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Simplicity, numerical targeting and consensus are not only the key strengths of the MDGs as a mobilizing tool. But used for planning, simplicity leads to reductioning, numerical targets to distortions, and consensus to maintain the status quo. We should beware of taking goals seriously, but not literally as hard planning targets.

In a recent UNICEF publication (2), economist Charles Kenny comments:

> *'It's worth starting with one undoubted success of the MDGs: we are still talking about them twelve years later………it is not hard to understand why: they were simple, consensual, numerical and time bound – truly a common, and commonly understood framework for development where success and failure was easy for even the mathematically challenged to follow.'*

In singling out *simplicity, numerical targets and consensus* as the key strengths of the Millennium Development Goals (MDGs), Kenny presents what has now become a widely held view, reflected for example in the UN Task Team Report (3). But before adopting these strengths to guide the formulation of a post-2015 development agenda and the Sustainable Development Goals, we should consider the full assessment of the MDG experience, whose design and use have generated a large body of critical literature. This literature shows that simplicity, numerical targeting and consensus are not only key strengths of the MDGs but also sources of their weakness.

Simplicity or reductionism

The MDGs are powerful because they marked a departure from characteristically overloaded UN development agendas. But there is a downside; simplicity is also reductionism that can lead to neglect and distortion. It is now acknowledged that the MDGs were too narrow and left out many priorities, such as employment and decent work, sustainability and climate change, reducing inequality and discrimination, all of which are among the top contemporary challenges in virtually all countries of the world, rich and poor (4).

Reductionism can distort planning and programming of resources and development efforts. For example, MDG2 reduces the education challenge to achieving universal primary school enrollment. This makes little sense in countries that have already met the goal, but require a greater focus on expanding secondary and tertiary education and improving quality and equity. Reductionist global goals simply do not reflect national priorities well.

Simplicity also leads to reductionist thinking about causes and solutions. Lessons from development experience, research and broad consultations in the 1990s led to the adoption of broad agendas at conferences held throughout the decade. Yet in each case, the MDGs narrowed them sharply to a single goal. For example, while the Beijing Conference on Women and Development agreed on a thirteen-point platform of action, the MDGs included only the goal of gender equality in primary and secondary school enrollment. Similarly, while the Cairo Conference on Population and Development adopted a broad agenda for sexual and reproductive health, the MDGs narrowed this to maternal mortality. Yamin and Falb have recently analyzed (5) the consequences and found that other important objectives, beginning with family planning, have been sidelined. The over-simplification determined funding and programming allocations, but also displaced concerns of choice, dignity and the complex social changes needed to advance sexual and reproductive health by framing the objective as a medical goal.

The reductionism resulting from 'simple' goals can have serious consequences if they are applied literally as a planning framework to set priorities and allocate resources, and to frame thinking about human progress. Surprisingly little systematic research has been conducted on these effects. Alicia Yamin and I have therefore initiated a research project with an international network of scholars – *The Power of Numbers: A Critical Review of MDG Targets for Human Development and Human Rights* - to examine the empirical and normative effects of the MDGs, goal by goal, on global and national priorities.

Numerical targets for priorities or distortion

Numerical targets make the MDGs more powerful than a statement of aspirations because they imply firm commitments to take action. Performance can be measured and people can hold governments accountable. Yet here again there are downsides. First, the targets, which were set at unrealistic levels for the poorest countries to achieve (6), have been sharply criticized for arbitrary and inconsistent methodology, as well as their resultant bias against Africa (7).

Second, the faulty target setting is compounded when 'meeting the 2015 goals' is used as a metric for evaluating country performance. Being 'on track' to meet the MDGs has widely been used as evidence of good government performance. Conversely, not being 'on track' to meet the goals is seen as evidence of incompetence and neglect. This makes no sense. Whether a country is on track depends as much on its starting point as its effort. A more appropriate metric would be the pace of progress, not shortfall from the target. By that measure, the best performers are countries far from achieving the goals, mostly in Sub-Saharan Africa (8).

Third, many targets created perverse incentives, from as bulldozing slums to meet the slums goal, to weight gain, ultimately resulting in obesity, to achieve the undernourishment goal.

Thus the numerical targets do not provide a reliable framework for priority setting and worse, can also distort governance performance judgment and create false incentives.

The MDGs built an unprecedented consensus behind a framework for international development cooperation that defined ending poverty as its over-arching purpose. The strength of the MDGs is that they prioritze the state of human well being and the need to act urgently against dire states of poverty. Yet here again, there is a downside: privileging consensus favours the lowest common denominator, an agenda that builds on status quo thinking. Thus, unsurprisingly, the MDGs' lack of ambition is often criticized, particularly for not aligning with the transformative vision of the Millennium Declaration (9).

While the MDGs derive from the Millennium Declaration, all that is transformative in that Declaration – the commitments to solidarity, equality, and the respect for human rights and democracy - has been left out. The human rights community has been particularly critical of the failure to incorporate important human rights norms such as equality, non-discrimination, participation and accountability. The MDGs leave out the most progressive elements of development conference agendas in the 1990s that reaffirmed education, food, health, women's equality, and other human development objectives as human rights. These agendas recognized the need for change in social norms and power structures to rid societies of poverty. The reproductive health agenda is an apt illustration; a major advance of the 1990s, it was deliberately (10) left out of the Millennium Declaration and the 2001 MDGs, and was only incorporated as a target in 2005 after much lobbying by key stakeholders.

A consensus agenda unavoidably reflects existing power structures. Here again, another major criticism of the MDGs is that they reflect a donor driven agenda, pushed by development agencies and bilateral donors as part of a new strategy for consolidating aid (11). A consensus agenda is therefore not necessarily in the interests of the Global South. This is clearly reflected in MDG8, strengthening global partnerships, which lacks accountability and quantitative targets for the Global North.

Avoiding the pitfalls of misuse

Simplicity, numerical targets and consensus are rightfully identified as core strengths of the MDGs, creating the power to communicate ending poverty as an objective and mobilizing support for this urgent global priority. But these strengths become weaknesses when the MDGs are used for other purposes. As a planning framework, the goals are too narrow and the targets poorly defined, susceptible to distorting priorities and evaluation of performance. As the recent Lancet editorial concluded, simplicity "has proven to be a doubled-edged sword [...] that has encouraged vertical programming". It encourages silo approached depending on technolgical solutions without attention to the need for social change (12). Similarly, as an accountability framework they distort performance assessments, highly biased against countries with the least means and largest challenges. This is not surprising, since global goals are set through a normative process of international negotiations to agree on common, global priorities, not a technocratic process of planning.

Yet the purpose of global goals was never intended to be to create a global central plan, but to create a normative framework with benchmarks for evaluating progress. While global goals define some important priorities, targets and indicators help monitor progress towards those aspirations (13).

Drawing on the success of the MDGs, many urge goal-setting to continue in the post-2015 development agenda. Goals remain a powerful communications tool that can raise awareness and galvanize collective global support and solidarity for urgent but neglected priorities. We should avoid the pitfall of overextending the MDGs beyond their purpose as global goals setting aspirational priorities, and the targets and indicators as benchmarks to monitor progress.

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Footnotes

1. An earlier version of this article was published in UNICEF's Research Watch, March 6, 2013.

2. Charles Kenny, What should follow? UNICEF Research Watch, http://www.unicef-irc.org/research-watch/Post-2015--What-Next-/894/ accessed March 20, 2013.

3. UN Task Team, 2012, Realizing the Future We Want: A Report to the Secretary General. http://www.un.org/en/development/desa/policy/untaskteam_undf/report.shtml accessed March 20, 2013.

4. Ibid

5. Yamin, Alicia and Katherine Falb, 2012, Counting what we know; Knowing what to count: Sexual and reproductive rights, maternal health, and the Millennium Development Goals, Nordic Journal of Human Rights, Special Issue: Quantifying Human Rights, Malcolm Langford and Sakiko Fukuda-Parr, eds. Vol 30:3 pp 350-371.

6. Clemens, M. A., Kenny, C. J., & Moss, T. J. (2007). The trouble with the MDGs: Confronting expectations of aid and development success. World Development, 35(5), 735–751.

7. Easterly, W. (2009). How the millennium development goals are unfair to Africa. World Development, 37(1), 26–35.

8. Fukuda-Parr, Sakiko, Joshua Greenstein and David Stewart (2013) How Should MDG Success and Failure be Judged: Faster Progress or Achieving the Targets? World Development 20:1; Hailu, D., & Tsukada, R. (2011). Achieving the millennium development goals: A measure of progress. International Policy Centre for Inclusive Growth Working Paper 78. Brasilia.

9. UN Committee on Development Policy (2012) Policy Brief UN Development Strategy beyond 2015; Charles Gore (2010) The MDGs, Productive Capacity and the Future of Development Cooperstion, IDS Bulletin, University of Sussex; Sakiko Fukuda-Parr (2011) Theory and Policy in International Development: human development and capability approach and the Millennium Development Goals, International Studies Review 131:1 122-132.

10. Deliberately dropped in relation to the International Development Goals set by the OECD DAC in 1996 which were succeeded by the MDGs. See history in Fukuda-Parr, Sakiko and David Hulme 2011 "International Norm Dynamics and 'the End of Poverty': Understanding the Millennium Development Goals (MDGs); Global Governance 17:1 .

11. Fukuda-Parr, Sakiko and David Hulme, op cit.

12. "Health and the post-2015 development agenda,"The Lancet, 2 March 2013: Vol. 381, Issue 9868, Page 699.

13. Fukuda-Parr, Sakiko (2013) "Global development goal setting as a policy tool: intended and unintended consequences", Working Paper, International Poverty Center, UNDP, Brasilia.

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