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The MDG Hunger Target and the Competing Frameworks of Food Security

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ABSTRACT *This paper explores the effects of global goals on policies and ideas in development. The paper analyzes the consequences of the Millennium Development Goal hunger target on international development priorities and discourse. We argue that while the target did little to mobilize support to hunger as a global priority, it had more important implications for reshaping food security strategies. It reframed the narrative of hunger around under-nutrition targets that could be reached through narrowly focused and targeted interventions. Since 2000, strategies adopted by high-profile and well-resourced global initiatives emphasize short-term achievements of results, technological solutions, and the important role of the private sector. This contrasts with the 1996 World Food Summit consensus that conceptualized food as a human right, and food security as a multi-dimensional challenge emphasizing social, economic and political change. Although global goals focused on outcomes are intended to be neutral with respect to the strategic means to achieve them, the hunger target reframed the hunger challenge as a consumption issue amenable to short-term, technology-driven solutions. Left out of this frame are the long-term solutions to access, dependence on wage exchange, smallholder production, and social transfers. The choice of indicators also contributed to this simplification, marginalizing issues of vulnerability and instability in access, nutritional quality, and the host of social and political constraints. The target illustrates the power of target setting in framing the international development policy discourse.*

KEYWORDS Millennium Development Goals; Hunger; Food security; Human rights; Human development; Capabilities

Introduction

In a recent paper on the Millennium Development Goal (MDG) for maternal mortality, Yamin and Falb (2012) highlight the powerful effects of MDGs in drawing attention to neglected objectives but also their potential to distort development priorities and redefine norms. While the goal cast a spotlight on maternal mortality as a priority, it also cast a shadow on the broader agenda for sexual and reproductive rights. Moreover, the selection of indicators favored a particular conception of sexual and reproductive health, undermining human rights principles. These effects were not the policy objectives of the MDGs. They are unintended consequences of goal setting. In another article, one of the authors of this paper draws on recent social science literature on quantitative indicators in governance¹ to develop a conceptual framework for tracing the intended and unintended effects of the MDG targets on policy priorities and development thinking (Fukuda-Parr 2014). In brief, indicators can have two types of effects: “governance effect,” or shifts in policy and programs; and “knowledge effect,” or redefining concepts and norms (Davis et al. 2012). While goals are set as proxies for complex social priorities—such as ending hunger or reproductive health—the indicators take a life of their own and used as planning targets, rather than proxies. Moreover, indicators come to be used as shorthand for defining the

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broader concept and come to redefine complex concepts (Porter 1994). These effects of indicators can be perverse, when proxy indicators come to drive policy priorities and conceptual thinking as quantification inherently involves simplification, reification and abstraction of phenomena that are complex, intangible and locally specific.

The purpose of this paper is to explore these “governance” (policy) and “knowledge” (norms and concepts) effects of the MDG hunger goal (Goal 1: to eradicate extreme poverty and hunger) and its target (Target 1C) “to halve the proportion of people suffering from hunger between 1990 and 2015,” and the two selected indicators to measure progress: the prevalence of underweight children less than five years of age, and the proportion of the population below minimum level of dietary energy consumption. We evaluate these effects from the perspective of human rights and human development. We find that the goal did little to draw attention to hunger as a global priority. On the other hand, we argue that the goal had an important role in shaping a new narrative of hunger and framing policy responses that are more narrowly focused on short-term gains that characterize the recent international initiatives, displacing attention to the systemic causes of long-term food insecurity and the need for a broad based, multi-sectoral strategy.

Research for this paper included interviews with individuals from stakeholder organizations, many of whom have played leading roles in international policy debates on food and hunger strategies since 2000.²

Diverse Conceptions of Hunger and Food Security

One of the most striking aspects of international debates about hunger and food security is the fragmentation into competing visions of how the problem is conceptualized and strategies to address it. For most of the early twentieth century, hunger was conceptualized as a problem of supply shortages at the national and global levels. As hunger persisted even when global production increased, this view was challenged by many food security and policy experts (Hoddinott 1999; Longhurst 1986; Maxwell 2001; Maxwell and Frankenberger 1992; Sen 1982), and hunger came to be understood increasingly as a problem of distribution rather than production, and of access rather than supply, with a focus on human well-being rather than national security. Since the 1980s a human-centered concept of food security has gained influence, reflected in the consensus international definition adopted in the 1996 World Food Summit (WFS) Declaration that states: “Food security exists when all people, at all times, have physical and economic access to sufficient, safe and nutritious food to meet their dietary needs and food preferences for an active and healthy life” (FAO 1996a).

The work of Amartya Sen (1982) and international human rights norms provide an intellectual and ethical foundation for the human-centered approach. Sen showed that famines occur not because of supply shortages but because of households’ lack of access to food, and identified three means of access—or entitlement: wage exchange, social transfers, and own production. Food insecurity results from individuals losing one or more of these entitlements to food. International human rights law defines the right to food as economic and physical access, and emphasizes the importance of cultural appropriateness, nutritional adequacy, and stability of access (UN CESCR 1999). As the Special Rapporteur on the right to food points out, the right to food “is *not* a right to a minimum ration of calories ... or a right to be fed. It is about being guaranteed the right to feed oneself ...” (De Schutter 2012).

Another important conception of food security that dominates civil society positions is “food sovereignty.” Articulated by Via Campesina, a network of “peasant movements,” the essential component of food security is the autonomy of communities to determine their own food systems.³ Food sovereignty advocates promote agro-ecological technologies and the peasant livelihoods as a matter of social justice in the context of global food systems and the spread of corporate power that is encroaching on their livelihoods and nature (Pimbert 2010).

These conceptions of food security drive distinct policy strategies. The supply perspective prioritizes production and output with investments and technological innovation playing a central role. The food

sovereignty approach drives a political economy analysis and strategy. The human-centered approach advocates broad, multi-dimensional strategies to empower household access through wage exchange, own production and social transfers. This approach aims at multiple objectives simultaneously including: availability (supply of nutritionally adequate and culturally appropriate food through domestic agricultural production and imports); access (economic and physical related to wages, own production and social transfers); utilization (ability to achieve nutritional well-being through adequate diet as well as non-food inputs such as sanitation, clean water and healthcare); and stability of access (absence of vulnerability to shocks and sudden loss of access). The human-centered analysis of food security extends beyond short-term causes such as drought that create supply shortages or sharp price fluctuations to long-term systemic causes and advocate policy responses that address structural causes of hunger and enhance entitlements of the food insecure.

Origins of the Hunger Target as an International Norm

The goal to eradicate hunger, included in the Millennium Declaration (United Nations [UN] 2000) and the MDGs (UN 2001), builds on a long history of commitment by the international community, going back to the UN Declaration of Human Rights (UN 1948).⁴ Target 1C, “to halve the proportion of people who suffer from hunger” (UN 2000), originated in the 1996 WFS held in Rome, which adopted the goal of halving the number of undernourished people by 2015 as an overarching goal in its Declaration and Plan of Action (FAO 1996). The modification of the target from the *number* to the *proportion* of people has never been explained. In principle, the MDGs were intended to be a select set of the goals already agreed at the 1990s conferences. One possible motivation was a deliberate effort to make the goal more achievable as the trends over the 1990s were such that there was little likelihood of the goal being achieved. Another reason might have been a simple oversight in the absence of FAO in the elaboration of the goals.

While the numeric target was important, it was a just one element of a broad agenda adopted at the 1996 WFS, and other international consensus agendas on hunger, notably at the 1992 International Conference on Nutrition (ICN). The ICN recognized access to sufficient food as a human right and nutritionally adequate and safe food as a necessary precondition for many other development objectives (FAO and WHO 1992). It emphasized the central role of national governments and required them to prepare national plans that would identify the structural causes of hunger and malnutrition and would include crop diversification programs and food production practices that would allow for greater self-sufficiency, increased nutritional value, and greater dietary diversity. The WFS plan of action also addressed systemic factors that are at the root of food insecurity including household and gender inequality, under-nutrition, unemployment and unequal access to productive resources, environmental constraints such as land degradation, unequal trade, and various other social dimensions.

Although the two plans of action approach food security from different lenses, both explicitly relate to international human rights norms and standards, and recognize the “four pillars” of availability, access, nutritional adequacy/utilization and stability (FAO Committee on World Food Security [FAO-CFS] 2012). They adopt human-centered strategies addressing systemic causes with commitment to a country-specific and participatory approach. An analysis of the Plans of Action shows numerous mentions of the human rights/human development priorities, including accountability, participation, economic access, sustainable production, vulnerability, and the rights of disadvantaged groups, in a marked contrast to food production and supply (Table 1).

The multi-dimensional approach to hunger was further reinforced with the agendas adopted at several other conferences on related themes, namely Children, Human Rights, Environment, Population, Women and Social Development.

The ICN and WFS were not the only sources of the MDG hunger goal. The International Development Goals, set by the OECD DAC in 1996 (OECD 1996) in their vision for the twenty-first century, *Shaping the Twenty-first Century*, were an important antecedent for the MDGs but approached hunger in a different way. The International Development Goals did not include a hunger goal but contained a child mortality indicator intended to measure nutrition (OECD 1996, 10). The DAC document

Table 1. Human rights and human development principles in the ICN and WFS plans of action

Topic	Number of References	
	ICN	WFS
Production/availability	10	16
Economic access	15	38
Physical access	6	18
Utilization	21	31
Distribution/access for disadvantaged groups	52	60
Vulnerability	35	29
Participation/accountability	42	70
Education/capacity-building	54	64
Sustainability	8	44

published in May 1996 did not mention the commitments to food security that were gaining momentum at the time, nor the multi-dimensional approach to addressing structural causes of hunger as a problem of access that drove the WFS held in November of the same year. Instead, it commended international efforts towards increasing agricultural productivity as the major contributor to increased global caloric consumption and declines in malnutrition (OECD 1996, 7). The divergent conceptions of food security perhaps reflect the epistemic communities involved in the two sets of processes. While the WFS and ICN were driven by the food and nutrition community, led by the FAO, WHO, UNICEF, ministries of agriculture and health, and civil society groups and academics specializing in these issues, the DAC process was led by ministers of development in donor countries, ministers of finance, foreign affairs and planning in developing countries, and by DAC officials and staff.

Governance Effects: Consequences on Policy Agendas

In the broad context of international agendas, food security—including agriculture and nutrition—has long been a neglected priority. The MDG hunger target has had little effect in drawing attention to this issue and raising its profile while the 2008 “food crisis” led to a resurgence of attention.

Hunger as an International Policy Priority, 1960s to 2008

Hunger was an international priority in the 1960s and 1970s. The concern was driven by a supply problem; as population growth rates began to surge and outstrip production, the prospect of mass hunger loomed, particularly in South Asia, as both a humanitarian challenge and a threat to political stability. Major efforts were launched to increase production of basic staple crops in the developing world—largely driven by a technological approach to production increases—now known as the Green Revolution. Attention to “hunger” waned as food supplies expanded and the demographic transition began to take its course in Asia, and world cereal prices stabilized at low levels. India, Thailand, and other countries that were previously on the brink of major food shortages soon became self-sufficient and produced surpluses for export. Aid funding for agriculture dropped precipitously, from about 20% in the early 1980s to a low of about 4% in 2007 (World Bank 2007, 41; UNDP 2003, 92). Allocations in national budgets also declined (World Bank 2007), consistent with the liberalization agendas of those decades.

Outcomes have also been disappointing. Since 1990 the proportion of undernourished people in developing countries declined from 23.6 to 14.3% by 2013. Based on this measure, the hunger goal is recognized as “off track” relative to the target, having reduced the proportion of undernourished people by 39% with only two years to go before the 2015 deadline (FAO 2012). The total number of undernourished people has declined from 980 million to 852 million, only a 13% reduction in the

number of hungry people (FAO 2012). Progress has been particularly slow in the least developed and low-income countries (FAO 2012).

Following the launch of the MDGs, a few important international initiatives were initiated. The African Union adopted the 2003 Maputo Declaration that established the Comprehensive Africa Agriculture Development Programme. Referring specifically to the MDG hunger target, it commits to increase public investment in agriculture to 10% of national budgets and to grow agricultural gross domestic product by 6% per year (African Union 2012). The Maputo Declaration and the Comprehensive Africa Agriculture Development Programme were supported by the G8, at the 2005 Gleneagles Summit, where donor governments committed to strengthen support for agricultural investments in the region (G8 Information Centre 2013). In 2006, a major international initiative, the Alliance for Green Revolution in Africa (AGRA) was launched, with the vision that “Africa can feed itself and feed the world” (AGRA 2011).

Notwithstanding these initiatives, the MDGs and mobilization around poverty as a priority did not propel attention to food and nutrition in the way they did to health and education objectives. The trend is most visible in donor funding; food and agriculture related to Official Development Assistance (ODA) remained a low priority into the 2000s. Between 1995 and 2003, commitments to the agriculture sector declined by 14% in real terms, and 57% as a percentage of total ODA. Funding for food security programs and rural development declined, while basic nutrition continued to be neglected. Emergency food aid was the only sector to increase as a proportion of total ODA, the largest jump occurring from 2001 to 2003 was mostly for the emergencies in Iraq and Afghanistan. Development assistance to agriculture did not begin to increase until 2006, as shown in Figure 1.

The 2008 Food Price Crisis

The real turning point in putting food security as a top international priority came with the 2008 “food crisis.” As prices increased, food riots and protests took place in a number of countries and attracted global recognition (Lagi et al. 2012; Arezki and Brückner 2011). Food access became a global concern that propelled political attention. Such a “crisis” compelled an urgent short-term response on the part of all international and national institutions involved in the governance of food provisioning, as well as reflection on the longer-term strategies to focus on food security as a challenge of itself requiring its own strategy, not a by-product of reducing poverty or promoting economic growth.

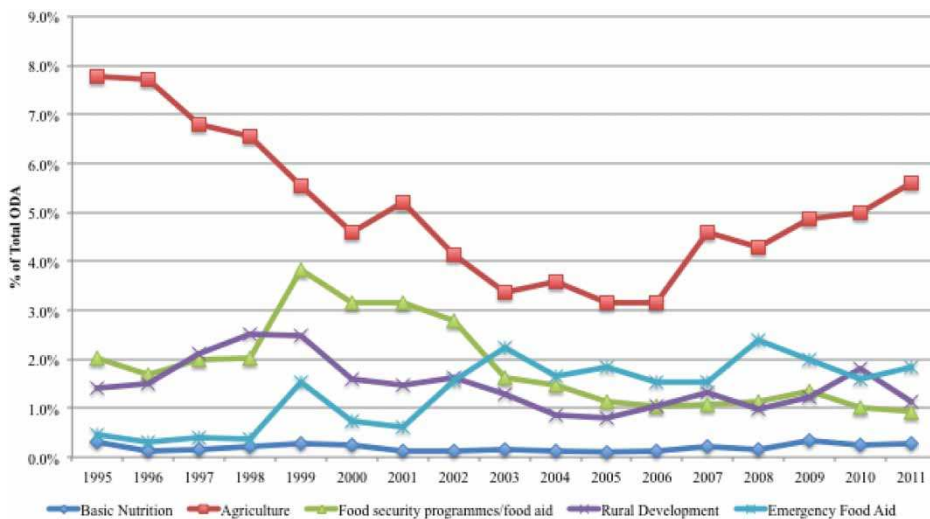


Figure 1. ODA to Food and Nutrition Sectors (all donors, percent of total ODA), 1995–2011.

Source: OECD DAC (2012)

The international community responded with several coordinated policy initiatives. The UN Secretary-General created the High Level Task Force on the Global Food Crisis in April 2008, which produced the Comprehensive Framework for Action in July of that year. The CFS was restructured in 2009 to include broader representation from civil society, philanthropy and the private sector, and to establish the High Level Panel of Experts on Food Security and Nutrition. The 2008 G8 Summit was the first to have a distinct statement concerning food security. It supported the Comprehensive Framework for Action and committed to making food security a priority, and announced the following year the L'Aquila Food Security Initiative and the Global Partnership for Agriculture and Food Security (G8 Information Centre 2013). Ensuing G8 summits continued to emphasize food security. It formed the Global Agriculture and Food Security Program, a multilateral private–public initiative coordinated by the World Bank and charged with addressing “the underfunding of country and regional agriculture and food security strategic investment plans ... and to make aid contributions toward the achievement of MDG 1.” Scaling Up Nutrition (SUN) was officially launched in 2010 as a multi-stakeholder initiative for maternal and child nutrition. Advocating for SUN, World Bank Managing Director Wheeler referred to nutrition as the “forgotten MDG” that was “often unrecognized, rarely acted upon, and grossly underfunded” (World Bank 2009, 4).

Why the MDGs Fell Short in Mobilizing Support

Why did the hunger goal have little impact as a mobilizing tool?⁵ First, the food, agriculture and nutrition communities did not campaign aggressively on the hunger target. There had been a momentum built around implementing the 1996 WFS commitments that engaged the FAO and the rest of the constituency. The MDGs came out of left field, and there was persistent consternation at revising the target to halve the *number* of people undernourished to the *proportion* of people.⁶ This was criticized as down-sizing the ambition as the number could grow even if the proportion declined in a context of a growing population (OHCHR 2008). International non-governmental organizations, civil society groups, and development organizations did not embrace the MDGs overall. However, the food and nutrition community did not actively reject the MDGs, but made best efforts to make use of them in promoting food security. Some found the hunger goal useful in advocating for more support for what they were already doing. For example, Kevin Cleaver, the Director of Agriculture of the World Bank at the time, used the MDGs in arguing for more support to small-scale farmers as a poverty and hunger strategy within the institution, in an environment that was dominated by macroeconomic reform agendas and program lending.⁷

The MDGs were not intended to replace—but rather supplement—the WFS and other conference agendas. But in fact the MDGs confused the momentum of the WFS process,⁸ in part because it brought in a revised goal, but also because the MDGs and the Millennium Declaration had been set in New York without the participation of the Rome-based agencies that led the WFS. The MDGs involved a different process and a different set of stakeholders from the 1990s development conferences. The CFS was particularly critical of the lack of attention given to agricultural development and food security in the International Development Goals, the MDGs, and in the G7/8 and G77 meetings (FAO-CFS 2001, paras 38 and 45). Overall, the WFS constituency did not feel ownership of the MDGs, endorsing it as a matter of institutional loyalty to the UN and the Secretary General.⁹

Second, perhaps the hunger target did not receive visibility in global debates because it was incorporated into MDG 1 and was overshadowed by the income poverty component of the goal. Much of the publicity on MDG progress does highlight the income goal, in part because it was achieved at the global level. In contrast, the hunger target is far from achieved at the global level (UN 2013).¹⁰

Third, there may be some entrenched constraint to prioritizing hunger—whether it is nutrition, agriculture, or rural poverty—amongst many other challenges because it would require intervention in the market. While the achievement of many other MDGs depends on provision of public services such as in schooling and healthcare, food security requires increasing incomes of the poor and the stabilization of food prices. Liberalization programs of the 1980s and 1990s withdrew state intervention from these areas.

Knowledge Effects: Consequences on Thinking

While the MDG hunger goal did have much of a policy effect, it was an important part of a new narrative of ending hunger. In a departure from the human-centered approach of the WFS that emphasized a broad multi-sectoral strategy to address the systemic social causes of food insecurity, the new narrative defines the objective in terms of achieving measurable outcomes and promotes narrowly focused interventions for gains in production or nutrition.

Recent International Initiatives

Since the 2000s, new trends in international policy debates emphasize technological innovation and private investments as key drivers of productivity increases, and economic liberalization as the enabling environment. The strategies of the largest international initiatives, AGRA and SUN, are emblematic of the outcome-driven, short-term, gain-oriented thinking that frame the new international development efforts. A majority of AGRA's total commitments are allocated to the seed research and development program, focused on introducing higher yielding seeds and fertilizers. The "policy and partnerships" program is principally focused on relaxing government restrictions to allow for improved seed varieties, reducing transaction costs, facilitating open markets, and securing land and property rights (AGRA 2013a). "Early success" stories noted in AGRA's policy program review included liberalization of seed policies in Ghana and Tanzania and the removal of the maize export ban in Malawi (AGRA 2013a).

In nutrition, the SUN initiative is intended to be a mechanism for gathering stakeholder groups to work towards comprehensive policies that include businesses, governments, civil society, donors, and international organizations (SUN 2012). It is heavily geared towards identifying quick solutions that achieve short-term results. It proposes "specific nutrition interventions" such as fortification of foods and micronutrient supplementation, both of which may produce short-term solutions to acute malnutrition but are unlikely to address the structural causes of such conditions. Although the SUN initiative emphasizes participation and accountability, the solutions to hunger do not lie in the hands of the people themselves but in what others can provide them. SUN is very much on board with the Copenhagen Consensus strategy to allocate resources to objectives that can be achieved in the shortest possible time period (Copenhagen Consensus Center n.d.). Indeed, the Copenhagen Consensus is cited in many SUN publications.

These approaches pay little attention to the distributive consequences and the broad economic and political causes of hunger and poverty that have been emphasized since long before the MDGs were introduced (Maxwell and Frankenberger 1992; Longhurst 1986; Hoddinott 1999). Not surprisingly, they have drawn controversy. Civil society groups argue that many of the initiatives are motivated by private industry interests rather than food security. Wise and Murphy (2012, 17) question the intentions of agricultural investments from governments and private donors alike. GRAIN, an advocacy group for small-scale farmers, found that the large-scale African land purchases since 2008 have been used predominantly to produce export crops, leaving African farmers without land to grow food staples intended for domestic consumption (GRAIN 2012).

Other recent international initiatives have also drawn controversy. GRAIN further argues that the G8's New Alliance for Food Security and Nutrition rationalized land grabs under the Principles for Responsible Agriculture Investment, which was drafted by the World Bank and supported by the G8 and G20, but rejected by the CFS and widely criticized by many international civil society groups for being exploitative and largely in favor of profit interests rather than developmental objectives. Similarly, the liberalization policies promoted by AGRA are aimed at increasing production but do not address distributional consequences and multi-dimensional causes of food insecurity. As a result of this approach, AGRA has received harsh and widespread criticism from advocates of food security (Patel 2013).

These trends in international initiatives for global hunger also reflect a broader trend in the aid environment in the 2000s—when development programs became skeptical of old approaches that

supported capacity-building of government institutions. The donor community turned to greater involvement of the private sector and away from support to national public-sector institutions. Greater demand for accountability has meant bilateral donors and international agencies came under pressure to “show results” and to follow “results-based management” in a climate of skepticism about the effectiveness of and funding for aid. New actors that emerged, especially the Gates Foundation, and outspent public investment initiatives introduced new approaches to project delivery involving the private sector, and methods such as social entrepreneurship and impact investing. The new thinking also emphasizes the important role of technological solutions that deliver visible results, fast.

Taking this vertical, short-term, results-oriented approach to solving the problem of hunger and under-nutrition may fulfill the 2015 hunger target, but it would not address the structural causes of hunger. Without strong social support for the human rights principles of accountability and participation, and non-discrimination, the food security agenda is at risk of being co-opted by profit interests, notably the use of land to produce cash crops and benefit from the rapid rise in commodities market valuation.

Framing a Strategy

What has been the role of the MDGs and the hunger target in these shifts in priorities and strategies? The theory behind the MDGs is to create outcome targets without reference to—and remaining neutral to—the alternative causal models to achieve them. But in so doing, the hunger target created a narrative that focuses on outcomes and the short-term means to achieve them. This framing does not draw attention to the changes in power structures, social relations and economic policies that are necessary. In contrast, the WFS and ICN agendas are heavy on qualitative outcomes such as the realization of the right to food, and processes such as citizen participation to identify systemic obstacles related to global and national structures of economy and power. The goal of eradicating hunger comes to be construed as the target of halving the proportion of people who suffer from dietary deficiencies. The reductionism and simplification of the target renders invisible the qualitative transformations in processes and outcomes that the WFS and ICN agendas incorporated. To illustrate, the hunger target and undernourishment indicators place a spotlight on dietary consumption—an emaciated child not having enough food to eat—but does not draw attention to the fact that the child may have been born with low weight at birth, and the mother may have been underage, and in a context where women have no say on decisions about marriage and childbearing. In that sense, the outcome target helps frame narrow policy strategies that are commodity centric, vertically structured, and siloed with a single-minded objective of delivering the measurable target.

The causal theory is laid out in the Millennium Project’s 2005 Task Force report, *Halving Hunger: It Can Be Done*. This report comments that past commitments, including the 1996 WFS and 2000 Millennium Summit, had largely failed in making any real progress toward eradicating hunger (Millennium Project 2005b). The report recommended seven actions, some of which included the WFS/ICN language, but what is more notable were the elements left out: attention to the most vulnerable, empowerment and participation. The strategy favors economically efficient interventions in terms of cost-benefit analysis (Millennium Project 2005b, 31).

The problem with short-term solutions that achieve measurable results is the sidelining of issues that are deeply embedded and require long-term structural change. If actions are taken to fulfill the hunger target simply to prevent a country from falling into the “zero or negative progress” category, a possible consequence would be that governments would inadvertently encourage policies that fail to address the root of the problem in favor of finding short-term, quick-fix solutions. These quick-fix solutions often sacrifice human development priorities such as participation, accountability, and capacity-building—all of which are necessary to address the structural barriers to an individual’s entitlements to food security.

The Choice of Targets and Indicators for Monitoring Human Development and Human Rights

Food security includes several elements: economic access; physical access or availability; dietary quality for nutrition and cultural specificity; and stability or vulnerability to fluctuating supply and access (Barrett 2010). The process of narrowing a development objective into a simple list of quantifiable targets and

indicators requires compromises. It resulted in a target of halving the proportion of people suffering from hunger, as measured by two outcome indicators: the prevalence of underweight children under five years of age (“weight for age”); and the proportion of the population below minimum level of dietary energy consumption (“prevalence of undernourishment” [PoU]) (UN 2001, 56).

A major shortcoming of PoU is that it is a national aggregate estimated from food balance sheets and cannot be disaggregated by population groups and used to identify discrepancies in food and nutrition security across geographic, demographic or ethnic lines. The methodology relies on a series of estimations, including the minimum dietary energy requirement, which is in turn based on an expectation of the physical activity level needed.¹¹ The measure is supply and calorie focused, and does not capture the qualitative dimension of food intake, and as an aggregate national estimate it cannot be disaggregated to track disparities amongst groups. Survey-based data are more amenable to disaggregation and used in analysis of inter-group inequality and institutionalized barriers.

As already mentioned, the MDG target to halve the prevalence of undernourishment (percent of the population) rather than the number of people undernourished, as proposed at the WFS, is a source of ongoing controversy. No matter what the reason this change may have been, it is significant for policy monitoring, particularly in the regions such as South Asia and sub-Saharan Africa where hunger is most severe. In both regions, the prevalence of undernourishment has decreased but the number of hungry people has risen.

Both of the MDG indicators are particularly weak with respect to human development and human rights priorities, including: distribution and discrimination, the poorest and marginalized, vulnerability to risk, participation of people in decisions that affect their lives and the accountability of authorities, and empowerment of people. In addition, recent debates about the right to food and human development have emphasized the essential role of small-scale farmers, the globalization of food systems as determinants of diet (production, distribution and consumption), as well as environmental sustainability (FAO, WFP, and IFAD 2013). Although there are severe limitations in measurement tools available to capture information relevant to these priorities, some indicators would be stronger than the two selected.

Anthropometric Outcomes

The anthropometric indicators are outcome measures that focus on the individual and that capture the multidimensional aspects of food and nutrition security because they have the power to shed light on utilization issues that cannot be solved by increased supply or improved access. Among the anthropometric indicators, there is now consensus opinion that height for age (stunting) is the better indicator of chronic, long-term undernourishment (FAO, WFP, and IFAD 2013).¹² Stunting is superior in addressing human development priorities, including concern for the most vulnerable and the structural causes of poverty. It reflects severe and chronic under-nutrition; while weight for age can respond rapidly to food intake, height for age does not. The consequences are also long term, undermining physical and mental development of the child, foreclosing life choices and capabilities.

Weight for age assesses caloric intake, but does not capture nutritional outcomes; weight can be increased with consumption of nutritionally poor and calorie-laden diets, and fails to distinguish between short children of average body weight and tall, thin, and perhaps malnourished children (UN 2003, 13). The measure can be misleading in the context of rising obesity amongst income-poor households. It could even create perverse incentives to promote excessive weight gain in early life, which creates predisposition to obesity in adulthood.

Two other indicators are more effective than weight for age in gauging malnutrition. Wasting (weight for height) captures severe malnutrition, and can be easily calculated when data on both height and weight are collected. This indicator would identify those who are the most vulnerable. Body mass index captures obesity, but data availability for this indicator is extremely poor (FAO 2012).

Expenditures

The share of food expenditures in household budgets of low-income groups is a useful indicator to assess food access. This measure can evaluate the ability of an individual or household to exercise

his or her “exchange entitlements” and highlights the importance of the relative values of household economic endowments and food in the market. The only caveat is that food expenditures may not provide an accurate assessment of food security in societies where a large proportion of food comes from subsistence production. Even so, balanced against anthropometric measures, it can be telling.

Other modalities of access can be monitored and analyzed. In countries with extensive food insecurity amongst farmers who are subsistence producers, tracking small farmer productivity in staple food production, particularly in fragile and marginal environments, would provide information on how these households are faring. With respect to social transfers, tracking the relative value of food baskets in relation to social transfers would provide information on the adequacy of the design of social transfers to provide safety nets.

Vulnerability and Instability

Although the central concern of food security is stability in access, there is little attention paid to volatility indicators. Information about the variability of food prices, production and supply of food, is useful in assessing vulnerability to shocks. Current price and supply volatility data are calculated for tradable crops only so information about local food staples, such as cassava, may follow quite different price trends. However, the national aggregate data can still provide valuable information.

Outcomes versus Vulnerability and Determinants

The FAO categorizes indicators for food security into: outcomes (inadequate access); determinants (availability, physical access, economic access, utilization); and vulnerability (fluctuations in price, supply, access). This categorization is useful because it shows the importance of going beyond outcomes and examining data on determinants and vulnerability. Those data are necessary to monitor progress in long-term solutions to hunger, rather than short-term, quick-fix solutions hiding existing structural barriers to food security. A summary of data on sub-Saharan Africa shown in [Table 2](#)

Table 2. Sub-Saharan Africa: directional change in food security indicators (1990–2012)

Determinants (inputs) (availability, physical and economic access, utilization)	Outcomes access to and utilization of food	Vulnerability/stability (food price variability, production and supply variability, dependence on imports/cereal imports, production potential)
+ Average dietary energy supply and value of production per capita increased	+ PoU declined	+ Food imports as a percentage of merchandise exports declined
+ Food diversity improved (more protein and fewer calories derived from cereals, roots, and tubers)	+ Food adequacy improved	+ Political stability improved moderately at the regional level.
+ Increased access to water and sanitation	Weight for age:	– Greater dependence on cereal imports
° Decline in domestic food prices (positive for consumers, negative for producers)	+ 36 countries improved	– Increase in food price, production, and supply variability
	– 8 countries worsened	– Percentage of arable land equipped for irrigation decreased
	+ Height for age (stunting):	
	+ 29 countries improved	
	– 12 countries worsened	
	Weight for height (wasting):	
	+ 26 countries improved	
	– 17 countries worsened	

illustrates this well. All determinant/input indicators show favorable results (dietary supply increased, value of production per capita increased, food diversity improved as measured by greater supply of protein and fewer calories derived from cereals, roots, and tubers). Among outcome indicators, the PoU declined and food adequacy improved. Of the anthropometric measures, weight for age generally displays more favorable progress compared with stunting or wasting. The vulnerability/stability indicators are mostly negative, contrasting starkly with the determinant/input measures. The region became more dependent on cereal imports, the percentage of arable land equipped for irrigation decreased, and heightened volatility of food prices, production, and supply probably caused significant uncertainty for producers and consumers alike. In the example of sub-Saharan Africa, while the region may be making progress (albeit slow) towards reducing the prevalence of undernourishment, the vulnerability metrics give reason to question whether policies implemented to fulfill such a goal are sustainable.

Conclusions

Two successes of the MDGs are widely acknowledged: they galvanized attention to poverty as a global priority, and they achieved consensus in the international community on the overall objectives of development cooperation. However, these effects refer to the MDGs as a package, not to their constituent parts. Different goals have had different consequences. Reducing hunger was a “poor cousin” among the eight goals and 21 targets.

While the MDG hunger target appears to have had little impact on raising the profile of hunger as a priority, the MDGs reinforce a particular framing of the challenge. The numeric targeting narrowed the concept of hunger and food security as caloric consumption, sidelining other dimensions of food security such as vulnerability, nutritional quality, and long-term stability of access. Although outcome targets are intended to focus on ends over which all can agree, and to be neutral with respect to sometimes controversial strategic means, the hunger indicators framed a narrative of ending hunger through technological solutions that can show concrete short-term results. But this is one perspective in the context of competing visions. Another perspective sees corporate control of the global food system as the key constraint to food security as it is squeezing out small-scale farmers. For advocates of food sovereignty such as Via Campesina, technological innovation led by corporate investments is part of the problem, not the solution. Yet another perspective emphasizes sustainability as the key strategic issue. In this political economy context, the hunger target and choice of indicators frames “consensus” strategies that exclude central issues for human development and human rights.

As Boas and McNeill point out, the power of framing is to create a hegemony of ideas about problems and solutions, keeping out radical ideas that are seemingly unthinkable. Framing is an exercise intended to ensure that problems are seen in a particular way, and “an effective ‘frame’ is one which makes favored ideas seem like common sense, and unfavored ideas as unthinkable” (Boas and McNeill 2003, 1). In this light, the MDG target and indicators frame the problem of food insecurity as a commonsense issue of supply and production, favoring quick and measurable gains in supply and production as the key solution, and marginalizing the complex socio-economic determinants and the human development and human rights priorities of distribution, discrimination, inequitable access, and lack of voice and autonomy. In these ways, the case of the MDG hunger targets and indicators demonstrates the power of numbers to frame international policy strategies.

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Notes

1. See, for example, Poovey (1998) and Porter (1994) for work on numbers in governance; and see Rosga and Satterthwaite (2009), Davis et al. (2012), and Merry (2011) for studies of indicators in global governance activities.
2. These included two former Director Generals and senior staff of IFPRI, former Director and senior staff of the World Bank's Agriculture Department and Nutrition Group, Vice President of IFAD, senior officials of FAO, Secretary General of FIAN, Special Rapporteur on the Right to Food, former Deputy Executive Director and senior staff of UNICEF, a Managing Director of the Rockefeller Foundation, as well as numerous individual researchers from academia and civil society.
3. See, for example, the mission statement of the Via Campesina: <http://viacampesina.org/en/index.php/organisation-mainmenu-44> (accessed June 25, 2013).
4. Article 25 on the adequate standard of living, UN General Assembly resolution 217 A, III.
5. This view was consistently expressed by all those interviewed.
6. Authors' interviews with staff of FAO (23 January 2013, 15 February 2013) and IFPRI (23 January 2013).
7. Authors' interview with Kevin Cleaver (15 February 2013).
8. Authors' interviews with FAO officials: Carlo Cafiero (13 January 2013), Eve Crowley (15 February 2013), Barbara Eckwell (31 January 2013) Florence Egal (25 January 2013), and Mark Smulders (25 January 2013).
9. Authors' interviews with FAO officials (see note 8).
10. The divergence between hunger and income poverty trends has raised controversy about the FAO hunger estimates (Prevalence of Undernourishment), especially given the high proportion of incomes of the poor that are allocated to food.
11. There is a large critical literature on this methodology (see, for example, Svedberg 1998). It is beyond the scope of this paper to review this literature.
12. Nearly all of the nutrition experts interviewed implied that height for age was a superior measure compared with weight for age, a conclusion that was also confirmed by the *Lancet* Nutrition Series (2008); as a result, height for age is used to gauge malnutrition in the SUN Framework.

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