

After 2015: progress and challenges for development

By Claire Melamed and Lucy Scott

The Millennium Development Goals (MDGs) have set the benchmark for global development policy since 2000. In 2015 the current set of MDG targets will expire, and although much progress will have been made, many targets will not have been met. What is the most effective way to take the MDG agenda forward after 2015?

This is a live political debate. The outcome document for the UN summit of September 2010 requires the UN Secretary General to ‘... make recommendations in his annual reports, as appropriate, for further steps to advance the United Nations development agenda beyond 2015’. Political capital is already being invested in a post-2015 agreement, and it is becoming an increasingly active agenda for non-governmental organisations. There are a range of options being proposed. These vary in ambition from keeping the current targets and extending the deadline, to keeping the current structure with some tweaking of existing targets and adding some new ones, or to the most ambitious aim of replacing the MDGs with a wholly new structure.

Whatever the practicalities of a post-2015 agreement, it is essential that it learns the right lessons from the past and has the right analysis of the future, if it is to be both politically acceptable and useful in reducing poverty. This Background Note maps out current thinking on the impact of the MDGs and options for the future.

Lessons from the past: MDG success and failure

A key component of drawing-up the post-2015 agenda is learning lessons from the MDG approach through examining what has worked and what hasn't (Moss, 2010). Quite a lot has worked. In stark, and welcome,

contrast to the conventional narrative of a few years ago, many of the stories coming out of Africa, Asia and Latin America today are of progress and success (www.developmentprogress.org). Not all of this can be attributed to the MDGs, but it seems clear that they have helped to raise the profile of poverty and development issues around the world. While this is a strength, it is also a weakness as other important development issues risk being neglected.

MDG successes

One key achievement of the current MDGs is the extent to which they have mobilised public and political support for development. In donor countries this has been reflected both in the increases in aid pledges in 2005 (Moss, 2010) (though rather less was delivered than was promised in most countries), and in the growth of broader campaigns such as ‘Make Poverty History’, which called for reforms of global trade rules and debt relief as well as aid increases. The MDGs were the framework for much of the political activity around aid in the period up to 2005, defining, for example, the amount of aid required as the amount needed to reach the MDGs. The range of political and popular support might have been greater than their designers ever anticipated (Vandemoortele and Delamonica, 2010).

In developing countries too, the MDGs have had an impact on the priority given to poverty reduction. A survey of 100 civil society actors in a number of countries revealed a strong belief that development has become a higher priority because of the MDGs (Pollard et al., 2010). Activists from the millennium campaign argue that the MDGs have also helped to build a popular movement against poverty in many countries.

Any post-2015 agreement needs to maintain popular momentum. Perhaps as important as the goals

themselves for mobilising civil society organisations in developing countries is the process through which a post-2015 agreement is drawn-up. This is certainly the view of representatives of many of those organisations (Pollard et al., 2010).

The MDGs have the political and popular power that they have in part because they are clear and concise (Jahan, 2010). Any post-2015 settlement will have to balance the need for clarity with the desire to adequately reflect the complexity of development.

One way of doing this would be of course to retain the current structure. They could either have an extended timeline, with suggestions for a deadline of either 2020 or 2025, or alternatively no timeline (Sumner, 2009). Dispensing with time-bound targets however, could fatally weaken the incentivising power and influence of the MDGs (Manning, 2009). Others argue that it would be the ‘worst scenario’ to continue with the current MDGs. Post-2015 discussions must provide an opportunity to respond to some of the criticisms of the MDGs (Vandemoortele, 2009).

MDG weaknesses

The experience of the MDGs has provided lessons about where and how global agreements can be a catalyst for change, and where they are less relevant. The main criticisms of the MDG approach have been the following:

MDGs are donor-led: A major criticism of the MDGs, rightly or wrongly, is that they are a donor-led agenda and pay little attention to local context (Sumner, 2009; Shepherd, 2008). As such, they penalise and stigmatise the poorest countries where achieving the goals is a greater challenge (Easterly, 2009).

Instead, it is argued that goals should be tailored to national circumstances and priorities, treating countries differently (Johannesburg Global Summit 2011). This could include adjusting targets for GDP (Langford, 2010). A second important principle is participation. More space is needed for locally-led strategies that emphasise the agency of citizens (IBON International). At the very least, any new agreement must go with, not against, the grain of politics and policy in developing countries (Shepherd, 2008).

However, there is a risk that focusing in too much on the national level will reduce the global reach and relevance that were such defining features of the MDGs. This trade-off will have to be considered carefully by policy-makers negotiating a post-2015 agreement.

MDGs miss out on crucial dimensions of development: Critics identify many ‘missing dimensions’ of the MDGs (German Watch, 2010). These include climate change, the quality of education, human rights, economic growth, infrastructure, good governance and security (Vandemoortele and Delamonica, 2010).

One response could be to enlarge the scope and number of MDGs, an ‘MDG plus’ option. However, it may be a mistake to believe that any development goals can perfectly capture and cover every dimension of human development (Vandemoortele and Delamonica, 2010). There is a danger that over burdening the MDGs would weaken their influence (Jahan, 2010).

An alternative could be to simplify the existing MDGs while adding additional dimensions of development; an ‘MDG compact’ view (Bourguignon et al., 2008). The three health-related goals could, for example, be collapsed into one overall health goal (Vandemoortele and Delamonica, 2010). This ‘MDG compact’ approach could involve taking a set of three or four ‘core’ universal goals plus a small set of three or four locally defined goals and/or goals that go beyond human development (Moss, 2010).

MDGs neglect the poorest and most vulnerable: The MDGs are based on average progress at a national or global level. In measuring progress, there is a risk that some people will fall through the net. In some countries MDG progress looks impressive, while the situation for the very poorest is actually getting worse (Save the Children, 2010). In addition, only two of the MDGs call explicitly for gender-disaggregated measures of progress. A failure to deal with gender issues risks failing to understand properly the gendered nature of many poverty problems and is a barrier to achieving the MDGs (Holmes and Jones, 2010).

One way to address this criticism would be to adopt a human rights approach post-2015 (Langford, 2010). A second would be to focus more directly on inequality and to have targets or indicators that require progress to be more equitably shared, including between men and women. Both approaches could be politically contentious, and again there will be trade-offs for policy-makers between achieving the best outcome and achieving the strongest political consensus.

What should a post-2015 agreement do?

It must tackle the most pressing development problems

The current goals and targets that make up the MDGs were debated and agreed in the late 1990s, when the world looked quite different. Most people lived in rural areas. Most poor people lived in poor countries. Climate change was a far-off concern, and far from the mainstream political issue that it is today. There was more optimism about what economic growth could deliver in terms of new jobs and improved living standards for all.

A global strategy for development in 2015 will have to confront different challenges to those of the 1990s.

In particular, the MDGs emerged in a relatively stable period, while the post-2015 world is likely to be characterised by multiple crises and sources of instability, including finance and climate (Sumner and Tiwari, 2010). Inequality within nations already poses a threat to the achievement of the MDGs (Vandemoortele, 2009) with many poor people now living in middle-income countries. What are the biggest current poverty problems, and how could a post-2015 agreement mobilise the necessary solutions?

Some key changes to be addressed in a post-2015 agreement include:

- **Urbanisation.** Most of the world's population now lives in cities. While that is not yet true of the world's poor, growing migrations to cities, and the relationships between city and countryside, are a key part of the realities of poor people's lives. The move to the city can be a catalyst for increased wealth and opportunity, or can trap people into a life of poverty and insecurity. The current MDG framework has been poor at driving the kind of policy and politics that would most effectively reduce urban poverty (Grant, 2011; Hasan et al., 2005). A post-2015 agreement will have to do better.
- **Climate change.** A fundamental criticism of the MDGs is their lack of attention to climate change, both in terms of the environmental sustainability of development pathways and in terms of the threats posed by climate change to development success (Urban, 2010). While global agreements on climate change are being discussed elsewhere, for the post-2015 era two questions are crucial. First, global agreements have to work together so that responses to climate change also accelerate poverty reduction, rather diverting aid and weakening the focus on poverty. Second, climate change has provoked a new interest in risk and vulnerability as key aspects of poverty. A post-2015 agreement should increase the resilience of poor people to shocks, if it is to properly address current poverty problems.
- **Chronic poverty and the rise of inequality.** We now know that poverty reduction is highly uneven, and that social, cultural and economic factors act together to trap some people in poverty even if average incomes are increasing. Meanwhile, the MDGs are criticised for being weak on equity. How can the realities of chronic poverty and inequality be reflected in a post-2015 agreement? Proposals include introducing targets to reduce poverty severity and depth or making MDG progress conditional on targets being reached in all regions of the country or among all population groups (Langford, 2010). Another proposal concerns social protection, an issue that has risen up the policy

agenda since 2000. Universal social protection could contribute to meeting many of the MDGs and reduce poverty and vulnerability (Shepherd, 2008).

- **Jobs and equitable growth.** Rising unemployment, with its human cost, its link to political instability, and its waste of productive resources, is shaping up to be one of the biggest economic and political issues of all in many developing countries. MDG 1 has a target on employment and latterly more attention has been paid to this issue. But some observers argue that it is too little, too late.

One criticism of the MDGs is that their focus on poverty and social indicators, at the expense of employment creation, makes them a form of 'welfare colonialism' (Vandemoortele, 2009). A new set of goals could focus on decent work and labour standards (ILO, 2009), and maximise the transmission mechanisms between growth and poverty reduction through job creation, but also redistribution through government fiscal policy (Melamed et al., 2008). The question is what governments and donors can actually do to create jobs and foster equitable growth, and how could an international agreement contribute?

It must reflect current thinking on development and aid

The MDGs are firmly embedded in the 'human development' paradigm of development (Hulme, 2010). This was conceived as an alternative to a view that development could be measured entirely through economic growth. Building on that idea, other development paradigms are now competing for space in policy debates. Well-being is one, a human rights-based approach is another. Both imply different ways of measuring whether progress is being achieved, and different policy priorities to achieve change (Langford, 2010; McGregor and Sumner, 2010).

MDGs are also based on a donor-recipient model of aid, where developing countries have domestic financing needs, for example to provide health or education services, which rich countries can help them meet through aid. For the poorest countries, this will continue to be true. However, as the poorest countries are also the most politically fragile and vulnerable to disasters, traditional development aid and humanitarian assistance will have to work better together to achieve both short-term relief and long-term change (Shepherd, 2008).

With the majority of poor people now in middle-income countries, the donor/recipient model may no longer be the right framework for the global actions required to end poverty. And given increasing political attention in all countries to global problems such

as climate change or security concerns, this model no longer reflects the reality of global political relationships. A post-2015 agreement might impose more demands on richer countries, to improve trade rules, tackle carbon emissions or even reduce consumption (Glennie, 2009). It might also be framed more around an understanding of finance for ‘global public goods’ (Severino and Ray, 2010), rather than traditional aid spending.

2015 – then what?

The MDGs can claim some major successes, though much remains to be done. Generating the political will and energy for a post-2015 agenda that learns

from both success and failure, and is appropriate to today’s problems will be a challenge for both political leadership and academic dexterity.

A post-2015 agreement does not need to encapsulate everything that is known about how to reduce poverty. Instead, it needs to focus on those aspects of development that can be addressed through coordinated global action. The quest should not be for the perfect agreement, but for the one that seems most likely to work.

Written by Claire Melamed, Head of ODI’s Growth, Poverty and Inequality Programme (c.melamed@odi.org.uk) and Lucy Scott, Research Officer with the Chronic Poverty Research Centre (scottlds@btinternet.com).

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Overseas Development Institute, 111 Westminster Bridge Road, London SE1 7JD, Tel: +44 (0)20 7922 0300, Email: publications@odi.org.uk. This and other ODI Background Notes are available from www.odi.org.uk.

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