Thematic Section

The Power of Numbers: A critical review of MDG targets for human development and human rights

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ABSTRACT *Fukuda-Parr and Yamin explore the effects of global goal setting on international development agendas and thinking. They present a condensed synthesis of the "Power of Numbers" project, an independent research initiative, led by them, and involving 17 scholars. The project analyzed the influence of MDGs and associated indicators on policy priorities and development narratives, their diverse incentives, and both intended and unintended consequences. The authors recommend that both positive and negative lessons from experience be kept in mind in the design of the post-2015 agendas.*

KEYWORDS *MDG incentives and indicators; global goal setting; transformative change*

According to the United Nations Intellectual History Project, global goals were one of the most important contributions of the United Nation as they contribute to shaping international development priorities (Jolly *et al.*, 2009). However, little is known about the way that global goal setting influences shifts in policy and thinking on the part of the key stakeholders in international development, including national governments, donor agencies, the United Nation and civil society. This article examines the consequences of the Millennium Development Goals (MDGs) on development agendas, including both the empirical effects on policy priorities and strategies and normative effects on development discourses about important objectives and means to achieve them. In particular, we are concerned with whether these effects further the people-centred vision for development enshrined in the Millennium Declaration.

The article summarizes the findings from eleven case studies, each focused on a specific goal or target (see list in appendix), which explore how the MDGs created incentives for behaviour (policy) change and knowledge (ideas) change. Each study examined:

- the analytical and normative origins of each goal/target;
- the empirical effects on policy priorities;
- the normative effects on discourses and narratives;
- the choice of indicators used and its incentive effects; and
- alternative indicators that could have been used.

The broad aims of this article are to contribute to: an understanding of global goals as a policy tool of global governance in advancing human development (expansion of capabilities) and the realization of human rights; inform the process of elaborating the post-2015 international development agenda and the setting the Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs); and contribute to developing a methodology for setting global goals, and criteria for human development and human rights indicators.

The power of numbers

The MDGs have become the consensus framework of international cooperation over the last decade. The commitment to eradicating extreme poverty as an urgent priority is a major achievement. Nevertheless, the implications of this framework go far beyond the question of whether the poverty reduction or any of the other 2015 targets are achieved. The framework has wide-reaching influence on both policy priorities and on development thought. The effects include both *intended* and *unintended* consequences. The intended policy objective of the MDGs is to draw attention to important but neglected social priorities. However, they may also have indirect effects that distort priorities by displacing attention from other objectives, by disrupting on-going programmes as well as advocacy alliances, creating perverse incentives and undermining alternative analyses and policy strategies.

The influence of global goals depends in part on the power of numbers. One of the core powers of goals, such as the MDGs, is derived from the exercise of numerical target setting through indicators. The Project draws on the conceptual model developed in the recent Social Science literature on 'indicators as a technology of governance' that models the effects of indicators (Porter, 1994; Merry, 2009; Davis *et al.*, 2012). According to this model, indicators exert influence in two ways: by setting performance standards against which progress can be monitored, rewarded or penalized; and by creating a 'knowledge effect' where the indicators intended to reflect a concept effectively redefine it. Performance standards create incentives for behaviour change on the part of

policymakers, opinion makers, civil society groups, businesses and the public. Knowledge effects can redefine the framework for understanding the purpose of development, the key constraints and the means to address them.

MDGs represent a quintessential use of measurement as a tool of governance to influence behaviour in these ways (Fukuda-Parr, 2013). Although each target/goal had its own trajectory and consequences, some common themes emerge.

Intended consequences – mobilizing attention and effort

For the leading governments, United Nations and development agencies that developed and campaigned for the MDGs, they have been an unprecedented success in achieving their intended objective of mobilizing political support for development. However, while the MDGs were intended to be interpreted as a package, and as such, to draw attention to reducing poverty as a priority, the eight goals and 21 targets did not all have the same effect. Some of the goals and targets garnered significant attention in terms of funding as well as programmes and research, while others were 'poor cousins' and made little difference.

The goal for global diseases (Nattrass, 2013) was a stunning success in terms of HIV treatment because it built on and contributed to the pre-existing momentum around AIDS. The goal probably garnered additional support health spending, and HIV treatment in particular, by drawing high-level political attention as well as supporting activism across the world. Goals for primary education (Unterhalter, 2013), water and sanitation (Langford and Winkler, 2013), and child survival (Gibbons and Diaz-Martinez, 2013) also contributed to positive campaigning. As with AIDS, authors are careful to point out that the MDGs contributed to the pre-existing momentum around these goals.

On the other hand, there were targets that made little difference. Notwithstanding the hunger target, the food, agriculture and nutrition agenda continued to be marginalized from national and international agendas (Fukuda-Parr and Orr, 2013). The issue has now emerged as a top global political priority, backed by several global

initiatives and mentioned consistently in G-8 summits; but this was a response to the 2008 'food crisis' and not the launch of the MDGs in 2001. Similarly, employment has continued to be a neglected issue (van der Hoeven, 2013). Both these were embedded as targets in the broader poverty goal, but were overshadowed by attention to the income poverty target championed by many stakeholders including the World Bank. Lacklustre results on hunger and employment have received relatively little notice.[1]

Similarly, the goal on a global partnership for development – aid, debt, trade, technology transfer – has also made little difference (Caliari, 2013). There was progress in debt relief and total aid commitments increased, although only very slightly as a proportion of the gross national income (GNI) of donor countries. Importantly, all three of these 'poor cousin' goals and targets are related to supporting measures to increasing the productive capacity of national economies, which was neglected in the heavy emphasis on 'basic needs' encoded in the MDGs priorities.

Unintended consequences – distorting priorities and shaping thinking

The studies collected in the Project revealed many unfortunate, largely unintended, consequences of simplification that framed development as a process of delivering concrete and measurable outcomes. During the 1990s, much of development economics research concluded that poverty reduction was a process requiring social change, including shifts in power relations. Several studies found a shift in development thinking during the decade of the 2000s that trended towards meeting basic needs, with strengthened financial support for vertical and technocratic strategies that represented a reversion to 1980's thinking.

First, diverting attention from important objectives and challenges – The process that mobilized attention and support for several goals and targets also led to marginalizing important objectives that were not included in the MDG framework. Many such objectives were key elements of the internationally agreed agendas that were being implemented as

the MDGs were introduced in 2001. Unterhalter's (2013) study on Goal 2–achieve Universal Primary Education – found that this target sidelined other important objectives that were being pursued under the 'Education for All' agenda, which had included quality of education, early childhood education, adult literacy, secondary education, and attention to marginalized and vulnerable populations and equity on multiple dimensions. Sen and Mukherjee (2013) found Goal 3 – promote gender equality and empower women – and its targets to be highly reductionist, sidelining all but one of the 13 points of the Beijing Platform for Action. Similarly, Yamin and Boulanger (2013) found that the Goal 5 target – to reduce the maternal mortality ratio by three quarters[2] – sidelined the broader sexual and reproductive health and rights agenda articulated in the Cairo International Conference on Population and Development (ICPD) in 1994 , and focused on narrow select interventions even within the health sector.

Gibbons and Diaz-Martinez (2013) conclude with respect to Goal 4 – reduce child mortality – that the framing of this goal 'not only shrunk the child health agenda, but took no account of incipient efforts to embed human rights principles in the pursuit of child survival'. Langford and Winkler (2013) likewise argue that Target 7C on water and sanitation failed to take into account crucial quality, equity and affordability concerns, which would have been part of a framework based upon human rights, and adequately reflected the Millennium Declaration.

Cohen (2013) found Target 7D – achieve a significant improvement in the lives of at least 100 million slum dwellers – diverted policy attention away from the critical challenges of urbanization including climate change, economic growth and employment creation.

Across the goals and targets studied, key human rights concerns of inequality and discrimination were almost entirely neglected. Overall, the agendas driven by the goals and targets were untethered from the framework of international human rights: rights to education, food, health, water and sanitation, sexual and reproductive rights, and rights to equality, including crucially gender equality.

Second, silo effect in programming – Several studies found that the goals/targets encouraged implementation approaches that were conceptually narrow, vertically structured and relied heavily on technological solutions, neglecting the need for social change and the strengthening of national institutions. For example, the hunger target encourages measures to achieve short-term improvements through feeding and nutritional supplements rather than by the broad approach of the 1996 World Food Summit, which identified a broad range of actions needed to expand access to food, from support to sustainable agriculture, expanding access to land, to ensuring international trade fosters food security, as well as promoting gender equality. Similarly, in areas of maternal and child health, funding over the last decade has overwhelmingly supported vertical approaches to activities at the expense of support to national systems. The 1990s conference agendas were inter-linked; education was not just in the Education for All agenda but in the agendas of conferences on women, population and so on.

Third, perverse incentives – Related to this silo effect was the effect of 'setting the bar too low', and what was arguably a minimalist target – such as primary education – becoming accepted as the satisfactory standard. The goals also set standards that were misleading when applied to different countries, being unfair to those that started far behind, being judged by achieving the single 'one-size-fits-all' target for 2015.

Fourth, knowledge effects – In addition to the empirical effects on specific sectors, the studies confirm that the MDGs have had enormous communicative power. Once the goals were defined and the targets set, they began to shape the way that development was understood – but with dramatically reductionist consequences for how development and poverty were construed. For example, Sen and Mukherjee argue that gender equality in primary and secondary education began to epitomize the notion of gender equality and empowerment. Such a limited understanding characterized thinking of earlier decades before the conferences of the 1990s, which highlighted dimensions of agency and human rights and advanced an understanding of gender equality as a process of shifting power relations between men and women, not merely equal achievement in meeting certain basic needs.

Yet, the essence of the MDGs is that they frame the concept of development as a set of basic needs outcomes, rather than as a process of transformative change in economic, social and political structures. The studies on maternal health, child survival and household food security found that a broad understanding of gender equality – encompassing access to employment as well as social services, as well as freedoms from coercion and violence in both public and private spheres – was emphasized in many of the international agendas that were agreed in the 1990s conferences, and that were still being implemented at the time the MDGs were decided. What happened with MDG 5 – the goal on improving maternal health – illustrates this well. Yamin and Boulanger argue that this goal reduced the comprehensive and necessarily politically contested, sexual and reproductive health and rights agenda of the ICPD, which was reaffirmed in Beijing, to the relatively depoliticized realm of maternal health, and in so doing, focused attention away from the social changes necessary to achieve the ICPD agenda to the idea of achieving a specific outcome measure.

Despite the idiosyncratic nature of the selection of targets and indicators, and the great variability in both ambition as well as data quality, an overarching conclusion of the Project is that once these numerical targets were set, they were perceived to be 'value neutral'. In fact, however, there were assumptions deeply embedded in the MDGs about the nature and purpose of development. As they were to be measured through outcomes, the effect of the MDG framing was to marginalize ongoing strategic processes for empowerment of people and transforming economies, including such central issues to poverty reduction as productive employment and productivity gains of small-scale farmers, as well as issues mentioned earlier such as women's access to reproductive services, and women's political voice, which were only partially added belatedly.

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Political dynamics of mobilization

Another common finding across the studies was the disruption in the social mobilization behind the international agendas agreed in the 1990s, involving alliances of civil society groups and the UN agencies that were involved in their implementation. This resulted not only from the narrowing and selective cherry-picking of the broad 1990's agendas as in education (Unterhalter, 2013), but also, in some instances, from the modification of previously-agreed targets. For example, the hunger goal was revised from halving the *number* of people suffering from hunger to halving the *proportion*. Goal 3 to empower women ironically had detrimental effects on the global women's movement as it undermined the rights based and broad agenda that had been achieved in the Beijing Conference in 1996 (Sen and Mukherjee, 2013). Similarly, Yamin and Boulanger (2013) confirm this with regard to the sexual and reproductive rights movement in particular. In other cases, the MDGs disrupted nascent initiatives, such as in employment where International Labour Organization (ILO) was mounting a broad initiative on the social impacts of globalization (Van der Hoeven, 2013).

It is instructive that the one study that argues for a possible positive effect of the MDGs on broad-based civil society mobilization with respect to HIV/AIDS treatment – Target 6 to combat global diseases – was in an area where there was no prior agreed international agenda. There was no contradiction for the new UN organization – UNAIDS – to advocate for HIV/AIDS targets, often going beyond MDG 6, and to use them in their mobilization campaigns (Nattrass, 2013). In contrast, studies note that the leadership of the FAO, ILO, UNESCO, UNCEF and UNIFEM, for example, initially did not invest in the process of elaborating the MDGs, as they were focused on the movement implementation of the conference agendas.

Choice of targets and indicators

In some cases, studies reveal that the indicator and target chosen were weakly conceptualized and added to the reductionist policy and knowledge effects. For example, Goal 1/Target 2 – to halve the proportion of the population that is undernourished – is a calorie-based metric that is derived by modelling and estimates. This metric of hunger as a caloric-consumption issue was reinforced by the second indicator of weight for age that also reflects caloric consumption, rather than other dimensions of food insecurity including undernutrition and insecurity. Alternative indicators, such as weight for height and price volatility in national price indices, would have monitored these dimensions that capture food insecurity as a longer-term challenge.

MDG 7, Target D – on slums – argues Cohen, is 'neither precise, nor evidence based, nor framed to confirm achievement or not'. He argues that it misses the point, not only in its minimal reach to some 5 percent of the concerned population, but diverts attention from the key role of the city in economic growth, empowerment and climate change.

Conclusions and implications for setting post 2015 and SDGs

The above findings do not contradict the consensus assessment of the positive effects of the MDGs in highlighting the importance of poverty reduction, and the focus on human well-being. However, the eleven studies referenced here have identified a number of indirect and often unintended consequences, which seem to have undermined or distorted the impact on the intended objectives. Consideration of this complex narrative should inform the current process of setting the post-2015 development agenda and SDGs. In particular, the criteria proposed for elaborating goals and targets in these debates – simplicity, measurability, concreteness and achievability – pose dilemmas.

Simplicity – While simplicity was a key strength of the MDGs, this was for the purposes of communicating the urgency of priorities. On the other hand, simplicity is highly reductionist. A key finding of the Project is that the goals were too simple; there are many development priorities that are too complex to reduce into a set of goals.

Measurability – While quantified targeting was another key strength of the MDGs, this again

was for the purposes of communicating complex concepts. A key finding of the Project is that many non-measured priorities were sidelined. The human principles of participation, equality, democratic voice and accountability are difficult to measure quantifiably. Yet they are essential for development as a transformative agenda. Exclusive focus on 'measurable' targets distorts agendas and can divert policy attention from pressing human rights and human development concerns, which require legal, political and institutional changes that are not well-suited to quantifiable measurement.

Concreteness or outcome focus – While concrete outcome-focused targets and indicators were effective in achieving consensus on the MDGs as a development framework, development is about more than meeting basic needs. If the ends of development are defined as the expansion of capabilities and the realization of rights, the process of development must involve people not only as the passive beneficiaries of progress, but also as active agents who can voice their concerns and claim their entitlements. The MDGs failed to capture the processes of social change that are fundamental to an emancipatory vision of development.

Statistical or policy criteria for indicator selection – While the choice of indicators with poor data availability and definitional difficulties have been identified as a weakness of the MDGs, robust statistical criteria may favour indicators that are less responsive to policy priorities and participatory processes. Policy priorities for human development and human rights include equality in both outcomes and opportunities, addressing vulnerability, insecurity and exclusion, and ensuring meaningful participation, voice and accountability. Metrics more capable of monitoring these dimensions of progress are needed. Data availability should be balanced against the ability to improve statistical systems to better measure these concerns relevant to human rights and human development.

In short, these are dilemmas in elaborating new goals. However, the response need not be to do away with simplicity, measurability and concreteness. Rather, the dilemmas can be addressed by

explicitly acknowledging the limitations of global goals. The primary purpose of global goals is to communicate urgent social priorities, to strengthen consensus and to mobilize support. The numeric targets and indicators are tools that can monitor implementation by setting benchmarks. They should not be interpreted as a substitute for a consensus development agenda, as occurred with the MDGs. Indeed, the MDGs were not developed for this purpose. They were introduced in the 2001 Road Map to 'harmonize reporting'. Nevertheless, they came to be interpreted as hard priorities and an international agenda.

These case studies show that by itself goal setting is a poor methodology for elaborating an international agenda, and that the exclusive reliance on quantitative targets has the power to distort priorities. A simple list of numerical targets cannot articulate an agenda for a complex process, such as sustainable, inclusive development. The studies in this Project strongly argue that by attempting to elaborate an agenda by numerical targeting, simplification, reification and abstraction of quantification creates perverse effects. The post-2015 development agenda and the SDGs need not only to go beyond 'finishing the agenda of the MDGs' but also beyond setting goals and targets. Quantitative targets are powerful as a communications tool and can provide benchmarks for monitoring progress. However, a transformative future development agenda requires a qualitative statement of objectives, visionary norms and priority action needed to achieve the objectives including legal, policy and global institutional considerations.

List of goals/targets studied and authors[3]

1. Goal 1 Target 1A: Halve, between 1990 and 2015, the proportion of people whose income is less than US$ 1 a day – Ugo Gentilini (World Food Programme, Rome) and Andy Sumner (King's College, London).

2. Goal 1 Target 1B: Achieve full and productive employment and decent work for all, including women and young people – Rolph van der

Hoeven (Institute of Social Studies, The Hague).

3. Goal 1 Target 1C: Halve, between 1990 and 2015, the proportion of people who suffer from hunger – Sakiko Fukuda-Parr and Amy Orr (The New School, New York).

4. Goal 2: Achieve Primary Target 2A: Ensure that, by 2015, children everywhere, boys and girls alike, will be able to complete a full course of primary schooling – Elaine Unterhalter (Institute of Education, London).

5. Goal 3 – Promote gender equality and empower women: Target 3A: Eliminate gender disparity in primary and secondary education, preferably by 2005, and in all levels of education no later than 2015 – Gita Sen/DAWN (Indian Institute of Management, Bangalore) and Avanti Mukerjee (University of Massachusetts, Amherst).

6. Goal 4 Target 4A: Reduce by two-thirds, between 1990 and 2015, the under-five mortality rate – Elizabeth Gibbons (Harvard School of Public Health, Boston) and Elisa Diaz-Martinez (St. Edwards University, Austin).

7. Goal 5: Improve maternal health; Target 5A – Reduce by three quarters between 1990 and 2015, the maternal mortality ratio – Alicia Ely Yamin and Vanessa Boulanger (Harvard School of Public Health, Boston and Dar es Salaam).

8. Goal 6: Combat HIV/AIDS, malaria and other diseases; Target 6A: Have halted by 2015 and begun to reverse the spread of HIV/AIDS – Nicoli Nattrass (University of Cape Town, Cape Town).

9. Target 7D: By 2020, to have achieved a significant improvement in the lives of at least 100 million slum dwellers – Michael Cohen (New School, New York).

10. Target 7C: Halve, by 2015, the proportion of people without sustainable access to safe drinking water and basic sanitation – Malcolm Langford (University of Oslo, Oslo) and Inga Winkler (German Institute for Human Rights, Berlin).

11. Goal 8: Develop a global partnership for development – Aldo Caliari (Rethinking Bretton Woods Project, Center of Concern, Washington DC).

Notes

1 Income poverty declined rapidly and the target has already been met as a global aggregate. However, this 'progress' must be seen in the light of the fact that much of the gains are accounted for by China. World Total without China would not be on track to achieving the 2015 target.

2 Initially the only target until the second target of universal access to reproductive health services was added in 2005, and the respective indicators were added in 2007.

3 Studies available as Harvard School of Public Health working papers http://harvardfxbcenter.org/power-of-numbers/, assessed 10 July 2013.

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