

A need for a new narrative

The MDGs post-2015

The economic, food and climate crises are making it even harder to achieve the MDGs. But they also provide a unique opportunity to formulate a new narrative to guide global development after 2015.

August 04, 2009 [Ellen Lammers](#)

It is notoriously difficult to turn around an ocean liner. With just seven years to go before 2015, the benchmark year for achieving the Millennium Development Goals (MDGs), it is clear that the development community will have to address a similar challenge. Faced with the prospect of failing to deliver on many of the MDGs, how can we speed up the process of eradicating poverty *beyond* 2015?

To address this question, more than 100 international development experts – including policy makers from developing countries, the European Commission, the UN, the OECD and the African Development Bank, as well as NGO representatives and academics – gathered at the High Level Policy Forum ‘After 2015: promoting pro-poor growth after the MDGs’ held in Brussels on 23 June 2009. This was an important day en route to the MDG+10 Review Summit, which is scheduled for autumn 2010. 2010 will also mark five years since the publication of report of the Commission for Africa, *Our Common Interest*, which aimed to achieve a ‘strong and prosperous’ Africa. But while outcome measuring and monitoring of the MDGs is ongoing, a quick glance at the interactive maps of the online MDG Atlas tells us what is obvious even without intricate statistics: Africa’s distinguishing colour (not that of the winning team) stands out on all eight MDG indicator maps.

This was evident well before the financial crisis made itself felt. With poverty rates now rising fast as a result,¹ achieving MDG 1 is becoming less and less likely in some regions. At the same time, the economic crisis will probably mean that rich countries will make considerable cuts in their aid budgets. This new reality reinforces the sense of urgency to address ‘post-2015’– even if we know quite well that the much-needed solutions are not restricted to money matters alone.

In the two weeks leading up to the event, in its role as preferred media partner for the Brussels policy forum, which was a joint initiative of IDS, DSA, EADI, DFID and ActionAid, The Broker started gathering inputs from across the world, based on Andy Sumner’s article ‘Beyond 2015: rethinking development policy’ (*The Broker*, issue 14).² The contributions to the online debate, as well as blog postings by speakers at the Brussels forum, can be found at www.thebrokeronline.eu. This article takes stock of the discussion so far, and the new thinking on post-2015 that is unfolding.

Ethical imperative

Within the aid system, few policy ambitions are more widely discussed than the MDGs.³ Not only have the MDGs ‘changed the talk’, as David Sogge says, they have done more than just that. Charles Gore



(UNCTAD) describes them as ‘part of the emergence of a global consciousness in which people all over the world are seen as living in a single social space and the nature of their well-being is compared’.⁴ This impact on the normative level, observed Sakiko Fukuda-Parr (New School, New York), means that the MDGs have become an ‘ethical imperative’ that has been internalized worldwide. Salil Shetty, director of the UN Millennium Campaign, believes this has ensured a human development and poverty focus in important global processes such as the conferences in Monterrey and Doha, Paris and Accra.

Nevertheless, many forum participants were critical of the impact and the future of the MDGs. With regard to impact, significant progress has undoubtedly been made – due in particular to the rapid pace of development in heavyweight economies such as China and India. But a calculation by Emmanuel Frot (Stockholm School of Economics) shows that in sub-Saharan Africa, using 2005 as a base year, and given past poverty reduction performance, it will take another 131 years to reduce 1990 levels of poverty by half. Moreover, there are what Charles Gore calls ‘dysfunctional outcomes’. For instance, more and more children may be attending school, but if public budgets cannot be increased sufficiently to hire extra teachers, quality of education falls.⁵ But a more fundamental criticism concerns process and approach. Among the forum participants there was a general feeling – which is also evident in the online comments and blogs – that it is high time for a new paradigm, or a new narrative, to guide development policy post-2015.

Beyond development

‘The world has changed dramatically, as have the assumptions upon which the MDGs were based’, writes Brian Pratt (INTRAC). The economic crisis has driven home the message that growth cannot be taken for granted in either the developed or the developing world. Besides, David Grimshaw (Practical Action) reminds us, there is substantial evidence that economic growth does not reduce inequalities in the long run, and that the long-held belief in the ‘trickle down’ effect is an illusion.⁶ The economic crisis is just one of many pressing issues that demand a new narrative: the impacts of climate change on development, food and resource shortages, and the so-called ‘multi-polarity’ of our new world, exemplified in the demands of emerging economies such as Brazil, Russia, India and China – known as the BRICs – for more voting power in international bodies.⁷

Together, these crises have provided a unique momentum for change, the direction of which Enrico Giovannini (OECD) succinctly summed up as follows: ‘To find a new narrative we need to go beyond the concept of development. In this interrelated world we must head for an integrated approach, towards more equitable and sustainable well being in a global context’.

Leaving behind Washington plus

Before discussing the proposals for a new narrative, it is important to note that the MDGs themselves do not represent a development paradigm. They are a set of indicators embedded in a paradigm, that is, the neoliberal Washington Consensus, including its ‘plus’ version, the Consensus with ‘a human face’ that emphasizes social investments. Yet the current development paradigm still promotes close integration with the global economy through deep liberalization, both at and within national borders. As a result, David Sogge argues, poverty is actively being created. He writes that Western donors ‘continue marching in lockstep to the beat of Washington’s market fundamentalist drums’, and have good reason to do so if we

look at the direction of financial flows. In 2008, the recorded flow of finance from sub-Saharan Africa to rich countries, net of aid and foreign direct investment, was a breathtaking US\$126 billion. Sogge notes that 'the MDGs have a compensatory function, something with echoes of the past. The basic relationship of feudalism, as described by the French historian March Bloch, was predation compensated by charity'.

Andrew Fischer (ISS) refers to ActionAid's research on 'phantom aid', which shows that 'probably the majority of aid flows return to their donors, if ever they even leave the shores of their donor'. He urges academics to take this issue much more seriously, 'although perhaps their avoidance derives from fear of biting the hand that feeds them'.

But if we are to leave behind a development policy guided by the Washington Consensus, what alternative do we have to offer that holds more promise? Several new perspectives were put forward in Brussels, which essentially involve a combination of, on the one hand, a more global orientation – including setting up innovative global institutions – and on the other, a localization of development policies, or a true bottom-up approach after all.

Perspective 1: Global sustainable development

Charles Gore proposes that the MDGs should be re-embedded within a new paradigm based on global sustainable development. The challenge of finding effective and fair ways of mitigating and adapting to climate change, while at the same time reducing global income inequalities, 'is staring us in the face now, but will be shouting at us after 2015'. A new paradigm for development must integrate the earth's ecosystem – supported by Andreas Rechkemmer (International Human Dimensions Programme, IHDP) and others calling for green development policies – and will also require new global institutions. These can become responsible for new financial instruments and innovative sources of finance, such as taxes on global transactions. Such taxes could come to serve as new and predictable redistributive instruments to replace the unpredictable aid flows, said Claire Melamed (ActionAid). She and others used the term 'global welfare state' to indicate what we should be working towards.

Productive capacities

Charles Gore stressed that a future 'global sustainable development' paradigm cannot do without a focus on productive capacities. Perhaps 'the most important historical lesson of the last 50 years' has been that substantial poverty reduction occurs in countries that develop their productive capacities and at the same time expand productive employment opportunities. Several online contributors, including Rajwant Sandhu (Ministry of Panchayati Raj, New Delhi), Lawrence Bategeka (EPRC, Uganda) and Osmund Uzor (University of Bremen), agree: any future MDG framework must focus on the fact that people in developing countries need jobs. Most people would much rather work than be dependent on social security nets provided by the state – talk of which has been in vogue since the economic crisis. This brings us to one of the dysfunctional outcomes of the MDGs: many young people, who have attended school, and even university graduates, cannot find work. Rajwant Sandhu stresses the need for skills development programmes and makes a proposal: a new measure of progress for the MDG-plus agenda should be the coverage of a targeted proportion of people living below the poverty line through skills development programmes and allied support such as access to credit and spaces where they can market their goods and services. Gore proposes building productive capacities in the fields of (alternative) energy,

infrastructure and ICTs. Andrew Fischer warns against co-opting of this part of the poverty agenda in (Washington Consensus-inspired) strategies that ‘tend to focus excessively on education or microcredit, while neglecting serious consideration of employment generation, particularly employment with decent wages and with terms negotiated by strong labour organizations’.

Revisiting international trade policy will also be essential, say Bategeka and Grady, in order to remedy the MDGs’ major oversight, which Uzor describes as ‘a focus on social goals without addressing the macro-economic and growth problems in sub-Saharan Africa’.⁸

Perspective 2: Rights and equity

At the Brussels forum many participants argued that rights, justice and equity should be central to the new paradigm, rather than aid and charity. The urgency of such a change was highlighted by Louis Kasekende (African Development Bank), who pointed to the growing social tensions across Africa as a result of growing income inequalities. In her contribution to the online debate, Heather Grady (Ethical Globalization Initiative) noted the benefits of meshing the internationally agreed human rights framework with the MDGs. That would ‘put the spotlight on discrimination, for example, which accounts for the social exclusion that Realizing Rights and Amnesty International have noted as the most significant gap in the current MDG process’.

No power over, but power with

A focus on rights perhaps comes closest to the issue of power relations – one that should be central to the post-2015 narrative, but which received little attention in Brussels. Frans Bieckmann asks, ‘How do we position our idealistic crusade within the much broader global environment where powerful, and mostly hostile, interests dominate the scene?’ Several online contributors address this subject. Heather Grady writes that the ‘overly technocratic channelling of funds’ of the MDGs has been at the cost of ‘too little emphasis on the social, economic and political processes that constrain or empower impoverished communities to demand the changes that bring them out of poverty’. David Sogge urges the ‘after-2015’ discussion to go beyond a focus on the poor, ‘to grapple with the skewed relationships that continually reproduce poverty’.

Along the same lines, Fischer writes that co-optation of the poverty agenda within the current development paradigm ‘has drawn attention away from the responsibility of rich countries for the poverty in poor countries, not simply in terms of the altruistic prerogative to provide aid, but more importantly in terms of actually causing poverty’. James Taylor (CDRA, South Africa) adds a philosophical perspective: poverty is not the problem but a symptom. ‘The problem is that the dominant ways in which humankind organizes itself have a strong tendency to impoverish. I use the word “impoverish” as opposed to “poverty” to focus on the act of *making* poor rather than on its result’. While he acknowledges that the MDGs ‘direct us towards what we need to be acting on’, at the same time they ‘reinforce our past ways of acting that have contributed to causing the problems we now face’. Are there any solutions?

Taylor believes that the MDGs only have a chance of being realized if they are pursued through new forms of organization, ‘based on principles and practices that do not detract, diminish, exclude and control’. New development policies must start not with the poor but with the rich (who use their power to

shape the world) and direct more energy towards innovation, creativity and leadership, while relying less on management. And finally, they must use 'power with', not 'power over' in order to include and maximize the potential of all people.

Perspective 3: Local perspectives

If development processes have to change towards 'power with', then what urgently needs to be addressed is the fact that the MDGs underemphasize poor people's agency. In his article 'After 2015', Andy Sumner asked whether the focus of an MDG-plus agenda should be on global or local indicators.⁹ The forum participants were clearly in favour of 'localizing' the MDGs. Erick Roth (Catholic University, La Paz) endorsed the idea of 'human-centred indicators' and developing targets that reflect individual or group aspirations, expectations, beliefs, attitudes and values. In other words, subjective perspectives of well-being should be at the core of post-2015 thinking. Ali Abdel Gadir Ali (API, Kuwait) reminds us that Amartya Sen's 'freedom approach' to development is the supposed philosophical foundation of the MDGs: to judge the welfare of people in terms of 'substantive capabilities to choose a life one has reason to value'. Grady agrees: 'In my twenty-plus years of working at the coalface of development in Africa, Asia and the Middle East, I found that the dimensions of poverty indicated in Sumner's article – vulnerability, risk, security, dignity and voice – were more relevant for measuring the well-being of a household than the sectoral divisions (such as health, education, gender and environment) we use with the MDG approach'.

Replacing the current impersonal and aggregated indicators with indicators of well-being, does run some risks, Giovannini warns: 'You need a hard set of indicators of well-being. Governments will misuse them if they are too softly defined. Politicians always pick the data that suit them best'.

Open questions for the future

One question that remains open is how to include new concepts that reflect people's daily realities – such as well-being, or civic driven change¹⁰ – into a new development narrative, as well as how to translate these concepts into 'hard criteria' and practical strategies. Another 'process' area up for debate is how to do this in an open and inclusive manner. It is high time that the self-isolating development community started to look beyond its own boundaries in order to create 'coalitions of the willing', together with environmental and human rights organizations and trade unions, at both conceptual and strategic levels. And finally, how can such local strategies be matched with the truly global governance orientation that we must strive for?

In moving from process to impact, many argue that the MDGs have been too much of a counting and accounting exercise. Not only did the many cost analyses often rely on unrealistic assumptions, comment Frot and Bategeka, but this approach also led many to believe that all that was required to achieve the MDGs was more aid money.¹¹ For Stephan Klasen (University of Göttingen) the 'too literal' interpretation of the MDGs – targeting, costing, implementing – was 'a step backwards rather than a step forward'. So are there other ways to measure progress and overcome the quantity–quality divide? New technologies (web 2.0, social media) that open up exciting new avenues for gathering data and translating them into new knowledge deserve our interest. Perhaps such methods can help to focus future policies on the question of 'how we get there'. They would be a welcome change from the outcome focus that has characterized the MDGs so far, and which has led to their being dubbed the 'Most Distractive Gimmicks'.

See www.eadi.org for many interesting background papers prepared for the Brussels forum, as well as interviews and videos of the event.

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Source: <http://www.thebrokeronline.eu/en/articles/The-MDGs-post-2015#t1>

Footnotes

- 1. In mid-June 2009, the FAO announced that the number of people suffering from hunger had risen by 100 million in the previous year, the steepest increase ever, to just over 1 billion.
- 2. Andy Sumner (2009) 'Beyond 2015: Rethinking development policy', *The Broker* 14. <http://www.thebrokeronline.eu/en/articles/Beyond-2015>
- 3. They are easy for politicians to understand and for them to explain to others. Simple as that may sound, according to Brian Pratt (INTRAC), this should not be underestimated as an important role: 'We need a constituency for development and for the important issues that the MDGs represent'.
- 4. [See blog posting](#) by Charles Gore – Not 'MDGs or a New Paradigm' but 'MDGs in a New Paradigm'. The fact that the MDGs allow for comparison across time and across countries, is generally commended. Rajwant Sandhu (Ministry of Panchayati Raj, New Delhi) sees an important purpose in the country reports which are publicly available, and are open to comment and criticism.
- 5. Ali Abdel Gadir Ali (API, Kuwait) suggests that additional measures in an MDG-plus will need to reflect not only quantitative dimensions (e.g. school enrolment ratios) but also qualitative ones. Lawrence Bategeka (EPRC, Uganda) argues that in the provision of social services such as education, water and health care 'quality should be prioritized against quantity'. [See their comments](#)
- 6. See Richard Wilkinson and Kate Pickett (2009) *The Spirit Level: Why More Equal Societies Almost Always Do Better*, Allen Lane.
- 7. See the European Association of Development Research and Training Institutes (EADI) project, European Development Cooperation to 2020: www.edc2020.eu
- 8. Unfortunately, as Grady notes, the MDGs so far have done nothing to address egregious global trade policy.
- 9. Ali suggests supplementing existing targets with local indicators, while Frot argues that any targets will be much more useful if they are country-specific and take into account local conditions and past performance. [See their comments](#)
- 10. See the special report 'Deep democracy' (The Broker, issue 10), and the subsequent online debate. <http://www.thebrokeronline.eu/en/Debate/Deep-democracy>

- 11. Michael A. Clemens, Charles J. Kenny and Todd J. Moss (2004) *The Trouble with the MDGs: Confronting Expectations of Aid and Development Success*. Working Paper 40, Center for Global Development. <http://www.cgdev.org/content/publications/detail/2749>