

Moving Towards a Post-2015 Development Agenda – Lessons from Malawi

An Interview with Her Excellency Madam Joyce Banda, President of Malawi

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For many years, Joyce Banda has been a well-known figure in the women's movement in Malawi. A grassroots activist, she was particularly closely associated with efforts to improve education, maternal mortality, and to build sustainable incomes for rural women. Despite being elected in 2009 as Vice President, her deteriorating relationship with President Bingu wa Mutharika meant that she was increasingly marginalised from the business of government, and in 2011 she was excluded from the Cabinet. However, following the death of President Mutharika in April 2012, in line with the Malawian Constitution, she became President, the first woman head of state in the southern Africa region. For over a year, she has sought to turn around the failing economy and bring rapid improvements to the lives of the country's poor majority. In 2014, she will face new elections, seeking a new mandate for a full five-year term of office. I accompanied President Banda to the opening of a new maternity centre in Dowa, a hour's drive north of the capital city of Lilongwe, and afterwards interviewed her at her official residence, Kamuzu Palace.

President Joyce Banda's perspective on the Millennium Development Goals (MDGs) is informed by her diverse experience in national and international civil society, a range of political positions, and her continuous record of working directly with poor women. In this context, her emphatic views that the MDGs have been powerful drivers of development, providing focus and creating a sense of urgency, are significant.

They have acted like a force, to push us... I don't remember any time in my 30 years working in the women's movement where we felt compelled to achieve [such results] –

because at the back of our minds, we know that New York is calling on us in 2015 to account. We will be held accountable.

1 Accelerating progress towards reducing maternal mortality

President Banda often refers to her own experience with serious post-natal complications as she talks about efforts to achieve MDG 5 on maternal mortality – one of the goals that Malawi is not considered likely to meet. The MDG target of less than 155 deaths per 100,000 live births was established on 1992 figures of 620; when 2000 data were released the rate had risen to 1,120. Progress was slow to 2008, when mortality rates stood at 807 per 100,000. Appointed at this time as African Union Goodwill Ambassador for Safe Motherhood, and subsequently as President, Banda has used strong personal leadership to accelerate progress. A range of actions has been taken to strengthen service delivery, improve infrastructure, and build community engagement. President Banda has instituted a national committee of traditional leaders, who have embarked on an ambitious plan to maintain registers of all pregnant women and their intended place of delivery, developing a shared commitment from the presidency all the way into the communities to ensure that all births take place under qualified care.

The result of these efforts has been a sharp fall in maternal mortality to current rates of 460 per 100,000. Despite falling short of achieving MDG 5, President Banda says, 'We have made

tremendous progress. We are coming from 1,120 women, and we are now at 460, so that's fine.' Nonetheless, she is concerned that reporting what will be perceived as a failure might create discouragement amongst people involved at all levels.

Malawi may not achieve MDG 5, but the rapid progress made in the recent past suggests that the MDG targets were achievable. With political leadership, plus a high priority given to accelerating progress and a determined partnership between government and community-based actors, improvements that had for years been elusive have materialised rapidly. Fortright political will has also attracted engagement from the private sector, keen to be associated with programmes that attract the President's personal attention and participation.

2 Improving the effectiveness of development assistance

President Banda argues that development assistance should be clearly and specifically focused on practical measures to achieve MDG targets. She uses MDG 3 on gender equality (which she refers to as her favourite) as an example of what she means. 'Women must achieve gender equality, which includes women's participation in leadership.' Historically, very few of Malawi's 193 MPs have been women. A number of development agencies have attempted to promote women's participation through a range of capacity-building measures, but Banda is sceptical.

You cannot come from London or New York to train me about how I should campaign in my village, because you don't know how I should deal with my chief. I know for me to win his heart, I have to kneel on the floor – for me it's normal, I was brought up that way. But for you to come [from outside] and tell me 'look him straight in the face because you have to be assertive'? I have lost the game before I even start.

Rather, she says emphatically, 'the problem is financial': women find it much harder than men to raise funds or decide how to use household income.

No one listened to me until Norway [did], two elections ago. They gave us MK50,000 each

[just over US\$3,000]. We went from 11 women MPs to 27. And then at the last elections, they again gave money to all the women candidates, regardless of their political party. Each one of us received MK100,000 [just under US\$3,000], as well as [campaign] T-shirts. With my MK100,000, I went into my constituency, and held workshops with the chiefs, the women, and the youth, and I passed on my message. We went from 27 to 45 MPs.

President Banda says that this funding from the Norwegian Government provided practical assistance to women, addressed the specific barriers to increasing participation, and has been directly responsible for the progress that has been made. Although she notes that the most effective form of assistance will vary in different contexts, Banda clearly stresses the importance of ensuring development assistance directly supports the realisation of MDG goals and targets.

3 A simple MDG framework to support diverse results

There is a risk that the extensive process of preparing the Post-2015 Development Agenda will result in the loss of one of the most compelling attributes of the MDGs – their simplicity. President Banda is clearly aware of this, and warns against the temptation of getting too complex. She points out that 'everything is a priority' in a country that has more problems than it does resources or capacity to address them.

Banda argues that the MDG framework has been very helpful in encouraging focus on specific goals, that 'are very, very critical'. Moreover, she adds that progress towards any of the MDGs in any case usually depends on a broad set of actions with positive results that go well beyond the MDG targets. To illustrate this point, she describes the circumstances necessary to create opportunities for women's empowerment:

a village with water taps, a graded road, where inputs [are available] and crops are growing; where there is a market, a school and a clinic. To [achieve] one MDG, [a range of other priorities] also need to be addressed.

4 Universal targets risk perverse incentives

President Banda is emphatic that the most significant shortcoming of the MDGs is the universal goals and targets that apply to all

countries. Her example of progress on maternal mortality (above) highlighted the disincentive of labelling even significant improvements as failure. More importantly, she also points to distortions that might result from pursuing targets that do not reflect the priorities and needs in a particular country or region.

We are all racing towards achieving education for all by 2015. But did we have classrooms in Malawi? Did we have desks? Did we have teachers? The MDG demands that we get as many children as possible into school – but what about quality?

The President highlights the consequences of pursuing a target that does not focus on local needs.

There is a school just down the road with 9,000 children, but it only has ten classrooms. [The] positive effect is that more children are going to school, but the negative effect is whether they are learning anything. I have never seen children as they are now, where they can go through primary school and not be able to read. The teacher has 250 students, and there is no way [that] so many can learn... I am troubled.

5 Towards a Post-2015 Development Agenda

President Banda strongly recommends that the Post-2015 Development Agenda articulates regional or perhaps continent-wide priorities and targets. She agrees that an external framework helps to push governments to place sufficient emphasis on key priorities, and that ambitious targets promote determined efforts. ‘Definitely they keep us alert, push us, and hold us accountable’, she says. However, she argues that by focusing shared goals and targets more closely on local contexts and needs, the new development framework could be more strongly embedded in national development plans. In this way, the synergies between a global framework, the donor commitment to alignment around a national development plan, and the day-to-day practicalities of implementing sectoral strategies and programmes can be strengthened.

By creating regional or continent-wide targets and goals, the President also points to the benefits of creating decentralised and more mutual accountability mechanisms. By shifting

the focus towards more practical partnerships focused on achieving anticipated results, ‘instead of just talking in New York, developed countries [can] come and work with their partners on the ground. When we go to New York after another ten years, we will be looking at how well we did in Africa’, she says.

The design of a successful Post-2015 Development Agenda depends on the full participation of developing countries, says President Banda. She points to the appointment of Dr Justin Malewezi, a former Vice President of Malawi, as a post-2015 champion being an important move in this respect. ‘Dr Malewezi has held workshops across the country just listening to people, who say what they feel about MDGs, and what must happen in our country’, she says. ‘They have been given a voice, and I feel really good about that.’ However, Banda warns that this ‘all-inclusiveness must happen all the way up to New York’. She emphasises this point strongly. ‘I have always said nothing about us without us, and I say that here. If we are talking about people with disabilities, they must be here. The youths, the women, the chiefs must be here. And they must be *participating*, not just as pictures, but real participation.’

So far, the President agrees, with a degree of caution, that the consultation process around the post-2015 agenda has been adequate.

I suppose I am seeing [adequate consultation], and it must continue. We must all feel we are part of the movement, and that we are all in this together. We don’t want to get a feeling that some people will make our decisions for us, without asking what is it that we think will best work for us.

6 In closing

President Banda is clearly determined to use all the opportunities available to her to empower women, fight poverty, and improve education and health care services in Malawi. As a women’s activist, as a politician, and through her unusual path to the presidency, her aims have closely mirrored those that were framed in the MDGs and indeed the Millennium Declaration. As President, her commitment to achieving transformation for the poor majority, especially women, is evident. Just one year after becoming President, her passionate engagement and progress in accelerating results is testimony to

the importance and indeed the power of political will to reduce poverty.

Throughout the interview, President Banda was clear that the MDGs have been influential in accelerating progress for the poor. She argues that the eight goals identified did not need to be exhaustive; rather, they needed to be simple, reflecting what she sees as indisputably top priorities. Through this, she goes on to highlight how the MDGs are not only interlinked, but also promotive of results in a much broader spectrum. In moving towards the Post-2015 Development Agenda, President Banda is unequivocal that targets must be regional. This, she says, is the only way to set targets at a level that balances sufficient challenge with some

chance of success. Furthermore, it also offers the prospect of promoting greater mutual accountability at regional level, and of providing some remedy to the perception that developing countries are being held to account by the developed world. At present, President Banda believes that to date the consultations around the Post-2015 Development Agenda have been sufficiently inclusive. However, it is clear that she is watching the process carefully, and believes that there is a risk that developed countries and donor agencies will come to dominate. If the views of ordinary people, civil society and the governments of developing countries become marginalised at any point in future, she will not hesitate to speak out.