The Millennium Development Goals: A Critical Discussion

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"Perhaps human is as human does. By setting thresholds of behaviour, the fully human [can] ... be distinguished from the sub-human, near-human; and utterly non-human"

(Fernandez-Armesto 2004)

This article critically discusses the Millennium Development Goals (MDGs), setting them within the wider context of universal human rights. It explores some key tensions embedded in the rights and development projects and draws parallels with the contradictions within the goals and targets of the MDGs. Although the MDGs are found to be problematic, it can be argued that they are important to processes of goal-setting that are central to the progressive realisation of human rights. However, the technocratic prioritisation of economic means over human ends is seriously problematic. Much depends on whether the ultimate goal of "developing a global partnership for development" is implemented in the spirit of rights-based development, with proper attention to the problems of conditionality and the fundamental inequalities of power and resources.

Introduction

The Millennium Development Goals (MDGs) provide a new consensus, even orthodoxy, for development towards 2015. They aim to "address the problems of extreme poverty in its many dimensions – income poverty, hunger, disease, lack of adequate shelter, and exclusion, while promoting gender equality, education, and environmental sustainability" (UN Millennium Project 2005:1). These goals relate to various dimensions of fundamental human rights, as set out by the Universal Declaration of Human Rights and the rights and development frameworks that have subsequently emerged.

This article looks at the MDGs in the context of broader thinking about rights, responsibilities and obligations and how they relate to the project of development. It argues that the responsibilities of Northern countries to assist or promote development must be understood in relation to the obligation to progressively realise and not violate human rights, with due respect to the principles of indivisibility and interdependence. The discussion of the MDGs shows that they are subject to the ambiguities and contradictions that have bedeviled the rights and development debate throughout its history. However, new opportunities have arisen since the 1990s to restore coherence and holism to the human rights project, putting people back at its centre. This is the deeper challenge that needs to be borne in mind when considering the MDGs.

Global development goals and targets

Many criticisms have been made of global development goals. Sceptics argue that such goals are irrelevant, that they are largely ignored and that they are bound to fail. Over-optimistic goals and targets will not be achieved, leading to "widespread cynicism and despair". The top-down nature of global goal-setting has been questioned, with its bias towards donor interests and expert views. There are reservations about the arbitrary nature of quantitative targets. A preoccupation with targets may lead to a neglect of broader qualitative concerns (Jolly 2003: 18). If we were to focus too hard on the target of halving hunger by 2015, for example, we might lose sight of the fact that the overall goal is to eliminate hunger, not halve it.

Others have defended global goals for their programmatic role. Goals give quantitative expression to development

objectives. They prompt the data gathering and analysis needed to monitor development indicators consistently. They provide guidelines for action at national and international levels. Agreed global targets provide focal points and benchmarks for governments and NGOs (non-governmental organisations), who use them to formulate and monitor national and international action. Delaying or failing to meet the agreed goals prompt critique and advocacy. Advocacy can take place behind the scenes or it may take the form of openly naming and shaming, compelling governments that fall behind to take more action.

One survey of the UN's goals is moderately optimistic, finding that the vast majority of global goals set since the 1960s have been largely, considerably or partly achieved (Jolly 2003: 5). However, many of the achievements took place before the 1980s and progress has slowed since then, due to economic constraints and lack of political will. Two interesting points emerge from this survey. Human development goals such as immunisation, sanitation and clean water have actually been more successful than the goals set for economic growth. The goals where developed countries have the strongest role, for example the provision of development assistance, have been rather unsuccessful, only falling into the partly achieved category (ibid.: 9).

The context for critical analysis

In 2000 world leaders declared their commitment at the UN Millennium Summit to eradicate poverty, to promote human dignity and equality, to achieve peace, democracy and environmental sustainability (UNDP 2003: 1) and adopted the MDGs towards these ends. In the recent report of the UN Millennium Project (2005: 1) Jeffrey Sachs argues that whatever the motivation behind the call for action on the MDGs, the solutions are the same – a new global partnership between developed and developing countries to achieve them. While consensus building is an essential aspect of global goals, this article suggests that the motivations, solutions and forms of global partnership require further interrogation. It is argued here that human rights should be recognised as the primary driver for such commitments.

Basic human needs and human rights approaches converge in a definition of minimum core rights that include the right to adequate food, clothing, basic primary health care, clean water

and sanitation and education to at least primary level (Beetham 1995). Although some progress has been made, global statistics show that there are unacceptable levels of suffering and deprivation in violation of these minimum core rights. Some countries have deteriorated: 54 countries are poorer now than they were in 1990 and life expectancy has fallen in 34 countries. Primary school enrolments have declined in 12 countries. The under-five mortality rate has increased in 14 countries and in 21 countries, a larger proportion of people are hungry compared to 1990 (UNDP 2003: 2).

Inequality and environmental degradation are probably the two most critical and contentious issues in development, but they are most often ignored, sidestepped or given only lip service. Global inequalities have reached "grotesque" levels (UNDP 2003: 39). Regional, national and sub-national inequalities are all on the increase. Sub-national inequality clearly compromises the progress made by even successfully developing countries. For example, China and India are deemed to be progressing well on development indicators, especially compared to the declines suffered by Sub-Saharan Africa, Eastern Europe and the CIS. Yet the tremendous inequalities within China mean that only some parts of China will achieve the MDGs, leaving behind enormous numbers of people in the inland and western regions (UNDP China 1999: 13). In India, poverty has declined and there have been good improvements in literacy, including the gender literacy gap. However, the poorest states lag behind and the lowest castes experience severe marginalisation and deprivation (UNDP 2003: 64).

The crucial aspect of inequality in relation to quantitative goals and targets is that the poorest countries, regions and peoples are suffering from the most deprivation. These same people have experienced declines in welfare and increases in inequality and risk. They have the most to do to reach their targets but the least resources and infrastructure to make the needed improvements. Indebted poor countries have to deal with the burden of debt conditionality, which affects their domestic capacity to retain and assign resources to fulfill human needs and rights or to ensure environmental sustainability.

A critical analysis of the MDGs

Despite their programmatic presentation, the MDGs embody a rather mixed bag of objectives and approaches, ends and means. Ambivalence and compromise are deeply inscribed in the goals

and targets, reflecting the long and contentious history of human rights and development. This critique discusses some apparent contradictions in the goals and targets and raises the general question of what the goals should be *about* and *for*.

Goal 1 is to "eradicate extreme poverty and hunger" and this translates into two quantitative, time-bound targets – to halve the proportion of people with an income of less than $1 a day and to halve the numbers of people who suffer from hunger by 2015. Goal 2 is educational, with the target of full primary schooling by 2015 for boys and girls alike. Goal 3 promotes gender equality, overlapping with the previous goal, but extending the gender equality targets to secondary and all levels, by 2005 and 2015 respectively. Goal 4 is to reduce under-five mortality by two-thirds and Goal 5 is to reduce the maternal mortality ratio by three-quarters, also by 2015. Goal 6 is to combat HIV/AIDS, malaria and other diseases, with the target of halting, and beginning to reverse, the spread of HIV/AIDS by 2015. Goal 7 is to "ensure environmental sustainability". This breaks down into three targets: the integration of sustainable development, halving the proportion of poor people without sustainable access to safe water and sanitation, and achieving a significant improvement in the lives of at least 100 million slumdwellers, the latter two by 2015. Goal 8 is to "develop a global partnership for development".

The first question is why these particular goals and targets have been chosen and not others. Secondly, how are the different goals and targets to be prioritised, since difficult allocative decisions will have to be made (Kanbur 2004)? The integration of sustainable development is a very challenging goal, since it raises questions about environmental limits to growth and the requirement to bear in mind the future generations' development needs.

Following Kanbur, we should note that Goal 8 is not actually an end, but *a means* for achieving the other goals. Goal 8 presents an ambivalent vision of global partnership and its seven targets raise more questions than answers. The global partnership targets lack precision and stand in sharp contrast with the strict, time-bound conditionalities imposed on indebted countries. The first global partnership target simply re-states development in terms of the World Trade Organisation's free trade project - the development of "a rule-based, predictable, non-discriminatory trading and financial system". The second target under Goal 8 is to address the needs of the least-developed countries. Emphasis is placed on tariff and quota-free access for exports, in line with

the free trade objective. The target also endorses enhanced debt relief (including cancellation of bilateral debt) and more generous official development assistance. The question is which element will be given greater priority - trade liberalisation or debt cancellation and whether Northern countries comply with trade liberalisation themselves, evening out the playing field for the South. The fourth target is to "make debt sustainable in the long term". Why are there two targets on debt? Cynics might see this as an attempt to confuse debt relief with debt sustainability. Might debt cancellation be used to sustain indebtedness instead of freeing resources to be put towards human development?

The third target under Goal 8 is to address the special concerns of landlocked and small, island developing states. We should bear in mind that these small economies are most vulnerable to negative impacts from an enhanced free trade regime. The fifth target tries to combine the needs of youth and employment by calling for the development of "strategies for decent, productive work for youth". The sixth and seventh targets emphasise the need to cooperate with private corporations to provide access to affordable essential drugs and other new technology, particularly ICTs.

Can the means deliver the ends?

We should not underestimate the problems accompanying the key assumption that the chosen means of economic growth and market liberalisation will lead to the ends of human development, especially from a rights perspective. There are fundamental questions about the ability of growth and market oriented policy choices to fulfill rights expectations. Kanbur warns that there is little consensus on the relationship between growth, poverty and inequality and that we need to question what we are buying into when we accept the goals and targets of the MDGs (Kanbur 2004).

Are free trade, debt sustainability and cooperation with the private sector to provide drugs and computers appropriate and sufficient means to realise rights-based human development? The answer has to be no, as markets, no matter how fast they grow, do not distribute health, education, clean water, sanitation or shelter because they are human rights. Markets distribute commodities, not rights. We have not solved the question of how countries can translate growth into human development outcomes. Economic growth can provide the means to human

development, but only if the growth in wealth is accompanied by a reduction in inequality and deprivation. How to reconcile markets with rights and growth with inequality are the hardest questions that have occupied the very heart of the debate since the inception of development as a discipline.

The big problem is that the least developed countries and regions will find it hardest to meet the targets. Since MDG goals are expressed as proportions (e.g. halving poverty), those countries that are farthest behind (with the most poverty) and suffering from declines (with poverty getting worse) are least able to meet the targets. Jolly suggests that target dates or goals could be modified by these countries (2003: 5), but a rights based approach would apply the principles of equality and non-discrimination, requiring external assistance to make these targets more accessible.

There is also the possibility that prescribed means may actually cause poor countries to travel in the wrong direction, resulting in increased poverty and deprivation. The targets set by the international community for debt sustainability and market liberalisation and economic growth may undermine the rights based nature of human development goals. Debt sustainability and conditionality reflect a punitive approach to the very poorest. MDG targets should reflect rights-based human development outcomes, and these outcomes should not be held hostage to a set of means for economic recovery.

Human rights 1948-66: universalism and divergence

The aspirations and foundational rights framework underlying the MDGs derive from the 1948 Universal Declaration of Human Rights (UDHR). Within this framework, we can observe both a *divergence* and *convergence* of the human rights and development projects over time.

Many strands of thinking have informed the human rights debate - religious and secular, social and political (Steiner and Alston 2000: 242). One could argue that the broad convergence of humanist and welfarist thought affirms the strength of human rights universalism. However, this universalism has always been compromised by strong ideological differences. The Western liberal tradition of rights has tended to emphasise negative conceptions of rights, stressing the need of individuals to be free from state interference. In contrast, the developmental view

emphasises a positive conception of rights as entitlements and assigns a sttong role to the state as guarantor of these rights.

The Universal Declaration of Human Rights established the "universal, indivisible and interdependent and interrelated" nature of human rights after the Second World War. However, formal consensus was marred from the very beginning by "a deep and enduring disagreement over the proper status of economic and social rights" (Steiner and Alston 2000: 237). There was great difficulty in reaching a consensus on the content and exact wording of the Declaration (O'Rawe 1999). After the adoption of the Universal Declaration in 1948, the next task was to translate the rights it recognised into binding treaty obligations.

Between 1949 and 1951 the Commission on Human Rights worked on a single draft treaty. Tensions had already appeared during the negotiation of the UDHR itself from 1946-1948, between the universalistic ideal and the political priorities of the powerful states. Eleanor Roosevelt may have been fêted as the First Lady of the World for her contribution as chair of the Human Rights Commission, "but in the USA neither she nor the idea of human rights enjoyed great popularity" (Walz 2002: 443). Walz observes that lurking under the surface "was the ugly question of race". Within the USA itself, the ideals of universal human dignity, equality and rights sat uncomfortably with the realities of inequality and discrimination. On the wider international scene, power politics came to dominate, compromising the universal principles of cooperation.

The Cold War intensified ideological rivalries between the Western and Eastern blocs. The socialist countries justified their system of government by claiming they were giving priority to economic and social rights. In response, Western governments advocated civil and political liberties and all but rejected the idea of economic and social rights (Eide 2000: 111):

> [P]olarized by the cold war, the rhetoric of human rights was reduced to a weapon in the propaganda for geopolitical interests. The West emphasized civil and political rights, pointing the finger at socialist countries for denying those rights (UNDP 2000: 3).

In 1966, after two decades of disagreement, two separate human rights treaties were put in place – the International Covenant on Civil and Political Rights (ICCPR) and the International Covenant on Economic, Social and Cultural Rights (ICESCR). A hierarchy of a sort became established in the system of international law. Underneath the surface of universal rights there

have always been differences as to which rights get priority and "some states had superior bargaining power to others in the 'universal' scheme of things" (O'Rawe 1999: 22). Civil and political rights were argued to be more "justiciable" and in the realm of "positive law" (United Nations 1995: 43 at 225). Economic, social and cultural rights were viewed in a softer way and were ascribed an emergent and gradual character.

Despite the split, the two Covenants "contain some identical or similar provisions". There was still agreement that the two sets of rights were interconnected and interdependent. The overall aspiration towards universal rights was intact since "they disagreed not about the goal but rather about how to achieve it" (United Nations 1995: 42 at 222). Both Covenants stressed, in their Preambles, the "inherent dignity of the human person" and the "inalienable rights to freedom and to equality" (ibid.: 38 at 200).

The 1970s – new conventions pave the way for convergence

Symonides argues that the universality of human rights depends on the *process of taking part in a progamme of rights* and pursuing various projects that derive from it (Symonides 2000: 110). From the 1970s onwards, new conventions were added, restating and developing a number of the principles defined in the two human rights covenants. These have moved the human rights project towards interdependence, indivisibility and equality. The projects of women's, children's and migrant workers' rights and the "right to development" have all contributed to the processes of taking part in a programme of rights.

Dissatisfaction grew during the UN's First Decade of Development, the 1960s, which emphasised economic growth and the trickle down theory. Critiques of poverty and inequality emerged within the development community and a needs-based approach began to gain currency. The addition of many new developing country members to the UN led to a growing collective voice on the inequalities of power and terms of trade experienced by formerly colonised states. In 1974, the call for a New International Economic Order (NIEO) "rocked the United Nations to its foundations" (O'Rawe 1999: 28) as it raised the fundamental issues of neo-colonialism and inequality that have never been fully resolved to this day. Attention turned towards poverty and the basic needs agenda launched by the ILO at the

World Employment Conference in 1976. Both strands contributed to a decade of negotiation, following which the Declaration of the Right to Development (DRD), was adopted in 1986.

The Convention on the Elimination of Discrimination against Women (CEDAW) was adopted in 1979 and entered into force in 1981. The Convention on the Rights of the Child was adopted in 1989 and entered into force in 1990. The International Convention on the Rights of All Migrant Workers and their Families was adopted in 1990 and came into force in 2003 (United Nations 1995: 71-2 at 328, 331, 332). These Conventions broke ground because they reintegrated the pillars of civil/ political and economic/social rights for women, children and migrants, thus marking a practical and progressive convergence of rights towards a holistic interpretation of human rights, giving particular emphasis to vulnerable and disadvantaged groups.

The 1986 Right to Development marked a turning point because it redefined the very concept of development. It admitted that national and international development had failed precisely because of the persistence of poverty and inequality: "the growing poverty of most human beings...and the increasing concentration of wealth and power in the hands of the few" (United Nations 1995: 74-5 at 343). The Right to Development emphasises that the starting point and ultimate ends of development are human beings: "the human person is the central subject of development". This shifted the focus away from economic growth and profit, "towards the attainment of human and social objectives through the improvement of the social, economic, political and cultural well-being of individuals, groups and peoples". Development was seen to require "the effective participation by all in the decisions affecting people's lives". (United Nations 1995: 74-5 at 344). This was more radically democratic, emphasising that development objectives must be determined by people themselves and that the benefits must be more equally distributed.

MDGs, rights and obligations

This section considers rights and obligations, beginning with the idea that the realisation of human rights is an obligation shared by all nations, developed and developing. The existence of rights presupposes several types or levels of obligation for states. It is

argued here that a genuine partnership for development must bear in mind the obligations to *respect*, to *protect* and to *fulfill* human rights and that developing states and the international community share such obligations.

Obligations are usually taken to refer to the role of states. Chapman (1995) advocates a violations approach to ensure that states comply with their obligations. There are three kinds of possible violations: those related to a government's actions, policies and legislation; those related to patterns of discrimination; and those related to the failure to fulfill minimum core rights.

Given the MDG goal of developing global partnership for development, we must also consider the obligations of the international community to assist states to comply. Following Pogge (2004) we might consider the possibility that existing global structures may obstruct rather than assist if they reduce states' abilities to comply with their obligations. Let us consider the example of the right to adequate food. The MDG goals of eradicating hunger should be interpreted in terms of progressively realising this right. The target of halving hunger is a means to progressively ensure the universal right to food.

Under the obligation to *respect*, states must not take any measures that result in preventing *existing access to food*. Liberalisation measures that force states to promote agricultural exports, or remove subsidies on basic foods or farming may prevent existing access to food. The forced and sudden exposure of a country's export sector to global markets may lead to radically lowered earnings and loss of jobs, thus indirectly reducing existing access to food through livelihoods. The obligation to *protect* requires that states take measures to ensure that enterprises or individuals do not deprive individuals of their access to adequate food. The prioritisation of export enterprises and downgrading of the subsistence sector is problematic if it results in some individuals having less access to adequate food. The obligation to *fulfill* incorporates the obligations to facilitate and to provide. The obligation to fulfill (facilitate) means that states must pro-actively engage in activities intended to strengthen people's access to and utilisation of resources and means to ensure their livelihood, including food security. In cases where individuals or groups are unable, for reasons beyond their control, to enjoy the right to adequate food by the means at their disposal, states have an obligation to fulfill, or provide that right directly (ICESCR UN Doc E/C.12/1999/5, cited in Steiner and Alston 2000: 267).

Conclusion: The MDGs, rights and development for the poorest

The human rights approach establishes responsibilities and obligations to work towards the progressive realisation of human rights for all. A comprehensive framework for international development cooperation should give mutual recognition and equal emphasis to economic, political, social, civil and cultural rights (Earle 2001: 18-19).

The end of the Cold War meant that there was no longer any need to retain the ideological division between the projects of rights and development. Reasserting the fundamental principles of indivisibility and interdependence and putting them into practice are historic tasks which both developing and developed countries have a common obligation to fulfill.

The conventions since the 1970s have gone some way towards healing the breach. Human rights and development campaigners have moved closer together since the 1990s and the literature now reflects a bridging of the traditional ideological gap. The Right to Development was particularly important for reinforcing the principle that the means of development must be subordinate to the ends, putting the human person back at the centre of development. The 1993 Vienna Conference on Human Rights reflected the post Cold War convergence towards rights based development. For the development community, the publication of the 2000 *UNDP Human Development Report: Human Rights and Human Development* marked a welcome turning point by explicitly reconnecting the human development and human rights projects.

Meaningful participation and self-determination are fundamental principles, hence the recognition within the right to development of the importance of people being free to express their views and preferences as to how they wish to develop. Such freedom is not only compromised by a government's denial of civil and political rights, but also when conditionalities are imposed, placing means over ends. The poorest and least powerful developing countries have been forced to make decisions that are arguably in violation of their obligations to respect, promote and fulfill fundamental human rights. Conditionalities such as the imposition of user fees for primary health or education, may lead to violations of basic core rights. They are also a denial and contradiction of the international community's "clear obligation to assist" (cf. United Nations Doc E/C.12/1999/4).

There has been a progressive emphasis on processes and definable outcomes in the decades since the UDHR was proclaimed. Rights that only existed as disputed ethical imperatives in 1945 have now become embodied as obligations. However, the "normative explosion in what is recognized as a right at the international level" has yet to be followed by implementation. Legal specialists have argued that a violations approach could be effective for imposing reporting requirements on governments and inspection requirements on international bodies (Livingstone 1999). However, the obligation of the wider international community to cooperate and assist must be taken much more seriously. Maybe most importantly, the international community must first do no harm with respect to the imposition of debt conditionalities.

Rights are mute and invisible, unless spoken for, and thus made actionable. It is only through collective recognition, responsibility and action that the programme of human rights can be realised. The MDGs should be seen as part and parcel of making rights actionable, providing forms of consensus and benchmarks for action. However, attention to the poorest and most deprived must be the central principle. The philosopher Hannah Arendt pointed out that human rights for all only came about when there was wider public recognition for the millions of people who had been forcibly denied their rights in the Holocaust. The defining characteristics of humanity are recognition and action, a kind of civic initiative whereby humans resist degradation and assert their dignity. Hence, in order to secure fundamental human rights, people in both developed and developing countries must actively recognise, develop and sustain a commitment to those rights. They must take the initiative on behalf of those rights, with an especial commitment to look first to those who are most deprived.

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