Paper Title:

Broadening the Environmental Agenda in the Post-2015 Development Framework

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Wordcount (excluding Table 1)

4,688 words

1. Introduction

Environmental sustainability is the cornerstone of human development, providing the water, food, air and materials that humanity relies on. The seventh Millennium Development Goal (MDG7) aims for environmental sustainability. Just like MDGs 1 to 6, its indicators are quantified, time-bound and encourage quick-win initiatives where environmental problems can be addressed while alleviating poverty. The goal serves to mobilise "political commitment and generating popular awareness around consensus development objectives, and as guidelines for coordinated action" (Jolly 2010: 49). It initially includes three targets:

- Integrate the principles of sustainable development into country policies and programmes and reverse the loss of environmental resources (Target 7A);
- Halve, by 2015, the proportion of the population without sustainable access to safe drinking water and basic sanitation(Target 7C); and
- Achieve, by 2020, a significant improvement in the lives of at least 100 million slum dwellers (Target 7D).

In 2002, the target 'to achieve by 2010 a significant reduction of the current rate of biodiversity loss' from the United Nations Convention of Biological Diversity was incorporated into the MDGs (Target 7B) (Sachs et al 2009). This move marks international recognition of biodiversity as a factor crucial to human development. It also demonstrates the highest level acknowledgement of the signals of unsustainability and disturbance of the planet's natural systems.

This paper unpacks the issues surrounding the position of MDG 7 in the context of the unfolding Post-2015 Development Agenda. First, it surveys the utility of targets and indicators of MDG 7 as a measure of environmental sustainability, and tracks the global progress to date. It then examines the crucial question of how to operationalize environment in the MDG process, within the public policy context of an upper middle income country of Malaysia. The final section identifies the emerging development challenges and outlines the possible scenarios of how sustainable development could be moved centre stage in the quest to reimagine international development agenda after the year 2015.

2. Environmental sustainability and MDGs

2.1. Progress of MDG 7

The MDG picture for environmental sustainability is one of conditional optimism. The 2012 annual report made by the United Nations which monitors the progress of the MDG records the following results (UN 2012). With respect to Target 7C, the world has met the target of halving the proportion of people without sustainable access to safe drinking water by 2010. However projections indicate that in 2015 more than 600 million people worldwide (especially those living in countries with greater socio-economic problems) will still be using unimproved water sources, rendering the future access uncertain.

The greatest challenge for Target 7C lies with access to modern sanitation with 2.5 billion people in developing countries are still deprived of this service. The number of people practicing open defecation remains a widespread health hazard. This is indirectly hampering progress in health and nutrition MDG. However the access to sanitation figure has increased from 36 per cent in 1990 to 56 per cent in 2010 in the developing regions as a whole with Eastern and Southern Asia making the greatest progress.

With Target 7B, the world has missed the 2010 objective for biodiversity conservation. Based on current trends, the loss of species will continue throughout this century even as more areas of the earth's surface are protected. Moreover, half of the world's most important terrestrial sites for species conservation remain unprotected.

With respect to Target 7D, improvements in the lives of 200 million slum dwellers bring achievement of the MDG target ahead of the 2020 deadline. The share of urban slum residents in the developing world declined from 39 per cent in 2000 to 33 per cent in 2012. The reduction in the percentage of urban population living in slums notwithstanding, the absolute number of slum dwellers continues to grow and the projections of rapid urbanization foretells a mounting pressure in the near future. This uncertainty is also seen in Target 7A with regards the integration of sustainable development into country policies and programmes. Good progress such as forest area increase in Asia is helping to slow, but not reverse, global losses worldwide. Similarly, the on-going economic crisis pushes down global greenhouse gas emissions only slightly, attributable to the slowing economic activity. This however is expected to be only a short-term change rather than a permanent one.

Although the environment is recognized as a precondition to the achievement of the MDGs, it is poorly mainstreamed in public policy (UNDP 2006). In summary, the sustainable use of ecosystem services is hardly an integral part of development

strategies across the world when compared to other MDGs such as health and education. Consequently, there is a chorus of analyses and opinions doubting that the world is to make the targets for environmental sustainability.

2.2. Gaps of existing MDG 7

Unlike other established UN development goals such as health and education (Jolly 2010), the MDG 7 is relatively ahistorical and contains less concrete goals and indicators in comparison with the rest of the Millennium Declaration goals (von der Hoeven 2012). The early interest in developing environmental indicators in the 1970s was mainly to support environmental monitoring for the incipient environmental agencies in developed countries. Hence, environmental goals fall mainly within the purview of national governments and not part of the international development agenda. But since then, combining global to local initiatives, there are literally thousands of efforts to define and measure appropriate indicators of environmental sustainability. Any attempts to garner a homogenous view of the goals of environmental sustainability among scholars and practitioners are therefore fruitless. Consequently, numerous criticisms are mounted against MDG 7 including errors of omission (Castello et al 2010), the separation of environment into one of eight goals (Roe and Elliot 2004), and misplaced priority (see for examples Langford 2010). On the extreme side there are claims that Goal 7 for the environment is MDGs' biggest shortcoming.

As a trade-off for simplicity and communicability, the framing for environmental sustainability has been minimized and does not capture the complexity and breadth of the challenge. Only a small subset of issues is covered. For instance, the goal makes no reference to key environmental issues such as land degradation, population growth and the eroding natural resource base so important for continuous human development in the developing world.

There are also issues surrounding the impotence of the chosen indicators to reflect their respective targets. Although the world has met the target for drinking five years ahead of schedule, 'halving the proportion of people without access to improved sources of water' is a very limited conception of the developing world's water agenda. Absent in current framework is a holistic thinking, one which emphasizes that access to water and sanitation depends on the availability of healthy ecosystems which are managed sustainably. The connection of environmental indicators to the social dimension through the poverty-environment link is also weak. Indicators on protected areas and forestry for example do not reflect critical changes affecting the poor such as land degradation and

desertification. The view that MDG 7 is fragmented and does not integrate the different components of environmental sustainability well is shared by The United Nations Development Group (2010) in its thematic assessment, pointing that the components do not provide a full picture.

The holy grail of 'comprehensive picture' with strong linkages between goals is constrained by the complexity of environmental sustainability for two reasons. First is data availability and comparability at the international level for key sustainability challenges such as biodiversity loss and climate change mitigation or adaptation. When data is absent even proxies are hard to agree upon because of the complexity of the environment. Second, although problems like water scarcity, nitrogen pollution, and trans-boundary air pollution have clear risk tractability and scientific evidence, their international policy mechanism for defining the problem and organizing the response is lacking. So, the problems with MDG 7 not only lie with measurement but also the fact that the choice of indicators is highly politicized at the international level.

3. MDGs impact on development policy in Malaysia

Although progress has been uneven, the MDGs have helped to galvanise a significant scaling-up policy responses on the eight goals across the world during the past decade. Malaysia is one of 194 United Nations member states supporting the MDGs. Historically it has institutionalized human development since Independence in 1957 with a remarkable record in poverty alleviation. With a population of 28.7 million, the country belongs to the upper middle income club and currently instigating reforms to graduate into a high income country.

3.1. MDG policy process in Malaysia

Although the MDGs are seen by many countries as a UN agenda (rather than national political priority) the MDGs were widely accepted by policy-makers in Malaysia since their early days because human-based development has always been its development philosophy. Malaysia has institutionalized human development since Independence. Hence, for the Malaysian government, the MDG framework is one of the international goal-sets consistent with its policy objectives. In many official documents, it is often claimed that Malaysia has the resources, the capacity and the know-how to address the basic problems affecting human development. These are not unfounded. Infant

mortality, now at 6 per 1,000 live births, is comparable to the most advanced countries. Universal primary education for boys and girls was achieved in 1990. All boys and girls are enrolled at primary school level, and enrolment rates exceed 80 per cent at lower secondary level. Investment in human capital, especially in health and education, is another hallmark of the Malaysian model. For these reasons, even though considered as a low-hanging fruit for its modest target, the MDG framework is also seen by many officials as a 'doable' regular reporting obligation to the international agencies.

In 2005, the country assessment on MDG achievement showed that Malaysia was 'on track' with six out of eight targets. The results are echoed by a recent regional MDG assessment which categorized Malaysia as an early achiever for the following goals and targets:

- Goal 1 – $1.25 per day, underweight children;
- Goal 2 – Primary enrolment, primary completion;
- Goal 3 – gender primary, gender secondary, gender tertiary;
- Goal 6 – TB incidence, TB prevalence; and
- Goal 7 – Protected area, ODP substance consumption, water total.

Given that most of the progress in some targets such as income poverty is attributable to pre- MDG efforts, how do we assess its influence in policymaking and policy dialogues within the country?

3.2. Socialization of MDGs in public policy

In official terms, references to the MDG appeared in the Ninth Malaysia Plan document released in 2005. To date, there have been two assessments of MDG implementation in Malaysia. The first, initiated in 2004, was a collaborative effort between the Country Team of UNDP (UNCT) and the Economic Planning Unit (EPU) of the Prime Minister's Department. The EPU established an Inter-Ministerial Steering Committee to provide inputs and coordinated extensive consultation with civil society groups. The UNCT and the Malaysian Government organized two consultative workshops with NGOs, the media and academe to seek their views on Malaysia's successes and challenges in progressing towards the MDGs. The assessment team endeavoured to raise awareness of human rights and their links to MDGs through these consultations. A notable achievement of these consultations was bringing the Human Rights Commission of Malaysia, the Government and NGOs together to debate development issues through a human rights

lens. The consultation process also involved a number of workshops on 'localizing the MDGs' in the East Malaysian states.

As a result of the various consultative processes, two MDG publications were produced and published. The first, entitled *Malaysia: Achieving the Millennium Development Goals: Successes and Challenges*, provides a detailed account of the policies, strategies and programmes on a goal by goal basis that had enabled Malaysia to meet most of the MDGs. The second is a standard public relations graphical MDG monitoring report entitled "Malaysia: Achieving the Millennium Development Goals." These publications were officially launched by the Prime Minister of Malaysia on 28 January 2005. In conjunction with the launch, an international conference was also held concurrently to share best practices with a number of Asian and Southern countries as well as members of civil society, both local and international. On 14 September 2005, the Prime Minister presented the Reports to the United Nations General Assembly on Malaysia's progress in implementing the eight MDGs.

The second MDG assessment was initiated in January 2010. The UNDP Country Team had tasked seven individual consultants to review the achievement of eight Targets. The individual reports were synthesized into a 3-page document for the Prime Minister's speech on the MDG to the UN General Assembly in New York. The findings from this assessment were later published in a report entitled *Malaysia: The Millennium Development Goals at 2010* which was released in 2011. Notably, the country has largely achieved the MDG objective of eradicating poverty, which fell from 17 per cent in 1990 to 3.8 per cent in 2009, based on the national poverty line. It has also achieved gender parity at all levels of education, surpassing parity at the national level. For these reasons, the Government has outlined its commitment to the MDG-Plus agenda through its Tenth Malaysia Plan (2011-2015), with a 30 per cent of development expenditure allocated to the social sector. In addition to the aggregate assessment at the national level, the 2010 review also adopts a disaggregated view of MDG by looking at performance at sub-national levels by state, rural-urban location, gender, ethnicity, age-group and other disaggregated categories. One important finding is the stark picture of regional inequality in the incidence of poverty.

3.3. Policy changes

A number of 'symbolic' measures of MDG mainstreaming are commonly observed in Malaysia. For instance, MDGs feature invariably in the premier's and ministerial speeches, especially around key MDG years such as 2004-2005 and 2010. Another

measure of integration is when reference is made to the MDGs in key development documents such as the Ninth Malaysia Plan. Despite strong mention of the MDGs in the Ninth Malaysia Plan, however, the Tenth Malaysia Plan contains no reference to this global goal.

Besides MDG 'integration' into government documents, media coverage of MDGs is another means to gauge their conceptual influence or penetration in Malaysia's policy process. A simple search of MDG in a local press database for four newspapers returned close to 100 hits. Poverty and health (HIV/AIDS in particular) are the most frequently discussed MDGs, while MDG 7, the environment, is the least referred to (Hezri 2012).

A credible institutional response to the MDG is crucial in ensuring new rules and patterns of control are firmly entrenched in the logic of development practices. Examples of instrumental integration include the following.

- *Organizational* - The EPU is appointed as a coordinating agency, and the National Steering Committee is established

- *Informationa*l - The Department of Statistics Malaysia responded to MDG's informational requirement by establishing and hosting an interactive Malaysia Info Database containing data for MDG indicators.

- *Programmatic* - An extended Theme Group on HIV/AIDS was established in 2004 and included representatives from Government and civil society, as well as United Nations Country Team members. The main thrust of its work was to give momentum to the development of a revised National Strategic Plan on HIV/AIDS. Due in part to the work of the Country Team, a revised draft National Strategic Plan was developed and endorsed by government.

The pitfalls of global target-setting were revealed immediately when some countries began boasting of success within a few years of the Millennium Declaration. This is particularly the case in middle-income countries which already had more ambitious targets or possessed the capacity to quickly halve or address smaller gaps. Governments pick and choose according to their own tastes in highlighting success or hiding failures. Malaysia is no exception to this phenomenon. For poverty, the targets are problematic in being largely unfocused on the poorest of the poor. Furthermore, inequality is still an issue because poverty levels still vary considerably by state and ethnic groups. Both challenges are not widely discussed in the open.

3.4. MDG 7 in Malaysia

The environmental MDG registers specific challenges. Broadly, after decades of struggle to create concrete programs to address regressive environmental trends, it has become clear to policy makers and environmental activists alike that there is a gap between the objectives and the implementation of sustainable development policies. In reality, it is extremely hard to bridge the gap between stated policy goals and practical strategies to achieve those goals. The main difficulty is to overcome the distinctly resilient patterns of production and consumption associated with conventional paths of economic development.

The latest MDG assessment commissioned by UNDP-EPU analyzed the performance of 10 indicators. Evaluation of MDG 7 achievement is difficult compared to health-related MDGs. The environment portfolio in the Malaysian government cuts across 6 ministries and 22 government agencies. Some indicators are performing well within the MDG analytical frame. Access to water supply in Malaysia is excellent. Be that as it may, urban residents are faced with increasing episodes of water supply disruptions. Also, although population with access to improved sanitary facility recorded a figure of 97 per cent in 2007, untreated sewage system is still causing bacterial contamination of waterways and coastal waters. In energy use, indicators show that a great effort is needed to reduce energy use by increasing efficiency and shifting to renewable sources.

How does Malaysia fare when compared with other nations on related sustainability metrics? In a 2005 study benchmarking the performance of 146 countries on an Environmental Sustainability Index, Malaysia ranked thirty-eighth. This was not a particularly comfortable result for the country because other mega-(bio)diverse nations such as Brazil, Argentina and Costa Rica all ranked higher on the index (Hezri and Dovers 2011). On the 2010 Climate Change Performance Index, which rates the emission levels, emission trends and climate policies of the world's 57 largest carbon dioxide emitters, Malaysia appeared in the bottom-ranked group of countries alongside countries like Canada, Australia, the United States and Saudi Arabia. On the biodiversity side, the 2008 Red List of Threatened Species published by the International Union for Conservation of Nature ranked Malaysia as the country with the third-highest number of endangered species (1,141), after only Ecuador (2,208 species) and the United States (1,192 species).

Methodological issues at times influence the interpretation of an indicator. For instance, for land area under forest cover, Malaysia's official figure has changed from 56% to 62.4% simply because the Food and Agriculture Organization (FAO) had recently considered rubber plantations as 'forested area.' This renders Malaysia 'on track' for this indicator. Omission of nationally-important indicators is a recognized weakness of MDG. As globally set goals, key environmental challenges in Malaysia such as waste management and pollution are not measured in the list of ten indicators. Plus, there are also signs of false or motivated reporting to keep government agencies under or over a line of convenience. This and earlier discussions argue against a sole reliance on MDGs in to streamline development efforts, set national priorities and focus action.

4. Post-2015 Framework

4.1. Emerging challenges

Three realities strengthen the case for a new development agenda. First, development challenges have become more pressing since 2000 when MDGs were conceived. Growing evidence of planetary change convincingly demonstrates that Humanity is now a geological force that has ushered in a new epoch called the Anthropocene. Fresh scientific findings suggest that we are now approaching limits in global resource availability and sink strength. Many indicators point to the unprecedented planetary changes such as biodiversity loss, climate change and nitrogen removal from the atmosphere, with another three at imminent risk (Rockstrom et al 2009). These changes are happening because of economic growth in both high income and developing economies, driven by the continuous striving for improvements in material welfare. If left unchecked they are real dangers that could threaten development and trigger humanitarian crises across the globe.

Second, albeit concise and measurable, the unambitious environmental sustainability goal is not only unreflective of the gravity of environmental challenges, it also lacks enough positive results. The rate for deforestation shows signs of decrease, but the global biodiversity condition is alarmingly 'off track' and continues to decline. In addition, greenhouse-gas emissions are likely to increase. The Intergovernmental Panel on Climate Change (IPCC) states that the existing pattern of failure in achieving the MDGs correlates with areas where high climate vulnerabilities are expected.

Third, the Rio+20 Summit of 2012 has laid out some new and inspiring pathways for transitioning towards a green economy. It also opens a political space to resolve the apparent tension between poverty goal and the sustainability of the planet. Herein lies an opportunity to strike a radical shift towards more sustainable patterns of consumption and production and resource use but couched in the reality of poverty eradication and sustainable development. Another policy innovation from Rio+20 is the proposal to develop Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs) as a part of the Post-2015 development agenda. Any new or revised goals for the environment ideally will embrace broader notions of wealth encompassing natural capital, address environmental challenges directly, and enhance livelihoods and resilience of the poor.

4.2. Post-2015 criteria and scenarios

These emerging challenges demand a Post-2015 development framework that recognizes human development and a healthy planet can co-exist. To re-imagine a new development agenda, the five criteria listed below should guide the integration of sustainable development in the unfolding framework.

i. *Focus on economic development (as opposed to solely international aid)* – The real causes of poverty and the low growth level is *the absence of an industrial sector*.[1] Hence, ways must be found how to develop industrial and services sectors in order to improve lastingly the living conditions of people living in developing countries.

ii. *Frame a joint policy agenda for climate and economic development* – One alternative development strategy is to implement green economy (or growth) with increasing role of the private sector (P-P-P).

iii. *Change the logic of international cooperation* – Developing countries may hesitate to open up for global scrutiny unless there is a commitment for a joint action. Funding mechanisms that move beyond reducing the externalities of underdevelopment (e.g. combating poverty trap) should be explored.

iv. *Reduce the burden and complexity of reporting* - MDGs impose large data collection and reporting burden on under-resourced government offices in the

[1] One of the problems of the MDG of the last decades is that developed countries are investing more in humanitarian aid than in development programs.

developing world. Combining MDGs and SDGs will maximize resources and avoid duplication and free up more resources for policy implementation.

v. *Design universal goals with targets that are relevant to national contexts* – Goal should universally apply but international reporting of MDG must follow the combination of these two rules. One, the indicators are harmonized at the international level so that every country reports the same statistics. Two, indicators are selected by individual countries but must fall under specific categories established by an international reporting agreement (core or headline indicators).

Criteria (iv) and (v) beg the question of possible scenarios for the Post-2015 Agenda. Essentially there are two possibilities – dual-track measure whereby MDGs and SDGs are developed as separate measures or a single track measure in which MDGs and SDGs are combined. The two possibilities give rise to three scenarios as shown in Table 1. The central tenet guiding all three scenarios is that long-term social and economic improvement will need closer attention to be paid to the environment.

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A future development agenda as listed above will stand a better chance at addressing the complexity of sustainable development and the linkages among its multiple dimensions.

5. Concluding Remarks

The MDGs have proven to be a powerful tool for international efforts to eradicate poverty and focus action towards meeting education, public health and the environmental goals. Be that as it may to further mainstream environmental sustainability, a more comprehensive set of principles and metrics are needed to design appropriate goals, targets and indicators. There is also a need to rethink international partnerships to foster low-carbon economic development across the developing world.

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Table 1: Three Scenarios for the Post-2015 Agenda

	Scenario 1 MDGs Continuation and Incremental	**Scenario 2** MDGs Continuation and Radical	**Scenario 3** SDGs Replacing MDGs
What such a target might be called or looked like?	Ensuring sustainability through climate resilient and low-carbon development	Operating within a safe operating space	'Bull's eye' or MDG-styled targets versus 'jigsaw puzzle' or harmonisation of disparate sustainable development goals
What guiding principles?	Addition of new targets and new indicators or integrate climate concerns into all eight MDGs	Shift from concentrating on available statistics to new measurement at national level	SDGs deserve deeper analysis of interconnections and synergies between goals, trade-offs, and indicators and targets
What indicators might be included to measure progress?	Renewables penetration; energy efficiency achievements; access to strategic resources such as water, energy and food (or the WEF nexus); integrate climate change initiatives into national development plan; loss of ecosystem services	Indicators include: change in land use; global freshwater use; ocean acidification; phosphorous cycle; biodiversity loss; climate change; nitrogen cycle; and additional indicators from MEA to focus on ecosystem services	Thriving lives and livelihoods, sustainable food security, sustainable water security, universal clean energy, healthy and productive ecosystems, and governance for sustainable societies[2]

[2] These six SDGs are proposed by Griggs and colleagues (2013) by combining the MDG targets with 'planetary boundary indicators', updated and extended for 2030.