

The MDG Enterprise: Experiences and Thoughts from Zambia

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Abstract This article outlines Zambia's uneven progress towards attaining the MDGs. The central goal of cutting poverty in half by the end of 2015 appears to be definitely out of reach, whereas the goals of universalising primary education, reversing the HIV epidemic and ensuring access to HIV treatment for all who need it have been virtually reached. The greatest progress towards MDG targets was made in areas that directly involved people as beneficiaries, where their active participation was required, and where costs were not prohibitive. Although the MDGs were incorporated as guiding principles in Zambia's national planning, they were not set within a rigorous institutionalised planning and budgetary framework. Direct pursuit of the MDGs themselves was largely absent, except for those that fell within the remit of different UN agencies. A critique of the MDG framework is that while responding to widely experienced real human needs, it seemed to do so largely from an external perspective, without sufficient ownership either at the national level of policymakers and planners or at the local level of needs for which individuals required urgent relief. Nevertheless, the MDG framework has been remarkable in the way it has focused the attention of the world on the plight of the poor and those living in less than human conditions. Arguably, this may be the most noteworthy contribution that the entire enterprise has made to human development.

1 Introduction

Thirteen years have passed since government leaders from 189 countries committed themselves at the UN Millennium Summit in September 2000 to do what the international community should have done earlier, 'to create a world... which is defined not by stark inequities but by soaring opportunities' (Kim 2013). Only two years and a few months remain for countries to reach the new and better world that attainment of the Millennium Development Goals (MDGs) adopted at that meeting would represent. Many are devoting this time to renewed efforts to achieve the goals as they apply to their countries. Others are concerned with the structure and content of the development framework post-2015, especially in the light of emerging economic and environmental concerns. Still others, including this author, are asking whether the MDG framework established in 2000 was adequate for its mammoth task. In particular, we ask here about the influence of the MDG framework in making the right to development and to freedom from want, a reality for every person in Zambia,

as pledged in the UN Millennium Statement (UN 2000: 11).

2 Zambia's MDG record

Zambia's MDG progress has been very uneven. Some targets were reached around the middle of the decade 2000–9, others are within sight of attainment, and others – the majority – will not be reached in the time that remains before the end of 2015. It seems almost certain that the most fundamental goal and the major focus of the entire MDG enterprise, to cut poverty in half and reduce hunger, will not be achieved. In 1991, 58 per cent of Zambians lived in extreme poverty. Today that proportion (for what is admittedly a much larger population) has declined to 42 per cent, an undoubted improvement but still far from the country's MDG target of 29 per cent. What is of special concern is that in the predominantly rural eastern, northern, southern and western parts of the country, poverty levels have remained stubbornly high and in some areas have even shown some signs of increase in recent years, whereas it is only in the heavily urban provinces

Box 1 The degrading face of poverty

In a primary school in the south of Zambia a teacher was drilling her class of ten-year-olds in responding to simple questions in English. One of her questions – ‘What did you eat yesterday?’ – quickly drew responses from individual pupils:

‘Yesterday, I ate *nshima* [cooked maize meal] and beans.’

‘Yesterday, I ate *nshima* and *ndebele* [okra].’

‘Yesterday I ate only *nshima*.’

But then it was the turn of a young girl who got only as far as ‘yesterday’ before bursting into tears. Through her gasping sobs, the teacher learned the child’s full story: ‘I did not eat yesterday. It was not my turn to eat.’

Not only did the young girl’s poverty leave her hungry, in her eyes it shamed her before her classmates and teacher. Despite the progress made on poverty reduction, today, 13 years after the adoption of the MDGs, 6–7 million Zambians share the experience of this young girl, with their lives defined by recurrent and debilitating hunger, the never-ending task of accessing adequate food, and the demeaning multidimensional experience of abject poverty.

of Lusaka and the Copperbelt that they are approaching their MDG target level (UNDP 2011; GRZ 2011).

On the other hand, remarkable progress has been made on the targets relating to HIV and AIDS, one of the greatest human and development challenges that Zambia has faced in recent years. The most recently available figure is that 85 per cent of those with advanced HIV infection have access to antiretroviral therapy (ART), while the rate of new infections and of AIDS-related deaths has dropped by more than 50 per cent (UNAIDS 2012). Reflecting concern at all levels for the wellbeing of children who have lost one or both parents to AIDS and other illnesses, orphaned children are as likely as their non-orphaned peers to attend primary school. Progress has also been made in reducing the number of new malaria cases, in large measure because of the donor-assisted distribution of insecticide-treated bed-nets and indoor residual spraying of insecticides, and in reaching TB-related targets.

Notwithstanding these achievements, Zambia faces strong challenges in reaching its targets of attaining gender equity in secondary and higher education and in parliamentary representation, raising the adult literacy rate, reducing child mortality, reducing birth-related mortality among mothers, preserving its forest areas,

reducing the use of solid fuels, increasing access to a sustainable source of safe drinking water, and ensuring universal access to an improved sanitation facility. In many respects these challenges, and the overarching challenge of reducing poverty and hunger, outweigh the gains that have been made in universalising access to primary education and reaching critical HIV-related targets.

Manifesting this adverse development situation from another perspective, Zambia’s Human Development Index (HDI) in 2012 stood at 0.448, below the average index for countries with low human development (0.466) and marginally below the average index of 0.449 for least developed countries (UNDP 2013). Although still unacceptably low, Zambia’s HDI, which stood at the abysmally low level of 0.376 in the year 2000, has increased steadily for each reporting year since then. This may be indicative of the positive influence of the MDGs throughout this period in guiding policies and programmes towards higher levels of human wellbeing. But the country’s current low HDI is also indicative of the distance Zambia must still travel if it is to make the right to development a reality for its people.

The overall picture for Zambia suggests that the greatest progress towards MDG targets was made in areas that directly involved people as beneficiaries or where their active participation

was required – ensuring that girls and boys of school-going age attend primary school, making use of services for the prevention of mother-to-child transmission of HIV, going for ART, having young children immunised, and using insecticide-treated bed-nets. In all of these areas direct costs tend to be low, although opportunity costs may be relatively high, as is the case when sending girls to primary school or when in regular attendance at a clinic in order to access ART. On the other hand, achievements were lower in relation to two types of targets: first, those that depended on broad policy initiatives and strong government intervention (cut poverty in half, reduce the prevalence of underweight children, achieve gender parity in parliamentary representation, conserve forest areas); and second, those that involved people in significant real or opportunity costs (achieve gender parity in secondary and higher education) or that seemed to intrude into cultural or traditional life (as with issues relating to maternal health, child and infant mortality, and the provision of sanitation facilities).

3 Acceptance of the MDG framework

Adoption of the MDG framework was an exhilarating experience for the world leaders gathered at the United Nations in September 2000. Recognising that they had collective responsibility to uphold the principles of human dignity, equality and equity at the global level (UN 2000: 2), it seemed altogether fitting to them that they should begin the new millennium by committing themselves to ‘spare no effort to free our fellow men, women and children from the abject and dehumanizing conditions of extreme poverty... [and] to [make] the right to development a reality for everyone’ (UN 2000: 11). Those who had been present brought the inspiration of this moment back to their respective countries, thereby initiating what amounted to a global movement for the attainment of the MDGs.

Accordingly, in Zambia as elsewhere, the MDGs got off to a good start. They were seen as worthy objectives that transcended political differences, spoke to real needs and unified people around common highly desirable goals. They quickly entered the language of the media, civil society and social justice activists, becoming almost a mantra for these groups. The fact that the MDGs embodied features which accorded with

the social aspirations of the main political parties, non-governmental and civil society organisations, the churches, and the private sector greatly enhanced their universal acceptability and stimulated activities aimed at their implementation. In a number of key areas this led to the intensification of what was already being done by some of the specialised UN agencies such as UNAIDS in confronting HIV, WHO in promoting maternal and child health, UNICEF in fostering child development and water and sanitation initiatives, and the FAO in promoting agricultural production. The donor community also intensified its efforts and increased its support in such areas as education; HIV, malaria and TB control; the development of infrastructure; and budget support.

The integration of the MDGs into development in Zambia was further promoted by two ongoing sets of activities that had been at the centre of national concern in the 1990s, those dealing with the AIDS epidemic and those stemming from the Education for All (EFA) initiative. The setting up of a local UNAIDS office, following the establishment in 1996 of the Joint UN Programme on HIV and AIDS, hosting the 1999 ICASA (International Conference on AIDS and STIs in Africa) in Lusaka, participation in the International Durban AIDS Conference in 2000, ongoing moves within Zambia to establish a dedicated high-level body to deal with the epidemic (a National AIDS Council), and growing recognition of the implications for personal and national development of an estimated adult prevalence rate of more than 20 per cent, all served to make responding to the epidemic a very high priority for Zambia. Given this scenario, the situation was ripe for the integration into ongoing measures of MDG 6 to combat HIV/AIDS, malaria and other diseases.

It was somewhat similar in relation to MDG 2 (achieve universal primary education). Strong momentum had already been generated by the Jomtien Education for All (EFA) Conference in 1990, by Zambia’s own National EFA Conference in 1991, and by Zambia’s participation in the Africa Region EFA Conference in Johannesburg in 1999 and subsequently at the Dakar International EFA Conference in 2000. What was already in place meant that MDG 2 and, to a large extent, elements of MDG 3 (gender equity in education) were pushing on an open door.

4 The MDGs within Zambia's planning frameworks

As early as 2002, Zambia's Poverty Reduction Strategy Paper (PRSP), prepared jointly with the IMF, noted that its selection of indicators took into account the need to monitor Zambia's progress towards the achievement of the MDGs (GRZ 2002: 134). This implicit acknowledgement that the MDGs played a role in national planning was repeated in the Fifth National Development Plan, which took over from the PRSP in 2006, and in the Sixth Plan which commenced in 2011 and runs until 2015. A third important planning document which shows the influence of the MDG framework is Zambia's *Vision 2030. 'A Prosperous Middle-Income Nation by 2030'* (GRZ 2006b).

Explicit references to the MDGs are sparse in these documents – the 350-page Fifth Plan makes eight such references; the 214-page Sixth Plan makes five, some of them almost incidental, while the 40 pages of *Vision 2030* refer explicitly to the MDGs only once. But the spirit and thrust of the MDGs run through each one of these key driving documents for development in Zambia, with all of them incorporating MDG targets and indicators. The Fifth Plan refers to this background presence and influence of the MDGs when it speaks about the 'integration of government budget resources and donor resources within a mutually agreed programme of activities as defined in this Plan and guided by the National Vision and MDGs' (GRZ 2006a: 336). The Sixth Plan and *Vision 2030* both address the twin objectives of economic growth and equity, the theme of the Sixth Plan being *Sustained Economic Growth and Poverty Reduction*, while *Vision 2030* aspires to a Zambia that will provide opportunities for improving the wellbeing of all, embodying values of socioeconomic justice and underpinned by such principles as gender-responsive sustainable development and respect for human rights. With objectives such as these, both documents show the influence of the MDGs in their genesis and formulation.

It can be very difficult to attribute causal links between programme outcomes, planned or otherwise, and the concerns that contributed to establishing, maintaining and implementing the programme. It becomes all the more difficult to do so in the case of newly formulated concerns which are integrated into ongoing programmes. The new expressions of concern may contribute to some intensification in efforts, a more favourable

environment for programme activities, greater clarity on strategies, a more purposeful allocation of resources, and a better defined focus on the programme outcomes. Though individually and collectively each of these can make a very significant contribution to the attainment of objectives, it would exceed the evidence to say that one or more of them actually caused the outcome, whether desirable or otherwise.

This is the way it has been with the MDGs in Zambia (and possibly in other countries also). In broad terms, prior to the year 2000 the country was already grappling with the problems of reducing poverty, eliminating hunger, creating employment, promoting good health, universalising primary education, confronting HIV/AIDS, improving the status of women and girls, and extending access to safe drinking water and sanitation facilities. When they came along, the MDGs with their clear concern for human rights and human development provided a strong boost for what was already under way. They heightened the momentum and, because they were time-bound, increased the sense of urgency. Further, they established an environment that was highly conducive to more intense and purposeful action to reach very desirable but also highly elusive outcomes. For those concerned with social development, the MDGs became comparable in many respects to the air they breathed, 'this needful, never spent, and nursing element'¹ which energises every undertaking. The framework became so pervasive in the approach of practitioners to development that somewhere at the back of their thinking there was the ever-present question, 'How does this proposal/investment/activity speak to the attainment of the MDGs?'

5 Strengths and weaknesses in the conceptualisation of the MDGs

Adopting a limited number of very specific goals and establishing clear targets and indicators added tremendous value to the MDG framework. In his 'Letter from a Birmingham Jail', Martin Luther King reminds us that '(h)uman progress never rolls in on wheels of inevitability; it comes through the tireless efforts of (people)... and without this hard work, time itself becomes an ally of the forces of social stagnation' (King 1963: 6). By establishing a framework of goals, targets and indicators, the United Nations recognised the need for tireless efforts and hard work to

overcome the stagnation that gripped the world in relation to human development, particularly in distributing the fruits of global progress equitably to every man, woman and child.

Reflecting recently on Dr King's words and looking forward to ending world poverty within a generation, the President of the World Bank, Jim Yong Kim, expressed in very powerful language the need for goals, whether set early in this millennium or whether driving sustainable future development processes:

We set goals precisely because nothing is inevitable. We set goals to challenge external obstacles – but also to defy our own inertia. We set goals to keep ourselves alert to the 'urgency of the moment,' to push constantly beyond our own limits. We set goals to keep ourselves from falling into either fatalism or complacency – both deadly enemies of the poor. We set goals so that, every day, every hour, we can ensure that our actions are aligned with our deepest values – those we can affirm without shame before the judgment of history (Kim 2013).

The needs that were identified, the goals that were set, and the language that spoke readily to a broad audience were extraordinarily powerful in universalising the esteem in which the MDGs were held and in fostering action at national levels for the achievement of the stated goals. So also was the work of UNDP in stimulating work at the national level and in monitoring progress. To keep Zambia 'alert to the urgency of the moment', the local UNDP office, in collaboration with the Ministry of Finance and Planning, produced five MDG Progress Reports for Zambia between 2003 and 2013. Each report details progress towards meeting the stated targets, comments on obstacles and contextual strengths and weaknesses, and suggests specific areas where the investment of national resources and the assignment of personnel would accelerate progress towards the desired goal. The 2011 report highlights 12 targets for seven of the goals and states that on present trends two of them will be achieved, five stand in need of considerable acceleration (development-speak for 'will be attained with difficulty?') and five require significant reform and investment (meaning that it is unlikely that they will be attained).

However, the regular monitoring by UNDP of progress towards the achievement of the MDGs brings out a major weakness in the entire framework. Although the foreword for these reports is over the name of the Minister of Finance and Planning and, as has been seen, the MDGs are referred to in some of Zambia's key planning documents, the institutionalisation of MDG-based planning and the coordination of MDG implementation is not provided for in the MDG framework. One result is that the MDGs remained just as guides to the framing of plans, programmes and budgets but were not set within a rigorous and properly established planning or implementation framework. There are no MDG desks within the relevant ministries in Zambia or at provincial or district level, closer to where action must take place. This results in progress occurring largely by happenstance, because it was the offshoot of other objectives that were being pursued. But direct mobilisation in regard to the MDGs themselves was largely absent, except for those that fell to the remit of different UN agencies.

A further concern is the way in which several of the targets are expressed. The goals themselves cannot be faulted. They express concern in key areas for fellow humans and have long been the objective of development activities. But many of the targets for these goals are almost demeaning in the way they imply that for the moment it may be adequate to go only part-way in enabling people to make the transition from less than human conditions to those that are truly human (Paul VI 1967: 20). There is a monumental difference between the goal of eradicating extreme poverty and hunger and the target of halving between 1990 and 2015 the proportion of people suffering from these conditions. Even if Zambia reached its poverty target it would still remain with more than four million people living in severe poverty, something that should be totally unacceptable in a country that is rich in natural and human resources. The sense of urgency that should characterise the entire MDG enterprise would have been better captured by showing the number and not the proportion of people who would remain in sub-human conditions even if the target was attained.

The way the goals were formulated may also have given rise to another problem. Some tendency arose to view them in isolation from

one another and to place responsibility for the attainment of individual goals in distinct silos, within separate ministries and government departments, but without sufficient appreciation that the MDGs constituted a unified holistic package, that they referred to a wide range of human needs and that meeting or denying a need along one dimension inevitably had knock-on effects on the objectives that were being pursued along other dimensions. Poverty stretches its debilitating tentacles into the spheres of hunger, maternal and child health, responding successfully to HIV, attaining gender parity in educational provision, ensuring sustainable access to clean drinking water, and conserving the forest environment. Similarly, success or failure in dealing with any one of these areas influences the possibility of success or failure in responding to each of the others. The MDG framework would have benefited from a more unified holistic approach that would have acknowledged the linkages between the areas covered by the various goals. It might even have been better if the framework had more explicitly identified just two overarching goals – the eradication of poverty and the elimination of hunger – and then developed a set of subsidiary goals relevant to these.

Paradoxically, the language adopted in much of public discourse in Zambia went in the opposite direction and tended to collapse all of the goals into one comprehensive but ill-defined aspiration referred to as ‘the MDGs’. ‘The MDGs’ became a rallying cry for many, but it was not always certain that the proponents had good information on what the individual MDGs were and what the various programmes were seeking to achieve.

One final concern about the MDGs as they were domesticated in Zambia relates to their ownership. This concern arises at two levels. At the national level of planning and implementation, the responsible technocrats and civil society personnel were not party to the deliberations and discussions that gave rise to the MDGs. This is true also of the majority of senior executives and of political and civil leaders. Zambia’s Fifth National Development Plan speaks of its being ‘guided’ by the MDGs (GRZ 2006a: 336). In effect this seems to have been the way the entire millennium approach was addressed in Zambia. The goals, with their targets and indicators, were well accepted as a

helpful guide to the direction in which the country’s social sector should be moving. But it was a guide prepared outside Zambia without clear local participation in the specification of the individual goals or in the identification of targets and indicators. This almost alien nature of the entire framework may have contributed to the non-establishment of a dedicated MDG planning, implementation and monitoring unit and to the relatively lacklustre incorporation of the MDGs into the national planning framework.

Looking forward to the development agenda subsequent to 2015, the *European Report on Development 2013* proposes that ‘(t)he new framework should pay attention to how global goals relate to national policy needs, respecting domestic policy space and linking national and international efforts in a mutually supportive and flexible manner’ (ERD 2013: 6). Incorporation of this approach in any global Post-2015 Development Agenda would go a long way towards resolving the concerns being expressed here.

At a very different level, while the MDGs addressed people’s needs in specific areas, they did so from an external perspective – what the experts, the UN, or the Zambian government thought it was that the people needed. In this way, the people became recipients of development and not agents of their own transition to more human conditions. When Peter Piot visited Malawi as Executive Director of UNAIDS, he asked a group of women living with HIV what their highest priority was. ‘Their answer was clear and unanimous: food. Not care, not drugs for treatment, not relief from stigma, but food’ (Piot 2001: 7). The response of the women was different from what the experts had expected. But this was their priority. There is value in allowing people to define their own needs; indeed it is imperative that they do so. Undoubtedly it will be very difficult to ensure this; but the UN’s aspiration to make the right to development a reality for everyone and to free the entire human race from want (UN 2000: 11) will never be realised until people have themselves identified their own wants and needs and indicated the measures that will bring them satisfaction. People’s involvement in choosing and walking the route of their transition from less than human conditions to those that are more human is itself part of the development process. Failing this, what is being considered is

charity and not development and the realisation of human rights.

6 Promoting human development post-2015

At the time of writing there is no dearth of reports from high-level panels, development and sustainability institutes, and individual development specialists on what should be included in a post-2015 development framework. These do not devote much attention to asking whether such a framework would be relevant or useful for countries. Instead they seem to take this as a given and proceed on the presumption that by the end of 2015 the United Nations will have established a new global framework for human development. Certainly this seems to have been the position of the UN Secretary-General (UNSG) when he appointed a High-Level Panel of eminent persons to advise him on the Post-2015 Development Agenda. It is worth noting that the very existence of such a presumption in favour of a new, 'ambitious yet achievable' (Bali 2013), global development framework points to a significant shift for the better in the world's approach to development. History will determine whether in many respects this may emerge as the most noteworthy contribution that the MDG framework has made to human development.

In the light of the concerns expressed earlier in this article a new post-2015 MDG framework would be relevant and useful, provided it effectively addressed the authentic development of each and every person and their transition from less human conditions to those that are more truly human, reflected national ownership, and genuinely involved people as the agents of their own development. Specific goals, targets and indicators would all be useful, but only if they embodied locally expressed needs and were conceived within an overarching framework of a very limited number of super-ordinate principles.

Key characteristics for development into the future are that it should be both person-centred and universe-centred.

Being person-centred, the Post-2015 Development Agenda should propose robust measures to ensure that:

- 1 Real expression is given to the unassailable dignity of every person;

- 2 Determined efforts are made at international and national levels to bring about a more equitable distribution of the world's resources; and
- 3 Every person is assured of access to life's necessities.

In practise, the attainment of these objectives would require a massive concentration on increasing the agricultural productivity of small-scale farmers (including promoting their ability to respond to the challenges of changing climatic patterns), and on the generation of employment and preparing people, especially young people, for the rapidly changing world of work. It would also require focus on a more equitable international trade regime and on ensuring that the extractive industries domesticate a fair share of their profits within the producer countries.

Being universe-centred, development post-2015 should recognise that we live in a universe characterised by interdependence and interconnectedness, not just between people but between people and everything that constitutes the natural environment in which they live. Human development can never be pursued independently of concern for the universe of which we are part and on which we depend. 'We bear the universe in our being as the universe bears us in its being. The two have a total presence to each other' (Berry 1988: 132). Hence, the Post-2015 Development Agenda should vigorously address environmental preservation and, as a minimum, seek to contain and redress the ecological damage that the human family has already inflicted on it.

In order to ensure that in the decades after 2015 concerns for human development and for environmental protection can reach mutually supportive goals, population issues must also be considered. Current population growth creates major problems for poorer countries in sustaining the environment and eradicating poverty, while in wealthier countries it is giving rise to new challenges in generating and maintaining wealth. A realistic Post-2015 Development Agenda needs to address the population question from both perspectives.

If it is to move in these directions, development would need to be guided by a more determined and elaborate version of what is currently

MDG 8 – develop global partnerships for development – something that has already been brought out in the communiqué from the UNSG’s High-Level Panel (Bali 2013) and in the *European Report on Development 2013* (ERD 2013).

7 Uniting humanity for human development

In conclusion it can be said that the MDG enterprise appears to have been unique in the way it focused world concern on the many dimensions of poverty experienced by more than a quarter of the human race. It was also distinctive in the simple but comprehensive and impressive road map it laid out for reducing the deprivations suffered by countless men, women and children. The whole undertaking also accomplished something very new and of boundless value in human experience – it united

the whole of humanity in its aspiration towards development, towards improved prospects for all, and ultimately towards universal peace. These achievements must not be compromised. The vision must not be lost. The momentum generated by the MDGs must be sustained and given new energy. The adoption of the MDGs at the beginning of this millennium initiated a global movement towards a better world. A successor framework that is based on the principles of human dignity, equity and equality at the global and national levels must now be put in place to build on what has been accomplished. If this is appropriately done and acted upon, then the world may see the right to development finally becoming a reality for everyone, everywhere, and the entire human race being freed from want.

Note

1 Poet, Gerard Manley Hopkins.

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