

The MDGs: past, present and future: views and voices of young people

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“ If we just tell children about the MDGs, they will forget. If we just show them, they will remember. But if we involve them in the realisation of the MDGs they will understand. By including young people in the attainment of the MDGs and involving them at all levels of decision making and implementation, we will be rendering a service not only to children , but to their communities also.” (Gilbert Chisenga - National Youth Constitutional Assembly Zambia.)

Introduction

This paper reflects the views and voices of young people from around the world on the Millennium Development Goals (MDGs). It builds on a growing body of literature which recognises the importance of children’s voices in the process of policy formulation. (Hallett and Prout, 2003; Johnson et al, 1998) ‘The right to participation’ is also one of the four core pillars of the Convention on the Rights of the Child. Young people (aged 15-24 for purposes of this paper) are ideally placed to contribute to the debate around the future of development and the MDGs. Those who are 15 today will be ‘coming of age’ in 2015 and in many developing countries they make up the largest demographic group ever witnessed in history. This huge group of people have very firm views about the future of the world in which they live, but more importantly their energy and creativity will be vital to achieving the aims of development: *“without the involvement of young people, a demographic group that comprises one fifth of the world’s total population, the full achievement of the MDGs will remain elusive and their long-term sustainability will be comprised”* (UN ad hoc working group for youth, 2005).

Headlines: what young people have to say

- The MDGs have been important in focusing public policy and reflect a strength of good intentions: something similar should be retained to 2025
- They have brought greater focus to children’s issues: six of the goals relate to children
- They are good as an easy-to-understand and convening set of ideas: young people like and appreciate them, especially the quantitative targets
- Some may feel that the MDGs are ‘here, there, everywhere’ but they are not that widely known among youth. A major effort is needed to educate young people and harness their energy
- Young people are hungry to have tools to hold their governments to account and see the potential of the MDGs in this regard
- Large numbers of children still live in poverty; rising numbers of children are malnourished as a result of the 2007/08 food crisis; the financial crisis/global economic downturn are threatening health and education gains. A new development paradigm is needed to reverse these trends, in which substantial engagement of young people is central: young people can be powerful change agents and drivers of good governance.
- Social network sites can connect young people from around the world.

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Methodology

We wanted to ensure a good range of opinions from young people around the world and to ensure that ‘voices from the south’ were particularly well represented in this paper. In order to do this, we needed to ensure that the ‘survey instrument’ was easily understood and also that we adopted a data collection process which reached far and wide. Building on an initial consultation with UK-based young people in the autumn of 2008 (Plan UK’s Children’s Advisory Panel), we refined the survey questions to make them more ‘child and youth friendly’ with the view to making them easy to understand in a number of languages. The questions we used to gather the data presented in this paper can be seen in Box 1.

Survey Questions

1. What do you think of the Millennium Development Goals?
Have they helped the situation of children in the developing world?
2. How do you think that global targets like the Millennium Development Goals help reduce child poverty and child rights?
3. What do you think will be the best way to reduce child poverty after the Millennium Development Goals?
4. Do you feel that the Millennium Development Goals are too goal focused and concentrate on numbers and quantity instead of the quality of development and process of how we achieve the goals?
5. Should economic and material well-being be the main focus of targets OR should development focus more on empowering people from the inside to carryout change themselves in their own communities?
6. After 2015 should the focus of development be:
 - a. Just on the very poorest countries
 - b. A broader set of developing countries
 - c. All countries, given that poverty and inequality can be everywhere?
7. How can we build on the relationships between countries and people across the world to reduce poverty and inequality?
8. What is the best way to empower young people to hold their governments to account, especially young people in developing countries? What tools can be used to engage young people people in this process?

Data collection began with Plan Country Offices (49 programme countries spanning most of the globe) where workshops were arranged to collect views and ideas. This generated quite a bit of data but we wanted to go further, to more countries and other groups of young people. We thus took the questions to online discussions using Taking IT Global and facebook social networking sites. Taking IT global is a social networking site for young people interested in global issues, and as such was a perfect site for posting questions and for MDG related discussions. Regarding facebook, we made use of the special interest groups facility on which there are discussion boards and a wall on which group members can post messages. We set up a ‘youth and MDGs’ group which over 80 young people joined, and posted questions on a weekly basis. We also sent messages directly to facebook inboxes. Interestingly, quite a large number of people joined one or both of the networking sites in order to follow and engage with the MDG debate.

This approach allowed young people who were not involved with Plan to engage with the debate and allowed a more discursive element to the research. Young people could interact and explore issues with each other and we were able to also respond to ideas directly with young people, for example posting quotes or questions from respondents to the wider group. This also allowed us to pose new questions which arose from feedback to the original questions.

The one major drawback with this methodology is that informants are young people who have access to internet facilities and quite a high level of education. In its nature it excludes the most marginalised and vulnerable children and young people, and those without access to technology or education.

Findings

<p><i>What do you think of the Millennium Development Goals? Have they helped the situation of children in the developing world?</i></p>

Perhaps unsurprisingly a majority of young people are unaware of the existence of the MDGs, or if they have heard of them know little of their significance. This applies to young people in both ‘developing’ and ‘developed’ countries. Plan Timor L’este, for example, felt that they had to offer an education session on the MDGs prior to having a meaningful discussion on what they represent, their achievements/shortcomings etc. This finding mirrors that of an earlier (June 2004) on-line consultation with more than 350 youth about the MDGs when most of the respondents said that they knew little or nothing about them, nor did they have access to relevant information to follow their progress. (Ad hoc working group for youth and the MDGs, 2005) This finding raises serious questions related to the concept of MDGs as an accountability tool, if people who the MDGs purport to help have little or no knowledge of their existence. This is an obvious area for action by the international development community.²

Among those who are more familiar with the MDGs many feel quite positive about them: *“they have helped children – they are specific and touch important issues such as education, child and maternal health”*; *“goals such as reducing the mortality rate, eradicating poverty will definitely benefit the younger generation even if they are not completely achieved”*. Young people particularly like the idea of targets as they provide something specific to aim for, and it is a way to measure progress whilst being a tool to mobilise policy makers. *“I think the MDG's have helped greatly. They have given the UN an insight of what they MUST do, and applying pressure means that more things will get done, and have got to be done in a short space of time. This is great as it is children's lives we are affecting. There is still a lot of progress to be made to achieve all the goals, but I believe they have made a difference. Any improvement is better than none”*. (Sarah, UK)

Whilst the goals may be overly ambitious, that too is an element of attraction for some. For others, this is a source of disappointment: *“The MDGs set a universal platform for collective efforts by governments and citizens across the world to put together their energies in order to make poverty, child mortality and other core issues history. The MDGs were a good but failed attempt to combat poverty and improve livelihood for people in the developing countries”* (Gordon, Kenya).

² To ensure the MDG's help to create an impact and lasting change engaging with young people in the development, implementation, monitoring and evaluation of projects is essential. This is recognised by the National Youth Constitutional Assembly in Zambia who are keen to ‘sensitise’ youth as to the aims of the MDGs and mobilise children and youth in their achievement.

How do you think that global targets like the Millennium Development Goals help reduce Child Poverty and Child Rights?

Do you feel that the Millennium Development Goals are too goal focused and concentrate on numbers and quantity instead of the quality of development and process of how we achieve the goals?

An area of much debate among young people is that the MDGs are not a legally binding agreement and therefore contain no consequences/ repercussions for leaders who do not work for their targets. Alongside the good intentions and concerted efforts of many people and nations to reach the goals sit problems inherent in the status of the goals and the resources allocated to reach them. *“We believe that in 2015, aims at the global level, such as the Millennium Development Goals will be effective in the fight against child poverty and improve the rights of children. However, there are some weaknesses that may reduce the effectiveness of the targets. These weaknesses are: non-binding status of the MDGs; inadequate resources committed; and lack of coordination among stakeholders.* (Children from Plan Mali.)

Of the goals which has received less attention is Goal 8, developing a global partnership for development. This goal could be seen to encourage a culture of global solidarity and understanding which young people are ready and willing to embrace. The positive response to the questions posed for this paper show that young people all over the world are interested in these issues, and through social networking sites and other new media and technology global connectivity is very readily achieved. Young people are keen to learn about the life of their counterparts in different regions and to discover how their life's are linked through education and exchange programmes.

The numbers versus the quality of development argument is particularly hard to resolve and has some of the most polarising arguments during the preparation of this paper. For some the quantitative targets are the most important aspects of the MDGs. An important factor with the MDGs is that they are measurable and do give young people a target against which to monitor progress: *“I do think these targets will help to address child poverty as they show that we are thinking about these problems. The targets also show that we have a goal and an aim to reach meaning that we will be trying to solve the problems, to fulfil our goals”.* (Nia, UK.)

“The option between qualitative and quantitative as the Millennium Development Goals, we strongly encourage the latter. It is always desirable that more children acquire the basic education instead of a smaller number receive all the right knowledge to rule over a mass of ignorant. From our point of view, without reaching a critical mass of educated individuals in the nation, significant progress could be achieved” (Children from Plan Mali)

But still the quality issue is a factor for many young people who believe that anything we do must be of good quality in order to respect the rights of the young: *“It's not bad to argue with numbers but at the same time pointless to use generalised statistics. For example, I know of some states boasting of making basic education a reality but the fact is they have scored on the quantitative bit, where is the quality of it all? Our children have a right to quality basic education and I think should be more than basic but meaningful education that they can apply in their everyday lives. However the goals should not be driven by numbers as such but its very crucial to measure the progress hence numbers is good all the same.”* (Gordon, Kenya.)

What seems key is to get the right balance between the ‘numbers’ and quality, within any given resource envelope. This may mean finding new or different ways to deliver services such as education, which may be more cost effective or finding ways in which to increase funding and therefore the quality. *“Some schools have more than 100 children in a*

classroom: is this a quality education? Teachers can't give many students one-one attention, is it not the same as listening to a radio show?" (Tonee, Kenya.)

After 2015 – what should we do? Do we need a new development paradigm?

Any new development paradigm would be well advised to place the involvement of children and young people at its heart, with a real and concerted effort to engage all young people including those from the most vulnerable and marginalised communities. *“Policy makers and development specialists must enact a serious paradigm shift in the way they shape poverty reduction efforts and fully engage young people to avoid the perpetuation of poverty and hunger in villages and cities around the Globe”*(Ad hoc working group on youth 2005.)

The UN itself has acknowledged that the involvement of children and young people is key to achieving the MDGs: *“We as leaders must focus on young people and invest in young people if we want to achieve the MDGs. And the other is that we must work directly with young people and support their participation and leadership in order to achieve the MDGs by 2015.”* (Thoraya Ahmed Obaid, UNFPA Executive Director)

Evidence is growing that by engaging children and young people in decision making processes leads to better outcomes. We have seen that young people have the knowledge and the expertise to improve their own and their families lives. For example, with disaster risk reduction young people have been instrumental in planning for the future – hazard mapping their community, putting crisis plans into action and designing tools to use in times of disaster (Children of Holdibari film, Plan/World Bank). *“Children must by now know what type of community they need to live in by 2015 and beyond. It is very important that children know what is expected of them by their communities. By including young people in the attainment of MDGs and involving them at all levels of decision making and implementation we will be rendering a service not only to children but to their communities also.”* (Gilbert on behalf of National Youth Constitutional Assembly, Zambia.)

If we accept that the MDGs are a tool by which people can hold governments and policy makers to account regarding the eradication of poverty, whatever happens post 2015 must include education/awareness raising to all people of their rights and of the targets themselves. While it is very tempting to give guidelines around how we should be communicating with young people and how they can communicate amongst one another we must remember that youth the world over are not a homogenous group - they all come with their own cultural backgrounds, learning, life experiences and expertise. What is necessary the world over is that young people are able to engage positively with their governments, politicians and policy-makers, to influence child and youth-appropriate policies and monitor progress. *“You may agree with me that it's not possible to come up with general tools since each country has its own uniqueness. It's more prudent if the young people in the specific nations are consulted in developing the tools only applicable to them.”*(Gordon, Kenya)

Young people are keen to be engaged in a meaningful way in governance mechanisms. They know how they want to be involved and the procedures needed to achieve this. This includes making policy information available to young people in a language they can understand and in places where it is easily accessible i.e. where they are – schools, youth clubs, etc. (Feinstein & Haldorsson, 2007). In November 2008 Plan held a Youth Forum at the EU Development Days in Strasbourg, to discuss youth participation in local governance. The youth participants agreed that the biggest challenge to them and their peers is a lack of recognition of children's rights, causing a lack of engagement, poor access to public services and ultimately leading to a view of young people as a negative force in society. Resoundingly they all said they want to engage positively with policy and decision makers, they want these people to talk to them in safe, accessible spaces and in a language they can understand and ensure that young people

and their parents are aware of the rights and services that are provided for them. “A commitment is now also needed to make sure that more adults commit to engaging in a dialogue with children on their own terms.” (Feinstein & Haldorsson, 2007) This should mean that decision makers strive to put information into the public domain and encourage all citizens including young people to access and contribute to debates around development. *“Through the dynamism of local governance local communities would be able to shape the direction of their communities. Goals should ‘seek to give people the means to change the lives of their communities’.”* (Mali Children)

After 2015, what do you think we should do?

- These sort of goals need to be given a lot more time. Also developing countries need a chance to develop themselves so that they can lead themselves.
- The MDGs should be publicised more, this will apply more pressure.
- Whether they are met or not, it is necessary to galvanise people on the issue, to give them specific goals and ambitions and deadlines and to motivate them.
- They (the MDGs) make the issue more accessible to those working outside the field; new targets should be set in 2015
- Keeping global targets will keep child poverty on the international agenda.
- I think that the best thing to do to address children’s rights and poverty is to raise awareness in more developed countries especially in schools.
- If the rich countries understand what is needed to make children’s lives better, and end child poverty then there is bound to be change.

Conclusion

“The solution lies on the change of tack. Like, what role have young people (youth) played in the failures and successes? I think that maybe there was inadequate inclusion if not assumption of the potentials -real energies- possessed by the youth. They could have been brushed aside by the governments/authorities. It may not be necessarily to change the success indicators but rather change the attitude of the leaders. We can work together.” (Gordon, Kenya)

Through this paper we have shown that children and young people do indeed have valuable insights and contributions to make to the ongoing debates surrounding development and the future of development practice and global policies. Robert Chambers also believes that engaging with children is the key to a better, more equitable society; “There is perhaps no more powerful way of transforming human society than by changing how the adults of today relate to children, the adults of tomorrow” (Chambers in Johnson et al, 1998). The involvement of children and young people must now be mainstreamed into all development and governance practices with positive routes for their engagement. This has been carried forward by the Commonwealth Secretariat who are implementing a mainstreaming youth agenda.

“We must acknowledge the power structures which have been at play imagine children and young people as vulnerable, passive vic. We must take care not to replicate these structures and find ways to provide the correct care and protection for children.” (Johnson et al, 1998)

There seems to be strong support for a continuation of quantitative targets beyond 2015, but with some modifications: *“the timescale from 2000 to 2015, just 15 years, can be seen as quite tight and actually what is*

needed is a more holistic empowering approach which enshrines within development the process of empowerment and decision making of people that the goals are targeting. These sort of goals need to be given a lot more time and I also feel that less developed countries need a chance to develop themselves so that they can lead themselves to complete independence. If the goals are to be negotiated politically through these countries so that they can be independent, then the targets are definitely unrealistic and will take a lot longer than 15 years to reach. However, the fact that these targets are in place should address the

urgency of the matter and even if the targets are not reached in their entirety, they will obviously make more of a difference than if these goals didn't exist at all. (Colette, UK)

If young people are included in the setting of targets they are also well-placed to monitor them. In this way they can become a significant force to hold governments to account and foster a culture of good governance with strong involvement of civil society.

References

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