

After the MDGs – what then?

Janice Giffen with Brian Pratt, November 2011

This paper examines some of the debates taking place as we approach 2015, the target date for attainment of the Millennium Development Goals (MDGs). It provides reflections, drawn from discussions with donor agencies and international NGOs, on what the focus will be for international development work after that date. Will it be more of the same – nationally based targets to reduce poverty? Will it be a more refined approach with targets reflecting the specific needs of diverse groups of the poor? Or will it be something radically different, involving a revolution in the way we think about how to overcome problems of poverty and marginalisation?

Progress towards the MDGs

The 2010 MDG Summit, held in New York and attended by around 140 Heads of State and Government, was called to assess progress and re-assert intentions. The Summit adopted an outcome document entitled 'Keeping the Promise: United to Achieve the Millennium Development Goals'.¹ This document, based on examples of success and lessons learnt over the last 10 years, spells out an Action Agenda with steps to be taken by all stakeholders to achieve the eight MDGs by 2015. The document was drawn up by the UNDP which provided recommendations to advance progress on each of the goals over the following five years. The document also calls on donors to increase levels of aid. A follow-up meeting on the MDGs was held on 2-3 June 2011 in Tokyo where ministers and officials from more than 30 countries met alongside development groups, civil society groups and academics to track current activities and monitor progress since the 2010 Summit.

Most of the monitoring literature emphasises the considerable progress in many areas towards achieving the MDGs. However, some are lagging further behind than others and are thought to require special attention over the next five years. The Global Monitoring Report (GMR) 2011² highlights the mixed progress and diverse country performance; not only are the poorest and most fragile countries being left behind, but concerns are growing about pockets of indigenous and socially-excluded groups in middle income countries. The health MDGs (MDGs 4-6) and access to sanitation (MDG 7) are particularly off-track. The MDG Report Card produced by the ODI in September 2010 stresses the importance of considering absolute and relative gains, as well as regression in some areas. Like the GMR it flags up the need to unpick country progress to understand growing inequity *within* many countries.³

¹ See United Nations General Assembly (September 2011)

² World Bank (2011)

³ ODI (September 2010)

The United Nations Millennium Development Goals Report from 2010 focused on the impact of the global economic situation on the attainment of the MDGs.⁴

The Secretary General will be issuing an annual report on the MDGs in order to keep up the pressure. The UN has committed to an annual voluntary monitoring process in African countries via the Economic, Cultural Social Council (ECSOC) of the African Union ECSOC. There is also talk of the need for more citizen-led monitoring of delivery. Some targeted additional funds have been made available to support the push towards 2015, for example in areas such as maternal health and water, and at a country level.⁵ The next MDG Summit will be held in 2013.

Current debates about how far the MDG approach can deliver on poverty reduction

Whilst no one is talking of abandoning the MDGs, there are a number of discussions as to how useful such nationally defined targets are in the attempt to reduce poverty. These discussions are found in the academic literature, in the parallel meetings which have taken place at the various MDG summits and monitoring meetings, and, as we shall see below, are taking place in internal policy discussions amongst the various actors, such as donors and INGOs. Examples of such debates include:

The problem with targets

There is an increasing feeling that the MDGs are insufficient in and of themselves.⁶ As with all targets, the MDGs focus attention on partial solutions since gains are largely based on improvements in national averages, which can conceal broad and widening disparities in poverty. Likewise, the MDGs can focus attention so closely on the goals themselves that other issues and context-specific realities are ignored.⁷ The emphasis on specific indicators for monitoring the attainment of targets, for example maternal mortality ratios, raises major methodological questions about the reliability of data and attribution of causality.⁸ Further, the current framework of proportions and averages means that policy makers, in an effort to achieve headline targets, may focus on those who are easiest to reach. For example, in 2009, the Chronic Poverty Research Centre pointed out that attention only to averages and 'easier' groups would jeopardise the ultimate goal of poverty eradication. Paul Collier in *The Bottom Billion* pointed out that the MDGs will provide development for the easier end of the spectrum, but that there will continue to be specific 'poverty traps' which will need particular policies and approaches.

The need to target the marginalised and excluded

Many commentators note that the broad sweep approach of the MDGs does not encourage work with specific pockets of the poor and marginalised groups including ethnic minorities, disabled people, adolescents, and women. In response to this need, the UN Convention on

⁴ United Nations (2010)

⁵ For example, the European Commission launched the MDG Initiative in September 2010, a pot of €1 billion, to be allocated at country-level.

⁶ E.g. Vandemoortele (2009); Clemens et al. (2007); Easterly (2009)

⁷ See Black and White (2004); Hayman (2007).

⁸ See Hayman et al. (2011)

the Rights of Persons with Disabilities was introduced in May 2008. By 2009 it had been signed by 139 countries and ratified by 53. The convention defines disability both as a human right and a development issue. Article 32 states that the convention will ensure that international cooperation, including international development programmes are inclusive of and accessible to people with disabilities.

Poverty as a global issue

There is increased evidence that most poverty is now found not in the poorest countries, but in middle income countries.⁹ These figures suggest that the biggest causes of poverty are not lack of development in the country as a whole, but rather the political, social and economic marginalisation of particular groups in countries that are otherwise doing quite well. The emergence of thinking about poverty as a global issue, rather than thinking about 'poor countries' leads to a different focus for development work – one that is problem-led rather than seeking national level solutions.

The need for a more integrated approach

The MDGs can lead to isolated programmes which are designed to achieve specific targets rather than overall wellbeing. UNICEF, for example, has stated that investment in vaccination programmes and the focus on a reduction in infant mortality is not enough, particularly when once the children grow up there may not be the support for them to achieve fulfilment in life. It argues for more attention to be paid to creation of job opportunities for young people, among other things. Likewise, there seems to be a resurgence of interest in infrastructure, the productive sectors, rural development, and agriculture – all of which were paid scant attention within the MDGs. Initiatives to this effect include L'Aquila Food Security Initiative of July 2009, in which signatories committed to deliver US\$20 billion to boost sustainable agricultural development and double agricultural productivity using longer term multi-sectoral approaches, the Scale Up Nutrition (SUN) roadmap announced at the UN summit, a holistic approach to nutrition, and the EC's new financing facility for water and sanitation.

What happens after 2015?

The 2010 MDG Summit recognised the need for global thinking about a post-2015 development framework, and we see the emergence of more formalised discussion fora to discuss what a future framework might look like.¹⁰ INTRAC was recently commissioned by a leading INGO to look into donor thinking about future frameworks for their overseas development assistance funding, and into the direction of thinking within selected INGOs. INTRAC held discussions with informants in several key donor agencies, and had further discussions with a variety of INGOs in order to explore their thinking about working within the MDG paradigm, and what the future might hold.¹¹

⁹ See Sumner (2010)

¹⁰ This debate has and is happening in many places, e.g. Beyond 2015 initiative: <http://beyond2015.org/>; the European Association of Development Research and Training Institutes (policy forum of 2009: www.eadi.org/index.php?id=1108); the Overseas Development Institute (ODI) has produced various related discussion notes.

¹¹ Key informants were interviewed from: Action on Disability and Development; Christian Aid; CIDA; DFID; EC; ILO; Irish Aid; Netherlands Ministry of Foreign Affairs; Norwegian Foreign Ministry; Oxfam; Plan International; Save the Children; UNDP; UNESCO; UNICEF; USAID; WaterAid; World Bank.

Whilst all donors interviewed said, without hesitation, that current efforts must continue to focus on the achievement of the MDGs, and that it was important not to be 'distracted' by discussions of post-2015 frameworks, some were very articulate in their thinking for the future. Lines of opinion were:

- The existing MDGs should be extended for a period of time to ensure that the original goals are achieved. Within this there is discussion about the need to focus on the countries and sectors which are more off-track.
- A new set of wider goals should be developed, which may be more cross-cutting and broader based, or locally developed in different countries/regions.
- The MDGs have enabled a degree of success but what is needed now is a completely new approach.

Option 1: more of the same, but with refinements and specific focus

- Many of the current discussions focus on the need for more targeted attention to the 'off-track' MDGs, notably MDGs 4 and 5 relating to **maternal and child health**. In response to this, the UN Secretary General launched a new Global Strategy for Women's and Children's Health at the September 2010 Summit. This strategy seeks greater coordination amongst actors and includes pledges from individual countries, the private sector, and academic institutions.¹² Updating on the progress of this strategy, several speakers at the June 2011 Tokyo Summit spoke of the importance of work on sexual and reproductive health rights, and of the centrality of family planning within this. In addition, 16 countries announced new commitments to reduce maternal, new-born and child mortality. The Secretary General stated, 'Political and financial support for action on women's and children's health is reaching new and encouraging heights.'¹³ The Dutch, who are focussing more on a reduced set of priorities and countries, still highlight mother and child health as crucial. This is also now a major focus for the Bill & Melinda Gates Foundation.
- There appears to be a broadening of what should be covered by **education** strategies. The World Bank's Learning for All Programme presented at the September 2010 Summit and its Education Strategy finalised in April 2011 outline a broad strategy which will focus on implementation in three areas: knowledge generation and exchange; technical and financial support; and strategic partnerships. This new strategy will encompass education in its broader sense, including early childhood development and opportunities for older people and those out of school. The new charter developed by the Education for All Fast Track Initiative also adopts this broader approach.¹⁴ Despite these new initiatives, the informant from UNESCO noted a greater reluctance among some of the donors to invest in education since the strategies need to be long term – it seems that many bilateral

¹² Another focused initiative announced at the same summit was the Scale up Nutrition (SUN) initiative, which is a holistic approach to nutrition.

¹³ Initiative launched in Geneva May 2011: see

www.un.org/millenniumgoals/pdf/EWEC%20Press%20release%20May%2019%20final.pdf

¹⁴ The Education for All, Fast Track Initiative, initiated in April 2000, articulated six EFA goals and tracks progress in its annual monitoring report. In May 2011 the Board of Directors approved its new charter which establishes broader educational goals, including early childhood education, literacy and learning and life skills for young people and adults

See www.globalpartnership.org/media/library/EFA-FTI-charter-May-2011.pdf

donors are looking for faster returns such as investment in HIV/AIDS might provide. UNESCO says it is looking closely at emerging donors like China and Brazil who want to play a role. It is also investigating the possibility of an international finance facility to fund education. This is in line with other discussions around the MDGs, which recommend the emulation of the strategies used by the Global Funds which focus on one specific outcome area.¹⁵

- The World Bank Global Monitoring Report 2011 highlights that **fragile states** are particularly off-track in relation to the MDGs and that the international community needs to step up support for these states. This is reflected in the activities of the OECD-DAC, DFID, and the UN over the last few years related to fragile states, aid effectiveness and the MDGs.¹⁶ Likewise UNESCO's Education for All Global Monitoring Report (2011) also focuses on challenges to education in conflict zones.
- In the discussions about child and maternal health, the Tokyo Summit of June 2011 called for the need to address those **most at risk** as priority. UNDP stated, at the same conference, that 'to accelerate and sustain MDG progress there is the need to focus on **equity and inclusion** Ethnic and linguistic minorities, and indigenous people, for example, fare worse in most MDG indicators. Taken together, those groups make up a sizable proportion of the world's poor. MDG progress must reach them too; as it must reach women and girls.'¹⁷ This focus on inequalities and the hard to reach is an issue highlighted especially by the UN agencies which have responsibility to work with governments, and across the board (middle income as well as developing countries). UNICEF's line is increasingly about the need to go beyond national averages, since this runs the risk of large numbers of children being left behind – the examination of poverty data by wealth quintiles shows persisting, not reducing gaps. In addition there is a need to understand better a whole range of issues: the differences between urban and rural populations, the specific issues relating to recently settled urban populations in large encampments; and disability, and gender gaps which are still important for older children. UNESCO is also focussing on the equity issues, with access by the marginalised and excluded being a major problem. They see the need for the UN system to provide policy advice that goes beyond the traditional frameworks.

¹⁵ The 2010 Summit Outcome Document had also identified the need for a new Global Fund for Education.

¹⁶ See OECD-DAC pages on the Fragile States Principles: www.fsprinciples.org This site provides links to a range of documents on fragile states.

¹⁷ Opening remarks of Helen Clark, UNDP Administrator and chair of the UNDG at the follow up meeting on the MDGs, Tokyo Japan, June 011 see: <http://content.undp.org/go/newsroom/2011/june/clark-follow-up-meeting-on-the-millennium-development-goals-in-tokyo-japan.en>

Option 2: developing wider goals differentiated by context, which include cross-cutting issues and a human rights' focus

- The Institute of Development Studies (IDS) has stated that agreeing to a post-2015 MDG architecture will not be a question of which goals to focus on, but also of the **process** that is needed to produce any new set of pro-poor policy indicators or targets.¹⁸ A great deal of NGO lobbying is already focusing on who participates, and how, in the debate about the post-2015 framework. An INGO initiative called 'Beyond 2015' is in the process of convening a global dialogue on the 'essential must-haves that would need to be met in order for any new framework to be considered legitimate.'¹⁹ These 'must-haves' are based on deliberations at the World Social Forum, a global consultation process with members of Beyond 2015, in almost 50 countries. They focus on a discussion about who should be leading, owning and implementing the post-2015 framework (UN and national governments); how should the framework be developed (UN in collaboration with a transparent process involving national and local governments, civil society, and other initiatives such as Rio +20); what should the framework contain (global goals and contextualised national targets in full accordance with international human rights law and addressing causes of poverty and issues of sustainability); and mechanisms for accountability (between donors and recipient governments, roles for national parliament and civil society, government peer review processes, etc.).
- Issues of **governance and accountability** are increasingly on the agenda. DFID, at its March 2010 conference, stated that 'business as usual will not allow us to meet the MDGs' and that there was a need to focus more on leadership and accountability, balanced and equitable growth. President Obama, at his speech at the September 2010 Summit, stated, 'when we gather back here next year, we should bring specific commitments to promote transparency, to fight corruption, to energise civic engagement and to leverage new technologies so that we strengthen the foundation of freedom in our own countries while living up to ideals that can light the world.'²⁰ The increasing focus on results, emphasised by the EC and DFID (which launched the new UK Aid Transparency Guarantee in 2010) amongst others, reflects this drive for greater accountability and transparency in the use of resources. The drive for a stronger involvement of local civil society in monitoring development outcomes is also part of this concern. UNDP, at the June 2011 Tokyo MDG follow-up meeting, stated, 'We need to emphasise institution building and system strengthening. More attention needs to be paid to capacity development ... For example, it is important not only to build health clinics, but also to get the systems and incentives in place to ensure that health workers are paid on time, supplies get to where they are needed, and quality standards are met.'²¹
- Bond states that any future framework needs to consider cross-cutting issues, including human rights, climate change, gender, disability, and environmental sustainability.²² Poku and Whitman (2011) in their think-piece on 'The Millennium Development Goals and

¹⁸ IDS (June 2009)

¹⁹ See www.bond.org.uk/data/files/Beyond_2015_Essential_Must-Haves_April_2011.pdf

²⁰ See http://blogs.state.gov/index.php/site/by_author/motero/

²¹ Op cit: see footnote 16

²² Bond (January 2011)

Development after 2015' suggest that a reorientation might involve: prioritising actors over systems; disaggregated targets over global benchmarks; qualitative aspects of complex forms of human relatedness over technical 'solutions'; and developing country enablement over quick outcome indicators. The danger as always is that a post-2015 framework ends up as another wish list.

Option 3: completely new approaches or alternative paradigms

- Some of the new paradigms, outlined below, can be seen as questioning the approach which puts country ownership, government accountability and national policy and targets at the centre of the fight against poverty.²³ The MDG approach has been part of this paradigm – where donors have been seen to line themselves up behind national government in the joint push for target achievement. The new paradigms are looking at poverty more broadly, as a feature of developed, middle income and poor countries, and are focussing on thematically based solutions to problems which may be seen as more systemic to all societies rather than just to the poorest countries.
- In some quarters there is a return to thinking about the primacy of economic growth and the importance of markets and the private sector, with the implied downplay of the social development approach which has been dominant since the early 1990s. An informant from DFID stated that the new emphasis would be on the private sector and growth, although it was as yet unclear how this would fit with the MDGs. There is also increased talk of the importance of partnerships with the private sector in the delivery of outcomes, with a consequent shift in rhetoric away from development aid to development *financing*, incorporating multiple methods of transaction.²⁴ The Dutch have been involved in supporting the Public/Private Partnership (PPP) approach for a number of years (75 PPPs between 2003-12) and see this approach as fitting well with their perceived areas of expertise (agriculture, market chain development, market access, water, sanitation).²⁵ UNESCO has established a series of new partnerships with private partners to boost the education of girls and women, with a specific focus on Africa.²⁶ At the June 2011 Tokyo Summit, many speakers called for greater involvement of the private sector in meeting the 2015 deadline: the Managing Director of the World Bank stated that the role of public/private partnerships will be vital in leveraging the potential of the private sector over the next four years. And UNDP stated that there is need for support to sustainable models of economic growth which reach the poor, generate domestic resources for development and grow countries' capacities to trade.

²³ The Paris Declaration on Aid Effectiveness, signed in 2005, put country ownership and donor alignments with country policies at the centre of 'good donor practice'. How far are some of these newer paradigms querying this approach?

²⁴ DFID opened its new private sector department which will spearhead DFID's efforts on public-private partnerships, financial sector development and trade in January 2011. See www.devex.com/en/blogs/the-development-newswire/dfid-opens-private-sector-department?q=1 See also Obama's speech to the 2010 MDG Summit, www.trunity.net/positiveworld/blogs/view/158186/?topic=50901

²⁵ Ministry of Foreign Affairs of the Netherlands (18 March 2011).

²⁶ These include partnerships with Nokia, Procter and Gamble, Packard Foundation, Microsoft and GEMS education.

- **Environmental issues and climate change** are seen by several donors to be a key area for the future, with climate financing becoming increasingly conflated with development financing. The next UN Conference on Sustainable Development (UNSCD, or Rio+20) will focus on the green economy in the context of sustainable development and poverty eradication. These debates may lead the way. NORAD stated that it would be looking to support solutions to the provision of green forms of energy in emerging economies and middle income countries. Several informants spoke of the need for a greater focus on sustainability, which is linked to issues of climate change. The UN Environment Programme is committed to further work with less-developed countries to strengthen their ability to adapt to challenges such as climate change.
- Radical rethink of the paradigm. An informant from a Nordic country was the most explicit about this, suggesting that whilst it may be business as usual until 2015, thereafter there would be major changes in the approach of many bilateral donors. There are several underlying reasons for these predicted changes: the rise of the BRICS countries will lead to changes in the overall development assistance frameworks; the fact that poverty is increasingly seen as a global problem, with most of the world's poor living outside of the less-developed countries; the increasing focus from some quarters on the role of the private sector and the drive for greater collaboration between different types of stakeholder; economic change in OECD countries leading to cuts in aid budgets and a narrowing of the geographic and sectoral focus. There is the idea that post-2015, the discussion will be more about 'development' rather than 'aid'. This suggests that development challenges are outside the aid paradigm, and are about governance, capital investment, support for emerging economies, and especially support for new forms of energy. Under an approach which focuses on 'global public goods' the environment will provide a major lynch-pin, and change the nature of simple poverty programmes. Some of the new thematic initiatives such as the Education for All Fast Track Initiative²⁷ are examples of the categorisation of 'poverty issues' as global problems, with – perhaps – the need for global thinking regarding solutions, rather than seeing poverty as a national issue within individual countries. This idea of a radically new era of development cooperation is also increasingly found in other fora and debates about development, one of which suggests that 'we should reconceptualise development as the ability of all the world's citizens to live decent lives, rather than the problem of economic industrialisation of poor countries.'²⁸

²⁷ See above, footnote 14.

²⁸ See www.owen.org/blog/3815

Conclusions

It could be argued that the UN has more of a vested interest in the continuation of a universal approach as represented by the MDGs, whereas many bilateral donors are concentrating on fewer countries and fewer sectors. The UN and its offices have a responsibility to work with national governments across all countries, including middle income countries, and keeping a framework such as the MDGs helps provide a universal benchmark system to provide focus for their work. However, the UN has to be wary of pushing for a framework which will not speak to the current focus of bilateral donors – it being dependent on them for much of its funding.

Many bilateral donors are reducing their aid budgets, due to both pressure on budgets and a reduction in support for aid programmes by the domestic constituency. In addition, some bilaterals are concentrating more on key impact areas and self-interest, focusing not only on the value-added of their country's approach, but also on the value-added to the home country itself of its aid programme. DFID (which is maintaining its volume of aid) is reducing its number of priority countries to 27 (excluding overseas territories), and the Netherlands will be reducing further its current list of 33 countries to just 15. CIDA will continue to work in nine middle income countries (MICs), and DFID will continue to work in three, whilst the Netherlands will not. The Ministry of Foreign Affairs of the Netherlands (MoFA) is reducing its overall aid budget from 0.8% to 0.7% GNP, and is focusing its aid programme explicitly around four 'spearheads' which will frame its country strategies for the period 2012–15. These are: security and legal order; food security; water; sexual and reproductive health and rights (SRHR). MoFA says there can be no priorities without non-priorities, and that education and health care will be non-priority themes except in so far as such interventions contribute to SRHR. Thus there will be less money for primary education, the Fast Track Initiative, investments in health care, sector budget support, support for global funds for fighting illness and other international initiatives aimed at broad health care systems. These current trajectories are likely to have a considerable impact on the post-2015 paradigm.

Most of the INGOs we spoke with had not spent a great deal of time thinking about the future of MDGs. Most of the INGOs were not involved in the original discussions leading to the original list of MDGs, although in subsequent years they have frequently been asked to report on the contribution their work makes to the achievement of the MDGs. Those INGOs which are less dependent on institutional donors and which are less concerned about responding to official lines have not tended to give a lot of attention to the MDGs: thus, Christian Aid stated that it had not had many dealings with the MDGs, seeing them as a donor-inspired agenda, linked with country ownership and budget support. However, they did produce a publication prior to the September 2010 Summit²⁹ which focussed on what is lacking in the MDGs and looked forward to post-2015. They felt that the MDGs missed all those things that Christian Aid is wedded to, such as sustainability, participation, and equality, which 'get lost in the mechanical way of trying to deliver some of the MDG specific indicators.' Similarly, other agencies said that they have tended to get involved with the MDGs mainly in their advocacy work, and not in their programming.

²⁹ Entitled 'We are all in this together'

Of the NGOs spoken to, none seemed to be positioning itself to receive funds under new funding streams. This may be, as indicated by Oxfam, that they have not yet begun to think about the situation post-2015 and what this might mean to their fundraising strategies. Many are already positioning themselves to apply for more funds in-country (through budget support, pooled funds, etc.), and to working in collaboration with other civil society actors in country. Whether such funds will be driven by MDG-related targets depends on the sectors concerned. Much of the work of INGO head offices focuses on advocacy work, and as such, respondents spoke of the need to articulate the need for a greater focus on equity in target setting, and of the need to involve the people themselves in discussions about appropriate targets in their countries.

However, there is a group of INGOs and local CSOs which is wary of being left out of discussions about the post-2015 framework, and many of these are involved in initiatives such as the 'Beyond 2015' network, outlined above. For INGOs which are more dependent on funding streams from bilateral and multi-lateral donors, the post-2015 framework is crucially important, and this paper demonstrates that the future of the MDGs and a target-based approach to poverty reduction remains uncertain.

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