

**Governing Global Poverty?  
Global Ambivalence and the Millennium Development Goals  
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**Abstract**

The Millennium Development Goals (MDGs) are the world's biggest promise – a global agreement to reduce poverty and human deprivation at historically unprecedented rates through collaborative multilateral action. They differ from all other global promises for poverty reduction in their comprehensive nature and the systematic efforts taken to specify, finance, implement, monitor and advocate them.

This paper charts the evolution of the MDGs and examines the changing historical structure (material capabilities, ideas and institutions) that has shaped their form, content, application and achievements. In many ways the MDGs were the outcome of a fragmented conversation between critics of neo-liberalism, loosely grouped around the idea of 'human development', and non-fundamentalist neo-liberals, moving toward a post-Washington Consensus. The MDGs emerged at a time when (i) the previously dominant model for world development, neo-liberal capitalism, was being heavily questioned but there was no clearly articulated alternative, and (ii) world leaders and multilateral institutions were coming under pressure to generate a vision of 'how' the world would be different and better in the new millennium.

Following this introduction section 2 outlines the paper's analytical framework. In sections 3, 4, 5 and 6 (available from author) the evolution of the MDGs is summarised in a chronological account. The next two sections tackle the questions around which this book is framed. Section 7 applies Cox's analytical framework to the chronological account. It explains why the MDGs declared international development to be the pursuit of absolute poverty reduction (from a multi-dimensional perspective and framed in terms of results-based management), rather than the pursuit of economic growth or human rights or reduced inequality. The conclusion reviews the contribution that the MDGs have made to reducing poverty and inequality and speculates on the future of the MDGs, and similar global visions, in a post-American world.

## 1. INTRODUCTION

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## 2 HISTORICAL STRUCTURES AND GLOBAL PUBLIC POLICY

While the MDGs may appear to be a concrete list of goals drawn up at a particular moment in time (often erroneously believed to be at the Millennium Summit of September 2000) they evolved over many years. They are not a 'decision' agreed during a 'meeting', as rational-linear models assume, but the outcome of a complex and evolving configuration of forces that Robert Cox (2002) conceptualizes as an historical structure. Three categories of forces interact in such a structure (ibid, 97-101):

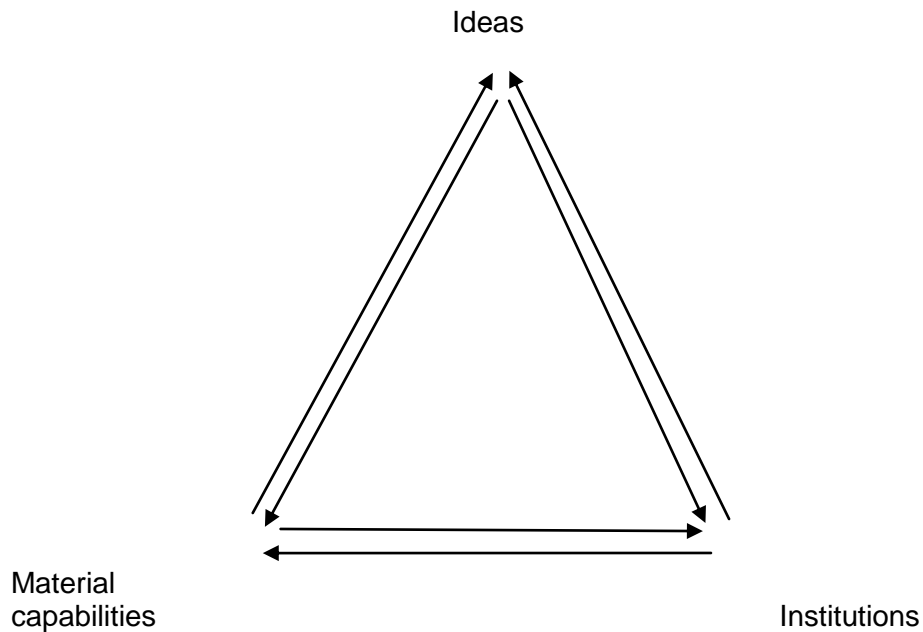
- **material capabilities** - technological and organizational capabilities with productive and destructive potentials
- **ideas** - including intersubjective meanings, around which there is widespread agreement across a society, and 'collective images of social order', which are often several and opposed
- **institutions** – amalgams of ideas and material power that are a means of stabilizing and perpetuating a particular social order. They reflect the power relations prevailing at their point of origin and are often formalized as organizations.

The influences of these three types of forces on each other are reciprocal and the directions and strength of influence vary with each particular case (Figure 1).

For the evolution of the MDGs the material capabilities that are most important lie in the staggering contrast between the material, technological and organizational wealth of the G7/8 and OECD nations, and especially of the USA, and the more limited capabilities of the G 77 (actually 130 countries), especially its poorest member

states. In terms of ideas then the clash between neo-liberalism and alternative development strategies such as human development<sup>1</sup> that looked beyond economic growth and posited a major role for public action, are central to the analysis. Results-based management<sup>2</sup> is also a significant idea as it provided a means for neo-liberal thinking to re-negotiate<sup>3</sup> the framing of human development. A vast array of institutions were involved in the formulation of the MDGs. The UN's General Assembly, Secretariat and specialized agencies played major roles as did the OECD's Development Assistance Committee (DAC), some national governments, social movements, faiths, NGOs and celebrities.

**Figure 1 Cox's Representation of an Historical Structure**



Source: Cox 2002, p98

**3. A BRIEF HISTORY OF THE MDGs:<sup>4</sup> PHASE 1 – ANTECEDENTS AND UN SUMMITS (available from author)**

**4. A BRIEF HISTORY OF THE MDGs: PHASE 2 – FROM SUMMITS TO LISTS (available from author)**

**5. A BRIEF HISTORY OF THE MDGs: PHASE 3 – THE UN RETURNS TO CENTRE STAGE (available from author)**

**6 A BRIEF HISTORY OF THE MDGs: PHASE 4 – FROM NEW YORK TO MONTERREY (available from author)**

## 7 Understanding the Millennium Development Goals

To explain the processes surrounding agreement on the MDGs, this section explores the historical structure that underpinned their evolution. It looks at the interactions of the different forces (material capabilities, ideas and institutions) that supported, opposed and shaped them. These interactions are not uni-directional: they are complex and reciprocal. For example, while the idea of human development has many sources its roots lie in the academic world, with Sen, Nussbaum and others, an institution, the UNDP, literally institutionalised the idea by publishing an annual *Human Development Report* and establishing a Human Development Report Office. By creating A Human Development Index (HDI) it launched a measure for economists and econometricians, the high priests of scientific work on development, that helped to steer them away from their obsession with economic growth. These actions greatly raised the level of academic and practical interest in the idea encouraging greater conceptual elaboration and influencing the nascent MDG debates. Eventually, once the MDGs were agreed, the idea impacts yet again on the UNDP which establishes a Millennium Project Office, basically to make a global plan for human development, and a Millennium Campaign, to raise public awareness around the world about the need to prioritize human development.

### (a) Material capabilities

Material capabilities (technological and organizational capabilities with productive and destructive potentials) lie at the heart of the MDGs. The Goals are underpinned by the overarching belief that humanity now has the material capabilities to dramatically reduce and/or eradicate extreme poverty across the world. In practice, reforming access to material capabilities has proved very difficult. The units that might rewrite 'the rules of the game' for access to and use of material capabilities – primarily national governments and associations of governments – have been prepared to reach general agreement on the need for change but key members and groups of members oppose specific changes. This is partly because of active opposition to changes because of national self-interest<sup>5</sup> and partly due to a more passive lack of interest in global poverty reduction. For most countries, and their governments and citizens, global poverty (poverty in other countries) is neither a high priority nor a pressing public issue. There are more pressing global issues – security, climate change, conflict, trade, energy supplies – or global poverty is judged to be of little political significance by those who hold power at the national level<sup>6</sup>. As a result, most heads of government and national political leaders find it easy to agree that global poverty must be reduced but few move beyond rhetoric and commit significant political or material resources to the pursuit of the MDGs.

So, while material capabilities in the aggregate create the opportunity for global poverty reduction it is the contemporary distribution of those capabilities that sets the limits on specifying and achieving such global goals. While material capabilities are spread around the world the concentration of capabilities in the USA, the world's only superpower (economically, technologically and militarily), means that it has been in a unique position to shape the evolution of goals and plans for global poverty reduction. It has chosen not to lead on this issue and has appeared to be deeply ambivalent. At times it has supported the MDG process, as when George Bush spoke at the Monterrey Summit and established the Millennium Challenge Account. At other times it has opposed the process, as when John Bolton (the US Ambassador to the UN) sought to have the term 'Millennium Development Goals' removed from the 'Millennium plus 5' General Assembly Declaration in 2005. Despite this ambivalence the US has been at the heart of MDG formulation and implementation as every other actor (governments, multilateral and bilateral agencies, social movements, NGOs, activists, celebrities) in the process constantly

asks 'what is the US position on this'? Their actions, for better or for worse, are partly conditioned by what they think the US position is or will be. The power of the USA has had many impacts on the MDGs but two have been particularly important.

First, ensuring that the US remained (and remains) engaged with the evolving MDG process set limits on the ambitions of the goals and on how they might be achieved. While the UN Summits, IDGs and MDGs dismissed the old 'Washington Consensus' they could not imagine challenging the idea or practice of free market, global capitalism as the basis for the improvement of the human condition. It is no accident that MDG Goal 1/Target 1 is personal income growth. Similarly, the MDGs' focus on reducing extreme absolute poverty (economically and socially) was acceptable to the US (and many others). Had they focused on reducing economic and social inequality more broadly the MDG process would have stalled<sup>7</sup>. The MDGs had to remain open on whether or not inequality was a bad thing as the US (and its most powerful internal constituents), and other less powerful countries and interest groups, would actively oppose a more assertive stance on inequality and/or redistribution. While philosophers in New York might bemoan the lack of ambition of the MDGs (Pogge 2002) politicians in Washington DC knew where the line on global aspirations needed to be set. Growth with absolute poverty reduction was fine but growth with redistribution would be a step too far.

Second, while the US was one of the keenest proponents of RBM approaches to international development it ensured that Goal 8 targets and indicators were weakly specified. Most other rich nations took a similar stance, wanting to retain room for manoeuvre in future negotiations and not give up bargaining points without receiving a reward. But, it was the US position that was critical – once it was obvious that the US would only support a token specification of Goal 8 then all the other OECD countries could follow this lead.

So, US ambivalence encouraged other powerful nations<sup>8</sup> to be similarly ambivalent. The exceptions to this ambivalence have been a small number of European countries who have energetically promoted financing and action on global poverty reduction. These include the self-defined 'G O.7'<sup>9</sup> of Denmark, the Netherlands, Norway and Sweden and, since 1997, the UK. The efforts of these countries have helped push the EU into significantly increasing foreign aid budgets and have impacted on wider multilateral processes. Indeed, it can be argued that the norm of 'global poverty reduction' has been institutionalised in the EU through the vehicle of the MDGs (Fukuda-Parr and Hulme 2009).

The UK stands out for the global leadership role it has unilaterally taken on. Its engagement has moved beyond the ministerial level (for example, of the likes of Short, Herfkens, Johnson and Wierzorski) to the head of government level (Blair and Brown). The UK played a lead role in mobilising international support for DAC's International Development Goals (IDGs), the precursors of the MDGs (Hulme 2009); it has worked behind the scenes at the UN to promote the MDGs, most recently in leading the 2008 'Call to Action'; it energetically encouraged countries to commit to the Monterrey Consensus and proposed an International Finance Facility (IFF); in hosting a 'child MDGs' mini-summit in 2001; and, in attempting to use its chairing of the G8 and presidency of the EU, both in 2005, to reignite plans to achieve the MDGs. While the personal moral commitment of the UK's political leaders to global poverty reduction should not be doubted, domestic political considerations have meant that giving global poverty reduction a high profile has been a good move in domestic political terms for New Labour (ibid) and, since 2006, for the re-launched Conservative Party.

Why should allies like the USA and the UK, who could agree to invade Iraq, have such different perspectives on global poverty reduction and the MDGs? The reasons

are several but many relate to their differing positions in the global political economy and domestic political processes. The US, an inward-looking global superpower that is suspicious of the UN, may be prepared to participate in the rhetoric of 'global poverty must be tackled' but sees little benefit in taking on leadership for such a difficult task. By contrast, an outward-looking former superpower with deep ties to many former colonies finds the leadership role more attractive. Such a role raises its international standing and plays well domestically in relation to public opinion and voting behaviours.

But how can one explain the lack of interest that many of the world's poorest countries have often shown to MDG formulation and implementation processes? This might seem strange but it can be relatively easily understood. First, on the basis of past experience, most low-income countries believe that they will achieve the 'best deals' at a national level through bilateral negotiations with trading partners (in the past USA and USSR but recently China and India) and aid-donors rather than through UN processes. Their relationships with the IMF and World Bank, over loan conditionalities and PRSP and PRS approval, are much more important than those engendered at the General Assembly. Global agreements at the UN are a public good that are unlikely to deliver significant additional resources and/or more favourable treatment to individual nations in the near future.

During the period of MDG formulation (1998-2001) the main interest of developing countries focussed on the need for goals for rich countries (more aid, more debt relief and fairer trade). Developing countries, and notably India, were concerned that the goals set in *2000: A Better World For All* (a joint IMF, OECD, UN, World Bank document) made no commitments about rich country contributions to global poverty reduction. Statements about rich world contributions were subsequently drafted into the Millennium Declaration and eventually developed into Goal 8 of the MDGs – in a non-RBM format.

In terms of the developing country 'voice' in the MDG formulation processes the biggest disappointment relates to the issue of reproductive health. By forging an 'unholy alliance' with three or four conservative Islamic states the Holy See (a non-member state at the UN) was able to influence the G77 so that it blocked reproductive health as an MDG goal.<sup>10</sup> As is discussed in the next two sections the shift in an international norm from 'population control' to 'reproductive rights' can have great influence but it may be challenged by those with material capabilities or institutional authority.

#### (b) Ideas – human development meets results-based management

Human development and results-based management come from two very different intellectual traditions. Yet, both played leading ideational roles in the complex and sprawling processes that produced the MDGs. Their forms of influence differed greatly, however. RBM was applied to the MDGs in a very direct fashion. At times goals, targets and indicators were screened for how 'SMART' (specific, measurable, achievable, relevant and time-bound) they were. Panels of experts were convened to specify targets and indicators and judgements made on RBM principles impacted directly on MDG form and content. Human development had a much more diffuse influence. The idea contributed indirectly to the thinking of many of those involved in the processes leading to the MDGs. There is no evidence that the idea was applied directly<sup>11</sup>.

While the idea of human development provided general support for UN conferences and associated declarations it promoted two specific theoretical strands that became underpinnings of the MDGs. First, it advanced the case that

development strategies needed to directly pursue the goals of development, and not just the means. Human development provided an overarching conceptual framework for arguing that education and health improvements and gender equality were not only good in their own right but were essential components of the pursuit of a dynamic vision of development. In crude terms five and a half of the eight MDGs are about enhancing human capabilities.

Secondly, when the convenors of the Social Summit, the DAC and the UN drew up lists of goals they could explicitly or implicitly argue that a list was needed as development and poverty reduction were multi-dimensional. Lists of goals were not mere 'shopping lists' reflecting a failure to analyse problems and select priorities (a criticism that had partly undermined 'basic needs' in the 1980s). Rather, a list of multiple goals was essential for any serious development effort based on rigorous thinking.

While the processes behind the placing of items on such lists involved complex interactions – involving ideas, empirical evidence, political interests and personal values – human development provided a well-reasoned case for multi-dimensional lists. In the background, were the works of Nobel Laureate Amartya Sen melding economics with philosophy to argue for the promotion of capabilities. His name, along with others, could be cited in an iconic fashion to show that a deep theoretical resource lay behind such lists.

But, the power of ideas was only part of what was happening. Interests, operating through the power of material capabilities and institutions, moderated the influence of human development on the MDGs. At the DAC, delegates realised that a multi-dimensional list made it easier to enlist the support of issue-based NGOs for increased foreign aid. Having educational, gender, health, HIV/AIDS and environmental goals meant that specialist NGOs – children, gender, HIV/AIDS, family planning, water, and conservation – would find one of their organisational goals on the list. So, having a multi-dimensional list was not only logical it also had political advantages. More negatively, the human development case for reproductive health was challenged by the concerns of the Vatican and conservative Islamic states and the reproductive health goal disappeared during the negotiations to finalise the MDGs.

The ideational adjunct to human development was results-based management. In the 1990s RBM was on the ascendant in Business and Management Schools and in the pronouncements of politicians and senior public servants, especially in the rich world. Its common sense nature and linearity made it attractive – set targets, monitor achievement and reward staff on the basis of performance. It was adopted across the public sector in Australia, Canada, Germany, New Zealand, the UK and USA and in the systems of many development agencies (e.g. CIDA, DFID, GTZ, NORAD, UNICEF and USAID). For the aid-financed programmes of the DAC and UN it was particularly attractive. The widely reported underperformance of aid in earlier years, it could be argued, would not occur in the future as RBM methods would ensure high levels of performance.

RBM and particularly its tenet of SMART measures influenced the MDGs in three main ways. First, it determined the structure of the MDGs and explains why they are a nested hierarchy of goals, targets and indicators focussed on time-bound 'outcomes'. Second, it shaped the specification of goals. While determining exactly what is 'achievable' is not an exact science one sees this tenet in operation with the \$1 a day poverty target. At Copenhagen this was set as 'eradicating' extreme poverty by 2015. When the DAC applied its RBM thinking to this target it was reduced to the more realistic 'halve' extreme poverty by 2015. Third, the idea of RBM meant that the MDGs avoided potentially difficult to measure goals like human rights and participation. These issues could be placed in the introductions and conclusions of key documents, but not in the lists that are to guide plans of action. As a result the

variety of human development that impacted on the MDGs was more a conceptualization of basic needs than of human rights.

As with human development, political interests moderated the full application of RBM. This is most obvious for Goal 8. The idea of RBM was rigorously pursued for goals 1 to 6 and partially applied to Goal 7. However, it was systematically avoided for Goal 8. While the like-minded group might be willing to agree to 0.7% of GDP to be provided in aid by 2015 (they had already achieved this) the US, Japan and other rich nations were certainly not going to agree to that. Power relations took precedence over ideas. But institutions, and particularly international organizations, both reinforced and obstructed the power of those with material capabilities to control the influence of ideas.

### (c) Institutions

A vast number of institutions shaped the formulation, and implementation (or lack of implementation) of the MDGs. These ranged from the UN General Assembly and its specialized agencies, to the DAC, the World Bank and IMF to bilateral development agencies, the foreign ministries of developing countries to social movements, the Holy See, NGOs think-tanks and coalitions of actors such as the Jubilee 2000 campaign group. Charting the interactions and outcomes of these different actors is infeasible but an analysis of how a few major players interacted at key times illustrates the types of processes that were important and the outcomes that resulted.

The UN has been central to the MDG process through pre-MDG activities (the UN summits of the early 1990s), MDG formulation (1998-2001) and MDG implementation. This has involved the UN General Assembly, the UN Secretariat, the UNDP and other specialised agencies. Early on the UN's main contribution was as a convening power, pulling together world summits and persuading member states to negotiate and agree progressive declarations. Some parts of the UN made major efforts and contributions. UNDP played a central ideational role by promoting the concept of human development throughout the 1990s. UNICEF operated highly effectively: it re-launched UN summitry, steered child development to the heart of the MDGs and, pursuing a human rights approach, achieved the Convention on the Rights of the Child. However, the UN Secretariat was often walking a tight rope, tasked with brokering agreements between its members, and other groups, that had very different interests and ideas about what improving the human condition meant and how global poverty reduction might be achieved. It brokered the 'final' deal in 2001 with the incorporation of Goal 8 - what rich countries should do. This made MDG implementation plans feasible but also created the Achilles Heel of the goals – the weak specification of Goal 8 targets. It also had to negotiate with the Holy See and G77 on reproductive rights (see below).

Within the broader UN system, but at the opposite end in terms of its contribution to and engagement with the MDGs, is the IMF. While it participated in key activities, such as being one of the four members of the technical committee that finalised the eight goals, and has renamed its key products to align with the MDGs (eg Poverty Reduction and Growth Facility) there is little evidence that it actively advanced the MDGs or that its actions or culture have been impacted by the MDGs. Interviews with IMF staff revealed that 'we mention the MDGs in the introduction of reports but they don't change anything' and 'the MDGs are European social policy and the IMF does not do European social policy'<sup>12</sup>.

The preference of international institutions specialising in public finance to avoid the MDGs may be systemic. When negotiating Nigeria's debt relief deal with the Paris Club in October 2005 the country's Finance Minister, Dr Ngozi Okonjo-Iweala, remembered Kofi Annan as saying that a country could only be considered

sustainable if it could finance the MDGs: ‘...we were told not to mention the word “MDGs”, that it was not a concern of the Paris Club’ (Okonjo-Iweala, 2006,5-57).

The OECD’s Development Assistance Committee also made an important contribution to MDG evolution through drawing up its International Development Goals. This revealed its commitment to increased efforts to promote human development and move away from neo-liberal policy prescriptions but this was also mixed with self-interest. The specification of the IDGs was also a strategy for raising the profile and stabilising the budgets of their aid agencies.

The institutional interactions and contestations around reproductive health are particularly revealing. In the early 1990s the women’s movement, and particularly networks such as the International Women’s Health Coalition, made enormous progress in developing and popularising the idea of sexual and reproductive health rights. By accepting a compromise at the very heated ICPD Summit in Cairo (they dropped the terms ‘sexual’ and ‘rights’) they managed to shift the population paradigm from ‘population control’ to ‘reproductive health’. However, in the negotiations before the Millennium Declaration they were out-manoeuvred by the Holy See<sup>13</sup>. It forged an alliance with a small group of conservative Islamic states and used this to persuade the G 77 to block reproductive health as a goal. In the final negotiations around the MDGs, reproductive health was the only IDG goal that was thrown out. These complex and multi-layered institutional interactions, often conducted in secret, permitted a group of less than 1000 celibate, elderly males (the official residents of the Vatican) to reduce the access of 3 billion women to reproductive health services!

## **8 Conclusion**

Assessing whether the MDGs are being achieved is an exceptionally complex statistical task that generates many annual reports (UNDP, WB, UNESCO). The accuracy of these reports is unclear because of the poor quality of much of the underlying data<sup>14</sup> and problems of estimation.<sup>15</sup> Assessing whether the formulation and promotion of the MDGs has contributed to these uncertain changes in levels of human development is even more difficult – as this would require isolating the contribution that the existence of the MDGs makes to poverty reduction from that of other factors (such as economic growth in Asia, global warming, the war in the DRC, bio-fuel policies, rainfall in Asia and Africa, the global financial collapse of 2008 etc). This is a daunting task well beyond the capacity of this chapter.

At one level the MDGs can be seen to have failed. The build up to the Millennium Summit created a once in a lifetime, perhaps once in a century, opportunity to engineer a transformation in the relative prioritisation that the international community, in all its guises (G7/8, G20, G77, OECD, UN etc), allocates to reducing extreme poverty. Had this been achieved then a series of major policy changes (trade, aid, debt) and institutional changes (most obviously in the Security Council and governance of the IFIs) would be evident. This potential, but unlikely, transformation did not occur, and so the pursuit of global poverty reduction returns to a long term strategy of gradualist, progressive change.

From this gradualist perspective it is possible to draw up a short list of ways in which the MDGs have contributed, positively and negatively, to processes that seem likely to foster global poverty reduction (Table 1). This can guide action towards building on success and working out how to tackle the negative impacts of the processes that the MDG exercise has fostered.

<b>Table 1 Have the MDGs Contributed to More Effective Poverty Reduction?</b>
<p><b>Positive Indicators</b></p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• The MDGs have increased pressure for data and there has been a great increase in the amount of data collected on human development in poorer countries. There are also significant efforts to improve the quality of data. More and better data increase opportunities for evidence-based policy making.</li> <li>• The MDGs have increased the number of opportunities for politicians and activists to publicly address the issue of global poverty and have created a 'hook' for the media to publish/present materials. This has increased the awareness of people in rich countries about global poverty. In the UK and some other parts of Europe this has helped raise the political profile of global poverty and impact on public opinion and political party policies.</li> <li>• In the EU, and especially the UK, the pursuit of the MDGs has supported increases in foreign aid. This aid is better targeted on poverty reduction than in the past. In the USA the MDGs led directly to the increase in aid associated with the Millennium Challenge Account and also helped expand budgets for HIV/AIDS initiatives.</li> <li>• The processes leading up to the MDGs helped to ensure that the Doha round of trade talks was declared a development round.</li> </ul>
<p><b>Negative Indicators</b></p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• There is little evidence that the MDGs have influenced the domestic plans of developing countries and/or Poverty Reduction Strategies (which remain under the influence of the IFIs).</li> <li>• There is a danger that reports (by right wing think tanks and the media) of 'MDG failure' (even in developing countries where conditions are gradually improving) will lead to public disillusionment in the USA and foster disengagement with the issue of global poverty reduction.</li> <li>• The MDGs tend to lead to an exaggerated focus on the role of foreign aid in global poverty reduction and a consequent neglect of other issues (such as international trade and quality of domestic governance).</li> <li>• In most countries national leaders have not been held accountable for the promises they have made about the MDGs. This may create an ingrained practice of leaders making big promises about global poverty reduction and then conducting business as usual ('everyone gets away with it').</li> <li>• The processes of negotiation at Doha run against the commitment in MDG 8 for there to be a 'global partnership' for poverty reduction.</li> </ul>

Balancing out whether these contributions are positive or negative overall is a personal judgement that often comes down to asking whether the MDG glass is 'half full or half empty'. From my perspective it is both half empty and half full. One cannot help but be deeply disappointed that the heady declarations of New York (2000, 2005 and 2008), Monterrey (2002), Gleneagles (2005) and others have not been matched by budgets and policy changes. For most national leaders the MDG speeches are nice rhetoric but promises of increased aid or pro-development negotiating stances at Doha can be left behind after the meeting.

But, counter-balancing this negative evidence, in some parts of the world public norms have changed and the MDGs have helped this process. Most clearly this is the case in the UK where all three political parties appear genuinely committed to foreign policy positions that are supportive of global poverty reduction. This may be partly because they think it is the moral thing to do, but it also because they believe that public opinion in the UK now supports global poverty reduction and that they

could lose votes if they do not take the MDGs and global poverty more seriously. In some democracies, it appears that constantly 'talking the talk' eventually brings pressure on leaders and political parties to start 'walking the talk'.

While, logically, much of the contemporary effort to use the MDGs more effectively focuses on short-term, practical actions this needs to be accompanied by strategic analysis. When thinking longer term about the role of the MDGs and/or their successors then two particular challenges need to be addressed.

1 The strategic compromises of the 1990s meant that the MDGs were framed from a basic needs perspective, meeting the minimum human development needs of the poorest people. This may remain the 'best' frame for improving the lives of the disadvantaged, but there are other frames that could be considered. For example, would the broader approach of reducing economic and social inequality within and between countries be a more effective means of promoting progressive policy reform and re-shaping the imaginations of the better-off about how they might assist local and distant strangers improve their lives? The historic structure of the 1990s generated the global meta-goal of 'basic needs for the poorest'. When the MDGs 'end' in 2015 could the historic structure of the 21<sup>st</sup> century (with its focus on security, terrorism and climate change) be influenced or manipulated to support more of a 'one world' (Singer 2002) meta-goal?

2 The material capabilities surrounding the MDGs were of the late 20<sup>th</sup> century, dominated by the USA and its OECD allies. Many actors shaped their thinking about the evolution of the MDGs in terms of what they thought the USA would do (some taking a lead from the US and others wanting to oppose it). The world of 2015 will be quite different with China's economic and technological capacity rapidly converging on the USA, with India, Brazil and Russia expanding, and with the 'next eleven' becoming increasingly significant economically and politically. By 2015 the first question informing national policy debates will no longer be 'what is the US position on this'? It will be the more complex 'what is the US and Chinese and Indian and EU and Russian (and perhaps Brazilian and South African and...) position on this'? The future of how the world imagines international development or global poverty reduction will depend less on the elites and publics of the USA and Western Europe and more on those in the emerging powers. Longer term, changing the ideas of the man on the street in Nanjing, Bangalore, Sao Paulo, Dubai, Budapest and Vladivostok may be more important than lobbying in Washington DC and New York. Identifying strategies to shape ideas in the future in the emerging world is a priority task for those promoting the MDGs today.

One cannot predict the future but one can have hope. My hope for the MDGs is that, over the *longue duree*, they will be seen as one significant element, at a particular historic moment, in a process of global norm change that led to the existence of extreme poverty, in an affluent world, being seen as morally unacceptable. This may seem unlikely...but then so did abolishing slavery, ending apartheid and giving the vote to women.

## Notes

<sup>1</sup> Human development posits that human beings are the ends as well as the means of development, challenging the focus of many economists and policymakers on per capita economic growth. It has encouraged a focus on the poor and the prioritisation of capability enhancing services (such as food security, education and health). It justifies a multidimensional conceptualisation of human well-being and poverty (Qizilbash, 2006), although there are heated debates about the exact dimensions of human

development The works of Streeten et al (1981), Haq (1995), Sen (1999) and Nussbaum (2000) are seen as seminal to this concept.

<sup>2</sup> Results-based management (RBM) - see Heinrich (2002) for a review - has been central to efforts to improve public service delivery since the 1980s and was highlighted in Osborne and Gaebler's (1992) influential book *Reinventing Government*. RBM is a 'strategy aimed at achieving important changes in the way government agencies operate with improving performance (achieving better results) as the central orientation... a key component is the process of objectively measuring how well an agency is meeting its stated goals or objectives' (Binnendijk, 2001, p. 3). This encourages a focus on identifying and continuously monitoring goals, targets and indicators.

<sup>3</sup> Critics of the MDGs would say 'to compromise or water down' the idea of human development.

<sup>4</sup> For more detail see Hulme (2009).

<sup>5</sup> Commonly such active opposition comes from special interest groups within a polity, for example farmers and advocates of tax minimisation.

<sup>6</sup> The most obvious example of this is Russia. While the original 7 members of the G8 regularly put global poverty and/or Africa on the G8 agenda the Russian position on this has been 'no comment'.

<sup>7</sup> The exception to this is Goal 3 promoting gender equality but that relates only to equality within nations not between countries or across the world's population.

<sup>8</sup> Including China, India and Brazil.

<sup>9</sup> These are the countries which have achieved 0.7% of GNI as ODA. Luxembourg is now included in this group.

<sup>10</sup> See Hulme (2009) for a discussion. Note that in 2005 the General Assembly agreed that reproductive health could be an MDG target (i.e. sub-goal).

<sup>11</sup> At the time that the MDGs were being agreed there were several lists of human development goals (Alkire 2002; Clark 2002) but, I can find no record of any attempt to use such specifications to shape the MDGs.

<sup>12</sup> Senior Social Development Advisor (July 2006) and Chief Economist, Africa Division (August 2006).

<sup>13</sup> The Holy See was, and remains, concerned that reproductive health services may offer women access to abortion services.

<sup>14</sup> Most sources agree that the majority of developing countries do not have evenly partly accurate data on maternal mortality and computing a baseline for 1990 for this indicator is as much guesswork as science.

<sup>15</sup> For example, the World Bank has recently revised the number of extremely income poor people in 2005 from just below 1 billion up to 1.4 billion. While it argues that this technical adjustment does not change the rate at which extreme income poverty has been declining since 1990, critics point to the many problems that underpin, and perhaps undermine, such estimates (Reddy and Pogge). Non-technical folk, like me, wonder why specialists do not spell out the vast margins of error associated with their estimates.

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