesitant to espouse the MDGs because they did not agree with the list of
      goals, targets and indicators or objected to the lack of adequate consultation in the way they were drawn up, or because

First, the MDGs institutionalized the consensus on ending poverty—their broad purpose as a whole or a package— as an international norm (Fukuda-Parr and Hulme 2011).[4]

Second, the MDGs have come to reshape the concept of 'development' to mean ending poverty. Poverty has not been the central issue in development, but has been more about transforming economic structures and creating capacity for sustainable growth. Yet, as I will explore later in this paper, this reconceptualization of development has also had perverse effects on development policy debates by over-simplifying the challenges involved.

Third, the MDGs have helped defining poverty as a multidimensional deprivation in the lives of people, including such dimensions as education, health, environment, food, employment, housing, and gender equality – or 'human poverty'.[5] Since the 1990s, the question of how poverty should be defined and measured has been a subject of much controversy. Though it is now widely recognized that poverty is a multidimensional phenomenon and a human centred concern, the most frequently used definition has been consumption based, and its measurement defined as the money-centric headcount below a threshold level of income.[6]

MDGs in national and international policy

National Governments and donor agencies have consistently adopted MDGs as an important part of their policy frameworks. What this has meant, in practice, has ranged from rhetorical adoption, such as referring to them in general policy statements, to instrumental adoption, such as using the targets to drive resource allocation and policy shifts. For example, as part of the MDG implementation effort, the UN Millennium project made a major effort to assist Governments with the necessary cost and programme investments to achieve the 2015 targets. In most cases, these estimates were controversial and were not incorporated into national planning, budgeting and resource mobilization processes such as the Poverty Reduction Strategy Papers, national development plans and budgets. In fact, in a 2008 study (Fukuda-Parr 2008) I reviewed 22 Poverty Reduction Strategy Papers (PRSPs)[7]under implementation and found that they consistently referred to the MDGs as a major national development objective, but not all included timelines or action plans for achieving the targets. Moreover, those that did were selective about which of the 8 goals and 18 targets were incorporated in the papers. While many included income poverty, primary education, child mortality and water goals, other goals

they replaced agendas that they were pursuing. But over time, they have become more broadly accepted and some of the initial critics have begun to use them as the consensus framework for development efforts. For example, the human rights community initially ignored or criticized them (Alston 2005) but changed course and adopted a more constructive approach to use the MDGs to pursue a human rights and development agenda (OHCHR 2008).

4   The MDG narrative meets the criteria of a norm that has become well established according to the trajectory of international norm dynamics elaborated by Finnemore and Sikkink (1998). Norms emerge, then cascade, and then reach the final stage of becoming 'institutionalized'. At this stage, norms take on "a taken-for-granted quality and are no longer a matter of broad public debate." (p. 9). The mechanisms that keep the norm alive at this stage are 'habit' and 'institutionalization'. The main actors are the professions and bureaucracy who uphold and adhere to the norm in order to conform to a recognized standard. In contrast, it is the idealistically committed 'norm entrepreneurs' who drive the emergence of a norm, and states and organizations that promote its 'cascade'. See Fukuda-Parr and Hulme (2010)

5   'Human poverty' was introduced by the 1997 UNDP Human Development Report and refers to multiple capability deprivations. (UNDP 1997)

6   See Stewart and others (2007) for a detailed review of alternative definitions and measures of poverty.

7   PRSPs are prepared by Governments of low-income countries and serve as a framework for reaching agreement with the donors on development priorities and financing requirements. The study included all 'second generation' (second PRSP prepared by the country) PRSPs existing at the time of the study.

(e.g., decent work, food and nutrition, gender equality, environmental sustainability, and global partnerships) were consistently neglected. Additionally, many PRSPs adopted a strategy of economic growth and social sector investments without considering distributional challenges. Implicitly, PRSPs have assumed that aggregate national economic growth and social sector expansion would lead to the achievement of the goals through a process of 'trickle down' without acknowledging the considerable evidence that macroeconomic policies may have distributional impacts that can undermine poverty reduction. Only one of the PRSPs reviewed mentioned inequality and gave attention to the most vulnerable.

The same study reviewed policy frameworks of 21 bilateral donors and found all consistently mentioned MDGs as overall objectives. Environmental sustainability, education, health and global diseases as well as income poverty were the goals mostly cited. Priority was also given to governance, including human rights and democracy, as well as peace and security that are chapters of the Millennium Declaration but were not included in the MDGs. However, none of the donors have adopted MDGs as a framework for allocation of resources and for programming purposes.

Nonetheless, there has been a perceptible increase in funding for social sectors and within these sectors, for primary basic services (see tables 1 and 2 and figures 1 to 4). ODA for other MDG priorities, notably food production and agriculture, which are important for reducing hunger and malnutrition and for reducing rural poverty, also increased but less markedly. Increased ODA allocation to primary basic services took place at the expense of other sectors. The proportion of aid allocated by member countries of the Development Assistance Committee (DAC) to basic social services increased from 10.1 per cent in 1999 to 21.0 per cent in 2009 while the proportion of ODA for building trade capacity declined from 38.5 per cent in 2001 to 28.9 per cent in 2009.

Table 1. ODA commitments by OECD/DAC bilateral donors, 1990-2010 ($2010 millions)

	1990	1995	2000	2005	2010
Social Infrastructure and Services	19,844	20,231	20,919	34,174	44,333
Production Sectors	10,322	6,755	4,405	5,997	8,977
Agriculture	..	2,142	2,219	3,042	5,372
General Budget Support	1,155	1,291	561	1,826	2,365
Education Total	8,631	7,307	5,522	6,656	9,470
Basic Education	..	775	1,166	1,910	2,510
Health Total	2,441	2,845	2,385	4,076	5,116
Basic Health	..	1,266	1,329	2,532	2,945
Food crop production	..	83	66	102	239

Source: United Nations (2011a) http://mdgs.un.org/unsd/mdg/Resources/Static/Data/2011%20Stat%20Annex.pdf. Accessed April 14, 2012.

Table 2. Proportion of total bilateral, sector-allocable ODA of OECD/DAC bilateral donors to basic social services and aid for trade, 1999-2009 (per cent)

	1999	2001	2003	2005	2007	2009
Basic social services (MDG indicator 8.2)	10.1	14.0	15.7	15.9	19.9	21.0
Aid for trade (MDG indicator 8.9)	..	38.5	29.0	30.7	27.7	28.9

Source: United Nations (2011a) http://mdgs.un.org/unsd/mdg/Resources/Static/Data/2011%20Stat%20Annex.pdf. Accessed April 14, 2012.

While the years following the introduction of the MDGs were notable for the ambitious and high profile political commitments made by the G-8 countries, such as the pledge to double development aid to Africa (or 0.51% of their GNIs) made at the Gleneagles Summit in 2005, they have largely not been implemented (United Nations 2011, p.12, figure 3), except for a few cases.[8] Moreover, no significant international poverty initiatives were launched, and the rich countries have not shifted their positions on critical international economic policies including trade, finance, investment and technology transfer. As the title of the UN MDG Gap Task Force 2011 report, "The Global Partnership for Development: Time to Deliver", makes clear, donor countries have fallen far short of implementing their Goal 8 targets for aid, trade, debt and technology (United Nations 2011a). So far, the only tangible progress in these areas has been the reduction of the debt burden of the poorest countries. Multilateral trade negotiations — the Doha Round, labelled the 'development round' — have become deadlocked, largely over differences between developing and developed country positions on agricultural subsidies in the developed countries. Aid commitments have increased in volume, but these trends started before 2000 and have slowed since 2006. Moreover ODA flows still remained at 0.31 per cent of donor GNI in 2010, far short of the UN target of 0.7 per cent of GNI. There has been substantial reallocation to the Least Developed Countries (LDCs) — from $21 billion in 2000 to $29 billion by 2009 (2009 prices and exchange rates). But this is still only 0.10 per cent of donors' GNI compared with the UN target for ODA to LDCs of 0.15-0.2 per cent of GNI (United Nations 2011a, p.10, table 1).

Beyond Governments, the MDGs have spawned numerous responses on the part of local governments, civil society and businesses across the world. For example, in Ecuador, local governments used MDGs as a framework for establishing priority action plans. In Brazil, the MDGs have mobilized the national petroleum company to initiate social projects. The numbers participating in the 'Stand Up Against Poverty' campaign have mushroomed into millions. There are numerous other examples, though it is difficult to assess the impact of these diverse and disparate initiatives.

Surprisingly, the consensus on poverty as a policy priority has not led to fundamental debates or new thinking about policy alternatives for faster poverty reduction. Over the last half-century, many ideas have marked the evolution of development thought and driven historical shifts in theory and strategies. Some examples that come to mind include Basic Needs in the 1970s, structural adjustment and neoliberal reforms in the 1980s, and Human Development in the 1990s, all of which brought elements of theoretical ideas with practical policy strategies. Such shifts in policy strategies did not occur since the consensus on poverty as a

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8   The US doubled aid to sub-Saharan Africa between 2004 and 2009, one year ahead of the pledge; Canada doubled funding from 2001 levels; Norway surpassed the pledge to maintain ODA at 1 per cent of GNI, and Switzerland increased its ODA to 0.41 per cent of GNI.

Figure 1. Sectoral allocation of ODA commitments by OECD/DAC bilateral donors 1990-2010 ($2010 million)
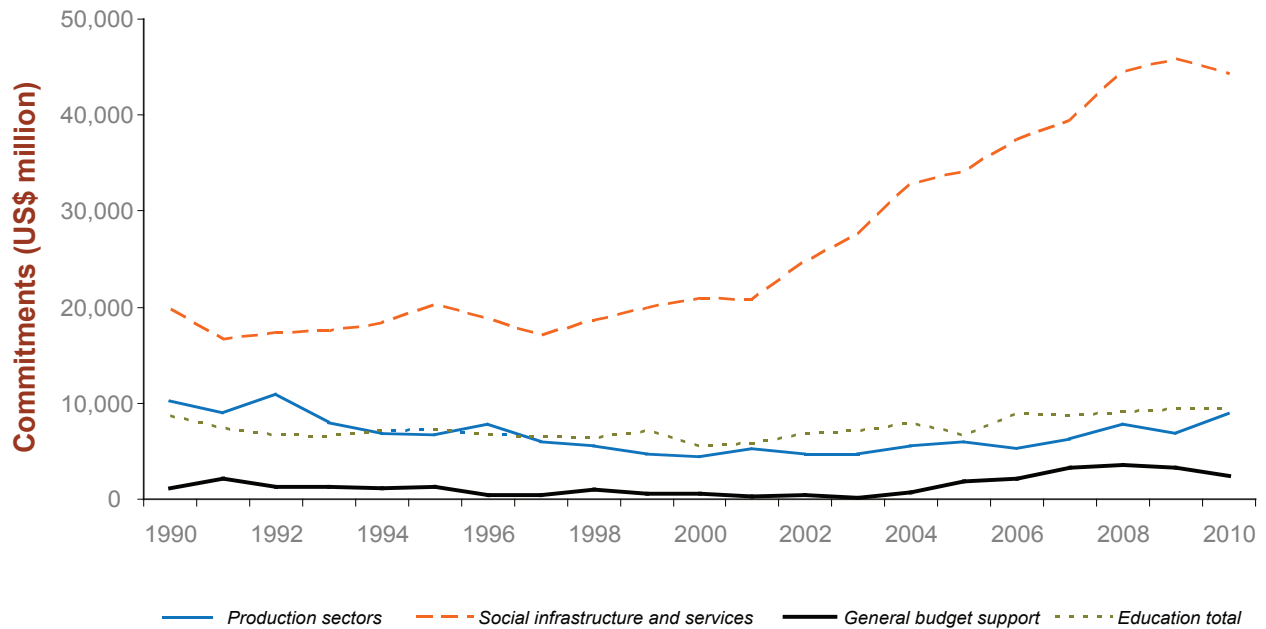
Source: OECD (2012), OECDStat Online Database. Available from http://stats.oecd.org/Index.aspx?lang=en&DataSetCode=TABLE5#. Accessed May 2012.

Figure 2. Allocation of ODA commitments by OECD/DAC bilateral donors to selected sectors, 1990-2010 ($2010 million)
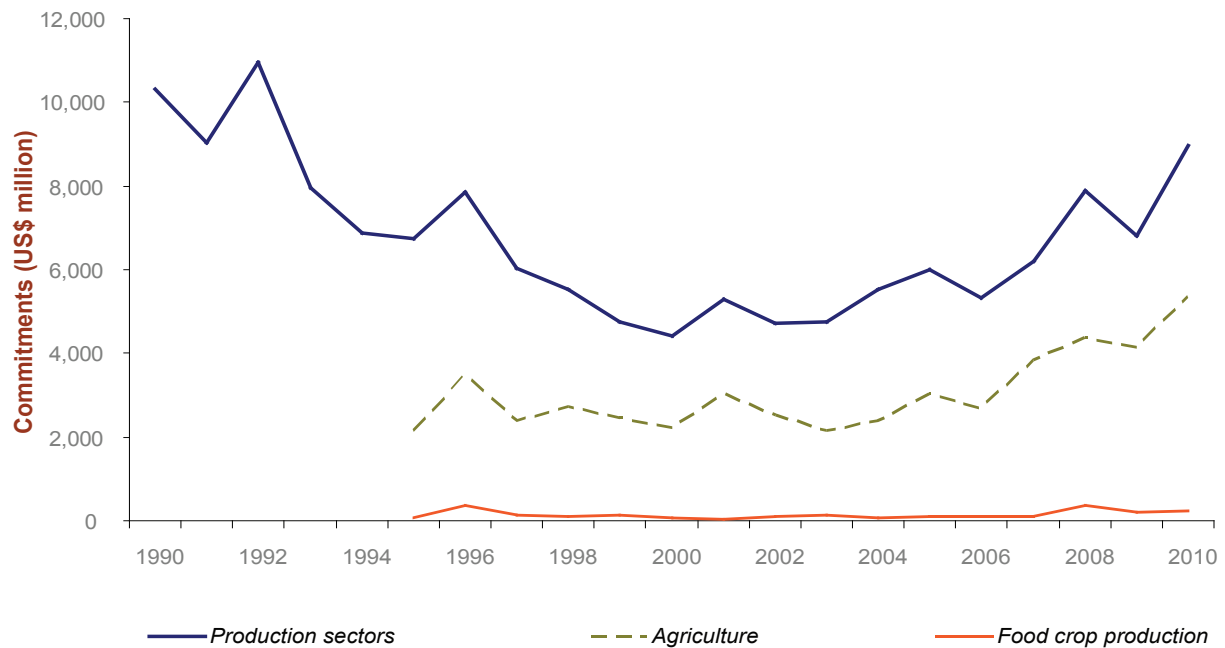
Source: OECD (2012), OECDStat Online Database. Available from http://stats.oecd.org/Index.aspx?lang=en&DataSetCode=TABLE5#. Accessed May 2012.

Figure 3. Allocation of ODA commitments by OECD/DAC bilateral donors to health, 1990-2010 ($2010 million)
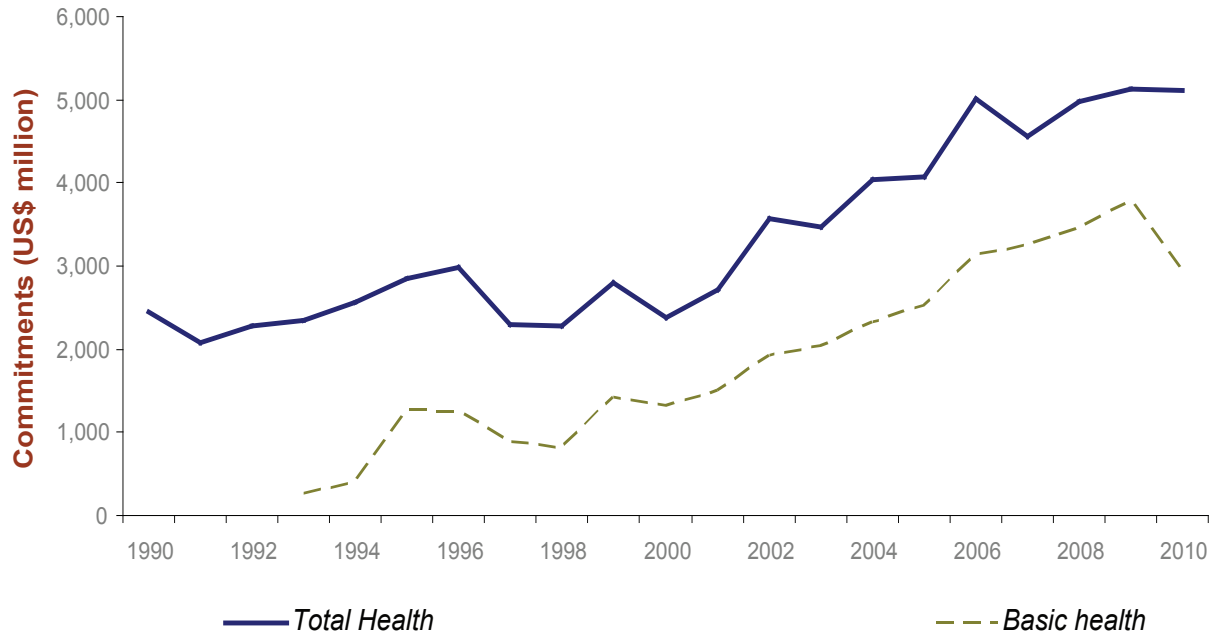
Source: OECD (2012), OECDStat Online Database. Available from http://stats.oecd.org/Index.aspx?lang=en&DataSetCode=TABLE5#. Accessed May 2012.

Figure 4. Allocation of ODA commitments by OECD/DAC bilateral donors to education, 1990-2010 ($2010 million)

Source: OECD (2012), OECDStat Online Database. Available from http://stats.oecd.org/Index.aspx?lang=en&DataSetCode=TABLE5#. Accessed May 2012.
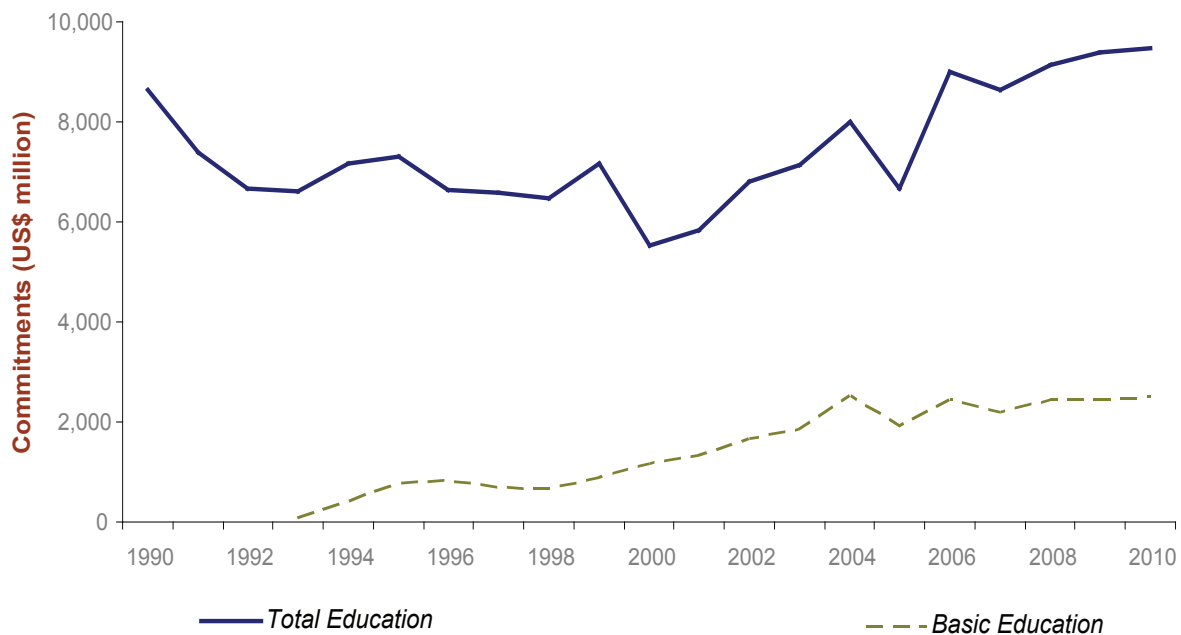
priority emerged. While poverty reduction was identified as the 'overarching' objective, development strategies continued to follow the approach of the 1990s that emphasized macroeconomic stabilization as the priority objective through the application of 'Washington Consensus' policies to promote aggregate economic growth through private investments. Greater focus has been placed on social sector investments to meet basic needs and on social protection, including conditional cash transfers.

Table 3. Summary of global and national progress towards achieving the MDGs

	Improvement since 1990	Distance progressed to global goal (100% = goal attained)	On track	Faster progress 1990-2000/2000-8	Faster than historical patterns
I. Global Progress					
Poverty	Y	80	Y	Y	..
Undernourishment	Y	77	N	N	..
Primary Education	Y	90	N	Y	N
Gender Equality[a]	Y	96	Y	N	N
Child Mortality	Y	69	N	Y	Y
Maternal Mortality	Y	57	N	Y	Y
Drinking Water	Y	88	Y	N	..
II. National Progress					
	% of countries making progress	% of countries on track	% of Countries Faster Progress than pre-MDGs	% of countries outperforming historical patterns	Faster than historical patterns
Poverty	63	47	51	..	..
Undernourishment	55	25	..	..	..
Primary Education	75	55	35	68	..
Gender Equality[a]	61	89/82[b]	46	56	..
Child Mortality	95	36	32	51	..
Maternal Mortality	83	30	..	33	..
Drinking Water	73	66	34	..	..

Source: Melamed (2012), p.12.

Notes: [a] Represents the proportion of developing countries for which the appropriate data is available.

[b] Gender Equality for primary and secondary education, respectively.

For sure, important studies have been published and there have been many departures from the structural adjustment programmes of the 1980s. Social investments and protection, including initiatives such as conditional cash transfers, have emerged as important priorities. But the core macroeconomic strategies have remained unchallenged. The MDGs did not propel new thinking about challenging the macroeconomic policy approaches of the Washington Consensus framework and their implications for poverty reduction have not emerged into mainstream international policy debates. In other words, the core Washington Consensus policies aimed at macroeconomic stabilization and liberalization have continued to dominate development strategies, only supplemented by emphasis on social investments. New development strategies and approaches have emerged not from mainstream thinking and advice from the international community, but from innovation within developing countries that have not been in IMF policy-based

lending programmes. These approaches have included not only alternative growth strategies, but also poverty reduction strategies, particularly in Brazil and several other Latin American countries which have achieved not only stable economic growth and weathered the global financial crisis, but have also reduced inequality. These policy approaches are similar to those that have been raised by interventionists, in terms of promoting expansionary macroeconomic policies, expanding employment, and raising incomes of the poorest through targeted programs such as conditional cash transfers.

Outcomes

It is difficult to assess whether the MDGs have had an impact on the pace of poverty reduction and development outcomes, since it is impossible to attribute any recent trends to the MDGs as opposed to the myriad of other factors that have driven national poverty outcomes. But the problem remains that while poverty reduction has continued globally, progress has been too slow and unevenly distributed (table 3). Overall, the pace of progress has not accelerated, with Sub-Saharan Africa showing faster progress than other regions (table 4). Progress has been uneven also among different social groups, thus reflecting persistent horizontal inequalities (table 5).

Table 4. Global poverty estimates, 1990-2015

	Percentage of population			Number of poor (millions)		
	1990	2005	2015	1990	2005	2015[a]
$1.25 poverty line						
East Asia and Pacific	54.7	16.8	5.9	873.3	316.2	119.0
China	60.2	15.9	4.8	683.2	207.7	66.1
Europe and Central Asia	2.0	3.7	1.2	9.1	17.3	5.8
Latin America and the Caribbean	11.3	8.2	4.7	49.6	45.1	29.1
Middle East and North Africa	4.3	3.6	1.3	9.7	11.0	4.8
South Asia	51.7	40.3	22.4	579.2	595.6	379.3
India	51.3	41.6	22.4	435.5	455.8	276.8
Sub-Saharan Africa	57.6	50.9	35.8	295.7	388.4	344.7
Total	41.7	25.2	14.4	1,816.6	1,373.5	882.7
Total, excluding China	..	..	..	1,133.4	1,165.8	816.6
$2 poverty line						
East Asia and Pacific	79.8	38.7	19.7	1,273.70	728.7	399.4
China	84.6	36.3	15.4	960.8	473.7	213.4
Europe and Central Asia	6.9	8.9	4.5	31.9	41.9	21.4
Latin America and the Caribbean	19.7	16.6	10.7	86.3	91.3	66.3
Middle East and North Africa	19.7	16.9	7.2	44.4	51.5	26.2
South Asia	82.7	73.9	57.1	926	1,091.5	967.2
India	82.6	75.6	56.9	701.6	827.7	702.0
Sub-Saharan Africa	76.2	73.0	57.7	391.2	556.7	555.6
Total	63.2	47.0	33.1	2,753.5	2,561.5	2,036.1
Total, excluding China	..	..	..	1,792.7	2,087.8	1,822.7

Source: Melamed (2012), p. 13-14.

Notes: [a] Projections.

Table 5: Selected MDG indicators: national average and selected social groups

	National Average	Women	Rural population	Poorest 20%
MDG 1 – Underweight prevalence in children under five, 2003–2009 (%)				
Developing countries excl. China	23	24	28	40
Sub-Saharan Africa	22	21	25	29
South Asia	42	42	45	56
LDCs	28	27	30	34
China	6	7	8	..
India	43	43	46	57
MDG 4 – Measles coverage, 2008 (%)				
Developing countries excl. China	81	64	61	51
Sub-Saharan Africa	72	58	55	45
South Asia	74	59	58	44
LDCs	76	65	62	56
China	94	..	..	..
India	70	56	54	40
MDG 5 – Births attended by skilled health personnel, 2003-2009 (%)				
Developing countries excl. China	63	..	50	28
Sub-Saharan Africa	46	..	36	24
South Asia	42	..	33	17
LDCs	38	..	29	24
China	98	..	97	..
India	47	..	38	19

Source: Melamed (2012), p. 17.

The UN and other international agencies assess progress made against the 2015 targets, focussing on the level of achievement. According to the 2011 UN MDG Progress Report (United Nations 2011c), globally, the 2015 targets for income poverty (goal 1) and water (goal 7) are on track to be met, while there is steady progress in the reduction of child mortality (goal 4), malaria and other global diseases (goal 6). Primary school enrollment has been advancing, but the pace has begun to slow down and the goal of universal enrollment may not be achieved. More alarmingly, there has been either stagnation or regress for some goals and targets. For instance, the proportion of people who are hungry (goal 1) has plateaued at 16 per cent since 2000/2002; the number of undernourished people grew from 817 million in 1990/92 to 830 million in 2005/2007; employment and decent work (goal 1) have shown a setback in many countries; progress has been slow in gender equality and empowerment, other than in primary education (goal 3), and in reducing maternal mortality (goal 5).

The impact of the MDGs on changing policy behaviour and outcomes would be reflected not on the levels of achievement but rather on whether the pace of progress had improved. Countries have different starting points, and, for many countries, achieving the MDGs may not be feasible even if they were to adopt improved efforts resulting in better performance (Clemens and others 2007). In another paper (Fukuda-Parr and others, forthcoming), my co-authors and I have argued that the criterion for success should be improvement in

performance to be measured by the pace of progress. We proposed a methodology for this criterion and made estimates for 24 MDG indicators.

Our findings were disappointing at the country level, but more encouraging for sub-Saharan Africa and South Asia as regions. We found improved performance by a majority of countries for just five of the 24 indicators studied. On the other hand, the majority of sub-Saharan African countries showed improved progress for 16 indicators (table 3). At the global level, the pace of progress improved for under-5 mortality rate, measles immunization and gender parity in primary schooling, but not for attended births or safe drinking water. For income poverty, the pace improved in all developing regions. South Asia and sub-Saharan Africa — the two regions with the highest concentrations of poverty — showed consistent improvement and performed better than the other regions. In sub-Saharan Africa, progress has been made at a faster rate for all but one indicator for which data are available since the MDGs were introduced. In South Asia, improvements have accelerated for all indicators, except child mortality and child malnutrition. While it is not possible to attribute the improved progress to the MDG initiative, the record of improvement is encouraging.

In brief, the impact of MDGs on outcomes and policy is ambiguous, uneven and limited at best, while the initiative has been a significant factor in shaping international debates. The MDGs did not introduce a new concept or policy strategy, but created a narrative that has raised global awareness of poverty as a compelling moral challenge requiring urgent action. The narrative has become a consensus framework for debate on international development. The MDGs are widely accepted among the key development stakeholders, including national governments, donor agencies, NGOs, and local civil society groups, regardless of their views about the MDG relevance as a development strategy. The importance of this new awareness and consensus should not be underestimated considering that the pursuit of development priorities in the globalized and democratically governed world requires the public at large to share commitments to these priorities as a matter of ethical imperatives of a common humanity. The MDGs are associated with an increase in social sector investments, notably in aid allocations, but this is the continuation of a trend that started prior to the introduction of the MDGs. If there is causation, we might ask if donor policies drove the MDGs rather than the other way round.

The controversies

The MDGs have generated critical debates among both development practitioners and researchers, particularly when they were initially introduced. The numerous points that have been raised can be categorized into two sets of issues: (i) those that concern the composition of the goals, targets and indicators, and (ii) those that relate to the development and implementation processes.

With respect to the composition of the lists, critics have raised the following issues:

(i)   *Poorly designed development goals:* The methodology for setting the goals has been inconsistent and apparently arbitrary (Easterly 2009; Saith 2006), the levels set are unrealistic for many countries (Clemens and others 2007) and biased against countries with low starting points (Clemens and others 2007; Easterly 2009; Fukuda-Parr forthcoming).

(ii)   *Composition is too narrow and excludes important dimensions of development:* The publication of MDGs led to strong reactions from many constituencies whose agendas were left out

including: reproductive health rights particularly as the Development Assistance Committee (DAC)/International Development Goals (IDGs) included this agenda; gender inequality that was only reflected in the primary education goal; employment; governance; the macro-economy and structural change; and in more recent years, climate change. In 2005, three new targets and 12 new indicators were added to the list in response to some of these criticisms. Concern for the narrow and unbalanced composition of the targets continues to be raised. While the MDGs draw on chapter III of the Millennium Declaration, they leave out the objectives of chapters IV (environment), V (human rights, democracy and good governance), VI (protecting the vulnerable), and VII (meeting the special needs of Africa).

(iii)　　*Lack of attention to important norms and principles, in particular falling short of human rights standards:* The human rights community has been highly critical of the MDGs (Alston 2004). Although the MDGs overlap with many economic and social human rights, they lack some of the key human rights principles including: concern for the most vulnerable and the marginalized; removing discrimination and respecting the equal rights of all; participation; accountability; and standards for rights that require universal access to services (Darrow forthcoming; OHCHR 2008).

(iv)　　*Lack of attention to equality:* The MDGs do not reflect important ethical concerns expressed in the Millennium Declaration for the poorest of the poor and the most vulnerable. Similarly, the principles of equality, empowerment and participation have not been adequately reflected (Nelson 2007; Fukuda-Parr 2008; Saith 2006).

(v)　　*Unbalanced international political economy:* Goal 8 is weak and lacks hard quantitative 2015 targets. It is also narrow in scope. It is a poor reflection of the agendas advocated by developing countries, notably those related to the asymmetric rules of global trade, international investment and finance, the reduced policy space and quality of aid. From the onset, many developing countries were skeptical of the MDGs for fear they would present another set of conditionalities, while imposing a stronger accountability framework for the developed countries.

(vi)　　*Distortion of national priorities:* From the start, many civil society groups in developing countries expressed dismay with the MDGs for undermining their advocacy and policy dialogue with their Governments. For example, some of the goals such as universal primary education took the agenda backwards in countries where the challenge was to improve quality in primary schooling and advance access to secondary education. This led one activist to rename the MDGs as the 'Most Distracting Gimmick' (Atrobus 2001).

Critics have raised a number of issues with respect to the process of formulation and implementation, as follows:

(i)　　*Lack of broad consultation in formulation:* The MDGs were introduced in the 2001 report of the UN Secretary-General, derived from the Millennium Declaration. Both documents built on the outcome documents of the UN development conferences of the 1990s, but the selection of these outcomes for these documents did not involve wide consultations. This led to criticism from civil society organizations (Bissio 2003) and lukewarm responses from Governments of developing countries.

(ii)   *Global or national goals?:* An important debate exists on the applicability of the goals at the country level. Some have argued that the global goals should be adapted at the national level (Vandemoortele and Delamonica 2010), while others have held that they should be achieved in each and every country (Sachs 2005).The Millennium Declaration and subsequent UN official documents leave the question unanswered. In practice, the UN monitoring reports[9] apply the goals to each country, though many countries have also adapted the goals to their national contexts. Applying them at the national level and holding Governments accountable is highly problematic, since they impose a one-size-fits-all set of 2015 targets for countries with hugely divergent starting points, constraints, financial resources and capacity (Clemens 2004; Easterly 2005; Fukuda-Parr and others, forthcoming).

(iii)   *Criteria for success and methodology of measuring progress:* The methodology for assessing performance used by official national and international monitoring reports focuses on the level of achievement relative to the target. This method is biased against countries with low starting points. A more appropriate metric would be to focus on the pace of progress as discussed above (Fukuda-Parr and others 2010). Countries are committed to doing their best, and they should be held accountable for making faster progress towards ending poverty. It does not make sense to apply a set of one-size-fits-all targets to countries of enormously divergent conditions and means, and judge their success and failure.

(iv)   *Aid-centric process:* Development aid has been a major focus of much of the MDG debates and their use. They are applied to developing countries and not to developed countries, and the international monitoring efforts focus on the performance of developing countries, rather than the challenge of poverty worldwide.

MDGs in context: the political economy of development cooperation

Much of the MDG experience can be explained by a clearer understanding of the concept of global goals as a policy instrument. Global goals are international normative instruments that differ in important ways from national economic and social policies. They draw attention to neglected global priorities. They create incentives to national governments, donors and other development stakeholders, but are not used in a system of resource allocation and legislative enforcement. They are set through a process of political negotiations rather than through technocratic economic management. The strong impact of the MDGs on narrative and their weak influence on development strategies reflect the political dynamics that drove the consensus. The criticisms about the list and its implementation as national planning instruments reflect an incorrect interpretation.

Origins of the MDGs: controversies over structural adjustment

In an earlier article co-authored with David Hulme (2011), I have explained the motives that drove leaders of the international development community – heads of the World Bank and UN development agencies, the European development ministers and others - to create the MDGs and invest in promoting them. To summarize, their creation was motivated by the need to forge a united community to defend international

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9   The annual progress reports report global and regional aggregates. Country progress is tracked in the on-line system that also rates whether countries are 'on track' or not to achieving the 2015 targets. http://www.mdgmonitor.org/ accessed 28 January 2012.

development as a global project and to reverse the declining support for development aid. During the 1980s and 1990s, the development community was divided by sharp controversies over the structural adjustment lending programmes of the World Bank and IMF which were conditioned on the adoption of Washington Consensus policy reforms. These controversies not only pitted the NGOs and academics against the World Bank and IMF, but also UN agencies such as UNICEF, as well as some stakeholders within national governments, which advocated alternatives. Moreover, development agencies became internally divided as individuals took divergent positions. The MDGs/poverty narrative could help unify this divided community, since no one could argue against ending poverty as a moral concern. It was particularly important for the UN leadership and the development ministers of major bilateral donor countries to put an end to these controversies, because they faced declining support for international development within their respective constituencies. With the end of the Cold War, the geo-political interests no longer sustained support for aid budgets.

These motivations led bilateral donors to introduce the IDGs, a list of six quantitative goals with timeframes for achievement, in three areas: economic well-being, social development, and environmental sustainability and regeneration (OECD 1996). As Colin Bradford of the United States delegation explained, it was important to tell a story of aid that spoke directly to conditions of people's lives to win over the 'parliaments and publics'.[10]

The IDGs were effective in articulating the meaning of international cooperation for development and had gained traction in raising awareness in the donor countries. They were a concrete articulation of a consensus donor vision of development published in the 1996 statement of the Development Assistance Committee of the OECD (OECD/DAC 1996) entitled 'Shaping the 21st Century: Contribution of Development Cooperation in the 21st Century'. The statement gave three reasons why rich countries should support development: the humanitarian purpose of ending dire dehumanizing poverty; enlightened self-interest in a world free of threats of terrorism, global disease, political instability, and uncontrolled migration; and solidarity for joint action to solve common challenges such as environmental sustainability.

The IDGs developed considerable traction and demonstrated the effectiveness of a simple list of concrete goals to communicate a compelling story of development. They had already begun to pay off as the secular decline in aid commitments began to be reversed. The World Bank and UN agencies began to support them and, in 2000, published a joint document monitoring their progress using the IDG framework. They inspired the UN to include goals in the Millennium Declaration. But the IDGs could not be 'owned' by all stakeholders since they were invented by the bilateral donors.[11] The MDGs built on the IDGs to forge a broader consensus, including the Bretton Woods institutions, UN agencies and national governments.

The MDGs could build a narrative behind which dissenting stakeholders could stand united and argue for development aid. For example, Lord Mark Malloch Brown, then UNDP Administrator, who played a central role in building the Millennium Declaration into the MDGs and creating an implementation plan, recounts the view that the MDGs could bridge the divide between the UN and the World Bank over structural adjustment.[12]The consensus on the MDGs can be attributed precisely to the fact that they allowed the

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10   Interview with Colin Bradford, New York, 16 October, 2008.

11   This was patently apparent when the NGO community vigorously protested the UN Secretary-General joining the World Bank and the OECD in signing the 2000 progress document, Better World For All http://paris21.org/sites/default/files/bwa_e.pdf accessed Jan 28, 2012.

12   Interview with Lord Mark Moloch Brown, June 27, 2008, London.

protagonists in the 1980s and 1990s to exchange views over structural adjustment– IMF, World Bank, United States Treasury, UNICEF, NGO networks, and academics on both sides of the issue– and to agree on the purpose of development while disagreeing on the means. It allowed bilateral development ministers, who needed to support and were supported by all of these dissenting stakeholders, to get out of the dilemma. Why did the developing countries buy into the Millennium Declaration that included the global goals? Ambassador Rosenthal of Guatemala, who was one of leading figures in coordinating the negotiations, explains that the priority for the developing countries was to keep the development issue a high priority on the UN agenda, on par with the political issues.[13]

The post-2000 aid architecture: new narrative, new instruments, old policies

The divisions over structural adjustment programmes centred around the issues of conditionality as an aid modality, liberalization and privatisation as economic growth strategies, while the 'social dimensions' of the process focussed primarily on the consequences of fiscal austerity and stabilization measures on the poor and the vulnerable and on social investments. While economic arguments over macroeconomic policy choices drove the controversies, the social dimensions commanded a moral high ground. In this context, the narrative of poverty as the 'overarching' purpose of international development provided a way out for all sides of the controversies. Consensus could be reached on the ends without resolving differences over the means. It is therefore not surprising that the Millennium Declaration and MDGs define the ends, but not the means. The Washington Consensus policies did not need to disappear, but continued as a part of a broader agenda, and behind the headline of the MDGs. It is also not surprising that the last decade has seen little by way of new proposals by the World Bank and on new policy strategies to foster economic growth combined with social justice that addresses poverty, inequality and the fulfilment of human rights.

MDGs are thus a key feature of the new aid architecture that was put in place in the late 1990s. The MDG narrative justifies aid on humanitarian grounds. The consensus defines the relationship between donors and recipients as a partnership, constructed in pursuit of a shared commitment to end poverty. For this purpose, donors would support national strategies that would integrate the MDGs and be elaborated in the national PRSPs. The partnership is to be guided by principles of mutual accountability and respect for national ownership. Donor support would be provided to implement the PRSPs through the IMF new Poverty Reduction and Growth Facility (PRGF) along with other multilateral and bilateral support and debt relief under the Highly Indebted Poor Country (HIPC) debt reduction initiative.

These elements, introduced towards the end of the 1990s, retained the core policy elements of the instruments of the controversial structural adjustment lending programmes of the 1980s and had also replaced them. The PRSPs and the Poverty Reduction Growth Facility (PRGF) replaced the Policy Framework Papers that spelled national policy agendas, including key economic policy reform measures. While these reform agendas are not found consistently in the PRSPs, they are included in the PRGF and HIPC agreements and condition the release of financing under these arrangements. The principles of ownership and mutual accountability expressed in the Paris Declaration on Aid Effectiveness[14] would guide partnership between donors and the Governments of developing countries. But the policy space for aid dependent countries remains limited under financing conditionalities. The underlying economic/development strategies continue to be driven by

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13　Interview with Ambassador Gert Rosenthal, 25 August, 2008, New York.

14　Available at http://www.oecd.org/dataoecd/15/3/46874580.pdf.

the Washington Consensus agenda aimed at macroeconomic stabilization and liberalization. To this end, the MDGs added a basic needs agenda, emphasizing priorities for social investments and commitments for partnership.

A normative instrument, not an economic and social policy

Many of the criticisms of the MDGs reflect an incorrect interpretation of MDGs as economic planning instruments which is not their intended purpose. The MDGs are derived from the Millennium Declaration, which is a normative document that defines how the world should look. Applied to development policy making, the Declaration offers a framework for evaluating progress and assessing priorities. The 8 goals, 21 targets and 60 indicators, are best interpreted as benchmarks for monitoring implementation, not as hard planning targets. According to UN officials involved in drafting the Millennium Declaration,[15] the original idea behind including some quantitative targets in the Declaration was to give concreteness to the development agenda. And, as officials who were involved in formulating the MDGs have pointed out, the MDGs were not intended to apply to each and every country, but rather to monitor global progress and to encourage donors and national governments to make greater efforts to end poverty (Vandemoortele and Delamonica 2010). In this regard, it is not surprising that they are considered overambitious for many countries since they did not originate from a technocratic planning process based on consideration of economic variables necessary for achievement of social and economic outcomes. The same misinterpretation has led to confusion about whether the MDGs should be applied at the country level.

Understanding the MDG concept as a normative instrument also explains at least in part their success in influencing debates and their weakness on policy thinking. Norms define ends not the means. Accordingly, it is erroneous to interpret them as a new development paradigm or a policy strategy since that was not the purpose for which they were intended.

Global goals after 2015

New directions

With the expiration of the MDGs in 2015, the promises of the Millennium Declaration remain unrealized, and the extent of global poverty and the slow pace of progress remain unacceptable in today's world of prosperity. The benefits of global economic integration have been as unevenly distributed since 2000 as in the previous decade — the gaps between the rich and poor within and between countries remain considerable.

It may be argued that global goals would not be worth setting after 2015, because the MDGs did not have adequate impact on shifting policy. Nonetheless, the MDGs have demonstrated the power of global goals and the value of comprehensive development goals in raising awareness, maintaining political support for development, and in coordinating policy debates. Without the MDGs, it is likely that the Millennium

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15   Interviews with John Ruggie, former Assistant Secretary-General in the Office of the Secretary-General, 6 August, 2008, Cambridge Massachusetts; with Andy Mack, former Director in the Office of the Secretary-General, 11 September, 2008 by telephone. Ruggie and Mack were principal authors of the *Secretary-General's report, We the Peoples to the General Assembly*. The last chapter of this report was transformed, with modifications, into the text of the Millennium Declaration.

Declaration would have been shelved soon after its adoption along with numerous other decisions by the General Assembly. For these reasons, new global goals should be set to advance the implementation of the Millennium Declaration, but they need to be pursued with the institutional weight of the UN Secretary-General and with the UN investing in efforts to promote and mobilize support for them. The UN has set many global goals since the 1960s, but none has had the reach – or the investment – of the MDGs.

What should be in the new goals? The expiry of the MDGs in 2015 presents an opportunity to correct the deficiencies of the current list and emphasize new priorities, which are becoming clearer as the 21st century advances. It is also an opportunity to build goals consistent with their function as normative instruments to promote inclusive and equitable development, rooted in the ethical commitments of the Millennium Declaration.

Ethical commitments of the Millennium Declaration: shared values, human rights and the UN development agenda

In setting out a vision for the 21ˢᵗ century, the Millennium Declaration expresses shared social objectives based on universal values. The first chapter of the Declaration states the 'fundamental values to be essential to international relations in the twenty-first century' (UN 2000, paragraph 1): freedom; equality; solidarity; tolerance; respect for nature; and shared responsibility. The Declaration commits Governments to pursue a particular pattern of growth and development—one that is equitable and human rights-based. The core theme of equality is articulated throughout the document and reflects not only equality within countries, but also between countries. This includes gender equality (paragraph 6), equitable and non-discriminatory trading and financial systems (paragraph 13), with special attention to the poorest and vulnerable people (chapter 6) and the needs of Africa that face multiple challenges (chapter 7). And most importantly, it includes the ideal notion of inclusive globalization, the central theme which is articulated in paragraph 5 as follows: 'We believe that the central challenge we face today is to ensure that globalization becomes a positive force for *all* the world's people. For, while globalization offers great opportunities, at present its benefits are very unevenly shared, while its costs are unevenly distributed.'

Human rights principles

The ethical framework of the document derives from the consensus international norms set out in the UN Charter that have evolved over the decades and been codified in international law. The framework goes beyond the economic concept of development 'with equity' and seeks a world that is not only more peaceful and prosperous but 'just' (paragraph 1). It draws explicitly on international human rights norms and principles, which are reflected throughout the document; to the core principle of 'human dignity and freedom, equality and equity' (paragraph 1), the respect for economic, social, cultural, civil and political rights (paragraph 25). It reaffirms commitment to the UN Charter (paragraph 1), the Universal Declaration of Human Rights (paragraph 25), to the Convention on the Elimination of All Forms of Discrimination against Women (paragraph25), and the Convention on the Rights of the Child (paragraph 26). Interestingly, it also refers to the right to development (paragraph 24), the only international human rights concept that addresses development as a process.

The 1986 Declaration on the Right to Development affirms development as a fundamental human right, and is important for two reasons. First, it defines development as a 'constant improvement in the well-being of individuals' (UN 1986, Preamble). Second, it articulates responsibilities for development as involving not only individual, but collective actions of states. It not only states desirable development objectives, but also the obligations of states; 'as leaders we have a duty therefore to all the world's people, especially the most vulnerable' (paragraph 2). The Declaration commits to strengthen international cooperation (paragraph 26).

For these reasons, the development strategy that the Declaration commits to is 'human rights based', characterized by the realization of all human rights (economic, social, cultural, civil and political) as its objective; the well-being of the individual as the focus and unit of assessment; and the application of core principles of equality and non-discrimination, empowerment and participation in the development process, and rooted in the norms of international human rights law. This contrasts with the concept of development that focuses more narrowly on economic growth and the improvement of living conditions, including meeting basic (material) needs. This conceptual framework for evaluating the development process is closely related to and overlaps significantly with the capability approach to development, or human development, which is based on the concept of development as expansion of the capability of individuals to lead lives they value developed by Amartya Sen.[16]

The UN development agenda

These ethical values, and the theme of human centered, equitable and sustainable development, have been reflected in the origins of the Millennium Declaration and MDGs in the UN conferences on topics ranging from environment to children to habitat held throughout the 1990s. The Internationally Agreed Development Goals (IADGs) and the UN Development Agenda are comprised of the full set of goals emerging from the 34 summits and conferences held up to 2005.

Taking place in an era of active debates about structural adjustment and liberalization, these conferences were particularly concerned with the consequences of this policy shift on poor people and poor countries. These meetings raised the common concern that reflected a strong voice of the civil society and the Governments of developing countries[17] that the benefits of globalization were not broadly shared. The major commitments of these conferences were combined in a single package in the 2000 Millennium Declaration, while the MDGs are a select list from the broader list.

As highlighted in the The United Nations Development Agenda: Development for All (UN DESA, 2007, p.iii) which reviewed UN conferences in the 1990s, the resulting UN development agenda is strongly embedded in the UN ethical values and fundamental purpose—namely, human freedom and dignity, solidarity and burden-sharing, equality, and tolerance, and can be seen as a concrete means to implement the UN

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16   Both Sen (2004; 2011) and Nussbaum (2011) have written about the close connection between capabilities and rights. See also UNDP (2000) Human Development Report that explores the theoretical overlaps between capabilities and rights, and the policy implications for development. See Vizard and others (2011).

17   These conferences were also noteworthy for their unusually open processes (UN DESA 2007). Unlike most UN debates that involve only Governments, these conferences opened up to broader involvement of civil society groups. They were involved in the preparatory meetings organized by national Governments and UN agencies at country and regional levels. Civil society groups were often included in official national delegations and involved in inter-governmental negotiations.

Charter. According to José Antonio Ocampo, "Two elements have permeated the content and character of the Agenda since its inception. First, a fundamental concern for equity and for equality of all persons, as human beings and as citizens ... [And] the second essential element [is] partnership. The conference process has engaged all the key stakeholders: Governments, UN system organisations, other intergovernmental and non-governmental organisations, civil society, and the private sector." (UN DESA 2007, Preface, p. iii).

Setting new goals, measuring progress

Like the MDGs, the purpose of the goals, targets and indicators beyond 2015 would be to harmonize reporting and to facilitate monitoring of progress towards the achievement of the Millennium Declaration. But a new approach is needed to setting the goals, targets and indicators. To begin with, in order to redefine progress in alignment with the vision of the Declaration for development as inclusive, equitable and sustainable, there is need to expand beyond the current focus of the MDGs on poverty and chapter 3 (development and poverty eradication) of the Declaration, to reflect chapter 1 (values and principles) and to acknowledge the important ways in which development and poverty eradication are intertwined with the challenges of peace and security (chapter 2), environment (chapter 3), human rights, democracy and good governance (chapter 4). Moreover, goal setting needs to be framed with a methodological coherence. Finally, the new approach should include some critical means as well as ends considering the drawbacks of the MDGs.

Monitoring progress in human well-being

The new approach to setting goals should also build on a coherent framework in development thinking about the nature of progress and what we have learned from development economics research in the 1990s. The following essential considerations are worth highlighting here.

First, the multidimensionality of human well-being needs to be fully acknowledged. The work of Amartya Sen is particularly helpful in defining progress as the expansion of capabilities and freedoms — or human development approach — and in emphasizing the multidimensionality of essential instrumental freedoms to encompass economic facilities, social opportunities, political freedoms, transparency guarantees and security (Sen 1999). Sen's capabilities approach to development is closely related to human rights-based development and essential capabilities overlap considerably with the core human rights, including economic, social, cultural, civil and political areas (Sen 1999; Vizard and others 2011).

Second, there is need to promote security from downside risks. The work on human security (Ogata and Sen 2003; UNDP 1994) and on vulnerability and poverty (World Bank 2000) has highlighted the importance of protection from threats of sudden changes in core life conditions. The recent crises in the global financial, fuel and food markets have highlighted these threats as important challenges of the 21st century as global market integration proceeds and expose the risks of instability and their contagious effects across countries.

Third, sustainability implications need to be considered and addressed. The threats to sustainability arising from environmental deterioration have become acute as global warming increases. Sustainability is an overriding challenge, where failure is likely to threaten all dimensions of human development, and requires major shifts in policy as well as in international cooperation.

Fourth, there is need to pursue equality of opportunities and rights. For all the reasons already elaborated, equality is a principle that is central to the normative framework of the Millennium Declaration. In practical terms, policy strategies that respect equality provide for equality of opportunity and non-discrimination in the fulfilment of human rights.

Fifth, means — both at the global and the national level — to ending poverty need to be identified. The MDGs include one set of means to ending poverty in goal 8, but they need to be strengthened and set into clear quantitative targets. They should also be broadened to incorporate objectives of stable market environment necessary for human security, and agendas for systemic reform consistent with the principles of democracy and equity.

Sixth, while goals should be set as global targets, countries should be encouraged to adapt the goals to their national contexts, through a process of democratic consultation. Without such adaptation, the goals are both biased against countries with low starting points and under-ambitious for those with high starting points. They would distort not only government priorities, but also the efforts of civil society to hold authorities accountable for their development performance. Previous global goals set by the UN followed this approach, and the MDGs were the first goals whose applicability to country levels was left ambiguous.

Seventh, goal setting should involve a participatory process of consultations with national governments worldwide, and with civil society organizations at national, regional and global levels. The MDGs drew on the goals already adopted by the UN development conferences that in themselves involved widespread consultation among civil society and government in the national and regional preparatory conferences. In the absence of such process, it is all the more important to set in place a process of broad consultations at national, regional and global levels. The implementation process will be as important as the composition of the goals; the new goals should build on the increasing use of the MDGs by civil society to demand more of Government. Furthermore, formal structures would strengthen accountability. At the national level, one approach would be to set up national commissions that would work out the implications of policy goals, and monitor implementation.

Finally, the new goals should apply not only to developing countries, but to all countries, since human poverty, inequality and exclusion are challenges facing developed countries as well.

Concluding remarks

The recent history of the MDGs reveals much about the history of development thinking and policy in the first decade of the 21st century. It highlights the reconceptualization of development as reconceptualised as poverty reduction, opening up to a concept applicable regardless of the stage of industrialization and diversification, and levels of income and technological capacity. It further underscores the role of ideas in shaping political support for 'development' locally and globally as well as in shifting economic and social policies.

The MDGs were the first comprehensive development goals and were effective in drawing attention to poverty eradication as a global norm and priority, and provided a common framework for debate and action. They encouraged and, no doubt, contributed to greater support for social investments in sub-Saharan Africa,

but did not lead to changes in policy strategies or to addressing systemic issues that create unequal opportunities for people and countries.

The corollary to these policy trends has been the failure to address the systemic problems of protecting developing countries from the consequences of global market integration. A leading example of these trends is the inadequate response of international cooperation to protect the poor against the consequences of climate change, and the crises of the global financial, fuel and food markets. Seen in this light, the MDGs could arguably have provided a convenient 'cover' behind which the economic model of the 1990s could be pursued. The MDGs perhaps co-opted the language of human development, and the social impact of adjustment while 'defanging' critical debates about the impact of the liberalization agendas on poverty and inequality. The need for alternative macroeconomic policies that would favour distribution, job creation for the unskilled, and reduce inequality no longer resonates with policy-makers as urgent issues.

The impact of the MDGs brings home the importance of narratives, and the power of quantitative indicators as a communications tool that can have far-reaching impacts on how to reshape the definition of terms with positive and perverse consequences. The staying power and the reach of the term 'MDGs' in framing international development policy debates can only be explained by the power of numbers to communicate complex ideas by simplification, and abstract ethical values by reification, and to convey (misplaced) scientific precision and certitude. The definition of development is ambiguous, fraught with controversies over definitions, measurement and strategies. The process is complex involving human creativity and effort, social cooperation and mobilization, economic investments and political commitments. The challenges are complex and location specific, requiring high-risk solutions. But the magic of quantification renders such a complex challenge into a single number, intangible factors into concrete goods and outcomes, and risk prone processes into a predictable technological solution. But sociologists who study indicators as 'technologies of governance' point out that it goes further. Quantification is 'not merely a strategy for describing the social and natural worlds, but a means of reconfiguring them. It entails the imposition of new meanings and the disappearance of old ones' (Porter 1994, p. 338).

By articulating the complex challenges of development in 8 goals and concrete targets for 2015, the MDGs have had unprecedented success in drawing attention to poverty as an urgent global priority. But the simplification and quantification have reduced the development agenda to meeting basic material needs, stripped of the Millennium Declaration's vision for development with social justice and human rights. It has left out any mention of equity, empowerment of people, sustainability, and building sustainable productive capacity for economic growth. The simplified narrative has no room for understanding poverty as related to the underlying power relations within and between countries and the asymmetries in the global economy. It leaves no room to draw attention to the issues that have long been and remain on the agenda of developing countries and in international economic negotiations, such as the lack of voice in the World Bank, WTO and other institutions of global governance. It similarly remains silent on the issues that have long been and remain on the agenda of critics of standard macroeconomic frameworks for their distributional consequences. The new global goals thus need to use the power of numbers to recapture the ethical principles and norms of the Millennium Declaration.

The MDG experience also highlights the limited reach of ethical norms or normative ideas and technocratic knowledge or positive ideas in international policy making. The MDGs were powerful and convincing to

people — 'the parliaments and publics' around the world — because they conveyed a compelling case for ending poverty as an ethical priority. Yet, for the development policy professionals, ethical norms and principles are not convincing arguments to change policy behaviour. They mobilized and invested in implementing the Millennium Declaration by interpreting the MDGs as economic policy tools as if they were technocratically constructed. Entrenched in the tradition of a 'positivist' science driven by quantification and evidence, development economists incorporated only chapter 3 of the 8 chapters of the Declaration in the MDGs, picking out only those objectives which were measurable and for which data were available. The ethical principles laid out in chapter 1 of the Declaration were forgotten in the spirit of 'only what can be counted counts'.

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