Development and Change

Published on behalf of the Institute of Social Studies, The Hague

Focus

The MDG Story: Intention Denied

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ABSTRACT

This article gives an insider's view of the origin of the Millennium Development Goals (MDGs), the aim of which was two-fold: to rescue the Millennium Declaration from oblivion and to expand the development narrative beyond economic growth. The former has been successful, but not the latter. Since its establishment, the MDG agenda has been permeated with the idolatry of literalism and sanitized to fit the conventional development paradigm. Statistics have been abused to fabricate evidence of success. The great paradox is that poverty is increasingly regarded as a multi-dimensional phenomenon whilst its quantification remains essentially one-dimensional, which reinforces a money-metric perspective of the MDGs. The agenda has been cut back to a standard set of macroeconomic, sectoral or institutional reforms of a technical nature. However, the MDG agenda implies fundamental transformations in society, which are invariably driven by domestic politics and local actors. The world is off track, not because of insufficient economic growth but mostly because people in the bottom quintiles have benefited disproportionately little from national progress. As long as the world continues to turn a blind eye to the growing inequities within countries, the MDGs will be *mission impossible*. For the remaining period, their meaning is best described as 'Minding Development Gaps'.

INTRODUCTION

The Millennium Development Goals (MDGs) have been misinterpreted as one-size-fits-all targets and misused to reinforce a donor-centric view of development. Most importantly, however, they have been misappropriated to propagate an economistic perspective of development. As a consequence, they have failed in their attempt to shift the focus of the development discourse from income-poverty to the multi-dimensional nature of human poverty; from a narrow growth paradigm to a broader human-centred perspective of sustainable and equitable well-being. The money-metric view has succeeded in misappropriating the MDGs to reproduce the conventional narrative of development. This article gives an account of the MDG story,

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Development and Change 42(1): 1–21. © 2011 International Institute of Social Studies. Published by Blackwell Publishing, 9600 Garsington Road, Oxford OX4 2DQ, UK and 350 Main St., Malden, MA 02148, USA

from the intention to foster evidence-based priority setting at the national level to the actual outcome of policy-based evidence making at the global level.

The conventional view regards slow economic growth as the main reason why so many countries will miss the 2015 targets. Economic growth is considered to be the primary driver in reducing poverty. Others argue that it is insufficient foreign aid or inadequate governance that prevents so many countries from achieving the MDGs. In other words, human development is considered either as growth-mediated, aid-mediated or as governance-mediated. Several institutions and individuals subscribe to one of these views. Dollar and Kraay (2000) exemplify the growth argument; Sachs (2005) embodies the aid argument; and Kaufmann et al. (2009) advance the governance argument. Each is absolutely convinced of the power of their explanatory factor, as well as the direction of causality. They reduce the development narrative to an argument either about faster growth, more aid or better governance. To substantiate their simplistic arguments they use, and sometimes misuse, statistics — validating Saith's (2006: 1174) observation that 'institutionalizing targets in bureaucracies and governmental regimes usually invites misuse and manipulation of statistics and the misrepresentation of outcomes'.

The three arguments have one thing in common; they all interpret the MDG agenda in a manner that fits the donor-centric perspective of development. 'We know what works' is the common refrain. Reports with titles such as *What will it Take to Achieve the Millennium Development Goals*? (UNDP, 2010) exemplify this attitude. Donor agencies and multilateral institutions often display a strong belief in global blueprints, silver bullets and universal trajectories. They firmly believe in best practices that can be replicated and scaled up. The growth argument contends that in order to achieve the MDGs it would be essential to liberalize and deregulate the economy and to reduce trade barriers. Or, according to the aid argument, it would suffice to scale up investments in health, education, agriculture, water and sanitation, and infrastructure for each and every country to achieve the global targets. Or, it is essential to foster good governance through multi-party elections and anti-corruption campaigns, claims the governance argument.

They all reduce the MDG agenda to the application of a standard set of macroeconomic, sectoral or institutional reforms of a technical nature. They miss the point, however, that achieving the MDGs requires fundamental transformations in society, which transcend macroeconomic, sectoral and institutional models. Moving towards gender equality or improving maternal health, for instance, will take more than applying a few technical solutions or replicating lessons learnt elsewhere. Such transformations are never easy. The pursuit and realization of such fundamental societal change is invariably driven by domestic politics and by local actors. They are seldom triggered by outsiders or caused by technical advice, let alone by loans and grants from overseas.

In the 1980s and 1990s, the Bretton Woods institutions attempted to bring about transformations in economic policy through conditionalities attached to structural adjustment programmes. That experience confirms that outside leverage is rather limited when the policy space is severely constrained.[1] To be successful, transformations must be driven by an internal impulse for change. Those who readily provide general solutions to specific problems, or those who constantly repeat standard recommendations for achieving the MDGs, frequently fail to understand that the end of human poverty will not result from more wealth or aid, but from more equity and justice. Behind each preventable case of child or maternal mortality lies a story of inequity and discrimination.

It should not come as a surprise that each of the single-minded schools of thought about growth, aid and governance has provoked strong and solid counter-arguments. Perlo-Freeman and Webber (2009), for instance, argue that the empirical evidence does not support the view that economic growth plays such an essential role in improving nutrition, education or health; rather the causality seems stronger the other way around. Recent publications with titles such as 'The Trouble with Aid' (Glennie, 2008), 'The Curse of Aid' (Djankov et al., 2008) and 'The Aid Trap' (Hubbard and Duggan, 2009) caution against the simplistic aid argument. In the area of governance, the Institute of Development Studies recommends turning 'the picture upside down so as to challenge the whole raft of preconditions and often implicit assumptions that underpin current development practice' (2010: 70). Szirmai summarizes it well when he writes 'every single mono-causal explanation ever advanced for development falls down in the face of the empirical evidence' (2008: 7).

This article describes how the MDGs came into being. It explains that their main purpose was two-fold: to rescue from oblivion some of the main commitments made in the Millennium Declaration, and to broaden the development discourse beyond the narrow focus on economic growth. Given their success regarding the former, several actors have tried to catch a free ride on the MDG bandwagon. Regarding the latter aim, however, the MDGs have been considerably less successful. The article argues that the MDGs will not be achieved as long as the world continues to turn a blind eye to the growing disparities within countries. Growth, aid and governance all play a role; yet in and of themselves they will never get the world back on track towards the global targets.[2] The principal reason why the world is off

1. Chang (2007: 35) speaks of the World Bank's and the IMF's 'Henry Ford approach to diversity', referring to Ford's promise that customers could have a car painted 'any colour so long as it's black'.
2. Milo Vandemoortele (2010) shows that inequity actually undermines growth because high inequality depresses aggregate demand, stimulates conspicuous consumption that generates few domestic jobs, contributes to financial instability and entrenches special interests that delay policy reforms and impede counter-cyclical measures. Similar points are highlighted in Levine et al. (2010).

track is because the poor and the dispossessed have not benefited much, if at all, from the social progress and economic growth the majority of countries have experienced. To change this course, the discourse about the MDGs has to change. In the meantime, the actual meaning of the MDGs can be best described as 'Minding Development Gaps'.

INSIDE STORY

Each global conference or world summit produces a declaration which captures the public's attention for a while but quickly recedes into oblivion. This occurred again in September 2000 when the Millennium Summit issued the Millennium Declaration (UN, 2000). For several months, the document was quoted in countless speeches, reports and articles. But after a while, the attention started to fade. It was then that the idea arose to place selected targets contained in the Millennium Declaration into a free-standing category in order to rescue them from oblivion. They came to be known as the Millennium Development Goals.

The Millennium Declaration was essentially crafted by John Ruggie — then Special Adviser to UN Secretary-General Koffi Annan. Soon after the Summit, Ruggie returned to academia and was replaced by Michael Doyle. In early 2001, Michael and I discussed the options for rescuing the document from oblivion.[3] We agreed to establish and co-chair a group of experts from across the United Nations, including the World Bank and the IMF, as well as from the Development Assistance Committee of the Organization of Economic Co-operation and Development (OECD/DAC). Its job was to extract the key targets from the Declaration and translate these into a free-standing category. Since the group included people from all major UN agencies, departments, funds and programmes, it took about six months to put the MDGs together.

The targets were taken verbatim from the Millennium Declaration, which was agreed language among member states. As UN staff, we were fully aware that we did not have the authority to change an iota of that text. A lot of ink has been spilt as to why those eighteen targets were selected and not others. The answer is straightforward: in an age where numbers prevail, it was decided that only those targets with agreed indicators and with robust data were to be included — but not without making some exceptions. This is why the quality of education, the affordability of water, good governance and human rights (i.e. civil and political rights) and several other areas covered in the Millennium Declaration were not included in the MDGs.

Apart from selecting the eighteen targets, the group of UN experts structured them into eight major goals and selected the relevant indicator(s) for each target — forty-eight in total. The group also needed to clarify the

3. The author had recently been seconded by UNICEF to lead the newly-established Poverty Group at UNDP.

period over which the targets were to be met. The Declaration is vague about the period over which the targets have to be achieved. One of the recurring features in global target setting is that developed countries — the so-called 'B-group' in UN-jargon — usually set ambitious targets, whereas developing countries — known as the 'G-77' — aim for a sense of realism. At the Millennium Summit, the two groups could not agree on the level of ambition. To create the semblance of consensus, despite some deep divisions, the difference was swept under the carpet. Member states agreed on a set of global targets but they blurred the period over which these reductions were to be realized. They called, for instance, for the halving of poverty and hunger by 2015. Although this may have sounded fine, it does not specify the time frame. And it worked; few observers ever noticed that the Millennium Declaration left considerable room for interpretation as to the level of ambition of the global targets.

It was left to the group of UN experts to set the baseline year. The choice quickly fell on 1990, for two reasons. First, it proved unrealistic to reduce hunger, poverty and the proportion of people without access to safe drinking water by half, infant and child mortality by two-thirds, and maternal mortality by three-quarters between 2000 and 2015. It was obvious that more time would be needed to achieve such ambitious targets. The second reason was that most global targets contained in the Millennium Declaration had their origin in the 1990s at the various world summits and international conferences. Most of them used 1990 as the baseline year. Given the Declaration's fuzziness about the timeframe, 1990 was taken as the baseline year for most global targets.[4] The MDG period was thus set between 1990 and 2015, covering twenty-five years, a period usually associated with one generation.

Having selected the targets, grouped them in eight goals, agreed on the forty-eight indicators and clarified the period, the group moved on to the final stage of giving the new set a name. One might think that Millennium Development Goals would have been the obvious choice. Not so. It actually required intense and protracted discussions before the name was agreed upon. Some members of the group wanted to make it obvious that the new set of targets was related to the International Development Goals (OECD, 1996). That set was put together by the Ministers of Development Co-operation in donor countries in an effort to stem the decline in aid levels at the time. Except for poverty, the targets echoed the ones agreed at the world summits and international conferences of the 1990s.[5]

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4. The Millennium Declaration refers to the baseline year only for the targets on maternal and child mortality. Moreover, the reference is indirect — i.e. 'of their current rates', which implies the year 2000 without saying so explicitly. The other targets are totally silent about the baseline year. The Declaration never refers to 1990.
5. Following the failure of the B-group to get international agreement for a poverty target at the 1995 social summit in Copenhagen, the OECD/DAC issued its own set of goals in 1996. The Millennium Declaration provided the first UN endorsement of the poverty target.

The major weakness of the OECD/DAC set of goals was that it omitted specific targets for developed countries. All seven goals were to be achieved by developing countries; not a single target was set for rich countries. No wonder they never gained much traction beyond donor countries. Nevertheless, colleagues from OECD/DAC, the World Bank and the IMF insisted on linking the name of the newborn to what they perceived as its pedigree. As chairman of that final session, I was fully aware that any reference to the OECD set would mean the death knell for the new set at the UN. A clear separation between the two was absolutely necessary if the new set was to gain any political acceptance and resonance among the G-77.

Once the title was agreed, the remaining step was to release the MDGs into the UN system. At the time, the 'Road Map' was being finalized — a report of the Secretary-General to the General Assembly on how to monitor the implementation of the Millennium Declaration (UN, 2001). The list of eight goals, eighteen targets and forty-eight indicators was annexed to that report and submitted to the General Assembly. In the relevant resolution, the 'Assembly noted with appreciation the road map report' (A/56/L.61). Although no explicit mention was made of the MDGs, they got an implicit blessing from the UN member states. The US administration at the time took the view that the General Assembly never formally endorsed the MDGs; thereby questioning their legitimacy and authority. But since the targets were lifted verbatim from the Millennium Declaration, we argued that formal endorsement was redundant because member states had already agreed upon them earlier.

As a final footnote to the story of how the MDGs came into being, it must be added that we were initially reprimanded by the office of the UN Secretary-General for taking the initiative. This was because we had involved colleagues from the OECD/DAC in a UN group, and because we had drawn the office of the Secretary-General too much into matters related to development. The first reaction was not unrelated to a somewhat traumatic experience in 2000 when the Secretary-General was severely criticized by civil society organizations for having co-signed a report with the Secretary-General of the OECD, the Managing Director of the IMF and the President of the World Bank. The document in question was entitled *A Better World for All* (UN et al., 2000); it reviewed progress towards the International Development Goals. Civil society organizations dubbed it, with some justification, *Bretton Woods for All*. The second reason was related to the conventional view that the Secretary-General is supposed to deal with overall diplomacy and issues of world peace, whilst development is the business of the specialized agencies, funds and programmes. It did not take long, however, before the first references to the MDGs started to appear in speeches and reports by the Secretary-General.

Several observers have written different versions of the MDG story. Manning (2009), for instance, recounts the origin of the MDGs from the point of view of OECD/DAC. Another version claims, incorrectly, that 'the reproductive health goal disappeared during the negotiations to finalize the MDGs' (Hulme, 2010: 20), when in fact the Millennium Declaration never mentions reproductive health. Hulme also alleges that the negotiations were tense and quarrelsome, when in reality there was a reasonable *entente* among the UN staff and those of the World Bank, IMF and OECD.

SANITIZING THE MDGs

The impact of global targets such as the MDGs cannot be measured with any degree of precision or certainty. The counterfactual scenario is missing — i.e. what would have happened without them. A contribution can readily be measured but an attribution is more difficult to make. Nevertheless, it can be argued that the impact of the MDGs has been positive. It has mostly been in terms of mobilizing stakeholders and informing the public about human development, broadly defined. Many acronyms see the light of day but not all stay around. The MDGs have been an exception.

Their power stems from a combination of three factors: (i) the charm of simplicity; (ii) their integrated and synergetic nature; and (iii) their measurability. They express key outcomes for human well-being in health, education, nutrition, water and sanitation, and gender equality. By focusing on outcomes, they are intuitively easy to understand. Sectoral specialists and development practitioners, however, tend to focus on the complexity of human development. Much of the critique against the MDGs stems from a misunderstanding about their ultimate purpose and their primary users.

The fundamental purpose of the MDGs is not for each and every country to meet the global targets, which would be utopian.[6] Their ultimate aim is to help align national priorities with the MDG agenda so as to foster human well-being. Therefore, the intended users are primarily politicians, parliamentarians, preachers, teachers and journalists. It cannot be emphasized enough that development practitioners and policy makers do not need the MDGs to carry out their work. The MDGs have little to do with defining the nuts and bolts of macroeconomic or sectoral policies or with designing technical interventions. Development practitioners already have the necessary instruments and tools at their disposal, namely policy frameworks, econometric models, human rights conventions, sectoral lessons and good practice, development concepts, narratives and paradigms. Their application does not require the MDGs.

However, the MDG agenda has been infused with a dual idolatry; that of literalism and that of ideology. Regarding literalism, it is common for the representatives of the different perspectives to complain that their

6. A lot is usually made of the countries that will miss the MDGs. The discussion often overlooks that if all countries were to meet them, the world would exceed the MDGs; which is not what the Millennium Declaration calls for. The misinterpretation of the MDGs as one-size-fits-all targets is discussed in Vandemoortele (2009).

focus — e.g. infrastructure, governance, human rights, etc. — is not explicitly mentioned in the MDGs. Their implicit view is that the MDGs are an exhaustive list of all the things necessary for achieving human development. They usually refer to the concept of 'MDG-plus' meaning that their specific concerns should be added to the MDGs. This, however, would be self-defeating. If all aspects of development were to be included, the MDGs would become overloaded and incomprehensible to their primary users. While the literalists believe in the perfectibility of the MDGs, the reality is that their success is due to their conciseness and measurability. This group refuses to accept that the MDGs can be used to make the case for their particular topic even if it is not mentioned specifically. In fact, one can easily use the MDGs to make the case for infrastructure, for instance, because everyone understands that schools and hospitals, roads and bridges are needed to achieve the MDGs. It would serve the MDGs well if those whose point of view is not explicitly mentioned would cease to call for an ever longer, 'MDG plus' list of targets, and focus instead on finding imaginative and creative ways of using the concise list for their cause. The MDGs have to be taken seriously but not necessarily literally.

Regarding ideology, the most common criticism is that the MDGs specify outcomes without spelling out the process of achieving them. In this way, many have not only tried to misappropriate the global targets to gain support for their own development paradigm, they have also sanitized them by making the MDGs less offensive and more acceptable for the conventional view of development. The fact of the matter is that the MDGs were never meant to promote a certain development strategy. They focus on ends, not on means, on the destination and not on the journey. This distinction is important because all development is context-specific. Any generalization about prescribed trajectories and ways and means towards specific outcomes is unhelpful and often erroneous. It is in this regard that the MDGs must be seen as 'good servants but bad masters' (Manning, 2009: 6).

By looking for dimensions that were never intended in their original design, some of the criticism has been unnecessarily fierce. The MDGs have been described as 'a bunch of words' (Langford, 2010: 89). The formula 'neo-liberal globalization + MDGs = development' (Saith, 2007: 13) may reflect the prevailing paradigm but it would be incorrect to blame the MDGs for this state of affairs. The misappropriation of the MDGs as a Trojan horse for a particular development narrative cannot be held against the MDGs. Anything that gets some international traction risks being misappropriated. One may regret this but it is to be expected. The primary purpose of the MDGs was precisely to make the dominant narrative a bit more sophisticated by focusing on equitable and sustainable human well-being, beyond the narrow domain of economic growth. The reason why the MDGs have failed in this respect is not due to their design. Although it can be improved, there is nothing inherent in the design of the MDGs that has triggered this course of events.

The process of sanitizing the MDGs started with the re-definition of human deprivation in money-metric terms. The world summits of the 1990s focused on specific aspects of human well-being, such as literacy and nutrition, health and reproductive health, gender equality and access to safe water. Donor countries wanted to introduce a global target for poverty at the 1995 social summit in Copenhagen but developing countries objected because they found the concept ill-defined. A year later, donor countries issued the International Development Goals (OECD/DAC, 1996) which included the target of halving poverty by 2015. In 2000, that target was included in the Millennium Declaration but with an important amendment: it explicitly defined poverty as living on less than a dollar per day. This is unique because the Declaration does not specify the indicator for any other target. This oddity does not originate in statistics but in politics. During the negotiations, donor countries worked hard to embed the international poverty norm into the formulation of the target. The word 'poverty' is actually not mentioned in the Declaration, which reads: 'To halve, by the year 2015, the proportion of the world's people whose income is less than one dollar a day' (paragraph 19).[7] And so a new global target was born.

That target was convenient because it helped to sanitize the MDGs in a manner which allowed the conventional perspective of development to usurp them. Poverty reduction, defined in money-metric terms, was made into the central target. Through some tautological statistics, the $1/day norm directly bolstered the view that economic growth is crucial for achieving the MDGs. While the promotion of the international poverty norm of $1/day was a key instrument in this effort, it has been the readiness of key actors and institutions to accept and use this particular indicator that has been crucial in sanitizing the MDGs. Bilateral donors, multilateral organizations, leading think tanks, top-rated universities and major media outlets have relentlessly repeated the assertion that hundreds of millions of people have been lifted out of poverty. Given that the evidence for making that assertion is disputable and highly disputed, it would be more accurate to say that, at best, the average income of the poor struggled to creep above the poverty line. The readiness to take the poverty estimates of the World Bank at face value is not due to a lack of statistical literacy; it clearly serves a non-statistical purpose.

The aim of repeating the assertion that millions of people have been lifted out of poverty is to ensure that the MDG agenda does not upset the prevailing development paradigm and does not undercut a money-metric and donor-centric view of development. The efforts have been quite successful, for the debate is still narrowly focused on economic growth and income-poverty. This is perhaps the greatest paradox of our times. Most observers and policy makers readily agree that poverty must be seen as multi-dimensional, yet

7. The formulation of the original target was 'a reduction by one-half in the proportion of people living in extreme poverty by 2015' (OECD, 1996: 2). No mention was made of the poverty norm of $1 per day.

its quantification reinforces a one-dimensional interpretation — i.e. money-metric. It is not the MDGs that posit income-poverty as the cornerstone of human development, human well-being or human rights. Quite the contrary: it has been the inability and/or the unwillingness on the part of the major actors and players to abandon old theories and mindsets according to which rapid growth and a particular development paradigm represent the sole route to achieving the global targets. John Maynard Keynes puts it famously: 'Practical men, who believe themselves to be quite exempt from intellectual influences, are usually the slaves of some defunct economist' (1936: 383). Two Nobel Laureates in Economics suggest that little has changed in this regard. In the wake of the financial crisis, Joseph Stiglitz opines, 'a surprisingly large number of those who had previously believed that markets work perfectly, and are self-correcting still believe that'.[8] Paul Krugman writes, 'When I was young and naïve, I believed that important people took positions based on careful consideration of the options. Now I know better. Much of what Serious People believe rests on prejudices, not analysis'.[9]

The global poverty estimates have not fostered a deeper and better understanding of human poverty; they have merely reinforced the growth narrative, that poverty will automatically be reduced due to the trickle-down effect. They have hijacked the debate in the past, enabling key players to stay within their disciplinary comfort zone and reaffirm their particular worldview. A recent World Bank study on the impact of the financial crisis on poverty in developing countries illustrates how conclusions about poverty are drawn from abstractions and not from concrete observations of reality. The following quote is telling:

> In Bangladesh and the Philippines, the crisis has led to a slowdown in GDP growth, which is expected to raise the poverty rate in 2010 by 1.2 and 1.5 percentage points, respectively, compared with what would have occurred *without* the crisis. In Mexico, GDP actually contracted by nearly 7 percent in 2009, and it is projected to rise by only 3 percent in 2010. The cumulative impact is projected to raise the poverty rate by nearly 4 percentage points in Mexico between 2008 and 2010. (Habib et al., 2010: 1)

These assertions about poverty trends in the three countries are made without any shred of evidence obtained from direct observations. They are based on assumptions, not on facts. They start from projected growth rates for the entire economy and subsequently estimate the resulting impact on household income, using the international poverty line. To claim that macroeconomic estimates reflect specific changes in well-being at the micro-level is audacious, for it reflects over-abstractions and over-simplifications. In spite of the veneer of accuracy expressed by an unwarranted use of decimal points, most observers consider this kind of analysis to be questionable science.

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8. Interview with Stiglitz by the Huffington Post in January 2010. http://www.huffingtonpost.com/2010/01/20/joseph-stiglitz-interview_n_429437.html (accessed June 2010).
9. 'Myths of Austerity' Column in *The New York Times*, 1 July 2010.

Several observers have argued that the MDGs should include a target for economic growth. Indeed, this example of the 'MDG plus' approach is not new. A poor precedent was set in 2007 when two new targets were added — on employment and on reproductive health. The former calls for the achievement of full and productive employment and decent work for all. The year by which the target is to be achieved remains unclear. Neither is it clear what 'decent work' really means. The concept is ill-defined, difficult to understand and impossible to measure. The four indicators selected to assess progress towards this particular target are all quite problematic.[10] Either their reliability is undermined by severe methodological weaknesses or they have no direct relevance to the desired outcome. None of them stands up to serious examination. This is not to suggest that employment is unimportant but merely that the manner in which the target has been formulated leaves much to be desired. It has been found that targets that generate the greatest impact are those that are clearly defined and strike a balance between their level of ambition and their sense of realism. 'Decent work' is vague and 'full employment' is an aspirational goal that cannot be achieved. Hence, this particular target sets up all countries for failure, which saps the motivation of actors and undermines the credibility of global target setting itself.

Such a poorly formulated target merely serves the agenda of a particular institution — in this case the International Labour Organization. Indeed, the influence exercised by multilateral institutions over the shape and content of global goals and targets should not be underestimated. The 'petty sovereignty' (Duffield, 2007) exercised by such organizations is real, albeit often overlooked.[11] The employment target, as formulated, does little to strengthen the set of global targets because it lacks clarity, conciseness and measurability. If the reformulation of the MDGs for the post-2015 period follows that pattern, the end result is likely to look like a badly decorated Christmas tree.

STATISTICS ON STEROIDS

A common critique is that the MDGs were put together by a group of statistical puritans, driven more by accuracy than by relevance. Our response is that measurability is important, not for statistical but for political

10. They include (i) growth rate of GDP per person employed; (ii) employment-to-population ratio; (iii) proportion of employed people living below $1 (PPP) per day; and (iv) proportion of own-account and contributing family workers in total employment.
11. Another example of petty sovereignty relates to the hunger target. The Food and Agricultural Organization and the World Food Programme continue to emphasize the target set by the 1996 World Food Summit, which calls for the reduction in the number of undernourished people by half to no more than 420 million by 2015. It is considerably more ambitious than the MDG target of halving the proportion of people who suffer from hunger between 1990 and 2015.

reasons. Measurement influences public action and shapes the political debate. League tables have triggered heated discussions, stirred action and eventually resulted in policy reforms and public action. The first thing people do when they get hold of the Human Development Report, for instance, is not to read the executive summary on the particular topic of the year. Most look first at the HDI league table and compare the position of their country to previous years and other countries. Similarly, the power of global targets stems, at least in part, from their numerical nature. Without reliable statistics, global targets lose much of their power and appeal.

Therefore, it is unwise to try to count something when it cannot be counted accurately. A target that is ill-specified cannot be monitored reliably, irrespective of the statistical effort one undertakes. A concrete example is the 2020 MDG target to achieve a significant improvement in the lives of at least 100 million slum dwellers. Not only is 'significant improvement' ill-specified; there is no generally accepted definition of a 'slum dweller'. Hence, this particular target cannot be monitored with any degree of accuracy, simply because its very content is undefined. Its inclusion in the MDGs was one of the exceptions to the general rule of selecting targets from the Millennium Declaration — another example of 'petty sovereignty' exercised by multilateral bodies.

Another example concerns a more prominent target, namely that on poverty. The number of people who live in poverty cannot be monitored with any degree of certainty because poverty is ill-defined. Its multiple dimensions make a universally accepted definition virtually impossible. To a certain extent, poverty is in the eye of the beholder. A family whose income falls below the poverty line is usually considered poor. It is less clear how to handle unmet basic needs. Should a family with an income above the poverty line be considered as non-poor when the children are unable to attend primary school, or when its members have no have access to primary health care or to safe drinking water? The answer will depend on the interpretation of poverty. According to a money-metric view, the family would not be ranked as poor. A broader interpretation would consider the family as impoverished. Others interpret poverty as the inability to keep up with the overall standard of living prevalent in the community. Still others emphasize non-material aspects such as voicelessness and powerlessness that prevent people from participating as fully-fledged members in society.

The point is that poverty is not easy to measure. Contrary to popular belief, it is actually quite hard to quantify poverty. It was for this reason that several members of the UN experts group had serious misgivings about including the \$1/day target in the MDGs. Their hesitation was not unjustified. Recently, the World Bank — the sole producer of global poverty estimates — signalled that it had systematically undercounted the number of people living in poverty (Chen and Ravallion, 2008). The reported margin of error was not minor; it approached the 50 per cent level. Normally, when an estimate is off the mark by such a large margin, it casts serious doubt on its credibility. This has not been the case with global poverty estimates. Institutions and individuals have immediately used the revised estimates as if the adjustments were a minor fine-tuning — certainly not an increase by more than 400 million poor people. A remark attributed to Benjamin Disraeli comes to mind — there are three kinds of lies: lies, damned lies, and statistics. The story does not end there.

Another assertion, made to the point of monotony, is that African countries will not achieve the poverty target. The consensus is that 'Sub-Saharan Africa counted 100 million more extremely poor people in 2005 than in 1990 and the poverty rate remained above 50 per cent' (UN, 2009: 7). However, a very different assertion has been made by two analysts at top-rated universities in the USA. Sala-i-Martin and Pinkovskiy state, 'if present trends continue [in sub-Saharan Africa], the poverty Millennium Development Goal of halving the proportion of people with incomes less than one dollar a day will be achieved on time' (2010: 1). Which one is to be believed? The answer is neither. Both assertions are based on 'statistics on steroids'. They are not based on any objective observation of reality. Both use fuzzy statistics to make the world fit a particular worldview. Hard data are missing because poverty is ill-defined and the indicator is highly problematic. They place considerable reliance on modelling, not on observations. The poverty target illustrates how targets that are poorly defined lead to unintended consequences. They lead to abuse, frequently to defend an ideological position under the guise of rigorous statistical work. The controversy regarding poverty trends in Africa exemplifies the danger that vaguely defined targets can lead to policy-based evidence making, instead of evidence-based policy making.

Another example of statistics on steroids is the maternal mortality rate. Until recently, the accepted view was that 'there has been little progress in reducing maternal deaths' in the world (UN, 2010a: paragraph 30). Yet this view has been challenged. A recent article argues that the world has seen considerably faster reductions in maternal mortality than previously thought. Based on data for 181 countries, Hogan et al. conclude, 'Substantial, albeit varied, progress has been made towards MDG5' (2010: 1). An earlier article estimated the number of maternal deaths at 535,900 cases globally for 2005 (Hill et al., 2007). The Hogan estimate, however, puts that number considerably lower, at 342,900 for 2008. Both estimates use, for the most part, the same sources of information.[12] The debate has been intense. One expert has framed her comments thus: 'Are my made up numbers better than your made up numbers?'.[13] Which estimate can we trust?

12. In another article in *The Lancet*, Rajaratnam et al. (2010) make a similar optimistic claim regarding child mortality. They estimate that the annual number of global under-five deaths decreased by 4 million between 1990 and 2008. UNICEF estimates the decrease at about 3 million. The optimistic assertions about progress regarding maternal and child health are both based on research funded by the Gates Foundation.
13. Blog by Karen Grepin, April 2010: http://karengrepin.blogspot.com/2010/04/are-my-made-up-numbers-better-than-your.html (accessed June 2010).

The fact is that both estimates are based on a problematic indicator. The UN states that 'Measuring maternal mortality is challenging at best' (2009: 27). The diagnostic of a maternal death is not always clear cut. It has been observed, for instance, that maternal mortality increases during the rainy season when malaria is more prevalent (Cross et al., 2010). Measuring maternal mortality is fraught with difficulties and uncertainties. Most experts prefer to use the related process-indicator, namely the proportion of births attended by skilled health personnel. In short, it is unwise to base an argument about maternal health on the maternal mortality rate.

Hunger offers another example to show that all indicators are imperfect but that some are more imperfect than others. Two indicators exist to monitor hunger: underweight and undernourishment. WHO/UNICEF estimate underweight among children below five years of age; FAO estimates the population below a minimum level of dietary energy consumption. The accuracy of underweight depends on the proper measurement of the age and weight of the child. Data generally stem from national nutrition surveys, Demographic and Health Surveys, and Multiple Indicator Cluster Surveys, whose quality has improved over time. Undernourishment, on the other hand, requires information on the average amount of food available at the country level, the inequality within the country in terms of access to food, and the minimum amount of food required per person.

Not surprisingly, the two estimates yield different results. Data on underweight suggest that hunger in the world is declining gradually, whereas the statistics on undernourishment indicate exactly the opposite. The latter shows that the number of people who suffer from hunger increased from 800 million in 1990 to 1.02 billion in 2009. Again, which one should we believe? All indicators use two basic ingredients: observations and transformations. It can be observed, quite directly, whether a child is malnourished, but direct observation cannot determine whether a child is struggling to survive on less than $1/day. When the indicator requires a large amount of transformations, however, its reliability and accuracy will diminish because transformations involve assumptions. Calculating undernourishment requires considerably more transformations and assumptions than estimating underweight. Hence, the latter is the preferred indicator for monitoring the hunger target.

In short, one needs to exercise considerable caution with arguments made on the basis of indicators that involve a hefty dose of transformations. Along with undernourishment and the maternal mortality rate, the $1/day poverty head count belongs to the group of most problematic indicators.[14] Ironically,

14. The flawed nature of the $1/day poverty indicator has been exposed by many analysts, including Fischer (2010), Kanbur (2009), Reddy (2008), Reddy and Pogge (2002) and Saith (2005). A glance at any of them should seriously undermine any confidence one can place in the global poverty estimates. The number of countries with missing data remains high. The World Bank states, '78 out of 149 developing countries lack adequate data to

it is the most frequently mentioned MDG indicator in reports, speeches and articles in newspapers and in journals.

Under the motto ‘you measure what you treasure’, the case is often made for setting global targets for topics with weak indicators and data, precisely to stimulate statistical work. As long as they are kept outside the MDGs, it is argued, no serious work will be undertaken to improve their measurability. However, the above-mentioned examples on poverty, hunger and maternal mortality show that the inclusion of a vaguely defined target does not necessarily lead to improved monitoring. The global poverty estimates have not improved over the past decade, despite being regarded as central to the MDG agenda. There is thus no basis for assuming that statistical monitoring will improve once the area of concern is turned into a global target.

EQUITY

The MDGs are designed to track the equitable pattern of progress. Although imperfect, the relevant indicator for that purpose is the share of national consumption that accrues to the bottom 20 per cent of the population. However, the sanitized version of the MDGs largely ignores this; the many monitoring reports seldom report data or analyses for that indicator. Instead, they sharply focus on income-poverty, using the $1/day norm. As a result, the common view is that slow growth is the principal reason why the world will miss the 2015 targets. Insufficient aid and/or poor governance come a distant second.

The evidence, however, points elsewhere; namely that within-country inequalities have turned the MDGs into ‘mission impossible’. People in the bottom quintiles have not benefited much, if at all, from social progress and economic growth in the majority of countries. Saith (2006: 1185) points towards the ‘spectacularly rising inequalities that are as visible as the worsening forms of social and service exclusion in large parts of the third world’. Minujin and Delamonica (2003), Moser et al. (2005) and Reidpath et al. (2009) document the growing disparities in terms of child mortality. The world will miss the MDG targets largely because within-country disparities have grown to the point of slowing down global progress.

Demographic and Health Surveys show that children born in poor families are more likely to suffer from malnutrition and illiteracy and die prematurely than their counterparts born in rich families in the same country. They also show that such gaps have widened in recent years in most countries. An analysis of countries with disaggregated data about under-five mortality (U5MR) confirms that the majority of them witnessed growing inequality. Most of the countries that have reduced their average U5MR over the past decade have also seen an increase in inequality among quintile-specific U5MR values. Of the countries with relevant data for the past decade, most

monitor poverty trends’ (2008: 22). One wonders how global estimates can be taken at face value when they cover less than half the countries in the world.

witnessed an increase in inequality.[15] They divide themselves along a ratio of 3:1 — for each country that managed to reduce inequality three witnessed an increase in inequality. Each group represents a diverse variety of countries. It cannot be said, for instance, that Africa or the least developed countries fall into a particular category.

The evidence suggests quite compellingly that relative progress matters; that well-being is not solely determined by the absolute level of human development. Already in 1996, the editors of the *British Medical Journal* wrote, 'what matters in determining mortality and health in a society is less the overall wealth of that society and more how evenly wealth is distributed' (1996: 7037). Wilkinson and Pickett (2010) show that income inequality is strongly associated with shorter life expectancy, higher infant mortality, lower birth weight, more AIDS and more depression. They use evidence from twenty-three rich countries and from the fifty states in the USA because they provide the widest coverage of reliable data on relevant indicators. The most unequal countries or states do worse according to almost every quality-of-life indicator. Whether the test is life expectancy, infant mortality, obesity, homicides, learning, teenage pregnancy, illegal drug use, depression or mental illness, the more equal the society the better its performance. The best predictor of how countries or states rank is not the differences in wealth between them but the differences in wealth within them.

Countries that perform best in terms of health and well-being include Japan, Sweden, Norway and Finland. They also display the lowest levels of inequality. Among those that do worst on all fronts are the USA, Portugal, the UK, New Zealand and Australia. Similarly, a recent study concludes that social mobility between generations is dramatically lower in highly unequal countries such as the USA and the UK than in less unequal countries (OECD, 2010). If children want to climb higher on the socio-economic ladder than their parents, the study finds, they had better move to Canada, Denmark, Norway, Finland or Sweden — all countries with low or moderate levels of inequality.

The conventional interpretation is that more income leads to better living standards. In other words, health and well-being are mostly seen as growth-mediated. However, Wilkinson and Pickett show that average life expectancy, for instance, displays no relation to the average level of per-capita income among rich countries. Neither is health status related to the amount of health expenditure or to the availability of high-tech medical services. The biggest influence on health and well-being, they find, is the level of inequality within the country.

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15. They include Armenia, Burkina Faso, Cambodia, Ethiopia, Guinea, Haiti, Kazakhstan, Madagascar, Malawi, Mali, Namibia, Nepal, Nicaragua, Nigeria, Pakistan, Peru, Philippines, Rwanda, Senegal and Vietnam. Those that reduced mortality *and* inequality include Bolivia, Côte d'Ivoire, Dominican Republic, Ghana, Indonesia, Niger and Zambia.

In other words, unequal societies are less healthy. Why? The answer usually given is that more equitable countries have fewer poor people and therefore fewer health and social problems. Wilkinson and Pickett argue that this is only part of the story. Evidence suggests that greater equality not only helps those at the bottom but also benefits those at the top. They compare people across rich countries with the same level of income and find that those in more equal societies invariably do better. In unequal societies, people from all income levels — not only the poor — have worse levels of well-being. In other words, everyone benefits from greater equality. A high level of inequality leads to greater status anxiety and more chronic stress for everybody, including those with relatively high status. Relative status hurts and harms people physically, emotionally and mentally — all people, not just the poor. The impact of high inequality on health and well-being thus runs across the entire society. This is confirmed by the dramatic improvements in average life expectancy in Britain during the two World Wars of the twentieth century. Amartya Sen concludes, 'we are really looking at influences on mortality rates that concern economic organization and social environment rather than the average level of real income per head' (1995:12).

Wilkinson and Pickett are less clear about the relevance of their thesis to developing countries. On the one hand, they state, 'In poorer countries it is still essential to raise living standards' (2010: 30), implying that the 'spirit level' applies mostly to affluent and developed nations. Later, however, they argue that 'a number of outcomes, including health and violence, are also related to inequality in less developed countries' (ibid.: 189). It would be hard to accept that the impact of inequality on well-being kicks in only above a certain threshold of economic development. And it would be problematic to argue that the significance of relative income is negligible until a society reaches a certain income threshold.

In summary, Wilkinson and Pickett's main argument is that 'There is no one policy for reducing inequality . . . and another for raising national standards of performance. Reducing inequality is the best way of doing both' (ibid.: 30). This, it has to be added, applies to all countries. It cannot be argued that well-being is growth-mediated in poor countries, but equity-mediated in rich countries.

CONCLUSION

The MDGs are not a sterile diversion or a reductionist view of development. Despite their limitations, the global targets have energized many stakeholders across the world. But ideology and the idolatry of literalism have detracted from their main objective. The former has succeeded in undermining the main purpose of the MDGs, which was to expand the development narrative beyond the narrow growth paradigm. The promotion of the international poverty line has been a key instrument for multilateral and bilateral donors, leading think tanks, top-rated universities and major media outlets to fit the facts to their particular worldview. Their principal storyline is that poverty is being reduced thanks to foreign aid and charitable projects, as well as the application of a particular policy framework and good governance. The poverty debate has been dollarized, and the MDG discourse has been donorized.

However, the MDGs cannot be reduced to a standard set of macroeconomic policies and sectoral interventions of a technical nature. They require fundamental transformations in society, which are invariably driven by domestic politics and local actors. The MDGs have been distorted and misconstrued as objectives that can be reached through technical interventions funded by foreign aid to scale up investments and replicate lessons learnt elsewhere. The controversy regarding poverty trends in Africa — whether the region will meet the poverty target by 2015 or not — exemplifies the danger that global target setting can lead to policy-based evidence making. It is unhelpful to set targets for dimensions of human well-being that are not clearly specified, lack a solid metric or for which no robust data exist.

An equity-neutral and hands-off pursuit of the global targets denies the fact that all targets have two key aspects: rate *and* pattern of progress. The main reason why the MDGs will not be reached at the global level is because the pattern of progress has been inequitable in the majority of countries. Progress has not been inclusive. The inequitable pattern is slowing down the rate at which the world is making progress. Behind each preventable child death, behind each out-of-school child, behind each malnourished child, behind each maternal death, behind each AIDS patient who is not treated with antiretroviral medicine and behind each instance of environmental destruction lies a story of high inequality and deep-seated discrimination. In other words, poverty will be eradicated not by more aid or more growth but by greater equality.

Equity-adjusted statistics on human development are a practical way of exposing the fact that most of the progress in the majority of countries has bypassed the most disadvantaged segments in society. They involve differential weights for the different quintiles so as to expose the inequitable pattern of progress.[16] Differential weighing, however, is often criticized as discriminating towards the non-poor because it implies attaching greater value to a life saved at the bottom than at the top. Such reactions are understandable because they stem from the firm belief that growth and progress automatically trickle down to the poor. The fixed mindset is not ready to consider the possibility that the growth paradigm may merely benefit the elite, while impoverishing the disadvantaged and victimizing the dispossessed. It is not the purpose of equity-adjusted statistics to discriminate against the non-poor; they simply aim to expose the degree to which progress has been inequitable.

16. Vandemoortele and Delamonica (2010) explore various methods to adjust standard statistics for inequality, using U5MR data for sixty-three countries.

Equity-adjusted statistics give an indication of the progress achieved *and* the pattern followed. The latter is missing from standard statistics.

The one-sentence summary of the latest MDG data (UN, 2010b) is that approximately 40 per cent of the road has been covered but it has taken 70 per cent of the time. Thus, some 60 per cent had to be covered in the remaining 30 per cent of the time. Are the MDGs still feasible? Several analysts have already given their verdict. They argue that without accelerated growth, more aid to Africa and better governance, the MDGs will indeed be missed by a large margin. It is not yet common currency to argue that the world still has the potential to achieve the MDGs, provided the growing disparities within countries are tackled in earnest. This would require a major change in the prevailing development paradigm, which is never easy. However, if the course is to be changed, the discourse about the MDGs will have to change too. A little equity and bit more policy space at the country level can yield spectacular outcomes in terms of human well-being. Until then, the real meaning of the MDGs will remain 'Minding Development Gaps'.

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