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# Recapturing the Narrative of International Development

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## Acronyms

<b>DAC</b>	Development Assistance Committee of the OECD
<b>GDP</b>	Gross domestic product
<b>GNI</b>	Gross national income
<b>HIPC</b>	Highly Indebted Poor Country
<b>IDG</b>	International Development Goal
<b>IFI</b>	International financial institution
<b>IMF</b>	International Monetary Fund
<b>IP</b>	Intellectual property
<b>MDG</b>	Millennium Development Goals
<b>NGO</b>	Non-governmental organization
<b>OECD</b>	Organisation for Economic Co-operation and Development
<b>OHCHR</b>	Office of the High Commissioner for Human Rights
<b>PRGF</b>	Poverty Reduction and Growth Facility
<b>PRSP</b>	Poverty Reduction Strategy Paper
<b>TRIPS</b>	Trade-Related Aspects of Intellectual Property Rights
<b>UN</b>	United Nations
<b>UNDP</b>	United Nations Development Fund
<b>UNICEF</b>	United Nations Children's Fund
<b>WTO</b>	World Trade Organization

## Note

This is a version of a paper that will be published as a chapter in *The Millennium Development Goals and Beyond: Global Development after 2015*, edited by Rorden Wilkinson and David Hulme, Routledge. The paper was prepared for the Global Poverty Summit held at Johannesburg in January 2011 and served as an input to the Johannesburg Statement on the Millennium Development Goals, [www.povertydialogue.org/global-poverty-summit/](http://www.povertydialogue.org/global-poverty-summit/), accessed on 5 June 2012.

## Summary/Résumé/Resumen

### *Summary*

Though it is difficult to assess whether the Millennium Development Goals (MDGs) have contributed to poverty trends across the world, their impact on the discourse on international development has been powerful and unexpected. By articulating the complex challenges of development in eight goals with concrete 2015 targets, the MDGs have had unprecedented success in drawing attention to poverty as an urgent global priority. But the narrow emphasis has also led to detracting attention from other important priorities—the complex strategic choices in economic policy—and has simplified development policy debates.

The MDGs have created a new narrative of international development centred on global poverty as a compelling moral concern. This narrative convincingly appeals to rich country “publics and parliaments” and to new global philanthropists. But the simplification of development to eight goals has reduced the development agenda to meeting basic needs, stripped of the Millennium Declaration’s vision for development with social justice and human rights. The narrative leaves out any mention of equity, empowerment of people and building sustainable productive capacity for economic growth. It 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 out much of the broader policy agendas, including the systemic issues of the global economy that have long been priorities for developing countries in international economic negotiations, and impacts of liberalization and privatization on the poor that have been priorities for the critics of globalization. Goals galvanize concern and action but quantification can oversimplify complex challenges with unintended consequences for the way these challenges are defined.

While there is widespread consensus on their importance in drawing attention to poverty as an urgent global priority, the MDG framework has generated some sharp criticisms. These include:

- composition of the targets—what was included and not included, the levels at which they were set or not set, the methodology for measuring implementation progress;
- reliability of the MDGs as a development framework given their narrow scope and oversimplification, and bias against African and other countries because of failure to take into account initial conditions, and the arbitrary and incoherent methodologies used to set the targets;
- non-participatory process by which they were formulated by bureaucrats without adequate intergovernmental negotiations nor open consultation with non-governmental organizations (NGOs); and
- inappropriate application of the goals as national planning targets.

The expiry of the goals in 2015 presents an opportunity to set new goals that would recapture the vision articulated in the Millennium Declaration for development in the twenty-first century that would achieve greater inclusion, sustainability and equity. This paper highlights the 10 most pressing issues to be considered in this redesign, and proposes directions for drawing up a new set of global goals.

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## **Résumé**

Bien qu'il soit difficile d'évaluer si les Objectifs du développement pour le Millénaire (ODM) ont contribué à l'évolution de la pauvreté à travers le monde, ils ont eu pour effet inattendu de marquer profondément le discours du développement international. En décomposant les problèmes complexes du développement en huit objectifs, puis en cibles concrètes à atteindre avant 2015, les ODM ont réussi mieux que toute autre stratégie antérieure à focaliser l'attention sur l'urgence de réduire la pauvreté au niveau mondial et sur le caractère prioritaire de cette action. Mais le but fixé étant très limité, il a aussi détourné l'attention d'autres priorités importantes – les choix stratégiques à faire en matière de politique économique, question d'une grande complexité – et a simplifié les débats sur les politiques de développement.

Les ODM ont donné naissance à un nouveau discours du développement international centré sur la pauvreté dans le monde comme préoccupation doublée d'un impératif moral. Ce discours est un appel convaincant lancé aux "publics et aux parlements" des pays riches et aux nouveaux philanthropes dans le monde. Mais en réduisant le développement à huit objectifs, on a aussi réduit le programme du développement à la satisfaction des besoins essentiels, en le dépouillant de la vision qui transparaissait dans la Déclaration du Millénaire, celle d'un développement alliant justice sociale et réalisation des droits de l'homme. Le discours passe sous silence l'équité, l'autonomisation des individus et le renforcement de capacités de production durables capables d'alimenter la croissance économique. Il ne laisse aucune place dans l'explication de la pauvreté aux rapports de force existant à l'intérieur des pays et entre eux ou aux asymétries de l'économie mondiale. Il laisse de côté une grande partie des interrogations politiques, notamment les problèmes liés au système même de l'économie mondiale, qui sont depuis longtemps des priorités pour les pays en développement dans les négociations économiques internationales, et les effets de la libéralisation et de la privatisation sur les pauvres, qui constituent un problème prioritaire aux yeux des critiques de la mondialisation. Des objectifs galvanisent en recentrant l'attention et l'action mais la quantification peut aussi simplifier à outrance des problèmes complexes, ce qui a des conséquences inattendues sur la façon dont ces problèmes sont définis.

Si le consensus est quasi général sur l'importance qu'ils ont eue en attirant l'attention sur la pauvreté comme urgence et priorité mondiale, les ODM ont aussi suscité de vives critiques, qui ont porté notamment sur:

- la composition des cibles – ce qui a été retenu et ce qui ne l'a pas été, les niveaux auxquels elles ont été ou non fixées, la méthodologie appliquée pour mesurer les progrès de la mise en œuvre;
- la fiabilité des ODM comme cadre de développement, étant leur portée étroite et leur excessive simplification, la partialité envers les pays d'Afrique et d'ailleurs en ne tenant pas compte des conditions initiales, et le caractère arbitraire et l'incohérence des méthodologies utilisées pour établir les cibles;
- la manière dont ils ont été formulés par des bureaucrates sans aucune participation extérieure, sans négociation suffisante entre les gouvernements et sans consultation ouverte avec les ONG; et
- l'emploi déplacé des objectifs, utilisés comme cibles dans la planification nationale.

La date butoir pour la réalisation de ces objectifs étant fixée à 2015, rien ne nous empêche de fixer de nouveaux objectifs qui renouent avec la vision esquissée dans la Déclaration du Millénaire, celle d'un développement au XXI<sup>e</sup> siècle qui favorise davantage l'intégration et l'égalité et respecte mieux l'environnement à long terme. Ce document met en évidence les dix questions les plus urgentes à examiner à cette occasion et donne des indications sur la manière de s'y prendre pour énoncer une nouvelle série d'objectifs pour le monde.

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### **Resumen**

Aunque es difícil evaluar si los Objetivos de Desarrollo del Milenio (ODM) han incidido sobre las tendencias de la pobreza en todo el mundo, sus efectos sobre el discurso acerca del desarrollo internacional han sido fuertes e inesperados. Al articular los complejos retos del desarrollo en ocho objetivos con metas concretas para el 2015, los ODM han tenido un éxito inédito en llamar la atención sobre la pobreza como una alta prioridad mundial. No obstante, el limitar el énfasis al tema de la pobreza ha tenido también el efecto de distraer el interés que cabría prestar a otras prioridades importantes—las complejas opciones estratégicas en la economía política—y simplificado los debates sobre las políticas de desarrollo.

Los ODM han creado un nuevo discurso de desarrollo internacional que se centra en la pobreza mundial como inquietud moral apremiante. De forma convincente, este discurso hace un llamado a los “públicos y parlamentos” de los países ricos y a los nuevos filántropos internacionales. Pero el reducir y simplificar el desarrollo a ocho objetivos ha reducido la agenda de desarrollo a la satisfacción de necesidades básicas, despojándola de la visión de la Declaración del Milenio de un desarrollo con justicia social y derechos humanos. El discurso deja por fuera toda mención a la equidad, el empoderamiento de las personas y el fortalecimiento de una capacidad productiva sostenible para el crecimiento económico. No da cabida al examen de la pobreza desde la perspectiva de su nexo con las relaciones subyacentes de poder dentro y entre los países y las asimetrías existentes en la economía mundial. Finalmente, no toma en cuenta gran parte de las agendas de políticas más generales, incluidos los problemas sistémicos de la economía mundial, que por tanto tiempo han sido prioridades para los países en desarrollo en las negociaciones económicas internacionales, y los impactos de la liberalización y la privatización sobre los pobres, que han sido prioridades para los críticos de la mundialización. Los objetivos galvanizan las inquietudes y acciones, pero la cuantificación puede simplificar demasiado unos desafíos que son complejos y generar consecuencias imprevistas para la forma de definir tales retos.

Aunque existe un consenso generalizado en torno a la importancia de los ODM para llamar la atención sobre la pobreza como una prioridad mundial urgente, el marco de los objetivos ha generado algunas críticas agudas, de las cuales cabría destacar las siguientes:

- composición de las metas: lo que se incluyó y lo que no se incluyó, los niveles que se fijaron o no para las metas, la metodología para medir los avances de ejecución;
- fiabilidad de los ODM como marco para el desarrollo, habida cuenta de su alcance limitado y su excesiva simplificación, y el sesgo contra los países africanos y otras naciones debido a que no se tomaron en cuenta las condiciones iniciales, así como las metodologías arbitrarias e incoherentes utilizadas para determinar las metas;
- el proceso no participativo que los burócratas utilizaron para formular las metas, sin una adecuada negociación intergubernamental ni una consulta abierta con las ONG; y
- aplicación inapropiada de los objetivos como metas de planificación nacional.

La expiración de los objetivos en el 2015 ofrece la oportunidad para fijar nuevos objetivos que permitan rescatar la visión formulada en la Declaración del Milenio para el desarrollo en el siglo XXI que permitiría alcanzar una mayor inclusión, sostenibilidad y equidad. En este documento se destacan los diez temas más imperiosos que han de considerarse en este nuevo diseño y se proponen algunas direcciones para formular un nuevo conjunto de objetivos mundiales.

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## Introduction

Though it is difficult to assess whether the MDGs have contributed to poverty trends across the world,<sup>1</sup> their impact on the discourse on international development has been powerful. By articulating the complex challenges of development in eight goals with concrete 2015 targets, the MDGs have had unprecedented success in drawing attention to poverty as an urgent global priority. The emphasis on poverty is a cause for celebration, yet this has not been without consequence for attention to other important priorities. The MDGs have also influenced how the problems of development and solutions to them are understood and communicated, with ramifications for the evolution of development thought and policy.

The MDGs have created a new narrative of international development centred on global poverty as a compelling moral concern. This narrative convincingly appeals to rich country “publics and parliaments” and to new global philanthropists. But the simplification of development to eight goals has reduced the development agenda to meeting basic needs, stripped of the Millennium Declaration’s vision for development with social justice and human rights. The narrative leaves out any mention of equity, empowerment of people, or building sustainable productive capacity for economic growth. It 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 out much of the broader policy agendas, including the systemic issues of the global economy that have long been priorities for developing countries in international economic negotiations, and impacts of liberalization and privatization on the poor that have been priorities for the critics of globalization. Goals galvanize concern and action but quantification can oversimplify complex challenges with unintended consequences for the way these challenges are defined. The expiry of the MDGs in 2015 presents an opportunity to open a debate about global development priorities and to renew the goals. Much has been written about the MDGs. While there is widespread consensus on their importance in drawing attention to poverty as an urgent global priority, numerous issues have been raised. They have included some sharp criticisms, including:

- i. composition of the targets—what was included and not included, the levels at which they were set or not set, the methodology for measuring implementation progress;
- ii. reliability of the MDGs as a development framework given their narrow scope and oversimplification, and bias against African and other countries because of failure to take into account initial conditions, and the arbitrary and incoherent methodologies used to set the targets;
- iii. non-participatory process by which they were formulated by bureaucrats without adequate intergovernmental negotiations nor open consultation with non-governmental organizations (NGOs); and
- iv. inappropriate application of the goals as national planning targets.

These controversies have been reviewed in several recent publications and more are emerging.<sup>2</sup> The purpose of this essay is to reflect on the narrative of development that the MDGs have created. I argue that after 2015, a new set of goals should be launched to recapture the development narrative as articulated in the 2000 Millennium Declaration through inclusive globalization, that could be expressed as “human development”,<sup>3</sup> or as “sustainable, equitable and human rights-based development”.<sup>4</sup> This paper highlights the 10 most pressing issues to be

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<sup>1</sup> Manning 2009; Kenny and Sumner 2011; Melamed 2012; Fukuda-Parr forthcoming. Assessing the impact of MDGs on poverty outcomes is difficult because of attribution problems.

<sup>2</sup> Manning 2009; Melamed 2012; Fukuda-Parr forthcoming.

<sup>3</sup> By human development, I refer specifically in this paper to the concept as defined in the United Nations Development Programme (UNDP) *Human Development Reports* based on the concept of capabilities articulated by Amartya Sen. Human development is a process of expanding choices and freedoms that people have in order to live lives they value. As a public policy framework, human development emphasizes expanding essential capabilities such as being educated and healthy, as well as equity and sustainability as the important ends of development. Economic growth is important as a means to these goals, not as an end in itself.

<sup>4</sup> I owe this term to the discussions at the UNDP/Overseas Development Institute (ODI) workshop on MDGs held in Cairo, Egypt on 26–27 October 2011.

considered in this redesign, and proposes directions for drawing up a new set of global goals. But first, I start with an explanation of why the MDGs must be understood as a narrative—rather than as a development strategy—and why recapturing that narrative is important.

## **MDGs: A Narrative of International Development, not a National Development Strategy**

### ***MDGs as the overarching objective***

The MDGs have driven a consensus on ending poverty as the overarching goal of international development. They have become the legitimized framework accepted by national governments, bilateral and multilateral donor agencies, international development NGOs, national civil society groups and other stakeholders in international development cooperation regardless of the views that any of these actors might hold individually about their relevance. They have become the reference point around which international debates about development revolve. The success of the international development enterprise is judged by whether the 2015 goals are being met. Since they were introduced in 2001, the United Nations, the World Bank and numerous other international bodies have monitored MDG implementation and issued annual reports with detailed data. International Monetary Fund (IMF) staff country reports<sup>5</sup> systematically include the prospects for achieving the MDGs, along with key macroeconomic performance indicators. UN meetings to review progress in achieving the MDGs have become both frequent and high-profile political events where participation is significant for a country's 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 refer to achieving the MDGs as the ultimate objective. Local NGOs advocate national budget reforms "to achieve the MDGs", even though they may be highly critical of these goals, because they are the accepted standard for evaluating policy. Media reports on poverty refer to failing to achieve the MDGs as a way of demonstrating the pervasiveness of abject poverty. In other words, the MDGs have become a convenient shorthand to refer to development and poverty, and have thus come to redefine these complex concepts. A recent study of books in the English language found that the term "MDGs" is almost as frequently used as GDP per capita to refer to development progress and has overtaken the Human Development Index (Kenny and Sumner 2011).

The MDGs have become an established norm according to the trajectory of international norm dynamics elaborated by Finnemore and Sikkink (Fukuda-Parr and Hulme 2011). Norms emerge, then cascade, and then reach the final stage of becoming "internalized". At this stage, norms take on "a taken-for-granted quality and are no longer a matter of broad public debate" (Finnemore and Sikkink 1998:9), and are kept alive by "habit" and "institutionalization". The main actors are the professions and bureaucracy which 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".

### ***Policy approaches***

Emerging after two decades of acrimonious contestations over the Washington Consensus policies that divided the international development community during the 1980s and 1990s, the consensus on poverty might have been expected to lead to changes in the policy approaches of the donor community. The MDGs might be interpreted as the embrace of what Simon Maxwell termed in the debates of that time, the "new 'New Poverty Agenda'" (Maxwell 2003), departing from the conditionality-driven Washington Consensus policies of the 1980s toward a people-centred human development agenda that gained momentum in the 1990s, especially through

<sup>5</sup> Such as reports under the Poverty Reduction and Growth Facility (PRGF).

the series of UN development conferences.<sup>6</sup> For those who contested the paradigm of globalization, the Millennium Declaration was a welcome affirmation of their concerns and endorsed the search for alternative models based on principles of social justice and human rights, in pursuit of a human development agenda (Darrow 2012).

Yet the MDG-led development decade has not seen the emergence of new thinking about alternative strategies. Furthermore, during this decade, while many bold commitments were made by the leadership of the most powerful countries, such as for doubling development aid to Africa at the Gleneagles Summit in 2005, they have largely not been implemented and no significant international poverty initiatives were launched. As the title of the UN MDG Gap Task Force<sup>7</sup> 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 (UN MDG Gap Task Force 2011). The only tangible progress made between 2000 and 2012 was the significant reduction in the debt burden of the poorest countries. Multilateral trade talks—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. After an initial upturn at the beginning of the decade, and stronger priority given to basic social services, aid commitments reached a plateau and are not expected to increase again from 2009 in the context of the global financial crisis and economic recession.<sup>8</sup> Thus, while the MDGs have forged a new consensus on poverty as the overarching objective of development, they did not drive major changes in the means to reach it. It was possible to achieve a strong consensus on the MDGs precisely because no one would disagree with the moral imperative of ending abject poverty, even if they did not agree on the means to achieve that objective.

In another article coauthored with David Hulme (Fukuda-Parr and Hulme 2011), I have explained the political and ideational dynamics behind the origins of the MDGs. To summarize, an important motivation behind the creation of the MDGs was the need to unite the development community to defend international development as a global project, particularly in the face of declining support for development aid. As already mentioned, the community had been deeply divided during the 1980s and 1990s by sharp controversies over the Washington Consensus policy strategies and structural adjustment programmes. These controversies not only pitted NGOs and academics against the World Bank and IMF but also individuals within organizations.<sup>9</sup> It was particularly important for the UN leadership and development ministers of major bilateral donors to put an end to these controversies because they faced a crisis in financing development aid. They faced a public sentiment of “aid fatigue” and scepticism about development and the aid industry generally. With the end of the Cold War, geopolitical interests no longer sustained support for aid budgets. The MDGs created a narrative that could be embraced by this divided community, and provide a convincing rationale to win over the “publics and parliaments”.

These motivations initially led bilateral donors in the Development Assistance Committee (DAC) of the OECD (Organisation for Economic Co-operation and Development) to adopt the International Development Goals (IDGs). This is a list of six quantitative goals with timeframes

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<sup>6</sup> The MDGs were not reinvented in the Millennium Declaration but are in fact a select set of goals set by UN conferences of the 1990s. They are a product of a process that opened up the United Nations to the energy of civil society actors from across the world, advocating an alternative policy agenda to the dominant policies of liberalization advanced as “Washington Consensus” and global market integration. They critiqued the distributional and human impact of liberalization policies and raised issues of poverty, inequality, human rights, and the asymmetries of global governance, including issues of trade, debt, technology, finance and developing country voice in decision making. Many of these critiques were part of new research that extended the analysis of poverty to relational and structural issues such as voice, accountability and empowerment, and that was reflected in the World Bank’s *World Development Report 2000*. The adoption of the MDGs as consensus goals of development by the entire development community, embraced by the most powerful bilateral donors and Bretton Woods institutions, might be seen as victory—a culmination of the move to adopt a full-scale human-centred development paradigm and a human development agenda.

<sup>7</sup> A task force created by the Secretary-General to monitor implementation of Goal 8 (Develop a global partnership for development) commitments. The task force includes representatives of the relevant UN organizations involved in issues related to Goal 8.

<sup>8</sup> UN MDG Gap Task Force 2011. Moreover, the increase in aid volumes started in the mid-1990s, prior to the introduction of the MDGs.

<sup>9</sup> The critical analysis by the United Nations Children’s Fund (UNICEF) of the social consequences of adjustment, particularly through cuts in social spending, was one of the most powerful voices in these debates. See Andrea Cornia et al. (1998).

for achievement, in three areas: economic well-being, social development and environmental sustainability and regeneration (OECD 1996:6). These goals had been 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 by DAC entitled *Shaping the 21<sup>st</sup> Century: The Contribution of Development Co-operation* (OECD-DAC 1996). The publication 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.

Ending poverty was a narrative that could both unify the development community and energize public support for development, and the IDGs were the centrepiece of this narrative.<sup>10</sup> But the IDGs could not be “owned” by all stakeholders since they were invented by the bilateral donors. The IDGs were transformed into the MDGs to build a broader consensus including the Bretton Woods institutions, UN agencies and developing country governments. The MDGs could build a narrative behind which dissenting stakeholders could stand united and argue for development aid. The success of the MDGs can be attributed precisely to the fact that they allowed the protagonists in the debates of the 1980s and 1990s over structural adjustment—IMF, World Bank, the US Treasury, UNICEF, NGO networks, and academics on both sides of the issue—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.

In the aftermath of the controversies over the Washington Consensus policies that led even its proponents to declare the consensus “dead”,<sup>11</sup> one clear direction on which there was considerable consensus was the importance of the social dimensions of development, and the need to reduce absolute poverty. But in the absence of a clear alternative policy path, the basic framework of Washington Consensus policies focusing on macroeconomic stability and liberalization continued to be pursued, and continued as a part of a broader agenda, behind the headline of ending poverty as the objective.

It is therefore not surprising that the last decade has seen little by way of new proposals by the World Bank or of new policy strategies to foster economic growth combined with social justice that address poverty, inequality and the fulfilment of human rights. 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 they supplemented rather than adjusted the economic model—namely, the pursuit of macroeconomic stability as a key objective, liberalization of the economy as a strategy. The MDGs thus provided a new consensus on an “overarching framework” of international development and outlined important outcomes but did not address the contested policy strategies. They created a powerful storyline to communicate development imperatives to the general public and politicians in donor countries about the urgency of providing assistance to end abject poverty.

### ***Aid architecture—New narrative, new instruments, old policies***

MDGs are a key feature of the new architecture that was put in place in the late 1990s. The MDG narrative provides a rationale for development cooperation based on humanitarian considerations. The consensus over MDGs also forms a basis for a relationship defined as *partnership* between donors and recipients. The partnership is to be constructed in pursuit of a

<sup>10</sup> For example, Lord Mark Malloch Brown, who, as UNDP Administrator in 2000 played a central role in moving to build the Millennium Declaration into the MDGs and an implementation plan, recounts that the divide between the United Nations and the World Bank over structural adjustment controversies needed to be bridged. (SFP interview with Malloch Brown, London, 27 June, 2008).

<sup>11</sup> For example, James Wolfensohn, President of the World Bank, observed that “the Washington Consensus has been dead for several years. It has been replaced by all sorts of consensuses” (<http://info.worldbank.org/etools/docs/reducingpoverty/doc/134/file/JDWShanghaiOpening.pdf>, accessed on 6 June 2012). Quoted in Simon Maxwell (2005), *Washington Consensus is Dead: Long Live the Meta-Narrative!*, ODI Working Paper 243. ODI, London.

shared commitment to ending poverty, defined within the MDG framework, implemented through national Poverty Reduction Strategy Papers (PRSPs). The partnership is to be guided by principles of mutual accountability and respect for national ownership articulated in the Paris Declaration adopted by the DAC in 2004. Donor support would be provided to implement the PRSPs through the IMF's 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 financing instruments were introduced toward the end of the 1990s and replaced the structural adjustment lending instruments. The PRSPs replaced the Policy Framework Papers. HIPC and PRGFs replaced structural adjustment loans but conditionality continued as the release of funds continued to be conditional on policy reforms as it was under the adjustment programmes. The DAC's Paris Declaration principles of ownership and mutual accountability and the Monterrey Consensus of 2003 imposed *ex ante* conditionality by emphasizing that additional aid would be forthcoming for countries that had already demonstrated good policies and good performance. The underlying economic/development strategies continue to be driven by the agenda of macroeconomic stabilization and liberalization. To this MDGs have added a basic needs agenda, emphasizing priorities for social investments and commitments for partnership, but the basic macroeconomic policy agenda has been retained.

### ***The Millennium Declaration***

It is important to recall that the MDGs were introduced in the UN Secretary-General's implementation plan for the Millennium Declaration, the "Road Map" document presented to the General Assembly in 2001, for the purposes of harmonizing reporting (UN 2001). The Declaration was adopted at the Millennium Summit in 2000, in which world leaders identified poverty and development, along with peace and security, democracy and human rights as their key objectives for the twenty-first century.

Like other UN declarations, it serves as a statement of broad objectives and principles that should guide the world community. Guiding principles that framed the Declaration were shared commitments to the universal values of freedom, equality, solidarity, tolerance, respect for nature and shared responsibility, articulated in Chapter 1 of the document. But such values are intrinsically difficult to translate into numbers and in fact absent from the MDGs. The fine wording of the Declaration and its statement of ethical principles—commitment to the right to development and to goals of empowerment—are overshadowed by the MDG goals of halving the proportion of people living on less than \$1 a day,<sup>12</sup> and cutting maternal and child mortality. Also, facilitated further by both commission and omission in the design of the MDGs, the process can be described as "From universal values to Millennium Development Goals: Lost in translation", as Ashwani Saith aptly put it in the title of his 2006 article (Saith 2006).<sup>13</sup>

The process of translating broad, value-based and multifaceted objectives into a set of quantitative indicators is a treacherous one. The MDGs are powerful in communicating a vision because they express in simple and concrete terms what is meant by ending poverty. They are powerful in communicating serious intent because they use time-bound numeric goals. But the translation necessarily involved a process of conceptual simplification and reification. The quantitative goals made concrete the vague and intangible commitments made in the Declaration: "We will spare no effort to free our fellow men, women and children from the abject and dehumanizing conditions of extreme poverty, to which more than a billion of them are currently subjected" (UN 2000:1). The Secretary-General and his advisors believed that numeric goals would be a way to strengthen the Declaration and make it a memorable historic document that would have significant public impact.<sup>14</sup> For this purpose, simplification was an imperative, since "less is more"; and the number of goals was limited to just a few that could be

<sup>12</sup> All references to \$ are to United States (US) dollars.

<sup>13</sup> For a comprehensive critique of MDGs from the human rights perspective, see OHCHR (2008), *Claiming the MDGs*.

<sup>14</sup> SFP interviews with: John Ruggie, Cambridge MA, 6 August, 2008; Malloch Brown, London, 27 June 2008.

easily memorized and recited (UN 2000). They fought the pressure and temptation to be comprehensive and include all the important dimensions of development and poverty in its outcomes, process and causes. The goals needed to be “memorable” and powerful in communicating the message to the general public and in broad aggregate policy debates.

The Millennium Declaration is a statement of a “human rights-based” vision of development as both an end and a process. The Millennium Declaration conceptualizes poverty as a dehumanizing human condition, in the human rights and capabilities perspectives rather than in the utilitarian perspective of material deprivation. The central concerns are with poverty as an affront to human freedom and dignity. The Declaration commits to the realization of the right to development and to the principles of freedom, equality, solidarity, tolerance, respect for nature and shared responsibility. It thus reflects a human rights perspective on poverty as a problem that imposes obligations on states and the international community to put in place adequate social arrangements to eliminate it.

The MDGs are an important advance on the purely money-centric definition of poverty and accommodate some the multidimensional human perspectives on poverty. Their widespread adoption as a norm signifies a consensus on poverty as broader than income poverty, as a human condition and as multidimensional. Nonetheless, the MDGs do not reflect the meaning of poverty as an affront to human dignity in the human rights and capabilities perspective. The MDG agenda focuses on increasing public spending on social services, but does not incorporate broader issues of human agency and ethical requirements in institutional arrangements. The agenda reconfigures the concept to a set of numerical goals to meet essentially *material* wants in the utilitarian perspective. It represents poverty as multidimensional *material* deprivation—lack of income, water, education and health services—stripped of the ethical commitments and human agency that are an essential element of human rights and capabilities perspectives. The MDGs define poverty as meeting essential basic—*material*—needs.

### ***The power of numbers and redefining development***

As the literature on the sociology of numbers explains,<sup>15</sup> numbers are used by authorities to organize and communicate social priorities and create incentives. Numbers are a powerful mechanism of social communication. They have the capacity to simplify complex concepts (such as poverty), and render intangible objectives concrete (such as expressing poverty as living on less than \$1 a day). This is what makes numbers such powerful tools but in the process they can in turn reinterpret and redefine complex and intangible concepts.

The MDGs have come to be substituted for the complex concept of poverty, have redefined the very meaning of development and have created a discourse of development as poverty reduction. But this simplification has reduced development to poverty reduction, leaving out the notion of development itself. Development can be defined in many ways but the concept is much more than the removal of abject poverty. The idea emerged in the late 1940s as a project of the international community in the context of the post-war decolonization process, aimed at bringing economic independence to newly independent states. It has been understood as a process of national transformation that enhances the capacity of economies to grow, and allows societies to expand the opportunities that people have.<sup>16</sup> In concrete terms, the MDGs limit the scope of “development” to ending human poverty, encompassing essential basic needs, and leave out essential dimensions of a broader conception of development, either as economic transformation, or as enlargement of people’s choices. It leaves out agendas for people’s empowerment, justice and rights, structural transformation of economies, and asymmetries of global economic arrangements. Charles Gore makes similar points in arguing that developing countries made a “Faustian bargain” in the MDG compact with the donors, accepting commitment to ending poverty but giving up the idea of national development (Gore 2010).

<sup>15</sup> Porter 1995; Poovey 1998; Merry 2009.

<sup>16</sup> For brief summaries of diverse development approaches, see Clarke (2006).

The policy implications of the MDG narrative are to give priority to basic social services and social protection, or a simplified form of the “basic needs” agenda. There can be nothing objectionable in this agenda except its narrow breadth. It ignores the new understanding of poverty that developed over the 1990s as a human, lived experience, and the causes of poverty as embedded in social and political structures. There was a considerable rethinking about poverty in terms of concept, measurement, causes and strategies. Drawing on this new thinking, the World Bank’s *World Development Report 2000* concluded that a fundamental cause of poverty was that individuals lacked power. It prescribed empowerment, security and opportunity as the three pillars of a poverty reduction strategy. The MDG-led basic needs agenda does not reflect on these lessons but echoes the earlier agenda of the *World Development Report 1980* that prescribes growth and social investment as the core elements of a strategy.<sup>17</sup>

## Ten Critical Issues

Should the MDGs continue after 2015? There is no doubt that the MDGs have had an important positive impact on raising public awareness of and solidarity about poverty. They have also shown the value of having a common framework and reference for debate among the thousands of stakeholders in the international community. The new goals should correct the distortions in the definition of development introduced by the MDGs and recapture the normative vision of the MD. The redesign should aim to shape a narrative of development as more than meeting basic needs to encompass a broader agenda of pro-poor growth and human development. What are the critical issues to be addressed in the current design of the MDGs?

### ***1. Inequality within countries***

Inequality is a major gap in the MDGs. Only one of the eight goals and three of the 60 indicators refer to disparity, and all of these refer to gender disparity. A defining trend since 1980 has been the growing income inequality within countries in both poor and rich countries, though this trend has been reversed in Latin America since 2000 (Cornia 2011). The MDGs were selected from among the many goals originally agreed in the UN development conferences of the 1990s, collectively known as the Internationally Agreed Development Goals (UN-DESA 2007), which included a number of objectives related to inequality, marginalization and the most vulnerable. But these were not incorporated in the MDGs.

Reducing inequality merits a place as an important goal in itself, and not just a measurement approach to monitor progress in multiple dimensions of poverty. It has intrinsic importance on ethical grounds if we value equality and non-discrimination. Inequality can also be instrumentally important as an obstacle to growth and human development. The goal could be monitored since indicators and data are available for a large number of countries, such as income distribution (shares of GDP by income quintiles; Gini coefficient), and rural/urban disparities in human outcomes and in access to social infrastructure (Fukuda-Parr 2010). An inequality goal would bring in an element of social justice and equity as important social objectives.

### ***2. Pro-poor growth and employment***

The MDGs do not include employment as a goal, though some indicators were added in 2005 to respond to the omission. A goal on employment is important because employment is intrinsically valuable for human well-being, bringing aspects of satisfaction related to realizing one’s potential and participating in society over and above simple access to incomes. However, an employment goal is also important in bringing issues of growth and patterns of growth into the policy agenda.

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<sup>17</sup> The World Bank’s World Development Reports decadal issues on poverty can be considered indicative of the latest thinking of the day in the mainstream international community.

Global goals should focus on important ends and not on the means, particularly as policy strategies need to be country-specific and cannot be prescribed globally. On the other hand, one of the weaknesses of the MDGs is that they did not provoke debates about alternative development strategies. While the 1990s were a period of active debates about economic strategies, with controversies over issues such as trade liberalization, capital account liberalization and investment policies among others, there has been less debate about macroeconomic strategies since 2000. The MDGs did not provoke a challenge to the prevailing economic growth models and emphasized social investments and social protection. These are important for promoting improvements in education, health, water and sanitation.

However, employment depends less on direct government investments than on growth and growth that is pro-poor, where the benefits of growth accrue to the poorer populations. An employment goal might provoke more debate on alternative macroeconomic and labour market approaches, particularly in the light of successes in Latin American countries in these areas.

### ***3. Democratic governance and people's participation***

As already noted, much has been learned about the process of poverty eradication within countries over the last 50 years and a very rich literature of development economics and multidisciplinary development studies has been created. Recent research on poverty has expanded beyond focus on low incomes to the broader set of interrelated economic, social and political variables. An important conclusion of this rethinking has been that poor people remain poor because they lack voice in decision making; they are powerless (World Bank 2000). Moreover, the multiple dimensions of poverty – lack of education, poor health, lack of resources and capital, lack of access to public infrastructure – all reinforce one another. Poverty reduction strategies require not only economic and social policies but also political empowerment.

### ***4. Climate change***

Over the decade since the MDGs were adopted, we have come to recognize the urgency of combating climate change to forestall deep consequences for humanity for generations to come. The impacts of climate change are likely to hit many of the poorer developing countries; rising sea levels are projected to lead to major land losses, rising temperatures are forecast to lead to losses in agricultural productivity, particularly in sub-Saharan Africa. This in turn will lead to higher food prices. Between 2000 and 2006, climate disasters are estimated to have affected some 262 million people annually, over 98 per cent in the developing world (UNDP 2008:16). Moreover, the consequences will be particularly severe for people living already precarious lives who have fewer resources to manage risks and limit losses. Action to mitigate the setbacks to human development progress, to rethink growth and development trajectories onto a path that is sustainable, is not only urgent, it requires international cooperation around a consensus set of priorities.

### ***5. Global governance reforms***

While developing countries have become increasingly assertive in global forums such as the World Trade Organization (WTO) and the international finance institutions (IFIs), there have been no systemic reforms in global institutions, with the exception of the emergence of the G-20. A number of other areas of structural reform in global governance are needed to create a more democratic process. Recommendations of the Stiglitz Commission on the global financial and economic architecture presented to the United Nations General Assembly in June 2009 should be pursued. Quantitative goals could be set for indicators such as voting shares in the Bretton Woods institutions.

### ***6. Rethinking aid and alternatives for development financing***

Aid is important for MDGs because countries that are farthest from the goals are dependent on external resources for financing development. Almost the entire capital investment budgets of many countries in sub-Saharan Africa and the least developed countries are financed by external aid. Aid dependence has nefarious effects: for example, it weakens states and the



democratic accountability of states to their people; it makes coordination of economic management complex; and it leads to unpredictability of resource flows. Budget aid can be an important step toward reducing the nefarious effects of aid dependence.

Many of the efforts to improve “aid effectiveness” in the last decade have focused on strengthening reporting to the donor rather than to the people of the recipient country. This is understandable but does not help build democratic accountability of states to their people. Given the severe limitations on the administrative capacity of governments, investing in accounting to external donors has high opportunity costs. New forms of generating development finance aid that can be more consistent with developing a democratically accountable state are needed. Efforts to increase the proportion of budget aid would help.

Donor countries have made commitments to increase development aid to achieve the MDGs but face domestic budget constraints to meet the target of 0.7 per cent of their gross national income (GNI). Given these constraints, they need to find innovative new sources of financing. Several important proposals have been made, such as a tax on international financial transactions, a tax on airline travel and bonds in international markets. But they have met with opposition from national governments.

### ***7. New approaches to financing research and development for critical technological needs of poor people***

One of the major challenges of globalization is to create incentives for technological innovation to meet the needs of poor people and to expand their access to existing technologies. Technology alone is never a single magic bullet of progress. But technological innovation can overcome the constraints of income and institutions to solve obstacles to improving human lives. It is hard to think of any major human progress in recent centuries that was made without innovation. Investments in innovation are an urgent priority for today’s most enduring problems of poverty. Medicines and treatments can save and prolong lives. Higher-performing varieties of crops and farming methods can improve the productivity of small-scale farmers who constitute the majority of the billion people who are food insecure. Yet investments in agricultural research have been in decline over the last two decades (World Bank 2008). Clean energy sources for over a billion people in the world who rely on biomass such as dung and crop residues as a fuel source are needed to address both environmental and health consequences, including the high rate of deaths related to respiratory diseases. Low-cost, solar-powered computers adapted to the conditions and needs of isolated rural populations can break communication barriers.

The critical obstacle to these needs is not science but policy initiatives to finance investments and broaden access in a world of strong global intellectual property protection under the WTO Agreement on the Trade-Related Aspects of Intellectual Property Rights (TRIPS). Intellectual property (IP) creates incentives to inventors but the needs of the poor do not translate into market demand and IP restricts access. For example, 90 per cent of the investment in medical research and development is devoted to the disease burden of 10 per cent of the world’s population. Policy innovations require private-public partnerships. Many proposals—such as prizes to create incentives, and airline taxes to finance access—are being discussed and some are piloted but a large-scale system is yet to be implemented.

### ***8. Clarifying the purpose—Monitoring benchmarks applicable at the global level require adaptation at the national level***

The MDGs originated from a normative process of defining what the world should look like in the 2000 Declaration. They did not originate from a technocratic national planning process. As already explained, the MDGs were introduced as tools to monitor the implementation of the normative pledges to end poverty as a commitment to equality, solidarity and human rights. Those who designed the MDGs conceived of them as global aggregate goals and never intended them to be applied to countries (Vandemoortele 2009). However, much of the debate about MDGs misinterprets them as national planning targets.

Interpreted in this way, the MDGs have come under heavy criticism from all perspectives. Economists have shown numerous methodological weaknesses in the way that the targets were set. Clemens and his co-authors (Clemens et al. 2007) show that the levels are implausible for many countries in the light of historical experience. Easterly (2009) argues that they are arbitrarily set without a consistent methodology and are biased against sub-Saharan Africa, setting them up for failure. Charles Gore and Ashwani Saith argue that the MDGs as priorities are misdirected and ignore the key issues of systemic reforms in the global economy and the challenges of development and transformation (rather than poverty reduction). Feminist Peggy Antrobus points out that they are blind to the political dimensions of poverty and dismisses them as a “major distracting gimmick” (Antrobus 2005). Many NGOs in middle-income countries decry them as the “Minimum Development Goals” that set the agendas back in their countries because many of the goals have already been achieved. The United Nations Office of the High Commissioner for Human Rights (OHCHR) argues that the MDGs set targets that are lower than the standards set under internal human rights law, and do not reflect the core human rights principles and norms of equality, participation, non-discrimination and transparency. UN agencies have been critical of the MDGs because they leave out too many pressing priorities and do not reflect the full breadth of the agendas being pursued that were agreed at global conferences in their specific areas – such as health, education and decent work.

The MDGs do not make sense as national planning targets for the simple reason that they take no account of diverse initial conditions in different countries. They impose a single global target in a world of extreme heterogeneity, with the largest challenge facing countries at the lowest starting points with fewest resources.

### ***9. Correct the metric for national performance monitoring—Pace of progress***

Interpreted as planning goals, the United Nations, World Bank and other international monitoring reports on MDGs assess progress by the criteria of whether the goals are likely to be achieved. This approach is helpful in showing how much has been accomplished and how much more needs to be done. But when used as an accountability measure, and applied at the country level, this approach is biased against countries with low starting points. The MDGs set targets very high for many countries in relation to historical record (Clemens et al. 2007). Easterly (2009) argues that the choices made in defining the targets build in a bias against Africa as a region, leading them to be falsely dubbed “failures”. Together with co-author Greenstein (Fukuda-Parr and Greenstein 2010), I have argued that the appropriate measure to monitor government performance on MDGs is the rate of progress made, not the level of achievement. Focus on the level of achievement leads to perverse results where countries that started at high levels of poverty and that are making rapid progress are labelled off-track and failures while countries that started at low levels of poverty and that are making very slow progress are labelled successes.

### ***10. Adapting targets to national contexts***

One of the most contentious issues in monitoring MDGs progress is whether they should be applied only globally, regionally or at the country level. Some argue that “adapting” the targets would lead to compromising the ambition of commitments made, while others argue that it makes no sense to apply a single universal standard to countries with widely divergent conditions. In practice, some countries have adapted the targets. However, the official United Nations and World Bank monitoring reports assess progress, country by country, by applying the target uniformly, and against the criterion of whether progress is on track to achieve the 2015 target.

The question is not addressed in the Millennium Declaration and the MDGs, leaving the issue open to interpretation. It is interesting to note that earlier global goals set by the United Nations were more explicit in the intention to set goals at the global level, while urging countries to set their own goals appropriate to their national conditions. Interpreting MDGs as planning goals and assessing performance by whether the targets would be achieved is particularly erroneous when applied at the country level. Not only do they have very different starting points,

countries face hugely diverse constraints and capacities, in financial, institutional and human dimensions. The MDGs need to be recast at the national level to set ambitious but realistic targets.

## **Recapturing the Narrative—Toward an Equitable, Human Rights-Based Development**

To recapture the narrative of development as a process of national development and expansion of human dignity as envisioned in the Millennium Declaration, and give recognition to empowerment as a necessary priority, what might the new global goals look like? If the list was to be limited to 12 goals, it could include the following dimensions: economic growth and diversification; income poverty and employment; hunger; education; health including child and maternal mortality, reproductive rights and global diseases; equality and removal of discrimination including gender inequality; climate change and environmental sustainability; democratic participation and accountability in national governance; systemic reforms in global governance structures and regulation; greater participation of the least developed countries in global trade, investment, technology and migration; creating global public goods essential to the fulfilment of human rights; and security in the public and private spheres.

The targets and indicators for each of these goals should systematically reflect the ethical commitments of equality, empowerment and solidarity. For example, indicators for climate change should draw attention to the effects of climate change on the most vulnerable people and countries, while indicators for hunger should draw attention to food security rather than aggregate availability of food. The systemic reforms in global governance would include an ambitious agenda including progress in creating arrangements to mobilize new forms of financing development and new forms of incentivizing investments in technology to meet the basic needs of poor people.

The MDGs narrative as the overarching objective of international development emerged in part from the desire by the UN leadership to forge a consensus within development policy. But basic questions persist about the deep structural causes of poverty and inequality that reside in the structures of global and national economies, and the impact of macroeconomic frameworks that are deepening inequalities. With a few national exceptions, the trend over the last decade has been to deepen inequalities within countries. And while there is clearly a reordering of global economic and political power structures, the OECD countries remain in firm control of decision making in governance of international trade and finance. As Lord Malloch Brown remarked, “The Washington Consensus has been declared dead (again) but the nature of the shift to a new model and the nature of policy space is, as yet, unclear. Certainly, the discussion is opening up to a wider range of policy instruments for development” (Malloch Brown 2010:vii). The opportunity for the next set of development goals would be to pursue a clearer alternative that would foster economic growth but also greater social justice and the fulfilment of human rights.

No set of goals can be adequate in reflecting such a complex agenda. Numeric goals express important social objectives with simplicity and concreteness. But quantification is inevitably a process of reductionism and abstraction that leaves out many important issues and contextual conditions. The MDGs are a strategy for describing what is meant by the Millennium Declaration’s commitment to spare no effort to “free our fellow men, women and children from the abject and dehumanizing conditions of extreme poverty”. But in reducing this concept to quantitative goals, the MDGs not only shed some meaning, they also impose a particular interpretation on the meaning of poverty. A new set of quantitative goals is needed to reset the narrative of development as sustainable, equitable and human rights-based development.

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