

After 2015: Promoting Pro-Poor Policy after the MDGs (DSA/EADI/ActionAid)

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1. Introduction

Having passed the midpoint between 2000 and 2015, it has been widely reported that the United Nations (UN) Millennium Development Goals (MDGs) for halving poverty by 2015 will for the most part not be achieved. Were the goals and targets themselves too ambitious? Did they exclude any other important goals? Was it the lack of commitment of donor or recipient countries? Did the implementation of programmes go wrong? Was it really pro-poor in application? This paper tries to answer these questions.

While global anti-poverty campaigns such as “Make Poverty History” in 2005 seemed to have raised public consciousness in the North, the film selected as the official selection for critics week at the Cannes film festival 2008, “The End of Poverty? Think Again”, questions the viability of poverty reduction under the current neo-liberal market system. Another recently released film, “The Age of Stupid”, calls for urgent global action to reverse climate change if human beings are to survive. It is the poor who are most affected by environmental degradation.

All three campaigns using music and film took place in different places with different audiences targeted,¹ but the issues are all interlinked. In addition, sharp increases in staple food prices will reverse the efforts towards poverty reduction, and the global economic crisis will thwart progress with reduced trade, financial flows, and concomitant remittances. Most importantly, development assistance itself has already started to be reduced.

This paper analyses the overall problems with the impact on poverty reduction of the MDG paradigm, with a discussion on political constraints as its focus. It argues that while universal goals are instrumental, approaches and implementations should be substantially revised and adjusted to each country’s needs, with a more participatory, humane and sustainable manner, and with gender mainstreaming. Monitoring and evaluation mechanisms need to be established to ensure donors’ accountability. We are now urged to reset those goals with major modifications in order to achieve poverty reduction.

2. Revisiting the MDGs

2.1 Problems in the Architecture of the MDGs

It is meaningful to create a global benchmark for achieving development towards improvement of people’s lives, and the MDGs themselves do address the important issues in relation to poverty

¹ Although the population targeted by “The Age of Stupid” may not watch this kind of film.

reduction. The eight MDGs with a further 18 targets are structured around the three core areas of human development, and are based on the idea that without consolidating social services in a country poverty cannot be eliminated. However, many criticisms have frequently been raised from the outset, among which I focus in this paper on two: the goals themselves, including what is not in the goals and targets, and their implementation.

Firstly, although having universal goals is important, each country has a different starting point. Targeting the reduction of maternal mortality in MDG 5 where there are no clinics or roads connecting to clinics is simply unrealistic. Even if donors manage to send skilled clinical staff to remote areas, such a service may not be sustained in the long run. Poverty is unlikely to be reduced without sustainable outcomes. Moreover, there are even more challenging factors, such as “culture”, that may hold back improvements in mothers’ health, such as not allowing women to go to hospital without male consent. This target, therefore, does not fit a country like Afghanistan, where the maternal mortality rate is high but its causes lie in various factors, including poverty itself.

Secondly, by creating narrow targets the MDGs automatically exclude other important issues. Achieving universal primary education in MDG 2 is an example. Focusing solely on primary education does not create a healthy society, let alone result in poverty reduction, since secondary, higher and technical education also play pivotal roles in developing countries. Jones (2008) calls this an “incomplete and one-dimensional” goal. He argues that no society has achieved full literacy only through primary education (Jones 2008). This target has been further criticised for having been influenced by neo-liberal ideas, whereby the World Bank and IMF insist that investing in primary education brings more economic growth compared to other levels of education (Jones 2008).

Many feminists, such as Antrobus (2003), have criticised MDG 3, reducing gender inequality and women’s empowerment, for focusing narrowly on the educational sphere, resulting in the exclusion of many other important gender issues, such as gender-based violence (GBV), which manifests the ultimate form of gender inequality, and women’s sexual and reproductive rights. If poverty is to be tackled, gender inequality needs to be a top agenda item, because the poorest of the poor are women. Saith (2006: 1170) also points out a strong influence of the report made by the OECD’s Development Assistant Committee (DAC) on the formation of the MDG with “a narrower frame focusing essentially on absolute aspects of some key measurable facets of poverty and deprivation, and away from a broader, more essentialist rights-based approach.”

Lastly, goals and targets are set as quantitatively attainable, ignoring quality. Poverty reduction is the single most frequently highlighted goal, but to measure it by “dollar a day” levels, which are defined as an inability to meet basic needs, is seen as a fatal weakness (Saith 2006). Even if we accept the poverty lines, target 1a of MDG 1, reducing by half the proportion of people living on less than a dollar a day, is a target already met by East Asia and the Pacific in 1999, and does not reveal the severe deterioration in Sub-Saharan Africa (SSA), unless China is excluded (Pogge 2005).

Achieving universal primary education in MDG 2 and eliminating gender disparity in primary and secondary education, target 3 of MDG 3, are primarily assessed by the enrolment numbers of children or girls in schools. This fails to consider drop-out rates, quality of education, quality of teacher training, and resources committed per child in the education process (Jones 2008;

Unterhalter 2005; Saith 2006). In India, for instance, Desai (2007) states that even though India will statistically meet MDG 2 by 2015, the quality of education is highly questionable, for some students do not learn at all due to low quality, high drop-out rate, and frequent absenteeism of both students and teachers. Thus, using quantitative indicators does not necessarily mean poverty reduction, and poverty cannot be measured with a simple numerical term.

2.2 Implementation of the MDGs

The MDGs' impact on poverty reduction appears to have been small. The following two points appear to suggest some of the reasons for this. Firstly, it has been reported that the ways in which the MDGs and their targets are implemented in SSA are largely top-down. Instead of being participatory, many multilateral and bilateral donors control the implementation of programmes chiefly due to the large size of their financial assistance. In a study conducted on education policies in Rwanda, Hayman (2007) found that donors and multilateral agencies mostly invested in primary education following MDG 2, despite the different vision of the Rwandan government for education. The Rwandan government believed that while primary education was important, investing in secondary, higher and vocational education was also necessary in order to strengthen the existing labour force, which would bring about economic growth. However, the Rwandan government had no option but to follow the "advice" of the donors. Hayman (2007) further pointed out that there was no particular concern for poverty reduction in the donors' approach.

Cush (2008) similarly reports that in Africa the MDGs were imposed on African governments that held different development models from those of the donors. In Tanzania, for example, MDG 1 for poverty and hunger reduction enforced large dam building in order to increase cash production, rather than building needed small-scale irrigation systems, which would have benefited small farmers. Due to the large financial input coming from the donors, accounting for 40% of Tanzania's budget, into such dam projects, agricultural aid is not being used effectively to improve people's lives (Cush 2008). Although dam building may result in an increase in Tanzania's GDP, cash is rarely distributed to poor small farmers. Thus, in most cases such programmes fail to reduce poverty and hunger. Both the above cases seem to take not a recipient-driven but rather a top-down approach without a clear focus on the poor.

Secondly, there are some cases in which recipient governments deliberately do not take the poor into account. These cases include those in which certain ethnic "minorities" live as second-class citizens under undemocratic regimes. In her study on indigenous people's rights and the MDGs in Latin America, Damman (2007) found that indigenous people who are among the poorest were excluded from surveys, interviews and questionnaires used for the calculation of extreme poverty lines, which as a result would present Latin America as less poor than it is. Most Latin American governments do not report on indigenous vulnerability and on their human rights obligations. More importantly, the UN does not even ask them to do so (Damman 2007). When they turn a blind eye to such undemocratic processes, poverty reduction does not seem to be a real concern of the UN and

other donors. The first case represents a lack of participation among governments and the second represents a lack of participation among the intended “beneficiaries.” The case of Latin America, as Damman (2007) also maintains, particularly entails a human-rights-based approach.

2.3 Missing Link

The MDGs should be conceptualised within a much wider vision and contextualised so as to connect global goals with realities on the ground. Four missing links may be identified at different levels. The first missing link is the complementary aspect of each goal and target. For instance, gender equality leads to universal primary education; eradicating extreme poverty and hunger reduces child mortality; and ensuring environmental sustainability reduces poverty and many diseases. There are many other causal relationships. In Latin America the issue of HIV/AIDS is often treated as one of homosexuality, thus missing the link with the issue of gender-based violence (GBV), through which many HIV/AIDS-positive women suffer as a result of male violence. In Honduras, where GBV is the second leading cause of death, the Ministry of Health has a programme to reduce maternal mortality,² which is MDG 5, but none on GBV.

Target 10 of MDG 7, access to drinking water and basic sanitation, is arguably a fundamental and basic component of reducing poverty³. Without access to clean water and sanitation, people, especially children, cannot remain healthy. In order to secure MDGs 4, 5 and 6, for example, MDG 7 is indispensable. While the WHO/UNICEF Joint Monitoring Program estimates that the MDG target for access to safe drinking water will be achieved in time, basic sanitation is most unlikely to be achieved due to slow progress in SSA. Lenton et al. (2008) identify women’s empowerment as another complementary aspect, since women are generally seen to be more concerned with target 10 than men. However, due to lack of women’s political participation, the scarcity of women in policy and decision-making processes means that these services are unlikely to become a national priority. Even within UN agencies, there has not been a single agency that works purely on water and sanitation, whereas there are agencies such as FAO, UNICEF, WHO that focus on food, children and health respectively (Lenton et al. 2008). Incorporating this link into the revision of the MDGs may be a highly complex task, both politically and technically. However, without it poverty is unlikely to be eradicated.

The second missing link is lack of political will in developing countries. For instance, it is argued that meeting MDG 1 is technically possible, as the cause of food insecurity is not due to lack of productive capacity but is rather a political issue that includes the lack of distribution capacity. In the case of

²² At an interview with Gender-Based Violence Coordinator at Pan-American Health Organisation (PAHO) in Honduras, January 2008, she told us that the Ministry of Health was only concerned with women whose wombs were occupied.

³ Lenton et al. (2008: 250-251) provide a useful table in which water/sanitation and other MDGs are linked.

India's health sector, Mavalankar et al. (2008) suggest that in India there is a lack of concern for health issues in general, which attract only 0.9 % of GDP expenditure on health compared to defence, un-targeted subsidies and non-vital infrastructure. This lack of political will results in resources being restricted to certain goals, and also everything entirely depends on the priority areas of each country. Sadly, many developing countries prioritise defence at the expense of necessary and basic services that would easily save the lives of the poor.

The third missing link is the lack of funding, despite all the activity and attention surrounding the MDGs. Floyd and Pantoja (2008) estimate that a total of US \$56 billion is required to achieve target 6c of MDG 6, reducing tuberculosis (TB), during the period 2006-2015. However, there has not been enough funding for reducing TB globally. Lack of funding is closely related to the first missing link. Where there is a lack of concern about complementary connection, money simply does not flow. The Women Won't Wait campaign initiated by ActionAid has tried to raise awareness of the link between HIV/AIDS and GBV, calling for more funding. Although the campaign has gained some attention, more funding is necessary to prevent women from getting HIV/AIDS and to assist women with HIV/AIDS.

Funds are limited, and if there is a lack of funding in certain areas, then where does the money flow? Due to the global war on terrorism (GWOT), aid for security and development increased dramatically. Goodhand (2006: 86) states, "Development actors feel increased pressure to align themselves behind security objectives related to the GWOT rather than the Millennium Development Goals." This is reflected in the recent shift of donors to conflict zones from which they themselves need to protect "their" people rather than the people within the conflict zones, as Goodhand (2006) suggests. This strategic attention shift of donors and the swift change in money flow after 9/11 reminds us of the rather recent and much more ironic incident that some US \$15 trillion has been injected to bail out bankrupt private banks worldwide (Toynbee 2009), which is equivalent to a quarter of the world's annual income (World Bank 2008), while the vast majority of the world's population continue to live in poverty.

The last missing link is the "beneficiaries" in a wider sense. With the global shift in development priorities towards conflict areas, donors have changed their geographical presence. For instance, most European donors have directed their priority areas to the most poverty-afflicted countries, conflict zones and East European countries⁴. Following this trend, the Swedish International Development Agency (SIDA) was preparing to leave Honduras in 2008, abandoning its existing programmes, some of which would disappear and others be taken over by other agencies. While bilateral donors' focus on conflict zones is necessary for peacekeeping and peace building, and their commercial and political interests with tied aid are indisputable, it is difficult to avoid the thought that such a focus may also mean more trading of arms, including helicopters and radar systems.

The MDGs are medium-term goals. Considering donors' changeable priorities as discussed above, donors do not seem to have a long-term commitment. Beneficiaries, on the other hand, need to be

⁴ This information was given by the gender advisor at SIDA at an interview with the author in Honduras, January 2008.

prepared for sudden changes in such donors' priorities. Small civil society organisations would be severely hit by such changes, with a possibility of ceasing operations altogether in the case of withdrawal of funding by donors. Considering the wider spectrum, aid in my opinion should function in such a way that the recipient eventually becomes self-sufficient and thus independent of it. In order to fulfil such a goal, a long-term commitment is necessary. However, the reality seems to be that injections of aid are made every year, with only short- to medium-term goals. This type of operation will not make a country independent of aid, but will rather make the country more dependent due to the accompanying donor–recipient power relations. Donors' half-hearted commitments risk leaving a country in a state in which it has not yet attained the development goals, or, when the programme does not provide sustainable conditions, it may even have had to return to the development level from which it started. This is analogous to the task of Sisyphus in Greek mythology in which he was punished by the gods and made to roll a huge rock up a steep mountain, but could never reach the top because the rock would always roll back down again.

These mechanisms of the aid industry may be beyond control. However, when the lives of the poor are at stake, donors' lack of commitment to sustainable long-term development is highly questionable. Aid, in my opinion at least, should be temporary. When aid continues to function in the current manner, which seems to be the only way so far, it fails to achieve its goals.

3. After 2015 and beyond

Reflecting the criticisms of the MDGs to date, the most important actors that could revise, reset and drive the MDGs are the recipient countries themselves. Lack of participation, lack of dialogue and lack of consultation with them seem to comprise the major reasons why poverty reduction goals are unlikely to be met by 2015. It is time for recipients to build their own architecture with goals that fit the context. Such government-led architecture will require the further participation of direct beneficiaries such as civil society organisations or the residents of communities in order to design and execute the new goals. The United Nations Country Teams need to encourage greater participation by all stakeholders. As mentioned earlier, narrow goals and targets set as universal benchmarks are unrealistic and manipulative, and many problems have arisen. Country-specific research and a more balanced approach analysing how poverty is created and perpetuated are essential before resetting the goals and targets. A wide range of data including national data and research conducted by academics and NGOs should be collected and referred. In order to make poverty reduction the real focus, this should accompany disaggregated data on the specific groups that are the poorest among the poor. Deploying other actors, both public and private, is also important.

In order to systematise the above proposal, appropriate monitoring and evaluation mechanisms to observe accountability should be established in order to direct accountability downwards. The donors' role should remain as advisory as possible, and they should ensure that gender, sustainability, human rights and participation are mainstreamed in the implementation of any goals and targets.

Development issues are part of global politics and cannot be dealt with independently. The prospects for the world economy are grim. The International Trade Union Confederation (2009) reports that the number of people without enough food to eat increased by 150 million in 2008, and a further 200 million people are going to fall into absolute poverty. The World Bank predicts that between 200,000 and 400,000 babies could die each year between now and 2015 (World Bank 2009) despite all the efforts made towards the achievement of the MDGs. The causes and consequences of the food crisis are related to wider issues of development, ranging from food production and the change in patterns of food consumption, such as the increased demand for meat and dairy products, to sustainability and the environment. In the face of the global economic crisis and the rather urgent issue of climate change, state control over corporate activities is needed to reduce the negative impact of neo-liberalism. At the same time, corporations will play a leading role in economic activities with increasingly responsible attitudes as a result of public pressure. Many companies have made efforts towards development, such as providing developing countries with cheaper drugs, creating environmentally friendly technology, or engaging in ethical trade. Corporations are expected to contribute much to development due to their huge resources.

4. Conclusion: MDGs and beyond

The impact of the MDGs on poverty reduction has not been significant. The MDGs have largely failed to effectively conceptualise the qualitative aspects of each theme. Subsequently, inadequate policies with quantitative measurement have been developed and applied. Such quantitative measures not only fail to capture the concept of poverty but also distort the outcomes, since the macro-level data may “improve” poverty or health but inequalities remain unchallenged. The MDGs have thus failed to contextualise the nature of their subjects. This is partly due to the huge gap between global “wishes” and the national realities of different countries. Universal goals are valuable, but we have learnt that a one-fits-all approach has always been ineffective since the 1980s. Top-down development has also been criticised and participation recommended. However, this seems to be practised in few countries.

Resetting the goals and targets adjusted for each country with more government-driven planning should be the aim after 2015. In order to achieve this, a renewed commitment to connect one target/goal with another is necessary, as they are all interrelated. Instead of focusing on only one aspect of the subject, a more balanced approach encompassing all MDGs is necessary to tackle poverty. The accountability of donors and the mainstreaming of key issues such as gender, human rights and sustainability should be monitored and evaluated via an established mechanism by an external party. Although the MDGs are medium-term goals, they must be linked to long-term goals if poverty reduction is the real concern. Aid effectiveness should be measured by how much recipient countries become independent from aid. In an ideal world, they would no longer require development agencies after achieving their own development.

The global financial crisis and environmental concerns are the greatest challenge to the MDGs, as many predict that poverty will increase due to decreased development assistance. In addition to political, administrative and managerial constraints as hindrances to the MDGs, global politics drives

donors' priorities without taking into account the lives of the poor. Global political affairs among the rich countries seem beyond the control of anyone. However, we tend to forget that issues of security are closely connected to those of development. Identifying the causalities of world events may not be easy, but transforming the nature of the aid industry may be an answer to poverty reduction and the MDGs.

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