

Global goal setting: strengths as weaknesses

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Charles Kenny, an economist at the Center for Global Development, writes in his commentary in this Research-Watch¹ dialogue on post 2015 development agenda:

'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.'

Kenny reflects a widely held view. The ever expanding debates and literature on post-2015 goals, including the UN Task Team Report², identify these three elements of the MDGs: *simplicity, numerical targeting and consensus* as their key strengths. They were the key features that differentiated them from earlier UN efforts to set development agendas.

But before we jump to the conclusion that these three parameters should guide the post 2015 agenda, we should reconsider the full range of the MDG experience including the critical debates. Simplicity, numerical targeting and consensus are not only the key strengths of the MDGs but also sources of their controversy and criticism.

Simplicity, numerical targeting and consensus

First, simplicity. A short list of goals is memorable and easy to recite, and create a 'commonly understood framework' as Kenny puts it. A perennial problem with UN agreements has been the Christmas tree effect of overloaded agendas that reflect the demands of all the multiple stakeholders, resulting in an unclear set of priorities. In

¹ <http://www.unicef-irc.org/research-watch/Post-2015--What-Next-/894/>

² UN Task Team, 2012, *Realising the Future We Want: A Report to the Secretary General*. <http://www.unicef-irc.org/research-watch/Post-2015--What-Next-/894/> accessed November 25, 2012

³ The MDGs were first published in the 2001 report of the UN Secretary General, the Road Map report, setting out an implementation strategy for the Millennium Declaration which was adopted by the General Assembly in

² UN Task Team, 2012, *Realising the Future We Want: A Report to the Secretary General*. <http://www.unicef-irc.org/research-watch/Post-2015--What-Next-/894/> accessed November 25, 2012

that sense, the Millennium Declaration – where the MDGs originated³ - was particularly powerful, listing a mere six key goals for development and poverty reduction. But there is a downside. While this short list may be easy to communicate it is much too narrow in scope to capture the full range of important global priorities. Many dimensions of development were left out, such as inequality, climate change and sustainability, all of which are among the top contemporary challenges virtually in all countries of the world, rich and poor.

The simple, and by necessity, narrow list of goals, set globally, are not necessarily a sensible set of national priorities. The MDGs were sharply criticized as minimalist for middle income countries where the goals, such as primary education, had already been met. They were distorting, sidelining other priorities such as quality not enrolment quantity. Recall that developing country governments hesitated to embrace the MDGs when they were first introduced and many civil society groups were openly critical. This is now attributed to a faulty process of formulation that did not involve adequate consultation. But the problem is more fundamental, and is not a matter of process but a contradiction between global goals and the exigencies of defining development strategies. One-size-fits-all targets agreed globally do not make much sense as priority targets for every country or community. The challenges, opportunities, and priorities differ by context. MDG goals and targets – taken literally - do not make sense as national planning frameworks for programming investments and projects, and for guiding policy formulation. As Peggy Atrobus famously remarked, MDGs stand for ‘Most Distracting Gimmick’.

Even at the global level, the goals do not represent an adequate and complete agenda. The lessons of development experience and research over the 1990s and broad consultations led to complex agendas. For example, the Beijing Conference on Women and Development agreed on a thirteen-point platform of action. The MDGs only included the goal of gender equality in primary and secondary school enrolment. The Education for All Agenda was reduced to primary school enrolment; many experts in the field complain that other important priorities such as early childhood education and adult literacy were sidelined. Alicia Yamin and Katherine Falb has recently analysed⁴ the impact of the MDGs on advancing reproductive health. They argue that by selecting maternal mortality ratio as a target, other important objectives were sidelined. These are reasons to worry that the reductionism resulting from the ‘simple’ goals can have serious consequences if applied seriously to set priorities and allocate resources. Surprisingly little systematic research has been conducted on these effects. Alicia Yamin and I have

³ The MDGs were first published in the 2001 report of the UN Secretary General, the Road Map report, setting out an implementation strategy for the Millennium Declaration which was adopted by the General Assembly in 2000.

⁴ 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

therefore initiated a collaborative research project⁵ to examine the empirical and normative effects of the MDGs, goal by goal, on global and national priorities. The project involves 16 researchers from around the world, and collaboration with UNDP, UNOHCHR and the Friedrich Ebert Foundation.

The simplicity that makes the MDGs so powerful as a communications device is by definition reductionist. It is in direct contradiction with the lessons of development research and experience that has shown development to be complex, not simple challenges, requiring multi-faceted and location specific solutions. If there is one consensus on the other otherwise controversial lessons of structural adjustment programs and macroeconomic reforms in the 1980s and 1990s, it is that without national ownership, no development strategies can succeed.

Second, numerical targeting. Numerical targets for concrete, measurable achievements make possible to evaluate performance, draw lessons from successes and failures, and to hold responsible actors accountable for shortcomings. Yet the numerical targets have been sharply criticized by economists on a number of grounds. Easterly, Saith and others have argued that the methodology for defining targets was arbitrary, inconsistent and led to a bias against Africa⁶. A study by Clemens, Kenny and Moss⁷ shows that they were set at levels that are unrealistic and unlikely to be achieved by many of the poorest countries, notably those in Sub-Saharan Africa.

By simple common sense, it should be obvious that evaluating performance of countries with very different starting points is unfair for those that start far behind. Yet the UN, the World Bank and other monitoring reports track country progress by how they are 'on track' to achieving the target goal by 2015⁸. And it has become commonplace to see development trends being 'on track' to meeting the MDGs as evidence of good performance and the likelihood that the government is taking necessary action, living up to its obligations of meeting basic needs of people. Conversely, not being 'on track' to meeting the goals is seen as evidence of incompetence and neglect. This makes no sense. Whether a country is on track or not depends as much on its starting point as its effort. With coauthors Greenstein and Stewart⁹, I have argued that the metric for evaluating performance should not be the level achieved and shortfall from the target but on the pace of progress. By

⁵ The Power of Numbers: A critical review of MDG targets for Human Development and Human Rights. See description here http://www.hsph.harvard.edu/news/features/features/mdgs-research-yamin.html?__utma=1.255194494.1353860241.1353860241.1353860241.1

⁶ Easterly, W. (2009). How the millennium development goals are unfair to Africa. *World Development*, 37(1), 26–35.

⁷ 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.

⁸ UN monitor <http://www.mdgmonitor.org/> accessed November 25, 2012

⁹ 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 19-30; earlier version published 2010, IPC working paper 63, <http://www.ipc-undp.org/pub/IPCWorkingPaper63.pdf>

that measure, our calculations find that the best performers are Sub-Saharan African countries, mostly not 'on track'. Hailu and Tsukuda¹⁰ have also found similar results, using a slightly different methodology of calculation.

In these ways, the numerical targets are not a reliable framework for judging performance of countries. In fact, they can distort judgement. They create a measurement scale that is tipped against the countries carrying the heaviest loads with the biggest mountains to climb.

Third, consensus. The MDGs built an unprecedented consensus behind a framework for international development cooperation that defined ending poverty as its overarching purpose. The strength of the MDGs is that they reflect important human priorities that speak directly to the state of human well being and the need to act urgently against dire state of poverty. Yet privileging consensus favours the lowest common denominator, an agenda that builds on conventional and status quo thinking. So it is not surprising that another important critique of the MDGs is their lack of ambition, as an agenda that was not transformative in its vision. The human rights community has been particularly critical for failing to incorporate important human rights principles and standards such as equality and non-discrimination, participation and accountability. In fact, 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 stripped out. What remains in the MDGs is a basic needs agenda of the 1970s.

By design, the MDGs were intended to reflect, in an international agreement, the priorities over which there was broadly shared agreement. Priorities that meet the test of international consensus amongst states, and tend to be the minimum common denominator, and an essentially conservative agenda. They leave out priorities that are in the *avant garde* of conventional thinking, needed to advance development at an accelerated pace. The reproductive health issues are an apt illustration. The 1994 International Conference on Population and Development held in Cairo agreed on a broad agenda that reflected progressive thinking building on most recent research and evidence. The agenda emphasized not only the need for medical services but also the agency of women in having a say in decision making. The agenda emphasized this as a human right. Yet the reproductive rights agenda was deliberately left out of the Millennium Declaration and the MDGs issued in 2001, and was only brought back in as a target in 2005 after much lobbying by key stakeholders.

¹⁰ Hailu, D., & Tsukada, R. (2011). Achieving the millennium development goals: A measure of progress. International Policy Centre for Inclusive Growth Working Paper 78. Brasilia, Brazil: United Nations Development Programme.

A consensus agenda is also one that reflects the existing structures of power that drive development agendas. Development is a field of contestation on ideas about priority objectives and the means to achieve them. The political economy that drives consensus ideas will tend to embed the interests of the most powerful stakeholders. Here again, another major criticism of the MDGs is that they reflect a donor driven agenda, and were driven by the development ministers of donor countries and the leadership of donor agencies such as the World Bank as part of a strategy for consolidating development aid into the new decade¹¹. A consensus agenda is therefore not necessarily one that is in the interests of the Global South. This is clearly reflected in the weak accountability framework for the Global North in the design of the MDGs where the goal for global partnerships (goal 8) states objectives for trade, aid and technology without any measurable targets.

Four interpretations of global goals

Numerical targets can be interpreted in four ways: as planning targets for allocating resources; as benchmarks for monitoring progress; as commitments against which responsible parties should be held accountable; and as a messaging device to communicate the aspirational goal in order to mobilize attention and support.

The MDGs have been interpreted in all four of these ways. But much of the criticisms refer to their use as planning targets, especially applied at the national level. If the MDGs are hard goals agreed by Prime Ministers and Presidents, each country has committed to them – surely they should become national planning goals. This is a compelling logic. But in fact, this logic is a pitfall. Global goals do not make a reliable planning framework.

To begin with, these targets were not set through a planning methodology and process. National planning targets are set through a process of national negotiations amongst sectoral ministries and their constituencies, led by technocrats in the Ministries of Planning and Economy, using economic and technical methodologies for assessing priorities, resource availability, and investment effectiveness. The MDGs were set by UN data specialists to reflect the key objectives set out in the Millennium Declaration. The Declaration was agreed through a process of international political negotiations amongst national governments, led by Ministries of Foreign Affairs.

No wonder that by the economic standards of planning methodology, the MDGs are sharply criticized. And when used as planning targets, they can distort national

¹¹ In a coauthored article with David Hulme, I have traced the process that drove the agreement on the MDGs. We argue that the MDGs were primarily motivated by the need to find a new narrative on aid in the face of declining political support in the donor countries and the controversies over structural adjustment. See 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

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priorities. When used as an accountability framework at national levels, they can be biased and unfair to the poorest countries with the biggest challenges.

Avoiding the pitfalls of misuse

Drawing on the success of the MDGs, many urge goal setting to continue in the post 2015 development agenda. Yes, this would be worthwhile because goals are a powerful communications tool that can raise awareness and galvanize collective global support and solidarity for urgent but neglected priorities. The numerical targets make in concrete terms what we want to achieve, and they provide benchmarks for monitoring progress. But we should not fall into the pitfall of interpreting these global targets as national planning and accountability frameworks.