

The MDG Conundrum: Meeting the Targets Without Missing the Point

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The MDGs are being misappropriated to gain support for a specific development strategy, agenda or argument, mostly being used as a call for more aid or as a Trojan horse for a particular policy framework. As relative benchmarks, they are extremely difficult to meet in countries with low human development. Their misinterpretation as one-size-fits-all targets is leading to excessive Afro-pessimism, begging the question whether Africa is missing the targets or whether the world is missing the point. The global MDG canon is dominated by a money-metric and donor-centric view of development, and is not ready to accept that growing disparities within countries are the main reason why the 2015 targets will be missed.

Key words: MDGs, Africa, equity

1 Introduction

The Millennium Development Goals (MDGs) have been praised and criticised since the day they came into being. Some see them as one of the UN's greatest achievements, arguing that global goals and benchmarks have influenced policies and outcomes in many countries (Jolly et al., 2005). US diplomats were among the first to criticise the MDGs. They saw them as an inter-agency attempt to force a consensus upon UN member states – almost a conspiracy orchestrated by a small group of UN bureaucrats.

This claim is invalid because the original 18 MDG targets were lifted verbatim from the Millennium Declaration, a document agreed by 191 countries at the Millennium Summit in 2000. Hence, they were an attempt to highlight the key commitments contained in that document and represent 'agreed language' among governments. Their selection was based upon the availability of established indicators and reasonably good data to measure and monitor progress at the global level. Eventually, the diplomatic phraseology of 'the internationally agreed development goals, including the Millennium Development Goals' resolved this first criticism. Many others have followed, often more subtle and seemingly less obstructive. Yet, several have tried to distort the MDGs by appropriating them for specific aims.

The MDGs express desired ends: for example, a world with less hunger and less illiteracy and an end to gender discrimination. They do not imply a particular means, for example public or private investments; fiscal stimulus or austerity; free or fair trade. A

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desired end can be achieved through different means. The original MDG agenda never implied a specific development strategy or policy framework. Defining such a strategy or framework belongs to the realm of sovereign policy-making at the country level.

Several players, however, have tried to misappropriate the MDGs in order to gain support for a specific strategy, agenda or point of view. Four new targets, for instance, were recently added to the original set of MDGs.¹ Such a move is ill-advised, reflecting a misguided belief in the perfectibility of the MDGs. No matter their number, a set of targets cannot adequately cover the many dimensions of human development. The MDGs were never conceived as the be-all-and-end-all of international co-operation but rather as a short-hand version of human development that could be understood by non-specialists and by the general public.

Nevertheless, a number of actors have tried to shape or use the MDGs so as to broaden the support for their own particular agenda. The MDGs thus face a dual risk. At best, they are in danger of being devalued to meaningless catch-all phrases. At worst, they are at risk of being usurped by interest groups that want to push a particular point onto the global agenda. Most commonly, they are used as a repackaged call for more foreign aid or as a masquerade for a particular policy framework. 'MDG Inc. has begun to exercise such an encapsulating effect' (Saith, 2006). The MDGs are seldom used to stimulate out-of-the-box thinking and action.

This article exposes the fact that the MDG targets are a faulty yardstick for judging whether country- or region-specific performances are on track. It also points out that, as relative benchmarks, they are particularly demanding of countries with low human development, including most African countries. The MDGs are thus not even-handed, and their misinterpretation as one-size-fits-all targets has added unduly to Afro-pessimism.

The article argues that the principal reason why the world will miss the 2015 targets is being overlooked. It calls for a fundamental change in the prevailing money-metric and donor-centric views of the MDGs. A partnership that is primarily based on money is inherently unequal and one-sided. Bilateral and multilateral aid agencies, non-governmental organisations, private foundations and think-tanks must de-emphasise the dimension of 'money changing hands' in managing development co-operation. A partnership among equals will come about only if the focus shifts towards 'ideas changing minds'.

2 Global targets and global trends

The claim that African countries will not achieve the MDGs has been repeated to the point of monotony. While it is justified to accord high priority to Africa, it is unwarranted constantly to compare the region's performance with the MDG targets – for two reasons.

First and foremost, the MDGs are global targets. They were set on the premise that global trends in human development would continue for the next 25 years as they had during the previous 25 years. Figure 1 illustrates that the numerical values of most

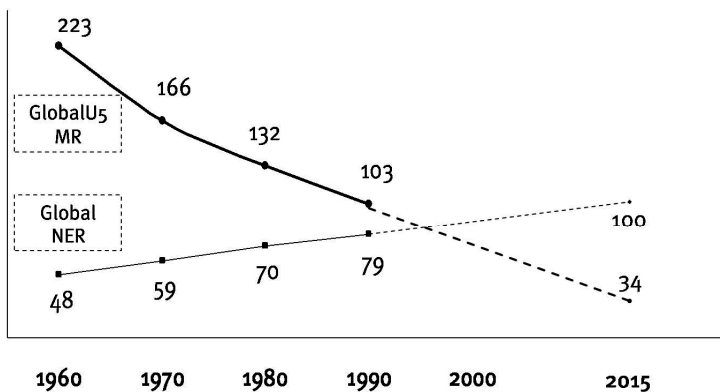
1. The latest list of MDG goals, targets and indicators is available from <http://mdgs.un.org/unsd/mdg/Host.aspx?Content=Indicators/OfficialList.htm>

MDGs were set on the basis of an extrapolation of global trends (Vandemoortele, 2008). The premise explains why some of the quantitative targets call for a reduction by one-half, while others aim for a reduction by two-thirds or three-quarters.

A careful reading of the Millennium Declaration – from which the quantitative MDG targets are extracted – shows that it does not spell out the period over which the numerical targets are to be achieved. It only mentions the deadline year (mostly 2015). An end-year suffices for absolute benchmarks (for example, education for all). But most MDG targets use relative benchmarks (for example, reducing the under-five mortality rate by two-thirds). A deadline year for them is insufficient; they also need a baseline year. Based on historical trends at the global level, the group of UN experts² who put the MDGs together decided to take 1990 as the base year. Global trends suggested that most of the relative benchmarks needed a 25-year period to be realised; they could not be achieved over the period 2000–2015. The choice of 1990 was also influenced by the fact that it marked the start of a series of world summits and global conferences that agreed on a series of global targets for human development.

Figure 1 shows that if global trends for child survival were to continue as in the past, then the global under-five mortality rate (U5MR) would decline from 103 to 34 per 1,000 live births between 1990 and 2015, as shown by the dotted line. Since 34 is two-thirds lower than 103, the global target for child mortality calls for a reduction by two-thirds. The Figure also indicates that the percentage of children enrolled in primary school in all developing countries combined increased from 48% in 1960 to 79% in 1990. An extrapolation of this global trend leads to the level of 100% in 2015. Hence, the global target for education calls for universal primary education – or a net enrolment ratio (NER) of 100.

Figure 1: Global targets extrapolated from global trends



Source: UN staff estimates.

2. The group also included colleagues from the Organisation for Economic Co-operation and Development (OECD), the International Monetary Fund (IMF) and the World Bank (IBRD).

It is a mistake to claim that a specific country or region is off-track for achieving the MDGs by 2015, because the numerical targets were set on the basis of global trends, not on trends for a particular country or region. Tracking progress vis-à-vis the MDGs is only valid at the global level. It cannot be done for any specific region or particular country because they were not set on the basis of region- or country-specific trends from the past. The UN Secretary-General writes, correctly, 'The MDGs encapsulate the development aspirations of the world as a whole' (United Nations, 2008a) – not of a particular region or an individual country.

It should be added here that global target-setting is not based solely on the extrapolation of global trends. Ultimately, global targets are the outcome of inter-governmental negotiations. Developed countries usually push for ambitious targets, whereas developing countries tend to caution against irrational exuberance. Global targets have frequently been modified over time as a result of global political negotiations. For instance, the MDG target for water was watered down from universal access by 2000 to halving the proportion of people without access by 2015. Remnants of that change can be found in a booklet with the text of the Millennium Declaration (United Nations, 2000). In its Foreword, the UN Secretary-General writes 'The leaders have set specific targets ... to provide clean water for all', whereas the Declaration itself states, 'We resolve ... to halve the proportion of people who are unable to reach or to afford safe drinking water'.

At the Millennium Summit in 2000, world leaders agreed to set global targets on the understanding that aggregate trends made them feasible at the global level. Individually, each leader signed the Millennium Declaration on the premise that the targets would be met collectively, not necessarily by each and every country. The Declaration is quite clear in this regard. The second paragraph states, 'We recognize that, in addition to our separate responsibilities to our individual societies, we have a collective responsibility to uphold the principles of human dignity, equality and equity at the global level' (ibid.).

The education conference in Jomtien, Thailand, was the first world summit of the 1990s to set global targets. Its Framework for Action makes the point that 'Countries may wish to set their own targets' (UNESCO, 1990; quoted by Manning, 2009). A few weeks later, the world summit for children took place in New York. The Plan of Action states, 'These goals will first need to be adapted to the specific realities of each country ... Such adaptation of the goals is of crucial importance to ensure their technical validity, logistical feasibility, financial affordability and to secure political commitment and broad public support for their achievement' (UNICEF, 1990).

But this basic insight has been lost in recent years. Contrary to the misinterpretation that predominates today, the spirit of the Millennium Declaration was not to impose a one-size-fits-all yardstick for judging national performance. Doing so would disregard historical backgrounds, natural endowments and country-specific challenges.

In 1961, UN member states agreed to strive for an average rate of economic growth in developing countries of 5% per year during the so-called 'First Development Decade'. The target was actually surpassed, although many countries failed to meet that rate of growth. Regarding the aid target, the European Union has agreed to provide, collectively, 0.56% of GNP for official development assistance by 2010 and 0.7% by

2015. This does not mean that all EU Member States must achieve that same target, because several will exceed it. The point is that a group of countries can achieve a collective target without requiring each of them to meet the target individually.

Nevertheless, the perception is widespread that all countries must achieve the same numerical target, otherwise the world will miss it. Such a view is incorrect. Global performance is the sum of country-specific performances. Some countries will contribute more than others towards achieving the global targets. It would be unrealistic to assume that all countries will see the same rate of progress in human development.

The correct view of the MDGs is to see them as collective targets. They are to be achieved at the global level but not necessarily in all countries. A global target can be met even if several countries fail to meet it. Global targets are meant to encourage all countries to strive for accelerated human development, but their applicability can only be judged against what is realistically achievable under country-specific circumstances. To be meaningful, targets must be adapted to the national context.³ A blind adoption of global targets set in New York would be mindless. 'The MDGs ... are good servants but bad masters' (Manning, 2009).

The good news is that the majority of countries have tailored the global targets to their national context. A survey of the perceived impact of the MDGs on 118 countries showed that '86% of countries reported to have undertaken some adaptation of one or more of the goals, their targets or associated indicators' (UN Development Group, 2005). Several countries have set targets that are more ambitious than the global ones (for example, Chile, Thailand, Viet Nam), whilst others have set targets that fall below the global benchmarks (for example, Cambodia, Ethiopia, Mozambique). Together, their combined performance can still match the global targets. No stigma should be associated with setting national targets that are less ambitious than the global ones, because adaptation is indispensable for gaining a sense of national ownership of the MDG agenda.

In sum, a dichotomy has developed between the way in which the MDG agenda is being implemented at the country level and the way in which the global MDG canon interprets them as one-size-fits-all targets.

3 Relative versus absolute benchmarks

The other reason why Africa should not be singled out for its slow progress towards the global MDGs is the way they have been formulated. Most targets are expressed in relative terms, for example halving extreme poverty, reducing under-five mortality by two-thirds and cutting maternal mortality by three-quarters.

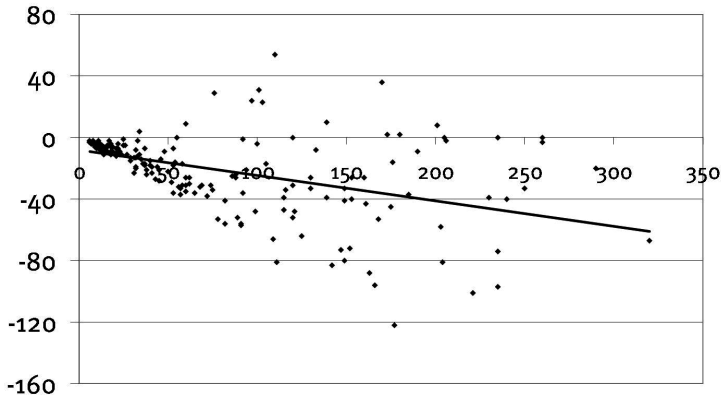
Proportional changes tend to be inversely related to the initial level from which the country starts, because of the size of the denominator. Reducing the national U5MR from 10 to 5 per 1,000 live births, for instance, implies a reduction by 50%, whereas lowering it from 250 to 200 yields only a 20% reduction, albeit that the latter is 10 times larger in absolute terms. In other words, targets that are expressed in relative terms are

3. At the country or regional level, the sole criterion that can be applied is the same as that which underpins the global MDGs, namely, whether progress is at least at par or shows acceleration over past trends, for that specific country or region.

hardest to achieve in countries with low levels of human development. Achieving the MDGs will be more challenging for Afghanistan than for Australia, more difficult for Benin than for Belgium, less easy for Chad than for Chile.

Trend data on child mortality for 190 countries confirm this point (see Figure 2). The horizontal axis in the Figure ranks the countries by their initial U5MR level in 1990; the vertical axis shows the absolute change in their U5MR between 1990 and 2006. Not surprisingly, Figure 2 indicates that the reductions were largest for the countries with high initial U5MR levels. On average, countries with an initial level of 200 under-five deaths per 1,000 live births managed to reduce their U5MR by some 40 points, whereas those with a low initial U5MR saw smaller reductions. Thus, the trend line in Figure 2 slopes downwards.

Figure 2: Absolute U5MR trends in 190 countries between 1990 and 2006

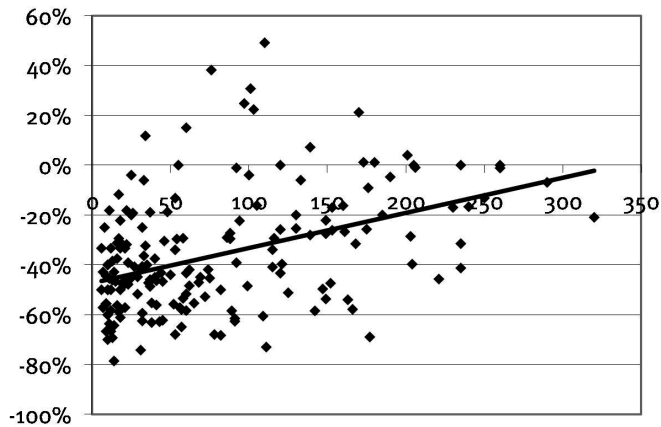


Source: based on UNICEF statistics.

Figure 3 displays the same data but expresses the changes in relative terms instead of absolute values, with the vertical axis showing the percentage change in U5MR between 1990 and 2006. The trend line then switches direction. The higher the initial level of U5MR, the smaller the proportional change. On average, countries with an initial level of 50 under-five deaths per 1,000 live births managed to reduce their U5MR by about 40%, whereas those with an initial U5MR of 200 achieved less than half that change. Thus, the trend line in Figure 3 slopes upwards.

Among the 190 countries in the data base, the 20 with the highest U5MR values saw a reduction of about 40 points between 1990 and 2006, compared with an average reduction of only 4 points for the 20 countries with the lowest U5MR values. Thus, the gap between the top and bottom 20 countries narrowed in absolute terms. But when expressed in relative terms, the gap widened. The relative gap, expressed by the U5MR ratio between the two groups of countries, almost doubled from 27:1 in 1990 to 46:1 in 2006.

Figure 3: Relative U5MR trends in 190 countries between 1990 and 2006



Source: based on UNICEF statistics.

The narrowing of the gap in absolute terms confirms the logic that countries with low levels of human development can rapidly improve their situation through relatively easy and inexpensive interventions such as vaccination drives, awareness campaigns and other preventive measures. Many believe that countries with high levels of human development no longer have such ‘low hanging fruits’ to harvest, so further improvements will be less dramatic because they will mostly stem from curative and costly interventions. However, the widening of the gap in relative terms confirms another logic, namely, that rapid improvements in human development require investments in infrastructure, institutions, capacity and good governance. Such investments need to be sustained over long periods of time before they yield a measurable impact. Until these prerequisites fall in place, a country will make only modest progress, if any.

According to the first logic, the trajectory towards a target will take the shape of a logarithmic curve, with fast progress in the initial stages, followed by a levelling off. According to the second logic, the trajectory will follow an exponential curve, with slow progress initially, followed by a rapid acceleration. The trajectory is likely to be a combination of the two, determined by time- and country- and sector-specific factors. Available cross-country data support an exponential shape more than a logarithmic curve.⁴

The bottom line is that performance can be measured in different ways – according to absolute or relative benchmarks. While both are valid, none gives a complete picture. It is important to realise that most MDG targets gauge progress in relative terms, thereby putting the least developed countries at a disadvantage. ‘By expressing the goals

4. Developed countries have continued to see rapid progress. Few experts would have predicted, for instance, that 20 of them would have pushed their national U5MR below the level of 5 per 1,000 live births by 2006.

in terms of halving the proportion of those in income poverty by 2015 and halving or reducing by an even larger proportion those failing to achieve some other goals, the poorest and most deprived countries face the biggest challenge' (Jolly, 2003).

It should be noted that earlier targets were expressed in absolute values and sometimes differentiated among groups of countries. In 1980, for instance, a 2000 target was set to reduce infant mortality to 120 per 1,000 live births in the poorest countries and to 50 in all other countries. Later targets combined relative and absolute benchmarks. The world summit for children, for instance, set a target for reducing under-five mortality between 1990 and 2000 by one-third or to 70 per 1,000 live births, whichever was less.

The MDG target for education, on the other hand, is not expressed in relative terms but as an absolute value. It calls for universal primary education, which means a net enrolment ratio of 100. It was set on the same basis of extrapolating global trends observed in the 1970s and 1980s. But in this case a simple extrapolation led to a bias – if not to a fallacy. A global enrolment target of 100 implies that each and every country must achieve 'education for all' at the primary level by 2015, because no country can exceed a net enrolment ratio of 100. Thus, most of the progress is supposed to come from countries with a low initial enrolment ratio. It is quite unrealistic to expect that these countries can meet the target of 100, based on the extrapolation of earlier progress made by middle-income countries and countries not affected by conflict. Therefore, the global target for education lacks a sense of realism. Experience shows that global targets with the greatest impact were the ones that struck a balance between the level of ambition and their sense of realism.

4 Unwarranted Afro-pessimism

The misconception is widespread that all countries, including those in Africa, must meet the same global targets for the world to achieve the MDGs by 2015. It has become common for speeches and reports to state that 'current trends ... indicate that no African country will achieve all the Goals by 2015' (United Nations, 2008b) and that 'the continent as a whole is lagging behind on each Goal' (United Nations, 2008c). It is not uncommon to see the region depicted in red on a 'traffic-light' world map that shows the countries that are off-track with regard to the global targets.

It is a real tragedy when respectable progress in Africa is reported as a failure by international organisations and external observers because the region's performance does not match a set of global benchmarks that are mostly expressed in relative terms. In fact, the region has made encouraging progress since 1990 in areas such as primary education, especially for girls. Africa also made considerable progress in measles vaccination and malaria prevention. Polio and guinea worm diseases are on the verge of elimination. Some 2 million HIV-positive patients are receiving anti-retroviral therapy in the region.

Yet, the repeated lamentation that Africa will not meet the MDGs has led to the misunderstanding that the world will miss the 2015 targets largely because of Africa's poor performance. 'Weak and failing states ... represent the single biggest challenge we have in fulfilling our promise to achieve the MDGs by 2015' (Benn, 2004). The implicit Afro-pessimism is unwarranted and begs the question as to whether Africa is missing

the targets or whether the world is missing the point. The point is that Africa does not need to meet the targets for the world to achieve the MDGs. ‘The statement that “Africa will miss all the MDGs” thus paints an unfairly bleak portrait of Africa’ (Easterly, 2007).

Africa will not, cannot, and must not meet the global targets – period. The very idea that it is to meet the global MDG targets is utopian, because they were not set on the basis of past trends in Africa. Moreover, as relative benchmarks they are especially hard for most African countries to achieve.

5 MDGs: minding disparity gaps

The world is unlikely to achieve the MDGs, not because Africa is lagging and not because growth is too slow or foreign aid too low, but because disparities within the majority of countries have grown to the point of slowing down national progress.

Measuring income inequality is shrouded in data imperfections and methodological uncertainty. Data for social indicators are less problematic for assessing disparities. The most compelling evidence that disparities are widening is not based on income, which is notoriously difficult to measure. Instead, it is based on household assets that can be readily observed, such as the possession of a bicycle or a radio, the size of the dwelling or the type of roofing material used. Survey after survey confirms that the gap in well-being between a child born in a poor family and one born in a rich family in the same country has been widening over time. This is true for education, health and nutrition.

It must be emphasised that disparities are not inherently problematic. Their significance stems from the oft-observed fact that progress systematically by-passes the most vulnerable and most disadvantaged groups. Although most countries have continued to witness improvements in human development, the disadvantaged segments in society have seen little or no progress. Two UNICEF staff members, who undertook a thorough statistical analysis of trend data for 24 countries with disaggregated information on under-five mortality, concluded that progress during the 1980s and 1990s for the bottom 20% of the population was ‘modest, and in most countries it was not statistically significant’ (Minujin and Delamonica, 2003).

This means that progress has been predominantly concentrated among the better-off groups. The poorest and most disadvantaged have found it increasingly difficult to participate in national progress. The significance of the lack of improvement in their level of human development is that many countries are not achieving sufficient progress for the world to meet the MDG targets by 2015.⁵

At first, the conventional view dismissed the argument about widening disparities as anecdotal. Now, even with a multitude of credible data sources indicating that the majority of countries are experiencing growing inequities, it is still dismissed as

5. Disparities in social indicators have also widened within industrialised countries. A recent study of the US concluded that ‘those in higher socioeconomic groups experienced larger gains in life expectancy than those in more deprived groups’ (Singh and Siahpush, 2006). This contradicts the common view that changes in environmental and behavioural factors offer less scope for improving life expectancy for better-off people compared with the disadvantaged groups in society.

irrelevant or a passing phase.⁶ The World Bank, for instance, published a working paper entitled 'Growth is Good for the Poor' (Dollar and Kraay, 2000). It received considerable attention at the time, more for its political value than for its analytical strength. Two UNICEF staff members showed that the paper's methodology was flawed. They used randomly generated numbers and applied them to the same analysis, only to obtain the same result (Vandemoortele and Delamonica, 2000). Thus, the paper's finding that the average income of the poor rose at the same rate as the national average income – i.e. a reported elasticity of one – failed to reveal a behavioural relationship with any policy relevance. Nevertheless, in spite of being methodologically flawed, the paper gained wide currency because it helped redefine poverty reduction in terms of economic growth. In that way, the conventional view could continue to place growth at the centre of the development strategy, despite an increased concern about widening inequities.⁷

The argument that inequality has become the ugly underbelly of global prosperity is gaining acceptance (for example, WHO, 2008). However, the policy response remains narrow and inadequate (for example, van der Hoeven, 2008). The recent Doha Declaration on Financing for Development is symptomatic of the prevalence of cognitive dissonance with regard to inequality and polarisation. It states, 'To advance towards the goals of the Monterrey Consensus, policies that link economic and social considerations are required to reduce inequalities within and among countries' (United Nations, 2008d). The text proposes as remedies: 'Measures aimed at integrating the poor into productive activities, investing in the development of their labour skills and facilitating their entry into the labour market'. Such a partial and superficial understanding of the necessary conditions for achieving equitable development is characteristic of the myth that the MDGs will be an automatic by-product of economic growth. The targets are often presented as a universal good that will not demand tough policy choices and hard trade-offs among social groups within a country.

The deficient policy response to address inequities is also reflected in the way equity is monitored. The agreed MDG indicator for equity is the 'share of the poorest quintile in national consumption'. Although it covers only one aspect of equitable development, this particular indicator is seldom mentioned in the many MDG monitoring reports. In the rare instances where it is included in the statistical tables, the data are not comparable or time series are not available. The sidelining of equity concerns occurs in other areas too. Efforts, for example, 'to measure decent work were disparaged and discouraged' (Standing, 2008).

A wall of silence seems to surround the monitoring of inequities and disparities. However, the meaning of the MDGs is gradually shifting from 'Millennium Development Goals' to 'Minding Disparity Gaps'. The wall must be broken down because measurement matters. When something is not being measured it often means that it does not matter. When something is not counted, it can be implied that it does not count.

6. Inequality and poverty are different conceptually but are often intertwined practically. Therefore, the argument that they are separate is problematic. Farmer (2005) documents concrete cases of how inequalities of power impact on the lives of vulnerable and disadvantaged people.

7. The morale is that nobody should be gullible to econometric results, since something that is statistically valid is not necessarily true.

6 Misplaced concreteness

Why are the MDGs so frequently misinterpreted as one-size-fits-all targets? Why does the global MDG canon overlook the evidence about growing inequities in human development within countries?

Once the MDGs gained currency, a cascade of statistical and analytical work got under way. Such initiatives were mostly driven from the headquarters of multilateral and bilateral aid organisations, universities or think-tanks. The perspective from which the work was conducted influenced the interpretation of the MDG agenda. It is common for people who work on global issues at headquarters to perceive the world from a one-size-fits-all perspective. A similar process occurred in the 1980s and 1990s at the World Bank when the so-called ‘Washington Consensus’ was translated into one-size-fits-all structural adjustment programmes.

Although uniform solutions may look neat and elegant in the abstract, they often do more harm than good in practice. It is important to understand that there cannot be a universal set of policies or a general delivery mechanism for achieving the MDGs that applies to all countries all the time. The quest for a global MDG strategy is often a disguise for usurping the targets for a particular agenda, point of view or policy framework.

Global perspectives often lead to ‘misplaced concreteness’.⁸ Global aggregates and averages are abstract concepts that help to comprehend complex realities. Misplaced concreteness crops up when one fails to understand that such concepts exist only in the human mind and not in reality. An excessive reliance on abstract concepts can unduly bias one’s understanding of reality.

Misplaced concreteness occurs when unwarranted conclusions are drawn, based on deductions from abstractions rather than on direct observations of concrete realities. Fellow macroeconomists are particularly vulnerable to relying on abstractions that lead to misplaced concreteness, such as assumptions about perfect competition, complete information, neutral institutions and independent utility functions. Huxley (1955) wrote: ‘We indulge in over-simplification, over-generalisation, and over-abstraction’. Kanbur (2001), after resigning as Director of the *2000 World Development Report*, contended that disagreements on economic and social policies can often be attributed to differences in the level of aggregation of data and analyses.

The mechanistic view of the MDGs has invariably led to an excessive emphasis on aggregate growth and global aid. Growth rates and aid levels are often seen as magic bullets for achieving the MDGs, but they provide little information about country-specific trends and patterns of human development. Some believe that a tripling of global aid will make the MDGs feasible in all countries. A recent estimate is that ‘external public financing for development in Africa needs to rise to US\$72 billion per year to support the achievement of the MDGs’ (United Nations, 2008c). The view that a certain amount of foreign aid will suffice to meet the 2015 targets in each and every country is misleading and misguided.

The other magic number is that countries must grow their economies by at least 7% per annum if they are to achieve the MDGs. Those who consider economic growth

8. Alfred North Whitehead coined the term in 1925. Its meaning is explained by Daly and Cobb (1994).

crucial argue that ‘achieving the income poverty MDG in sub-Saharan Africa would require a doubling of the region’s average GDP growth rate – to around 7% annually over the next decade’ (Berg and Qureshi, 2005) or that ‘those countries sustaining 7% growth for a decade have done best in terms of poverty reduction and this will be as true in Africa as in China or Vietnam’ (Leipziger, 2008).

Estimating a fixed price tag or setting a specific rate of economic growth is symptomatic of the misconception that the MDGs can be achieved through a scientific, apolitical and rational process which can be manipulated from the outside and accelerated by external actors. In reality, the MDGs call for fundamental changes and transformations within society and the economy that must be endogenous. They will seldom be rapid, rational or linear because they will have to address complex political, cultural and ecological constraints. In an age of technology and globalisation, some seem to have interpreted the MDGs as a reincarnation of the twentieth-century positivist movement.

7 Donor-centric view

The emphasis on the money-metric dimension is, in part, an expression of the excessively donor-centric view of the MDG agenda.⁹ This view has led to a differential impact of the MDGs, depending on the country’s degree of aid-dependence. A survey of 118 countries reported that awareness about the MDGs was considerably higher in the poorest and most aid-dependent countries. ‘Ministries of Finance/Planning are said to refer “often” to the MDGs in 9 out of 10 LDCs [least-developed countries] against just 4 out of 10 MICs [middle-income countries]’ (UN Development Group, 2005).

A donor-centric view has also been mediated through a gradual shift in the funding of multilateral organisations, with most witnessing a shake-up from core to non-core funding. Since money drives priorities, these institutions have gradually become instruments for increased ‘donor-ship’. More recently, several developing countries have started to refer to ‘wealth creation’ instead of to ‘poverty reduction’ as the mantra for their development strategy. Such changes may seem semantic, but they express subtle attempts to reclaim a sense of sovereignty over the national agenda, because the objective of reducing poverty is perceived as donor-driven.

The genesis of the poverty target is revealing in this regard. At the 1995 social summit in Copenhagen, a number of donor countries pushed for the adoption of a global poverty target. The developing countries resisted, however, arguing that any timetable for eradicating poverty and the choice of the relevant metric should be country-specific. A year later, DAC members issued a set of global targets that included, for the first time, a global target for reducing poverty (OECD/DAC, 1996). Subsequently, that target was included in the Millennium Declaration.

A recent intergovernmental document confirms the donor-centric perspective. The Doha Declaration on Financing for Development addresses each of the six pillars of the

9. Attempts to resolve the international debt problem are equally creditor-driven, including the Heavily Indebted Poor Countries Initiative, the Multilateral Debt Relief Initiative, the IMF/World Bank Debt Sustainability Framework and the Evian treatment in the Paris Club.

Monterrey Consensus (United Nations, 2008d).¹⁰ The section on foreign aid is the longest – and not by a small margin; its word count is about 60% longer than the average length of the other five sections. The extra length can only be explained by ‘donor-ship’. It cannot be justified on the basis that aid is proportionally a larger source of development financing than trade, domestic resources or foreign direct investment. The fact that so much text is devoted to aid-related issues is symptomatic of an excessive donor-centric view of the international development agenda.

Growth and aid are important, but they will not yield the desired improvement in the national MDG indicators as long as large segments in society are left out of national progress. Unless the unreached are reached and the excluded are included, progress towards the global MDG targets will continue to slow down – as has been the case since the ‘roaring’ 1990s. Imaginative policy reforms and new delivery mechanisms are urgently needed to make equitable development a practical reality. Ultimately, they are more urgent than growth and aid. The recent debate on pro-poor growth demonstrates that most actors accept that the conventional policy framework is lacking something. Yet, they cannot liberate themselves from the old views, theories or ideologies.

The MDGs have not only been misappropriated by the aid, trade and growth lobbies. They have also been criticised by those who focus on gender equality and human rights. While valid, their criticism has missed the key point that the gradual realisation of social and economic rights has been hampered by a secular discrimination against the poorest – often female – segments in society. Instead of complaining that human rights are not mentioned, the attention should be focused on the fact that progress across the MDG targets is systematically by-passing the most disadvantaged and vulnerable members in society. Instead of complaining that the gender dimension is not adequately covered, efforts should be directed towards the sex disaggregation of all MDG indicators so as to expose the persistent gender discrimination in terms of reducing hunger, illiteracy and mortality.

8 Towards a partnership among equals

The money-metric and donor-centric perspectives of the MDG agenda have reinforced the degree of imbalance in the international partnership. A partnership that is primarily based on money is inherently unequal and one-sided. ‘In such places as Uganda, Tanzania and Mozambique, for example, donor governments, international financial institutions, UN agencies and NGOs now exercise significant control over the design and delivery of core economic and welfare functions of the state’ (Duffield, 2007).

Rather than ‘money changing hands’, a genuine partnership among equals must start from ‘ideas changing minds’. The focus on ‘money changing hands’ is a one-way process that is donor-led. The focus on ‘ideas changing minds’ will yield a two-way dialogue that is led by national stakeholders, not external partners.

Accepting this may be difficult for the party with the money. Yet it promises to be more sensible and more sustainable in pursuing the MDGs. The current approach is generating too much negativity and pessimism – about countless developing countries

10. The six pillars include (i) domestic resources; (ii) foreign direct investment and other private flows; (iii) international trade; (iv) official development assistance; (v) external debt and (vi) systemic issues.

failing to achieve the global targets and about the majority of developed countries not meeting the aid target. If that approach prevails much longer, a silence is likely to befall the 2015 targets as the deadline draws closer. It is not uncommon for the inter-governmental debate to simply silence away issues that exhale negativity.

Most bilateral and multilateral aid organisations need to revisit their interpretation of the MDGs, not only through their generosity but also through less donor-centric approaches. This will require a willingness to listen and an openness to accept that one does not have all the answers and that one may actually be mistaken. To do so, they must set aside theories, perceptions and ideologies. A former head of the UN Economic Commission for Africa expressed it as follows: 'I had to unlearn a lot of what I was taught at Harvard, London, Leicester, and Ibadan' (Adedeji, quoted by Jolly et al., 2005).

A healthy dose of intellectual humility on the part of those who provide foreign aid is a pre-requisite for establishing a partnership among equals that is genuine about the principle of national ownership.¹¹ The principles contained in the Paris Declaration on Aid Effectiveness represent some of this humility (OECD/DAC, 2005).¹² These principles, though frequently quoted with much conviction, have yet to change the practice among most development partners. Even in the case of direct budget support, which has gained favour in the past few years, donors continue to request a number of frameworks and strategy papers that mostly focus on the dimension of 'money changing hands'. In my long working experience of managing development co-operation, I have seen little or no evidence that bilateral donors, multilateral bodies, global funds, large foundations or non-governmental organisations are either willing or able to adopt an attitude of humility, openness and flexibility.

The proliferation of actors and new initiatives is actually adding to the degree of fragmentation and incoherence. Since the MDGs came into being, several new initiatives have sprung up, including the International Finance Facility for Immunisation; the US Millennium Challenge Corporation and the US President's Emergency Plan for AIDS Relief; the International Drug Purchase Facility; the World Bank's Education for All Fast Track Initiative; the Millennium Villages; the Global Fund to Fight AIDS, Tuberculosis and Malaria; the Global Campaign for the Health MDGs; the International Health Partnership; the Catalytic Initiative to Save a Million Lives; the 'Danone Communities'; the Goldman Sachs Foundation and its '10,000 Women' Initiative; the Business Alliance Against Chronic Hunger championed by members of the World Economic Forum – and the list goes on. More initiatives are in the pipeline, several of them based on the market for carbon emission.

Each of them has detailed rules, regulations and reporting mechanisms; each generates specific political and bureaucratic dynamics; and each adds to the usual institutional and personal rivalries. Obviously, they are not conducive to the harmonisation and co-ordination of the activities supported by development partners.¹³

11. 'National ownership' is a fuzzy concept that can be best defined by spelling out what it is not – namely, 'donor-ship' or the overzealous actions of external partners that infringe the authority of national actors. Duffield (2007) uses the term 'contingent sovereignty'.

12. The principles include national ownership, alignment, coherence and harmonisation.

13. For purposes of illustration, the Global Fund became administratively autonomous from the World Health Organisation, effective on 1 January 2009. Proliferation and fragmentation are not a thing of the past, but

While centralisation is not necessarily part of the solution, fragmentation is definitely part of the problem.

9 Conclusion

The MDGs express ends, not means. Although they never favoured a particular development approach or policy framework, several groups have tried to misappropriate the MDGs to gain support for a specific strategy, agenda or perspective. They are most frequently used as a call for more aid or as a Trojan horse for a particular policy framework. They are seldom seen as a call for seeking out-of-the-box solutions to old problems.

As relative benchmarks, the MDGs are hardest to achieve in countries with low human development. Their misinterpretation as one-size-fits-all targets has magnified Afro-pessimism, which begs the question whether Africa is missing the targets or whether the world is missing the point. The point is that Africa will not, cannot, and must not meet the global targets. The very idea that the region is to achieve the MDGs is utopian. It is unacceptable that targets are set and metrics are selected so as to present Africa as a failure, solely to gain support for a particular agenda, strategy or argument.

The global MDG canon has not yet accepted that growing disparities within countries are the main reason why the world will miss the 2015 targets. Cognitive dissonance seems to prevail regarding growing inequalities. Instead, the global discourse has been dominated by a money-metric and donor-centric interpretation of the global targets. It has not yet started to mind the disparity gap.

The MDGs require an urgent and radical change of mindset on the part of the development partners. They also call for a leap in imagination on the part of the national policy-makers in developing countries. Without these, the partnership between the poor and the non-poor – at both local and global levels – will remain focused on ‘money changing hands’ and will continue to be one-sided and innately unequal. It is imperative and urgent to shift the partnership towards the dimension of ‘ideas changing minds’. Otherwise, the MDG agenda and the Paris Declaration will remain lofty ideals while the legacy of this generation will be one of broken promises.

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continue unabated. Since 1977, the General Assembly has repeatedly asked the many UN agencies, funds and programmes to simplify and harmonise their administrative, financial and personnel rules and regulations. After several years of piloting the so-called ‘Simplification and Harmonisation’ project, the UN started 8 new pilots projects in 2007 on UN reform, called ‘Delivering as One’. The pilots included Pakistan when I served there as UN Resident Co-ordinator.

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