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***The Political Economy of the MDGs: Retrospect
and Prospect for the World's Biggest Promise***

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Abstract

In September 2010 world leaders will meet in New York to discuss progress in meeting the UN Millennium Development Goals (MDGs), which include the promise of halving 'extreme poverty' between 1990 and 2015.

The paper begins with a brief history of how the MDGs came into being (See Table 1 for a list and other details), noting that they were primarily a product of the rich world, before looking at the progress made in achieving them and the degree to which the rich countries have lived up to the promises they made as part of Goal 8. The final section draws lessons from the MDG process to feed into the debate concerning what will take their place in 2015 when they come to an end.

Keywords

Millennium Development Goals, MDGs, global poverty, United Nations, poverty targets

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1. Introduction

In September 2010 world leaders will meet in New York to discuss progress in meeting the UN Millennium Development Goals (MDGs – see Annex 1 for a list), which include the promise of halving ‘extreme poverty’ between 1990 and 2015. Rousing words will be spoken and earnest speeches made, noting sombrely that much remains to be done if we are to achieve the ambitious MDG project, but lauding the progress made to date by the international community. World leaders will commit themselves to doing better and then take advantage of photo opportunities before jetting back to their capitals¹.

However, this self-congratulatory process will mask important questions concerning the MDGs, their impact, achievements and suitability as a method of tackling global poverty. The adoption of the MDGs was in many regards a tremendous achievement, gaining unprecedented international support, involving unanimous approval by 189 UN member states and 147 national leaders, behind the Millennium Declaration and the idea of eradicating poverty. This short paper examines the MDGs, their origins, their successes and failures, and the lessons that they provide for international development after 2015. Though the efforts expended by the international community to achieve the MDGs have not been all that they might, this paper suggests that the outlook should not be viewed too negatively. The MDGs, though flawed, can potentially be seen as a significant step towards the emergence of an international social norm that sees extreme poverty as morally unacceptable in an affluent world. With this in mind, some alternatives are put forward for how to advance this when the MDGs expire in 2015.

The paper begins with a brief history of how the MDGs came into being (See Table 1 for a list and other details), noting that they were primarily a product of the rich world, before looking at the progress made in achieving them and the degree to which the rich countries have lived up to the promises they made as part of Goal 8. The final section draws lessons from the MDG process to feed into the debate concerning what will take their place in 2015 when they come to an end.

2. The Origins of the MDGs

It might at first glance appear that the MDGs originated with the Millennium Summit of the UN. Although this was an important milestone in the formulation of the MDGs, it was only one element in a much longer process, involving not just the UN but the OECD, World Bank and

¹ Between 100 and 150 heads of state and/or government were expected to attend the 2010 summit but the recent debacle at COP15 at Copenhagen may reduce the willingness of leaders to attend global summits.

IMF (see Hulme, 2009a for a fuller history). While the idea of setting targets for development goes back to the 1960s, the roots of the MDGs are usually traced back to the series of UN conferences that took place in the 1990s. Particularly influential was the 'Children's Summit' of 1990, which managed to achieve more than the 'strong rhetoric but no action' pattern of many previous UN summits (Emmerij et al., 2001: 112). Subsequent years saw a large number of international summits and conferences covering a range of issues, including nutrition, human rights, social development, women and others.

Just as the summits in the 1990s were creating new targets for development and poverty reduction, aid agencies were entering a period of crisis. The OECD's Development Assistance Committee (DAC), the division that oversees the aid given by its members, recognised that it faced a problem.² Following the end of the cold war, overseas development assistance (ODA) from almost all countries had gone into steep decline. The global 'peace dividend' promised in 1990, with armaments turned into ploughshares, was a dishonoured memory and ODA in the rich countries fell from 0.34 per cent of Gross National Income (GNI) in 1990 to 0.22 per cent by 1999 (DAC, 2009). Ministers of International Development were being increasingly marginalised and the bureaucrats heading aid agencies found themselves engaged in the thankless tasks of defending their organisations and downsizing. The DAC felt that they needed a new way of engaging with the donor countries and a new justification for increasing aid flows. To this end, they resolved in 1995 '...to set up a Groupe de Réflexion with a view to review the future of development aid and the role of the DAC' (DAC, 1995: 8).

The *Groupe* was launched at the OECD's ministerial meeting of 23-24 May 1996. One task it undertook was to draw up a list of the declarations agreed at UN summits and attempt to pull these together into something more coherent. The specification of a list of targets chimed well with the ethos found in a number of member states at the time. Target-setting had become a common device for reforming public services (based on ideas from 'results based management') and it appealed to the US, UK, Germany and Norway in particular, which had begun to use 'logical frameworks' in their aid programmes (see Hulme, 2007).

Several aspects of this list were the subject of subsequent political wrangling, particularly the prominence given to economic growth, the inclusion of gender equality and reproductive health targets and the inclusion of targets for rich countries. Once a compromise was reached on these contentious issues, the final document, *Shaping the 21st Century*, was launched at the high level Meeting of Ministers in May 1996 (DAC, 1996). This 20-page document could easily be summarised by a simple listing of its 'International Development Goals' (IDGs) that all OECD members had approved.

² The DAC is a subsidiary body of the OECD. It comprises of a committee, of the representatives of its member governments, and a secretariat to service the committee. Its highest level of decision making is its council, comprised of the Ministers for International Development (or their equivalent).

Concurrent with these processes, the UN was seeking a grand idea approaching the new millennium. Kofi Annan, the UN Secretary General, felt that the 'Millennium Assembly of the United Nations' needed to be both ambitious and, most importantly, a success. The UN's 50th Anniversary Summit in 1997 was widely judged to have been a failure, and another failed major event would be a further serious blow to the organisation's credibility. Annan was also aware that an event that happens only once every thousand years created an unprecedented opportunity to raise ambitions and address key issues that had not received sufficient attention.

Kofi Annan knew that he had to produce a declaration to which all member states could agree. He decided to publish a report before the Assembly for states and public to comment on, drawing from the UN conference and summit declarations. This report became *We the Peoples: The Role of the United Nations in the 21st Century* (Annan, 2000), launched in April 2000. While both this and DAC's *Shaping the 21st Century* were based on UN conference and summit declarations, they contained notable differences. The Beijing Women's Conference goals on gender equality, women's empowerment and reproductive health, already watered down in *Shaping the 21st Century*, were almost absent from *We the Peoples* (see Hulme, 2009b for a discussion of the fate of reproductive health in the MDGs). The 20:20 proposal for social development expenditure³ was absent from both, while *We the Peoples* gave greater prominence to economic growth, technology, the setting of goals for rich countries, the environment and the highlighting of Africa's problems (Hulme, 2009a: 27-31).

We the Peoples formed the basis for drafting the Millennium Declaration. After being subject to the inevitable political process of additions, deletions and compromises to ensure that the Declaration was acceptable to all UN member states, it was approved unanimously on 8th September 2000. The Declaration contained the materials needed for drawing up an authoritative set of goals for poverty reduction that had the full support of 189 countries. The Secretary General then needed to draw up a 'roadmap' for how the world would achieve these ambitious UN goals.

However, there was a problem: there were now two sets of different goals being worked on simultaneously – the IDGs in DAC and (what would become) the MDGs in the UN. There were two options for resolving this issue. One was to continue on a two-track process, but this would look messy and add grist to the mill of aid opponents who could point to the fact that even the international development agencies could not agree on a set of objectives. The second was to merge the two. This also posed potential problems. Kofi Annan could not be seen to be modifying the Millennium Declaration when it had the agreement of 189 countries. Similarly, the DAC felt that the IDGs were simpler, monitorable and achievable, and had been endorsed by the World Bank, IMF and UN in June 2000.

³ This proposed that all aid donors allocate 20 per cent of their funding to social development (education, health, gender equality and social protection) and that all recipient countries allocate 20 per cent of national public expenditure to these sectors.

The issue was resolved in a World Bank convened meeting held in March 2001. It was agreed that the two would be merged, and that there would be a division of labour between the Bretton Woods Institutions (BWIs),⁴ which would continue to control national Poverty Reduction Strategy Papers (PRSPs), and the UN, which would drive the MDG process. With these compromises, Kofi Annan could put together the *Road Map Towards the Implementation of the United Nations Millennium Declaration* (UN, 2001). Contained in a four page annex at the back were the Millennium Development Goals, though with a note saying that Goal 7 (Ensuring Environmental Sustainability) and Goal 8 (Develop a Global Partnership for Development) were 'subject to further refinement'.

The process of creating the MDGs was not premeditated or consciously planned – it followed an iterative course across a number of agencies and with no clear start or end (since the MDGs continued to be altered long after publication of the *Roadmap*). What is striking is that this was a process that was led by rich countries, with comparatively little involvement of the lower and middle income countries that are the main subjects of the MDGs. The developing countries' only major input was to ensure that there was a goal related to what the developed countries should do (Goal 8). The IDGs were compiled with a view to altering the political conditions surrounding aid flows and were pushed up the agenda by the Utstein Group – a group of four like-minded women that were ministers for international development in the UK, the Netherlands, Norway and Germany in the late 1990s. The merging of the IDGs and MDGs was undertaken between the club of rich nations (the OECD), the BWIs, in which the richest nations dominate, and the UN Secretariat. Developing countries were deeply ambivalent about the IDGs, reflecting the fact that these were the product of the donor club for their own political reasons. This ambivalence also stretched over to the MDGs: the rich and powerful countries of the OECD needed ambitious goals for their image and legitimacy. The developing countries were more interested in national goals and relationships with the BWIs.

The MDGs achieved a global consensus on a set of time-bound development targets. These were ambitious (for critics, wildly overambitious – see Clemens et al., 2007) and contained requirements for both rich and poor countries. Perhaps most surprisingly, they subsequently received a level of sustained attention that is unprecedented for any UN developmental declaration. The following section examines the achievements of the MDGs to date.

3. The MDG Achievements

Progress in meeting the MDGs is usually described as 'mixed' (see Table 1). Some clear successes are visible, notably the reduction of extreme poverty from almost half the world's population in 1990 to slightly more than a quarter in 2005,⁵ and the improvement in primary

⁴ The BWIs consist of the World Bank and International Monetary Fund (IMF).

⁵ Perhaps somewhat oddly, the target of halving the proportion of people living below \$1-a-day (Goal 1, Target 1) uses 1990 as the baseline. This had the peculiar consequence that for the East Asia and Pacific region Goal 1 Target 1 was virtually achieved before the MDGs had even been created (Pogge 2004).

school enrolments, which reached 88 per cent in 2007 (UN, 2009: 4). The target of halting and beginning to reverse the spread of HIV/AIDS is likely to be met, even in the worst affected area, sub-Saharan Africa.

Table 1: Progress with the MDGs and Impacts of the Fuel, Food and Financial Crises

MDG	Status in 2005 or 2006	Impact of the Fuel, Food and Financial Crisis 2008/9
1. Halve extreme poverty	Globally on track because of China but unlikely to be met in sub-Saharan Africa.	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • 200 million more people fall into extreme poverty in 2005-2008. • 44 million people permanently damaged by malnutrition. • Increase in hungry from 850 million (2007) to 960 million (2009).
2. Universal primary education	Close to target but will probably not be achieved in sub-Saharan Africa and South Asia.	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Unknown number of children will be withdrawn from school and will not complete primary school.
3. Gender equality	Likely to be achieved at primary and secondary school level but other targets are lagging.	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Crises likely to impact particularly negatively on poor female-headed households and women more generally.
4. Reduce child mortality by three-quarters	Significant reductions in all regions but three-quarters of countries “off target”.	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • 200,000 to 400,000 additional child deaths per annum – most are easily preventable.
5. Reduce maternal mortality by two-thirds	Least progress of all the MDGs with 500,000 pregnancy-related deaths per annum. Very problematic in sub-Saharan Africa and South Asia.	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Almost certain to increase mortality rates.
6. Combat HIV/AIDS, malaria and other diseases	New HIV infections and AIDS deaths have peaked. HIV/AIDS remains a particular problem in sub-Saharan Africa. TB rates are falling, but not faster enough to meet the target.	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Increased infection rates predicted.
7. Environmental sustainability	Access to water target likely to be met but sanitation is lagging. Limited progress with CO ₂ emissions and deforestation.	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Mixed impacts.

However, several areas have shown only weak improvements and even the successes are qualified. Progress has been highly geographically uneven, with global progress masking

regional slippage, and regional progress masking deterioration in individual countries.⁶ So, for example, while at the global level progress on eradicating \$1-a-day poverty is considerable, to the extent that before the 2008 economic crisis this target looked likely to be achieved, this improvement is heavily driven by the tens of millions of people escaping poverty in China and India. Extreme poverty in other regions is either falling much slower or even worsening. Similarly, although the world is ahead of schedule to reach the target of halving the proportion of people without access to an improved drinking water source, some areas (notably sub-Saharan Africa) remain a long way from achieving this, although progress is being made (UN, 2009: 46).

On many goals progress has been slowed or reversed by the global economic downturn and by higher food prices. Higher food prices have caused the proportion of the population suffering undernourishment to begin to rise again in sub-Saharan Africa, having been declining slowly between 1990 and 2006. Furthermore, the steep decline in wholesale food prices over 2008 that followed the economic downturn have not fed through to lowering consumer prices (UN, 2009: 11). Unemployment has risen, and funding for the provision of family planning has declined steeply.

Where progress has been made, caution must be taken in attributing this to the MDGs (Fischer, 2010). Much of the reduction in extreme poverty was achieved between 1990 and 2000 through economic growth in China and India – before the MDGs even existed. Progress in some indicators might even have slowed since the MDGs were introduced. For example, under-five mortality in Southern Asia fell at a rate of around 3.5 per year between 1960 and 2000, while progress since 2000 has been at around 2.75 per year.⁷ Where progress has been faster since 2000 this may be more appropriately attributed to factors other than the adoption of the MDGs, such as fast economic growth in Asia, the associated rise in commodity prices and the emergence of sub-Saharan Africa from the two ‘lost development decades’ of the 1980s and 1990s.

The MDGs may be considered to have made an impact if it can be shown that their adoption has led to an increased quantity of development finance being provided by the donor countries, as was implicit in Goal 8 (Develop a Global Partnership for Development) and explicitly endorsed at various subsequent meetings. Sadly, however, the record has been poor on that score. Although ODA has risen by 39 per cent in real terms between 2000 and 2007 (the last year for which complete data is available), this somewhat flatters the donor nations’ efforts. If

⁶ The listing of the MDGs in 2001 was unclear about whether these goals should be monitored only at the global level or whether they applied to individual countries. The Sachs Report (UN Millennium Project, 2005) argues that they must be applied at national level but Vandemoortele (2007 and 2009), one of the MDG design team, argues that this was never intended and strongly criticises Sachs.

⁷ Data from UNICEF 2007, Progress for Children, and from UN 2009. Iran is included in Southern Asia in UN but not UNICEF.

debt forgiveness and humanitarian aid are removed⁸ the increase is more modest at 32.6 per cent – an improvement certainly, but at 0.23 per cent of GNI, remaining far short of the target of 0.7 per cent, and far short of the peak of 0.54 per cent of GNI achieved in 1961. Key pledges, such as that made by G8 leaders at Gleneagles in 2005 that ODA to Africa would double by 2010, are unlikely to be honoured. Between 2005 and 2007 the increase, excluding debt relief, was 9.8 per cent, and with the subsequent economic downturn and fiscal crisis affecting several developed countries it is unlikely that aid budgets will show sufficient growth to meet the target. The debt burden facing the poorest countries remains significant, though it has fallen. Sub-Saharan Africa continues to spend approximately five per cent of GDP on debt servicing, around three times the level of government spending on health services (DAC 2009; WHO 2009).

Goal 8 also explicitly mentions areas other than ODA in which the rich nations can contribute to achieving the MDGs, notably trade. Again, little has been done to honour these pledges. The current trade negotiations in the World Trade Organisation – the Doha Development Agenda (DDA) – remain stalled. The negotiation process continues to be exclusionary with only the most powerful developing countries, India and Brazil, being included in the small-group meetings in which the key negotiations occur, while other countries are sidelined.⁹ The offers currently on the table offer little hope that the DDA will be notably development-oriented. The US and EU are unwilling to reduce their agricultural subsidies significantly, and are demanding substantial opening of developing countries' markets for non-agricultural goods in return for any eventual agriculture deal.¹⁰ Analysis of the likely DDA deal suggests that some developing countries will be worse off under the package, notably sub-Saharan Africa which is estimated to see a reduction in income of just under one per cent (Polaski, 2006: viii).

The most important area of global governance for poverty reduction is the talks on climate change. As Erik Solheim (2010) puts it: 'The fights against poverty and climate change must go hand in hand, or we will lose them both'. The International Panel on Climate Change (IPCC) has found that increased global temperatures could lead to (among other problems) millions more at risk of hunger and subject to water stress, particularly in Africa; a rise in the proportion of the land surface in extreme drought from 1-3 per cent in the present day to around 30 per cent in

⁸ Debt forgiveness is often removed from ODA figures because much of the time it is merely cancelling debt that was not being, and never would be, repaid, and therefore it does not represent any real transfer of new resources. Furthermore, most of the debt forgiveness witnessed since 2000 has gone to just two countries – Iraq and Nigeria. Humanitarian aid, though highly important, is aimed at alleviating immediate crises rather than contributing to the longer term development with which the MDGs are concerned.

⁹ China remains somewhat on the sidelines, partly because it is a new member and partly because it is unlikely to be required to take on full liberalisation in any eventual agreement due to the onerous commitments it made in its accession.

¹⁰ Except for the Least Developed Countries, which will be required only to bind their tariffs without reducing them.

the 2090s;¹¹ and millions more at risk of flooding each year due to rising sea levels (IPCC, 2007). Given the cumulative emissions in recent years, it is increasingly clear that an unprecedented degree of action is required by governments across the world, far greater than has presently been agreed to, if catastrophic climate change is to be averted (Anderson and Bows, 2008). The reduction of global poverty will become much harder in the future if the threat of climate change is not dealt with swiftly, but any hopes that this might happen have been dealt a serious blow by the failure of the Copenhagen talks in December 2009.

Although the MDGs have achieved widespread interest and have been integrated into the workings of aid agencies and (to a lesser extent) the BWIs, they have not led to a significant shift in rich countries' policies. Part of this is due to the lack of traction that global poverty has as a political concern within the powerful nations (and indeed within many elites in developing countries). Despite a slow emergence of attention among the international community on the issue of poverty it continues to be largely rhetorical, while action is driven primarily by considerations of national self-interest. We will return to this below.

A second problem has been the lack of domestic social movement among the rich countries in support of the MDGs. Narrow national self-interest can be overcome – perhaps can only be overcome – if there is a sufficient groundswell of support for a particular cause, the best example being the debt reduction initiatives undertaken on the back of the Jubilee 2000 campaign. The MDGs have neither tacked onto, nor created, a similar movement behind their implementation. Existing campaign groups use the MDGs that relate to their particular interest area to grab media attention and generate support for their campaigning niche. (Indeed, part of the reason for the DAC choosing a multi-dimensional set of goals rather than focusing purely on income poverty was in order to bring in as wide a set of NGOs as possible, to maximise the resulting pressure on governments to give more aid). But a substantial social movement concerned specifically with the MDGs themselves (or ending poverty more generally) has not emerged. The closest has been the Global Call to Action Against Poverty (GCAP), a coalition of advocacy groups in 115 countries that has made only limited progress in making poverty a global concern, and the Make Poverty History campaign (but this was time-bound, linked strongly to the 2005 G8 summit and has subsequently largely dissipated). As such, the MDGs have played more of a role in supporting existing campaigns rather than being the subject of sustained popular support in and of themselves.

A second problem is that the MDGs have failed to either create or tie into an existing epistemic community. Epistemic communities can be defined as 'a network of professionals with recognised expertise and competence in a particular domain and an authoritative claim to policy relevant knowledge within that domain' (Haas 1992). Since the late 1970s, international development has been dominated by the epistemic community espousing orthodox, liberal economics and the 'Washington Consensus'. Proponents of these 'Chicago School' ideas held

¹¹ Extreme drought in this context refers to areas suffering significantly less precipitation than is the historical norm.

leading positions in the BWIs, finance ministries and academia (particularly in economics). They have not been without challengers, most notably from those promoting the concept of a more multi-dimensional 'human development', drawing from the work of Amartya Sen (1999). This has played an important role in underpinning critiques of the narrow focus of the Washington Consensus, but human development has failed to capture the intellectual heights within any powerful academic discipline or the institutions that dominate policy. The MDGs were therefore unable to tap into an existing powerful epistemic community that could help gather intellectual weight and political support behind the project. Although they contributed to the movement away from the narrow confines of the Washington Consensus and economic orthodoxy, the MDGs have failed to gain greater traction due to the lack of a fully articulated and institutionally embedded alternative to that orthodoxy.

However, it would be wrong to dismiss the MDGs – they have led to some changes. When placed within a longer term context, the MDGs can potentially be seen as having played an important role in changing international values, through contributing to the emergence of an international norm that sees global poverty in an affluent world as morally unacceptable (see Fukuda-Parr and Hulme, 2009).¹² Within this context, the MDGs are not simply about checklists for achieving poverty reduction, but are elements of a longer term alteration in how global poverty is viewed by the public and treated by the international community. This may perhaps be seen to be emerging in the EU, in which the 12 new member states that joined in 2004 were required to commit to providing 0.33 per cent of GNI as aid by 2015 and frame national policies to promote MDG achievement. While commitment to this norm may presently be weak, this nonetheless indicates that global poverty eradication is being internalised as a regional norm within the EU. Just as being part of the EU club requires a commitment to democracy, it now requires a public commitment to the eradication of global poverty.

Even if still a long way from generating an effective international norm, the MDGs generated unprecedented global convergence around the idea of global poverty reduction, which may in time be seen as having edged the international community closer to a 'tipping point'. Throughout its history the UN has been 'ahead of the curve' (Emmerij et al., 2001), in terms of the ideas it has generated. The MDGs should perhaps be seen in this light, as a stage in the emplacement of an international norm that sees poverty in an affluent world as being morally unacceptable. If successful, such a norm could challenge the strictures of narrow national self-interest informing international relations.

4. The Future of the MDGs

The prospects for the emergence of an international norm around global poverty reduction should not be over-emphasised, however. The shape of world power dynamics are shifting, most notably with the rise of China, India and Brazil, but the 'rules of the game' – most

¹² For a discussion of the development of international norms see Finnemore and Sikkink (1998).

importantly the central importance of *real politik* – remain largely unaltered. The overriding determinant of state action continues to be self-interest, and at present states do not see the MDGs or global poverty reduction as being particularly important to that state-interest. There has been very little genuine engagement with the MDGs, perhaps with the exception of (parts of) Europe. The rhetoric has been grand but the action has been limited. As noted above, aid has failed to increase in significant quantities, the WTO trade talks are unlikely to produce a pro-poor outcome and the Copenhagen climate change conference failed. Perhaps most importantly, at the organisations that have the greatest impact on the poorest countries, the BWIs, engagement with the MDGs has been limited. The IMF in particular sees the MDGs as being of little relevance. A senior economist at the IMF commented in an interview, ‘The MDGs are European social policy. We [the IMF] don’t do European social policy’.¹³ The MDGs are meant to influence PRSPs and national plans, however, little has changed. Country-ownership has so far been limited, with PRSP content still largely dictated by the BWIs (Dijkstra, 2005; Stewart and Wang, 2004). That said, as so-called ‘third-generation’ PRSPs are emerging, there are suggestions that at least some countries will have a greater input into their contents and timeframe. Meanwhile the United Nations Development Programme has been pushing for national development strategies to be based on meeting the MDGs, rather than the more narrow targets of affordability and stability favoured by the IMF. However, within developing countries there is little evidence that political elites or middle classes have changed their perceptions or behaviours because of the MDGs.

Ten years into the MDGs’ 15-year lifetime, now is the time to begin thinking about what, if anything, should take their place when they expire. One approach would be to move away from the concepts underlying the MDGs (rules based management and a basic needs approach to development) to an alternative basis. The clearest contender for this would be a human rights based approach, as argued by Thomas Pogge (2008) and Irene Khan and David Petrasek (2009). This would build on (or resurrect) the ‘right to development’ that was agreed in the UN General Assembly in 1986 which recognised ‘an inalienable human right, of which every human being and all peoples are entitled to participate in, contribute to and enjoy economic, social, cultural and political development in which all human rights and freedoms can be fully realised’. There are positives and negatives associated with such a rights based approach. In principle, once granted the right confers obligations on the international community to ensure that it is acted upon. However, precisely for this reason rights based approaches have met with resistance from rich countries, which fear that it would be used to force them to provide ODA and other development-oriented policies. The rich countries have always been unwilling to take on enforceable obligations, as was seen in the MDGs. Since states, particularly the most powerful, cannot be compelled to do anything by the UN, conferring a right to development on the poor may well prove to be little more than a rhetorical gesture, to join the long history of such rhetorical gestures and broken promises. Furthermore, rights based approaches have met with technical resistance, particularly from neo-classical economists, who see the indivisibility of rights as making them ineffective for allocating limited resources. They ask, how can spending priorities be determined when human rights give all goals the same status?

¹³ Interview with David Hulme, August 2006.

Alternatively, it could be argued that the MDGs were simply too complicated, based on technical ideas about planning, managing and monitoring organisational performance rather than on political analyses about mobilising popular action and challenging social norms. What is needed to galvanise the international community into action is a stark simplification of the aims, through choosing one of the most basic and consensus-forming rights, such as the right to life. This simple focus on, say, reducing childhood mortality, has the benefits of being immediately understandable for citizens and unlikely to generate serious opposition. It would therefore have a greater chance of generating sufficient support to create a set of concerted campaigns or even a social movement behind the concept, and of generating enough international backing to become an international norm. Furthermore, despite the simplicity of such an aim, much of the content of the MDGs is captured implicitly, as child mortality can only be tackled by improving incomes, reducing hunger, enhancing gender equality, providing reproductive and other health services etc.

Whether or not the MDG concept of setting time-bound goals is retained, there are lessons that must be taken from the experience to date. First, any future goals should ensure that national goals are set at the national level, ideally as part of a democratic process, and are not set globally. Global goals have several flaws. Aggregating statistics masks the lack of progress in certain geographical areas, as noted above concerning \$1-a-day poverty. In addition, global goals often take no account of national characteristics, particularly the starting point from which improvements will be made. Thus, as Clemens et al (2007) argue, for the likes of Burkina Faso to achieve universal primary education by 2015 would require improvements in school enrolments that substantially surpass any historical experience, even of the most successful countries (notably South Korea). That they will fail to achieve this goal should not detract from the progress they have made and continue to make.

Secondly, the link between global goals and national development strategies has been problematic. The MDG mechanism of linking global goals to national policies through PRSPs must be reformed, and future goals linked much more directly to genuinely nationally-owned strategies. This would empower national groups rather than continue the present anti-democratic imposition of policy by the BWIs behind the smokescreen of country ownership. This demands, however, a substantial shift in the present ethos of control seen in the Bank and Fund. Such a shift is unlikely at present, both due to the institutional trajectory of the BWIs and due to the power dynamics lying behind these practices. Powerful political forces support the nature and ideological underpinnings of BWI oversight which are unlikely to be readily overcome.

A third lesson from the MDG experience is the need for more effective leadership in promoting the idea of global poverty reduction. Although Kofi Annan pushed the MDGs, he lacked the international standing needed to generate global engagement and attract media attention behind the Goals. Furthermore, his successor, Ban Ki-Moon, lacks charisma and appears to be much less committed to the MDG project. What is desirable, indeed what is needed, is a charismatic global leader, preferably with poverty reduction credentials, to advance the MDGs

or their successors. One candidate would be President Lula da Silva of Brazil, who has been highly successful in reducing poverty and inequality during his presidency, is a natural leader and is well respected by leaders in other countries, both developed and developing.

In sum, the rhetoric behind the MDGs has been much greater than the action. The opportunity created by the Millennium Moment, to mobilise countries and people against poverty has been lost. The MDGs have made a difference but they have not transformed the process of international cooperation – over aid, debt, trade and climate change – in the ways that their proponents had hoped. Setting global targets for poverty reduction will probably continue after 2015 but the key issue will be about whether these goals and targets can promote a new international social norm.

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Annex 1: The Millennium Development Goals

Goal 1: Eradicate extreme poverty and hunger

Target 1.A: Halve, between 1990 and 2015, the proportion of people whose income is less than one dollar a day

Target 1.B: Achieve full and productive employment and decent work for all, including women and young people

Target 1.C: Halve, between 1990 and 2015, the proportion of people who suffer from hunger

Goal 2: Achieve universal primary education

Target 2.A: Ensure that, by 2015, children everywhere, boys and girls alike, will be able to complete a full course of primary schooling

Goal 3: Promote gender equality and empower women

Target 3.A: Eliminate gender disparity in primary and secondary education, preferably by 2005, and in all levels of education no later than 2015

Goal 4: Reduce child mortality

Target 4.A: Reduce by two-thirds, between 1990 and 2015, the under-five mortality rate

Goal 5: Improve maternal health

Target 5.A: Reduce by three quarters, between 1990 and 2015, the maternal mortality ratio

Target 5.B: Achieve, by 2015, universal access to reproductive health

Goal 6: Combat HIV/AIDS, malaria and other diseases

Target 6.A: Have halted by 2015 and begun to reverse the spread of HIV/AIDS

Target 6.B: Achieve, by 2010, universal access to treatment for HIV/AIDS for all those who need it

Target 6.C: Have halted by 2015 and begun to reverse the incidence of malaria and other major diseases

Goal 7: Ensure environmental sustainability

Target 7.A: Integrate the principles of sustainable development into country policies and programs and reverse the loss of environmental resources

Target 7.B: Reduce biodiversity loss, achieving, by 2010, a significant reduction in the rate of loss

Target 7.C: Halve, by 2015, the proportion of people without sustainable access to safe drinking water and basic sanitation

Target 7.D: By 2020, to have achieved a significant improvement in the lives of at least 100 million slum dwellers

Goal 8: Develop a global partnership for development

Target 8.A: Develop further an open, rule-based, predictable, non-discriminatory trading and financial system. Includes a commitment to good governance, development and poverty reduction - both nationally and internationally

Target 8.B: Address the special needs of the least developed countries. Includes: tariff and quota free access for the least developed countries' exports; enhanced program of debt

relief for heavily indebted poor countries (HIPC) and cancellation of official bilateral debt; and more generous ODA for countries committed to poverty reduction

Target 8.C: Address the special needs of landlocked developing countries and small island developing States (through the Program of Action for the Sustainable Development of Small Island Developing States and the outcome of the twenty-second special session of the General Assembly)

Target 8.D: Deal comprehensively with the debt problems of developing countries through national and international measures in order to make debt sustainable in the long term

Target 8.E: In cooperation with pharmaceutical companies, provide access to affordable essential drugs in developing countries

Target 8.F: In cooperation with the private sector, make available the benefits of new technologies, especially information and communications

Source: UN (2008).

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The Brooks World Poverty Institute (BWPI) creates and shares knowledge to help end global poverty.

BWPI is multidisciplinary, researching poverty in both the rich and poor worlds.

Our aim is to better understand why people are poor, what keeps them trapped in poverty and how they can be helped - drawing upon the very best international practice in research and policy making.

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