

PART III

Chapter 12

## Delivering the vision of the Millennium Declaration

by

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*Although the Millennium Development Goals (MDGs) have been highly effective in raising public awareness and galvanising political support for ending poverty, they have not delivered the vision of the United Nations Millennium Declaration: globalisation as a positive force for all, based on ethical principles of solidarity, equality, dignity and respect for nature. The MDGs have a narrow scope, lack a strategic approach and do not foster new thinking. To live up to the promises of the Millennium Declaration and tackle key contemporary challenges, the new international agenda should recapture the vision of the Millennium Declaration and its ethical commitments to shared values and human rights. To do so, it will need to encompass goals that can effectively communicate core aspirations, targets that facilitate monitoring and strategies for economic and social transformation.*

\* This paper draws on the work of the UN Committee on Development Policy and the author's work as a member of the Committee.

One of the most important achievements of the 20th century was reaching broad consensus on the idea that ending poverty is an urgent global priority (Fukuda-Parr and Hulme, 2011). The United Nations Millennium Declaration embodied international agreement that globalisation should be a positive force for all; this was a commitment based on the ethical principles of solidarity, equality, dignity and respect for nature (Box 12.1; UN, 2000). Yet when the MDGs expire in 2015, the promises of the Millennium Declaration will remain unfulfilled.

#### Box 12.1. **The universal values of the Millennium Declaration**

The Millennium Declaration's vision for the 21st century is one of shared social objectives based on universal values: freedom, equality, solidarity, tolerance, respect for nature and shared responsibility. The Declaration commits governments to pursuing a particular pattern of growth and development – one that is equitable and based on human rights:

- **Equitable growth.** The core theme of equality is interwoven throughout the document, not only equality within countries, but among them. This includes gender equality as well as equitable and non-discriminatory trading and financial systems, with special attention given to the poorest and most vulnerable people, and the multiple challenges faced by Africa. The Declaration goes beyond the economic concept of development “with equity”, seeking a world that is not only more peaceful and prosperous, but “just”.
- **Human rights.** International human rights principles are reflected throughout the Declaration, including the core principles of “human dignity and freedom, equality and equity” and the respect for economic, social, cultural, civil and political rights. It reaffirms commitment to the UN Charter, the Universal Declaration of Human Rights, the Convention on the Elimination of All Forms of Discrimination against Women, and the Convention on the Rights of the Child.

*Source:* UN (United Nations) (2000), *United Nations Millennium Declaration*, Resolution adopted by the General Assembly, United Nations, New York.

The extent of global poverty and the slow pace of progress in tackling it are unacceptable in today's world of prosperity. Since 2000, the benefits of global economic integration have been as unevenly distributed as in the previous decade – the gaps between the rich and the poor have actually widened within and between countries. The expiry of the MDGs in 2015 provides an opportunity to develop a new framework to realise the vision of the Millennium Declaration.

## Poverty eradication has not always been an explicit development goal

*The human right of freedom from want was neglected for many years*

Since the focus on “development” emerged in the late 1940s, eradicating poverty has been one of several important concerns, but not always the central objective, or even an explicit one. Development as an international project originated during the de-colonisation process with the aim of ensuring that newly independent countries would not only be politically, but also economically, self-sustaining. Thus, the key objectives were to transform the productive capacity of the economy by building infrastructure, technology, human capital and institutions (Gore, 2010). The key development objectives in the 1960s, 1970s and 1980s focused on economic growth and transformation, especially industrialisation; it was assumed that this growth would trickle down to reduce poverty and stimulate human development.

The adoption of the Universal Declaration of Human Rights in 1948 was motivated by aspirations for “freedom from want” along with “freedom from fear”; it recognised economic, social and cultural rights as well as civil and political rights. Nonetheless, the first set of rights, on freedom from want, were neglected – and sometimes rejected – by international human rights movements in the following decades. It was not until the last decade of the 20th century that international consensus emerged around ending poverty and pursuing the human right to freedom from want; this then became a key motivation for international development co-operation.

A number of initiatives during the 1990s built momentum towards this goal. The first was the series of UN development conferences on major global challenges that began with the Children’s Summit in 1990 in New York and the United Nations Conference on Environment and Development (UNCED) in Rio de Janeiro in 1992. Though each event had a specific origin and purpose, they shared a common theme: a goal of inclusive globalisation emphasising poverty reduction, equal rights and empowerment. As UN events go, these conferences were unusually open and were driven by a broad spectrum of stakeholders, including governments of the North and South, local and international civil society groups, UN and multilateral organisations, and development agencies (UN Department of Economic and Social Affairs, 2007). Civil society groups played a major role in pushing for a people-centred agenda. Governments of the South were also vocal in emphasising the obstacles that prevented them from reaping the benefits of the global economy. The declarations and action programmes that emerged from several of these conferences broke new ground in forging a progressive surge of recognition for the essential role of people and social change – or people’s empowerment – in development. For example:

- The Cairo Agenda on Population and Development (United Nations, 1994) highlighted how giving women a say in household decision making, and women’s rights more broadly, were central drivers of family planning and reproductive health.
- The Beijing Platform for Action broadened the women’s equality agenda to encompass gender empowerment and issues such as violence and political participation.
- The 1995 World Social Summit in Copenhagen became the first-ever UN conference to focus on poverty, addressing income poverty and inequality while integrating various sector-specific dimensions under a single umbrella.

In 1996, the OECD DAC policy document, *Shaping the 21st Century* took this international consensus a step further by proposing six International Development Goals (IDGs) centred on income poverty, education, gender disparity, maternal and child mortality, reproductive

health and environmental sustainability (OECD, 1996). This proved to be an effective way of communicating the purpose of development co-operation to the public in donor countries. The goals gained traction in raising the public profile of these challenges and mobilising political support (Ortiz, 2011).

The 2000 Millennium Declaration and MDGs assembled the numerous goals and agendas adopted during the 1990s – including the DAC IDGs – into a single poverty agenda or “super-goal” (Fukuda-Parr and Hulme, 2011). The Declaration was a turning point in achieving international agreement on poverty eradication as the central objective of international development, while the MDGs became a vehicle for deepening and spreading the consensus. They also helped people to conceptualise poverty as a multidimensional human condition, as opposed to a solely income-based problem. Nevertheless, as we shall see below (and elsewhere in this report), the MDGs have their own set of limitations.

### The MDGs have been a mixed blessing

While the Millennium Declaration was highly meaningful as an international agreement, the MDGs took poverty to the public; they raised awareness and galvanised political support for poverty eradication as the over-arching objective of international development. As Melamed remarks, no summit declaration is complete without a reference to the MDGs (Melamed, 2012). The eight goals – on income poverty and hunger, education, global diseases, maternal and child health, gender equality, environmental sustainability and global partnership – were highly effective in communicating the urgent need to improve the widespread and dehumanising conditions of poverty in the world. The MDGs have come to be used as standards for evaluating progress or justifying allocation of resources and effort. They are a reference point around which international development debates revolve, and have come to be used as a convenient shorthand to describe what we mean by development.

Whether and how the MDGs had any direct influence on poverty reduction since 2000 is impossible to establish, just as it is impossible to attribute outcomes to the MDGs amongst the myriad other contributing factors. Many poverty reduction efforts – such as increased social-sector spending by donor countries – began before 2000 (Melamed, 2012; Fukuda-Parr, 2012). What is clear, however, is that the MDGs helped to keep development and global poverty high on the list of international priorities and central to debates on policy; maintain support for development funding; and increase allocations for social investments, notably in health.

But the MDGs also sparked numerous controversies, in particular on the process through which they were developed. Criticisms include the assertion that their development did not involve adequate participation by civil society and governments; that the methodologies used to set the targets were inconsistent (Easterly, 2009; Clemens et al., 2007; Saith, 2006); and that measuring success by meeting targets does not adequately recognise the efforts of the countries that started out with the biggest problems – in fact, it penalises them (Fukuda-Parr et al., 2013). The relevance of the MDG targets to specific countries has also been questioned; depending on each country context they can be over- or under-ambitious – or simply off target – resulting in a distortion of national priorities. Underpinning many of these particular shortcomings are two fundamental characteristics of the MDGs: their narrow scope, and the lack of strategic measures for achieving them. I explore these two characteristics in the following sections.

## The MDGs exclude some key goals

*The simplicity of the eight-point MDG agenda is a key strength, but also a major weakness*

The simplicity of the eight-point agenda is a key strength of the MDGs, but also a major weakness. The eight goals leave out many priorities that are particularly critical challenges today, notably: the employment and growth that create decent jobs; climate change and environmental sustainability; the instability of global markets; and equity and inclusion in development processes. They also exclude the critical concept of empowering people in order to achieve equitable development – a theme that is central to the Millennium Declaration vision (Box 12.1; UN, 2000); the only goal with a clear focus on empowerment is MDG 3 (to promote gender equality and empower women).

The human rights community has been particularly critical of the MDGs (Darrow, 2011). While many of the MDGs overlap with economic and social rights, they do not reflect certain core principles, such as the concern for the most vulnerable and the excluded, the principles of equality and participation, and the standard of universalism. In short, setting goals that apply only to poor countries is at odds with the fundamental principle that all people, regardless of where they are born or live, have the same human rights. Achieving more consistent application of human-rights norms and principles would require goals that prioritise the eradication of discrimination, that recognise the universal nature of rights, and that incorporate participation as well as civil and political rights.

The MDG targets and indicators further narrowed the agenda, for example by reducing gender equality and empowerment to equality for girls and boys in primary and secondary education; what's more, education goals were limited to primary education (Chapter 4). Another example is the target to reduce maternal mortality, which led to the marginalisation of issues such as family planning (Yamin and Falb, 2012); it also overlooked the social determinants of reproductive health, such as women's education and their voice in decision making. The broader agendas for reproductive and sexual health agreed at the 1994 International Conference on Population and Development in Cairo (United Nations, 1994) built on research from the 1980s and 1990s that identified the social roots of poverty and exclusion, as evidenced in maternal health as well as in other areas, such as child mortality, hunger, under-nutrition and gender inequality.

In short, while the targets created incentives to address neglected priorities, they also created perverse incentives through over-simplification and a narrow focus. This over-simplification was an unintended consequence of the excessive use of global targets to shape planning, thereby removing issues from their context.

## The MDG process lacks a strategy

*Recurring global finance, food and energy crises underline the inadequacy of our policies and institutions*

The second, and related, drawback is the absence of strategy. Unlike other paradigms that drove shifts in thinking and policy – such as the basic needs concept of the 1970s, the liberalisation reforms in the 1980s or the human development approach of the 1990s – the MDGs did not have an accompanying policy approach. It is therefore not surprising that

while the MDGs raised awareness and support for development, they did not foster new and more effective strategies to achieve sustained economic growth and increase social equity and environmental sustainability. In the first decade of the 2000s, while progress was made in forging an international consensus on the purpose of development, there was little progress on how to achieve those objectives. Consequently, there has been little shift in international consensus on successful macroeconomic and development strategies. Although many national governments have undertaken important initiatives, the overall approach of the 1990s has continued, emphasising macroeconomic stability and a reliance on private investments as the principal drivers of growth, together with social sector investments to reduce poverty.

Social equity, empowerment and sustainable development require more than trickle down growth, as evidenced by the following:

- While there has been significant progress in reducing income poverty, this progress has been uneven and concentrated in a few countries; it disappears, for example, when China is removed from the global trend (United Nations, 2012; Chapters 1 and 2).
- While there has been progress on some goals, such as reducing child mortality and increasing access to sanitation, the same cannot be said for reducing hunger and maternal mortality, or increasing gender equality and strengthening global partnerships.
- While progress in income growth is to be lauded, it has been accompanied by rising inequality among and within countries (Ortiz, 2011; and Chapter 1).
- The environmental costs of our patterns of growth continue – including climate change, depletion of natural resources and decreasing biodiversity – because they depend on consumption patterns and technologies that perpetuate environmentally unsustainable practices (OECD, 2012b).
- Recurring global crises in finance, food, and energy continue to undermine stability and human security. These crises bring into sharp focus the inadequacy of our policies and institutions.

### **We need a coherent model for development**

We must renew our effort and approaches if we are to make real the Millennium Declaration vision. This will require an agenda to address key contemporary challenges, such as rising inequality – which is both unjust and a threat to social peace – persistent unemployment, especially for young people; instability in world financial, food and energy markets; and environmentally unsustainable growth patterns.

To achieve this, we need new policy approaches within a coherent model for development that will ensure the achievement of a broad set of human objectives while at the same time responding to the key global challenges listed above. What have we learned from the research about key elements of this model?

- Each country needs to start by identifying its own specific drivers of economic growth, which can, at the same time, also achieve social equity (especially through employment creation and social policy) and environmental sustainability (UN Committee on Development Policy, 2012).
- Proactive labour and industrial policies must play a key role in creating jobs and reducing income inequalities (Cornia and Uvalis, 2012).

- Social protection is an essential component of ensuring social equity, together with the right economic policies (Chapter 6).
- Global governance and co-ordination need to provide adequate space for national governments to pursue the policy measures necessary; finance global public goods (Chapter 13); and establish new instruments for – and a broader approach to – financing development (UN Committee on Development Policy, 2012; OECD, 2013).
- We need to address the social, economic and political determinants of poverty, building a development strategy for empowering people. Several decades of research tell us that the root causes of poverty lie in how societies are structured. Poor people and communities remain poor in part because of institutionalised discrimination that limits their opportunities (World Bank, 2006). The World Bank's 2000 *World Development Report* on poverty and the OECD Development Assistance Committee's Poverty Reduction Network have identified three pillars of an effective poverty reduction strategy: empowerment of people and communities; expansion of economic and social opportunities; and reduction of insecurity (World Bank, 2000; OECD 2012a).
- An empowerment strategy derives its ethical commitments from human rights, especially removing discrimination and injustice (Chapter 16, Global approach 5).

## Conclusions

*Simple goals and numeric targets cannot capture the complex transformational change needed to attack poverty*

The experience with the MDGs has highlighted the limitations of global goals in driving international development agendas. Simple goals and numeric targets cannot capture the complex transformational change needed to tackle poverty. The new framework needs to be broader, encompassing not only goals that can effectively communicate core aspirations and targets – and that facilitate monitoring – but also strategies for economic and social transformation.

More work is needed to allow countries of the South to benefit from global market integration and to protect them from its negative consequences. More also needs to be done to protect the poor against the consequences of climate change and global financial, fuel and food crises. Inclusive globalisation is a central theme of the Millennium Declaration: “We believe that the central challenge we face today is to ensure that globalisation becomes a positive force for all the world’s people. For, while globalisation offers great opportunities, at present its benefits are very unevenly shared, while its costs are unevenly distributed” (UN, 2000, paragraph 5).

The new international agenda should recapture the vision of the Millennium Declaration to end the scourge of poverty. It should be guided by the following principles: multidimensional and human-centred development, environmental sustainability, social justice and equality, and universality. The agenda should be applicable to all countries, not just the poorest. It should seek to achieve human resilience to economic shocks, violence, armed conflict, natural disasters, health hazards and seasonal hunger. Finally, the new agenda should be developed through inclusive and participatory processes, and there should be stronger accountability mechanisms in its implementation.

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