

# Are the Millennium Development Goals addressing the underlying causes of injustice?

## Understanding the risks of the MDGs

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*The Millennium Development Goals (MDGs) represent a global political consensus aimed at reducing poverty and promoting sustainable development. Such global agreement on these issues is a major step forward in international policymaking and has been welcomed by civil society organisations. Less emphasis, however, has been given to the potential downsides of this emerging paradigm. Such critical analysis is essential lest the global "grand vision" lead to re-making the mistakes of the past. This paper argues that whilst the Goals are positive overall, there are some serious risks that must be addressed. It outlines six such risks that must be factored into the MDG process. In particular, the dual questions of participation and ownership remain*

*unanswered within the MDG framework. Such questions require a greater emphasis on process, not just ends - and on institutional reform, not only volumes of finance.*

## **Introduction**

The Millennium Declaration, signed by world leaders on 8 September 2000, is a remarkable achievement. Despite numerous criticisms launched against the Millennium Development Goals (MDGs) in the past few years, the fact remains that at a given point in history, world leaders decided to set themselves clear targets for reducing poverty. In doing so, they have set out their vision of the kind of world they would like to see in the new millennium and put a timeframe on achieving that vision. The aim of this paper is to examine the strengths and weaknesses of the MDG framework as currently being implemented. The paper draws on field research carried out in November 2004, which involved consulting with key stakeholders in the MDG processes in Kenya and Zambia.

From the positive point of view, the MDGs cover nearly all the relevant dimensions of poverty, not just income poverty. The body of academic research underscores the fact that poverty is multi-dimensional. These goals reflect a broad terrain of basic human well-being, representing nearly all the relevant dimensions of poverty as part of an integrated whole.<sup>1</sup> The visible signs of poverty can be calculated in terms of access to basic needs such as food, sanitation, water, healthcare and education. They underscore the fact that tailored interventions in many sectors are essential if human development is to be achieved, as can be seen from Table 1. This analysis also points to a number of key gaps in the MDG framework, such as participation, which will be discussed in further detail later.

A further strength of the MDG framework is its links to the human rights framework, though, as this paper will argue, such links are not strong enough.<sup>2</sup> The MDGs are linked to the human rights framework both in terms of substance and, to a lesser extent, process. The MDGs link directly to Articles 25 and 26 of the Universal Declaration of Human Rights (UDHR), which states that “everyone has a right to a standard of living adequate for the health and the well-being of himself and his family, including food, clothing, housing, medical care and necessary social services” Art.25) and “everyone has the right to

**Table 1: The MDGs and the human development paradigm**

Human development						
<i>Directly enhancing human/capabilities dimensions</i>			<i>Contextual dimensions</i>			
Long and healthy life	Knowledge	Decent standard of living	Participation	Environmental sustainability	Human security	Gender equality
MDGs 4, 5 and 6	MDG 2	MDG 1		MDG 7		MDG3
Child mortality, maternal health HIV/AIDS	Universal primary education	Extreme income poverty, hunger		Environmental sustainability		Gender equality in primary education

Source: Selim Jahan, 2002

education. Education shall be free, at least in the elementary and fundamental stages". Furthermore, Article 28 of the UDHR calls for an international order supportive of the implementation of human rights – reflected in MDG 8. The MDGs also link to human rights indirectly through the paradigm of human development. However, they do not cover all the dimensions of human development – in particular the right to participate and human security are absent – but these do form part of the Millennium Declaration, from which the MDGs are taken.

Several other positive dimensions of the MDGs have been identified in the growing literature on the subject. Firstly, the MDGs are global and national. The process through which they were elaborated – heads of state together – means that they have meaning both at national level and global levels. There is no higher source of authority than heads of states agreeing at a global forum. Secondly, they are concrete output targets – they are not process driven. The goals offer clear, agreed and quantifiable targets to galvanise efforts in the rich and poor countries and to hold their leaders to account.<sup>3</sup> This means that they can be objectively verified, but as we will see, it also leaves the question of process wide open. Thirdly, the targets are direct – poverty reduction is not regarded as an indirect result of economic growth. They are also measurable and accountable. Governments have made these promises and can be held to account on them. Finally, they propose changes in both North

and South to achieve poverty eradication – including a macro-economic framework to achieve it.

## Risks of the current MDG approach

The MDGs, as outlined above, open space at the highest level to put key issues of poverty onto the global agenda, providing a welcome opportunity for public debate. They put centre stage questions of access for the poor to basic public services, underscoring the need for additional finances to fill the resource gap that exists. Such a shift in emphasis is particularly important given the current emphasis on security issues and militarisation.

Nevertheless, the way the MDGs are being used in policymaking also raises some cause for concern. A clear distinction must be made: acknowledgement of the positive nature of the goals is *not* the same as endorsing the processes and policy measures currently being pursued in the “name of the goals”. For whilst the MDGs are strong on outcomes, a major gap exists relating to processes to reach those outcomes.<sup>4</sup> Some of these problems, it is argued, help to explain the distinct lack of progress that has been made in delivering substantial change and concrete results.

### Risk 1: Window dressing leads to scepticism

The first such risk is that the MDGs can give an impression of change dressed up in a new discursive language – but little change in substance. Given the holistic nature of the goals, and their cross-cutting dimensions, they encapsulate the breadth of development co-operation efforts that have

been in existence for many years. Everything and everybody can attribute elements of their existing work to one or other of the MDGs. This has given rise to an elaborate window dressing exercise over the past four years. Countless studies, commissions, reports, workshops and think-ins have been held or are in progress to examine the contribution different institutions are making towards the Goals. Much of this work entails re-packaging the existing work within the framework of the MDGs.

*“The negative reactions from civil society to the MDGs are understandable. We’ve had the PRSPs, now we have the MDGs, what’s going to come next? For us it is ‘alphabet soup’.”*

JCTR, Zambia

Linked to this is the association of the MDGs with new reporting requirements and procedures which are often not accompanied by new resources or changes in policies. Within civil society, as with government ministries, there is fatigue at the constantly changing acronyms that, in the end, change little on the ground. Rather than enthusiasm for the Goals, the most marked reaction to the MDGs is a profound sense of resignation.

It is possible that the only thing that changes is the discourse of poverty and development and not the substance of policies and action. The main winners are the army of development professionals dedicated to report writing and intensive monitoring exercises.<sup>5</sup> The net effect of this is to further depoliticise the development agenda – shifting it even more from a question of politics to one of technical support and expertise.

## **Risk 2: Entrenching a top-down approach**

Associated with this first risk is the question of participation and the top-down nature of the MDGs. Ownership, participation, and partnership have become the core principles in implementing development strategies that are pro-poor, underscoring the fact that the poor are the best experts regarding their situation. Such principles are not additional to it but part and parcel of what constitutes human development. At

different levels of interaction – from PRSPs (Poverty Reduction Strategy Papers) to UN conferences – the participation of civil society has become a key feature in recent years. At every level, and to varying degrees of success, efforts have been made to translate the right to participate into reality, acknowledging that true development is only possible if this right is exercised. The UN also accepts that full participation and ownership are key to turning the MDGs into a reality.

As outlined above, the process that led to the internationally agreed development goals excluded key players, including Southern governments and civil society. From their inception, therefore, the participative nature of these Goals has been questionable. A recent

*“I’m a massive fan of the MDGs but when you try and shortcut the system and give them a role that they weren’t ever expected to have in policy, in budgeting ... when you start doing that you undermine equity decisions, you undermine local ownership, you undermine all sorts of processes that really are much, much more complicated ...”*

DFID, Kenya

International Institute for Environment and Development report finds that the goals are “too determined by ‘external’ experts, those suffering from deprivation have not determined the priorities and have had no role in the definitions of ‘what is poverty’ and of what is needed to reduce it.”<sup>6</sup> This same report also views the Goals as too focused on the role of international agencies and national governments, neglecting the investments and ingenuity that low income groups and their organisations can bring to poverty reduction, and the extent to which poverty reduction requires local processes that are more responsive and accountable to low income groups. This view was reflected strongly by the civil society representatives in the survey carried out for this report.

Jolly identifies this as a problem not only of the MDGs, but of global goal-setting in itself. He argues that such goals tend “to lead to a top-down process of planning and implementation, at the cost of bottom-up participation in which the community or other local groups set their own priorities for development.” Global goal-setting can also “bias the

*“These are things that were done at the topmost level – without involving citizens... that’s why it took a long time for that information to trickle down to the grassroots and, in the process, we’ve lost time to put pressure on so that they could deliver.”*

CSPR, Zambia

selection of development goals in favour of those that are internationally favoured by experts or donors, as opposed to those that make the most sense in the national context of individual countries.”<sup>7</sup> In this way, the critical issues which matter most to those countries in need are masked.

The success or failure of the UN’s ambitious drive to have the MDGs incorporated into all developing countries’ poverty reduction plans will greatly depend on the participation of Southern governments, civil society organisations, the private sector and other relevant stakeholders in the formulation of the MDGs and their sense of ownership over them. From the above it is apparent that the poorest people, in whose name the objective of poverty eradication is pursued, have never heard of the MDGs. Until they do, they cannot hold anyone accountable for achieving them. While they remain ignorant of them, they are not empowered by them. The solution is not to tell them about the global targets, which are barely relevant to them. It is to involve them in bringing these targets closer to home, to a level where they become tangible and relevant and can make a difference to their daily lives.<sup>8</sup>

### **Risk 3: Ignoring the intangible dimensions of poverty**

A further risk with the MDGs is their lack of direct reference to the intangible dimensions of poverty. It is widely accepted that basic needs extend beyond material goods to include other intangibles such as the need to be valued, or treated with dignity, or to be free to participate politically, culturally, and economically in one's society. Other important psychological dimensions of poverty are powerlessness, voicelessness, dependency and humiliation. The different

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DFID, Kenya, 2004

aspects of poverty outlined in Box 1 are based on the views and experiences of those living in poverty. They underscore the fact that poverty reduction is about empowering people to acquire the tools they need to meet their needs, to participate in political processes and to demand accountability from state and non-state institutions.

Another problem with the current approach, related to the above concern, is its failure to take into account the lessons learned around the negative role that targets can play in public policymaking and implementation. Whilst targets are good at rallying support, within such frameworks, process issues are often ignored as a natural consequence of the agreement on the outcomes. Targets and goals tend to foster an over-simplistic view of how systems work – resulting in a linear, technocratic, apolitical understanding of what constitutes change. Maxwell highlights this issue in his paper on the MDGs: “equity, consensus-building, partnership and managing change by simple targets” – can be overlooked.<sup>9</sup>

Maxwell points to the experience of target setting in the UK as an example of how complex processes can be over-simplified and priorities can be skewed as a result of targets. This research shows that the use of targets can “encourage a reductionist approach to complex problems, privilege quantitative indicators at the expense of qualitative ones, distort resource allocation, undermine professional motivation and responsibility.”<sup>10</sup> The fact that the MDGs and accompanying targets are greatly

concerned with measurable outcomes may result in too much support for top-down, targeted interventions to deliver on the chosen targets, and a neglect of development whose impacts are not easily measured, such as more accountable local governance, protection of poorer groups' civil and political rights and more possibilities for community-designed and managed initiatives.<sup>11</sup>

The possible implications of such risks are accentuated in relation to the specific targets set for the various MDGs. A number of criticisms have been levied in relation to the eighteen MDG targets. White and Black (2004) berate them for defining the expected outcomes of development rather than inputs in the form of resources and processes.<sup>12</sup> Maxwell also highlights the risks they pose: they can encourage a reductionist approach to complex problems, such as the “dollar a day” target for poverty reduction in Box 1. These tend to privilege quantitative indicators at the expense of qualitative indicators, distort resource allocation and undermine professional motivation and responsibility.<sup>13</sup> A further concern, highlighted by Jolly, is that targets produce a perverse incentive to falsify statistics, rather than admit to failures of the non-availability of relevant data.

**Box 1: The downside of Goal 1: measuring poverty using the dollar a day poverty line**

Monitoring progress towards MDG 1 with the dollar a day poverty line has grave limitations, especially in nations where the governance structure is particularly weak, ineffective or anti-poor. Any income-based poverty line should reflect the real monetary cost for individuals or households of meeting their needs. However, in most nations the income-based poverty lines used by government do not do this, because they take insufficient account of the real cost of non-food essentials, or do not include the cost of some non-food essentials in their calculations. Most do not allow for differences within national territories in the prices of essential goods and services. The use of a single income-based poverty line greatly understates who is poor in the higher cost locations.

Furthermore, if poverty is seen as a lack of opportunity to acquire lasting control of resources in order to strengthen one's capacity to acquire the basic necessities of life, combating it will require more than money, more than an income. It requires assets or entitlements, the value of which cannot be easily estimated in money terms. In other words, it requires rights that ensure access to all these things; rights that certainly cannot be acquired for a dollar a day.

Another flaw in the dollar a day yardstick to measure poverty levels is that it takes no account of people who did not even reach this level because they died, due to poverty,



shortly after birth or at least far below the average life expectancy enjoyed by others. Their numbers do not even reach the income statistics. At present, annual poverty-related deaths run into dozens of millions. Such a figure would add substantially to an annual stock figure of poor people at any particular moment in time.

A critical question posed by Pronk with regard to the dollar a day yardstick is what kind of life can a person live on a dollar a day anywhere, in Africa, Asia, in the cities of Latin America, or even in China? He wonders if that question has not been raised because of the fear that a more ambitious goal, affecting more poor people, could never be attained without far-reaching changes in the distribution of world income and entitlements, while the dollar level would only require better governance in the poor countries themselves and a slight increase in development aid. The blame for not meeting a dollar a day target level could easily be apportioned to the poor countries themselves, while failing to reach a more civilised goal could be attributable to the richer countries and their reluctance to share with the poor.

These issues are further highlighted in relation to other Goals, such as Goal 3 on gender equality (Box 2). One obvious problem relating to the gender dimension of the Goals is that none of the indicators are gender sensitive. UNIFEM has proposed additional

### **Box 2: Does Goal 3 empower women?**

MDG 3 has many problems, in particular, its totally inadequate Target 4 of "eliminating gender disparity in primary and secondary education" and its accompanying indicators. While the indicators on education and literacy represent major achievements for women everywhere, experience in the Caribbean shows how inadequate they are as indications of empowerment, where they have certainly not translated into higher access to employment, incomes, decision-making positions in the public domain or political office. Women in Caribbean countries have already achieved the target, yet can hardly speak of equality, equity, or empowerment where poverty persists, violence against women continues unabated and the second highest spread of HIV/AIDS after Sub-Saharan Africa, especially amongst women. Moreover, despite efforts to change this, there is still a great deal of sex-role stereotyping in the school curriculum that limits the options of girls. Indeed, education (or certain forms of education) may perpetuate gender stereotypes and, in that sense, even serve to reinforce the existing socio-cultural gender construct.

Regarding the indicator on the number of women in parliaments as an indication of women's empowerment, it depends on the circumstances under which women candidates take part in elections. In CARICOM, with few exceptions, the small number of women who run for and win seats owe their preferment to the men who make decisions within the political parties: women who challenge male privilege are not likely to be among these. Once in office women (and men) tend to cede their own power to that of their government and are unlikely to have the freedom to demonstrate empowerment and agency, especially in relation to gender issues.

indicators including women's wages and economic equality but they are still inadequate and would have to include others such as access to and control of land, equality before the law, incidence of domestic violence and rape, and access to health services.

#### **Risk 4: Over-emphasis on volume of finance**

Additional finance, in particular increases in ODA, is generally acknowledged as essential to achieving the MDGs.<sup>14</sup> One of the strengths of the goals is the way in which they are able to focus attention on the provision of essential services to the poor and to

demonstrate the gap that exists between existing sources of funding and that needed. In this respect, they can act as a powerful lever for international resources to address poverty and hunger.

This growing emphasis on the volume of finance, however, needs to be accompanied by an equally strong focus on quality issues – and reforming the international aid system. Merely increasing finance is not the solution to achieving the MDGs. The economic and political imbalances within the aid system mean that any additional funds need to be accompanied by reforms to the system so as to achieve the maximum benefit.

This emphasis on the need to increase the volume of development finance needs to be seen within the context of reforms to the aid system needed to achieve the Goals. If the donor community is serious in its intent to achieve the MDGs, the challenge is not only to ensure that the financing instruments are sufficiently predictable and flexible to respond to the needs of low income countries. At present, donor flows are highly unpredictable. They are four times more volatile than income from domestic revenue.<sup>15</sup> The current

*“Simply allocating more resources, even to education and health, will not reduce poverty; it is a matter of how that money is utilised.”*

Professor Seshamani,  
University of Lusaka

*“The investment requirement is just beyond what this country can afford.... That's why we're saying: Let's know all what we require, what can be gotten domestically, let's know what the gap is. And this gap is so strong that it is for the development community to provide in the spirit of world aid and, of course, the Monterrey conferences.”*

UNDP, MDG  
Focal Point, Kenya

volatility and unpredictability of aid flows is a serious impediment to planning to meet the MDGs. Only 70% of pledges are currently delivered. A more stable and predictable way to finance recurrent social spending and capital outlays is essential.

Despite the strong rhetorical commitment that donors give to partnership with recipient governments, evidence suggests that donors in general do not understand what it means to work in partnership. Donors typically continue to earmark finance for projects and programmes and impose detailed conditions and institutional controls. This undermines the accountability of recipient governments to their own public and civil society agents. A new relationship is needed between donor and recipient countries in aid, trade and debt. This should be based on giving a greater voice to poorer countries and impoverished communities in the key decisions that affect their lives and economies.

### **Risk 5: Distracting attention from productive sectors**

A further risk with the current MDG approach is its potential to distract attention away from the need to invest in the productive sectors of developing countries, particularly in Sub-Saharan Africa. Almost without exception, the lowest average yields for crops and livestock are found in Sub-Saharan Africa. African agricultural production actually declined by 5% between 1980 and 2001.<sup>16</sup>

If African countries are to have any chance of meeting and sustaining the MDGs, they need substantial investment in their productive sectors. Spending on Africa's productive sectors, such as agriculture, has fallen in relative terms over the past 20 years. Noting donors' increasing preference for allocating aid to social sectors such as health and education – traditional MDG sectors – equal and increasing investments in production and economic sectors are crucial for Africa to build its productive base and enhance its economic prospects.<sup>17</sup>

As the head of the UN's Economic Commission for Africa, K.Y. Amoako, said in 2003: "This preoccupation with the lifting of social services may have led us to neglect the centrality of strengthening the fundamentals... There has been a sharp reduction in the share of aid going to productive sectors. [Aid and debt relief] may have enshrined a set of policy priorities, which does not fully reflect Africa's most urgent needs. There is clearly a necessity to direct HIPC [Heavily Indebted Poor Country Initiative] savings beyond the social sectors."<sup>18</sup>

In Africa more than 70% of the poorest people live in rural areas and work in agriculture. There is an intimate relationship between poverty and agriculture. Studies have repeatedly shown that agriculture is key to poverty reduction efforts in Africa and must therefore play a central role in achieving the MDGs. Of the 1.2 billion people worldwide living on less than a dollar a day, 900 million live in rural areas.<sup>19</sup> Indeed, given the lack of alternatives, agriculture is the only route to sustained poverty reduction in Africa.

Agricultural growth has a more powerful impact on poverty reduction than any other economic sector.<sup>20</sup> Agricultural growth favours the sector where poor people work, uses the land and labour that they possess, produces crops that they consume and favours the rural areas where they live. It generates employment, creates income, and increases the ability of poor people to secure and create further assets. A 1% increase in agricultural productivity has been found to reduce the proportion of people living on less than a dollar a day by 0.6-1.2%.<sup>21</sup>

In the past two decades, moreover, African countries have been under constant pressure to lower their agricultural tariff barriers. This is evident in the conditions attached by the World Bank and the IMF (International Monetary Fund) to the approval of new loans and debt reduction. Liberalisation has often occurred at a breathtaking pace and depth, and has seemingly been promoted more by economic dogma than a considered analysis of its probable impact on poor people. Both Mozambique and Zambia now have more open economies than the UK and Germany, for example.<sup>22</sup>

This has led to surges in imports of cheap, usually subsidised, products that have undercut small farmers' ability to sell to local markets. This sets off what the FAO (Food and Agriculture Organisation) describes as "a progressive pauperisation of small-scale farmers, who cannot possibly compete with modern capitalised farms in an increasingly open world economy."<sup>23</sup> Sixteen country case studies carried out by the FAO, looking at the impact of the WTO (World Trade Organisation) Agreement on Agriculture, found that food imports surged after liberalisation. The FAO noted that "tariffs were often the primary, if not the only, trade instrument open to these countries for stabilising domestic markets and safeguarding farmers' interests".<sup>24</sup> As such, they represent a central source of income generation for Southern governments.

With growth rates of 6-8% typically required to achieve the MDGs in Africa,<sup>25</sup> only agriculture can be expected to mobilise

the required economic dynamism.<sup>26</sup> Not only can agriculture reduce poverty directly, but it can also stimulate growth in the wider economy. Studies have shown that a \$1 increase in agricultural value added leads to a \$1.50-\$2.00 increase in value added in the non-farm economy. Similarly, a 1% increase in agricultural gross output has been shown to raise rural non-farm employment by 1%.<sup>27</sup>

### **Risk 6: Distracting attention from macro-economic constraints**

A final risk with the current MDG approach is its ability to distract attention from the underlying macro-economic conditions which constrain the ability of developing countries to take control over their own finances. As discussed above in relation to the international aid regime, the ability or otherwise of countries to use the aid that is available to them

*“The cabinet is completely distracted by the drive to reach HIPC completion. Other things are going on, but everyone at government level is completely distracted by that; I’m not convinced of a serious focus on the MDGs, per se”*

Donor official, Zambia

depends on their ability to meet conditions set out by the IMF and World Bank. The IFIs (international financial institutions) not only administer a substantial share of all official development assistance, these institutions also exert enormous power by acting as gatekeepers for flows of official development assistance. They give their stamp of approval to countries they deem fit for investment, thereby signalling to the rest of the international community, including bilateral donors, other international financial institutions, and even the private sector, that it is safe to invest. The credibility of the IFIs’ stamp of approval comes in part from their preferential creditor status, which means that the IFIs are usually the first creditors to be paid, and are paid back in full and on time. Moreover, borrowing countries get the IFIs’ approval only after agreeing to undergo the structural and policy reforms dictated by these two institutions.

In theory, such macro-economic conditions are arguably set in the country’s long-term interests to ensure macro-stability. In practice, however, the policy advice offered by the IMF and the World Bank has served to further undermine the potential of countries to reach the MDGs. The role of the IFIs has come into serious question in a number of reports which highlight the way that they have stretched beyond their original mandate.<sup>28</sup> Donors

should take heed of the abundant and authoritative evidence that conditionality regimes imposed by the IMF have failed to produce pro-poor outcomes or to deliver the policy reforms desired by donors.<sup>29</sup>

In theory at least, the MDG of halving the proportion of people in poverty, for example, could be met by exacerbating the poverty of the other half – thus deepening the poverty of some to lift others out of poverty. It could equally be achieved through addressing the unequal distribution of assets and resources, through land reform or progressive taxation. This ambivalence is echoed in much of the critical literature: “risk exists that targets set by the Millennium Declaration may be met without addressing the structural issues that ultimately will determine the durability of the success.”<sup>30</sup> The emphasis on ODA levels in meeting the MDGs could result in the objective targets being met in part by 2015 – but the questions of structural inequality being left largely unanswered. This view is echoed by Martin Khor, who underlines the fact that the mere expansion of funds is not enough – and may be counter-productive unless the underlying issue of national and international inequality are addressed adequately.<sup>31</sup>

As Roberto Bissio of Social Watch argues: “If international aid was to be duplicated tomorrow, the present macroeconomic system would not allow it to be spent. The World Bank and regional development banks already have more money available than countries are allowed to absorb by the rules of the IMF.”<sup>32</sup> One such example is Uganda, which was originally forced to reject a \$52 million grant from the global fund for HIV/AIDS, malaria and TB so as to stay within the strict budgetary constraints it had agreed so as to acquire loans from the IMF. It was only after pressure was put on the IMF by donor governments that the decision was reversed. The low fiscal deficit and inflation targets of the IMF are directly affecting the capacity of governments to access available aid resources.

The serious implications of such underlying conditions are barely mentioned in the MDGs and are noticeably absent in the recommendations set out by the Millennium Project in its final report. At the end of the day, addressing the role of the IFIs in developing countries raises difficult questions around global economic governance, around participation and around ownership. These questions need to be put centre stage in the debates surrounding the implementation of the MDGs.

## Mitigating against the risks

The six risks identified in this paper point to the need to think more broadly about the MDGs, and in particular how they relate to process issues and systemic factors. Such factors are part and parcel of human development, not add-ons. Failure to adequately capture these dimensions within the MDG framework could threaten to undermine efforts to eradicate poverty.

These risks can be mitigated against in at least two ways.<sup>33</sup>

Firstly, the MDGs need to be more fully integrated into the human rights framework.<sup>34</sup>

Human rights instruments and mechanisms need to be mobilised to challenge the weak accountability mechanisms in the MDGs by arguing that not only should states

politically commit to the MDGs, they are also legally obligated to do so under the human rights treaties. The International Convention on Economic Social and Cultural Rights, the Convention on the Elimination of All forms of Discrimination Against Women and the Beijing Platform for Action offer a conceptual framework for understanding the MDGs as human rights obligations.<sup>35</sup> This changes the debate from the language of will and commitment to the language of duty and obligation.

Furthermore, the emphasis in meeting the MDGs' needs to take into account wider structural injustices within global economic governance, which go to the heart of the question of participation and empowerment. Such an approach would rest on the presumption that, given sufficient information, developing country governments, parliaments and civil societies are best placed to know their needs and priorities and to figure out how best to meet them. Thus those people who are most affected by the decisions of the IFIs would have a critical influence over the type of restructuring that would guarantee positive development

*“The whole thing has to be around rights. You approach them [the Goals] from a rights perspective and not provision. The reason people are poor is because their rights are being denied: that’s the bottom line. MDGs are almost distracting from the rights issue... To me, the main thing is to start talking about people’s rights to get all these MDGs and, once we have approached it from a rights-based perspective, then we will get there because we will hold governments accountable.”*

Gezahegn Kebede,  
Kenya Country Director,  
Oxfam GB

outcomes. Likewise, the IFIs should assume poverty eradication and equitable development as their ultimate objective. They need to consider the impact of their loans and policies – both ex ante and ex post - with respect to the MDGs and, more broadly, international human rights law.<sup>36</sup> The recommendations from the Independent Evaluation Office and the World Bank's Operational Evaluation Department reviews of the PRSP, while a step in the right direction that should be fully implemented, are not enough. A radical revision of the architecture of the PRSPs should be undertaken in order to bring all actors, including the IMF and World Bank inside a domestic, partnership-based, decision-making forum.<sup>37</sup> The IFIs should work with governments, civil society actors and specialised bodies such as the UNDP (United Nations Development Programme) to develop the capacity to produce ranges of policy options, including undertaking examinations of the economic, social and political trade-offs associated with different policy paths.

## Conclusion

As with any overarching framework, there are serious shortcomings with the MDGs. The framework tends to foster simplistic solutions and top-down approaches which treat some of the symptoms – but not the causes of poverty. Some of these can be overcome through greater attention to the wider context in which the goals are being pursued. At a more fundamental level, however, there is a serious risk that the MDGs could distract attention from underlying causes of structural injustice – at a national and global level. The framework at present fails to fully appreciate the role of the IFIs in national level economic planning within developing countries – and their lack of accountability. Without addressing these basic issues there is little chance that the MDGs will be achieved, even with the additional financial contributions promised.

## Footnotes

- 1 Pronk, J. (2003), "Collateral damage or calculated default? The Millennium Development Goals and the policies of globalisation", Inaugural Address, Institute of Social Studies, The Hague. p.2
- 2 Human Rights Perspectives on the Millennium Development Goals Conference Report (2003), <http://www.nyuhr.org/images/NYUHRGJMDGREPORT2003.pdf>.
- 3 OXFAM GB (2004), *Paying the Price: Why Rich Countries must now Invest in a War on Poverty*, Oxford; [http://www.oxfam.org/eng/pdfs/pp041206\\_MDG.pdf](http://www.oxfam.org/eng/pdfs/pp041206_MDG.pdf) p.1



- 4 A recent International Institute for Environment and Development report stated that “the MDGs are very clear in what they want to achieve, but not clear about the means through which they will be achieved. In a sense, they are a critique of development institutions and development theory, because they are pointing to desired outcomes that more than forty years of international aid have failed to achieve. But they give little idea of how international development assistance should change, except that more international aid needs to be spent on interventions to support these goals.” International Institute for Environment and Development (2003), *The MDGs and Local Processes: Hitting the Target or Missing the Point?* <http://www.iied.org/docs/mdg/MDG-booklet.pdf> p.11
- 5 Tandon, Y. (2004), *Are the MDGs WMDs? (Weapons of Mass Distraction/Diversion)*, unpublished paper
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