100 Voices: Southern NGO Perspectives on the Millennium Development Goals and Beyond

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Abstract Debates are beginning to evolve on what might form the next generation of Millennium Development Goals (MDGs). The post-2015 debate stands to be a 'lightning rod' for fundamental questions of what development is about, and how to make it happen. In light of this, the Catholic Agency for Overseas Development (CAFOD) and the Institute of Development Studies (IDS) conducted over 100 interviews with Southern non-governmental organisations (NGOs) to collate reflections on the MDGs to date and how any MDGs 2.0 might reimagine development.

1 Introduction

The Millennium Development Goals (MDGs) were perceived to have been led by Northern donors evolving as they did from the Organisation for Economic Co-operation and Development's (OECD) Development Assistance Committee (albeit drawing upon UN conferences). Debates are beginning to evolve on what might form the next generation of MDGs. The post-2015 debate stands to be a 'lightning rod' for fundamental questions of what development is about, and how to make it happen. In light of this, CAFOD and IDS conducted over 100 interviews with CAFOD's Southern NGO partners to collate reflections on the MDGs to date and how any MDGs 2.0 might reimagine development. Although the research was not driven by the economic or food crises, these crises formed the context for the research.[1]

Debate, however, has barely begun. There has been understandable caution with many concerned that the post-2015 debate might distract from efforts to achieve the original MDG targets. There has been some academic writing on the subject (e.g. Fukuda-Parr 2008, 2010; Manning 2009, 2010; Sumner and Melamed 2010; Vandemoortele and Delamonica 2010). The issue was touched on by various research hubs and reviews such as the Sarkozy Commission; the OECD-convened Measuring Progress Project; the Oxford Poverty and Human Development Initiative (OPHI); and the United Nations Development Programme (UNDP) Human Development Report Office (HDRO) 20-year review of human development. There have also been some private consultation meetings by the UN donor agencies, and internal discussion papers between bilateral donors. However, there has been very little, if any, work done to engage Southern NGOs explicitly with the question of what should come after the MDGs.

2 The post-crisis context and any new MDGs

The world has changed drastically since MDGs were formulated and signed. Discussions for a new framework will be framed by many factors, including the following.

2.1 Greater levels of uncertainty

While the MDGs emerged in a relatively benign, stable and fiscally buoyant period, a new framework would have to be developed at a time when the economic crisis has swept away old certainties; when the threat of climate change looms large; and when changes in global governance and emerging actors have diffused

geopolitical power. It will be more challenging to negotiate a major international framework in these circumstances, because the multiple competing interests that will have to be balanced are diverse and also in flux. This context also compounds the challenge of ensuring a framework is solid enough to compel action and hold actors accountable, but also flexible enough to adapt to changing circumstances and unforeseen events.

2.2 Changing patterns of poverty

The MDGs largely defined poverty as a lack of resources in 'poor' countries and have been successful in mobilising aid when it was very much under pressure. Looking ahead, the poverty problem has changed. Most of the world's poor no longer live in low-income countries (LICs). Three-quarters now live in middle-income countries (MICs). One read of the data is that world poverty is turning from an international to a national distribution problem, and that governance and domestic taxation and redistribution policies are becoming more important than aid. Another is that a new kind of multilateralism is needed, not only because the responsibilities to reduce poverty are shared, but also because new MICs may not want development assistance of the traditional bilateral sort (meaning ODA). It is likely that aid to an increasingly smaller number of LICs will still be about resource transfers, and perhaps more so focused on fragility and conflict/post-conflict countries, but this will be the minority of developing countries. For the majority of developing countries – MICs – it appears less and less likely that they will need or want resource transfers over time. This is significant in terms of a post-2015 framework, as it raises questions about demands from MICs for 'policy coherence' (as in MDG 8), rather than aid.

2.3 'New thinking' on indicators and institutional/ incentive arrangements

There is a wide range of initiatives seeking to revisit/rethink poverty and development indicators. Evidence of this is most visible in the recent Sarkozy Commission, chaired by Amartya Sen, Joseph Stiglitz and Jean-Paul Fitoussi, which has provided one of the strongest signposts of all with its conclusion that there is a need:

> to shift emphasis… to measuring people's wellbeing… objective and subjective dimensions of wellbeing are both important… the following key dimensions that should be

taken into account… (a) Material living standards (income, consumption and wealth); (b) Health; (c) Education; (d) Personal activities including work; (e) Political voice and governance; (f) Social connections and relationships; (g) Environment (present and future conditions); and (h) Insecurity, of an economic as well as a physical nature. (Stiglitz *et al.* 2009: 10, 14–15)

There is also the new UNDP/Oxford Multi-dimensional Poverty Index and the Oxford Poverty and Human Development Initiative (OPHI) on the 'missing dimensions of human development' – dimensions important to poor people but with little or no data – focusing on decent employment, agency and empowerment, physical safety, the ability to go about without shame, and psychological and subjective wellbeing. There are also a range of initiatives that are seeking to revisit/rethink institutional arrangements beyond crude results-based management. For example, output-based aid approaches (*aka* 'cash-on-delivery'), where aid financing depends on delivery of key outputs such as teachers trained or reduction in poverty indicators, rather than input-based indicators such as ODA spend.

Those seeking to construct a new international framework for development after the MDGs will face a number of trade-offs; both in terms of the process they undertake to decide the framework, and the content of the framework itself:

- On process – Developing the framework through a genuinely inclusive, participatory process vs ensuring it gains the necessary political momentum to forge agreement; and taking the time to 'take stock' of the MDGs vs seizing the opportunity of their closure and preventing the debate from 'going cold'.
- On the framework itself – Ensuring the framework is as widely relevant as possible (and includes the issues neglected by the MDGs) vs making it pithy, coherent and memorable. Ensuring the framework takes account of the particular development contexts to be found throughout the world vs ensuring it connects and galvanises the development movement as a whole. Addressing the causes of poverty and injustice vs ensuring the framework can be agreed by international consensus; and making sure the

framework is 'ambitious' vs making sure it is 'realistic' and judging what these two terms really mean in an increasingly unpredictable and uncertain world.

3 The 100 voices study

A total of 106 CAFOD partners made contributions to the research, from 27 countries all around the world.[2] The primary modes of data collection for this research were a survey, which was distributed via e-mail – and qualitative interviews, which were conducted primarily over the phone. In addition, there was one facilitated workshop in Kenya. Research participants were asked to contribute on a personal basis, rather than on behalf of their organisations. The survey asked a range of questions framed on a Likert scale. It was distributed in English, French, Portuguese and Spanish to 331 partners, and responses were returned from 95; an overall response rate of 29 per cent. The survey was collected via e-mail, then the data was manually inputted to 'Survey Monkey'. Following up from survey responses, we conducted qualitative interviews with partners by telephone, Skype and occasionally, face-to-face. Interviews were conducted in English, Spanish, Portuguese and French, as appropriate. Where it was not possible to speak to a partner directly, we engaged them in conversation via e-mail. Qualitative data was coded around key themes in two iterations. CAFOD partners in Nairobi convened a workshop with 12 of East African partners, to discuss key issues of the research in a group environment. Regionally, the largest number of contributions came from Africa – with 62 per cent of respondents working in this continent; 20 per cent of responses were from Asia and 18 per cent from Latin America. There was a particularly high number of responses from those working in Zimbabwe, Ethiopia, Nigeria and Brazil. There were some important skews in the data: two-thirds of those contributing to the research were men and thus, only one-third were women; 62 per cent of the respondents were from faith-based organisations.

3.1 Results of the study

First, there was perhaps surprisingly, overwhelming support for a post-2015 framework: whatever reservations they had about the original MDGs, 87 per cent of our Southern civil society respondents wanted some kind of overarching, internationally agreed framework for development after 2015. Some 75 per cent of respondents thought that the MDGs were 'a good thing'. No respondent strongly disagreed with this statement. A total of 72 per cent agreed that development had become a higher priority because of the MDGs; 60 per cent said the MDGs were a useful set of tools for non-governmental organisations (NGOs) – describing their value for lobbying, monitoring, fundraising and project design; 66 per cent believed that the MDGs improved the effectiveness of aid. However, just over half of the respondents thought the MDGs were more important to donors than they were to anyone else. Several said they had been of limited relevance to grassroots work, or poor citizens themselves; 64 per cent thought that the MDGs had contributed to greater gender equality; 65 per cent felt they had increased focus on addressing HIV/AIDS but only 28 per cent thought that MDGs had contributed to reducing conflict and building peace in their country.

Second, support for a post-2015 framework was conditional on it being developed through an inclusive, participative process; in partnership between North and South: 86 per cent agreed that the process of deciding a new framework would be as important as the framework itself. They stressed the need for an open, participative process, including poor citizens in developing countries. The most frequently expressed opinion of respondents was a desire to see North and South work in partnership to develop a new framework – rather than having one or the other take the lead.

Third, that a post-2015 framework should have climate change and the environment as an over-riding theme. In addition to the enduring development concerns of poverty, hunger, health and education, respondents stressed that the environment and climate change were top priorities for a new framework.

We posed three basic post-2015 options to our respondents:

1 Keep the existing MDG targets and extend the deadline.

2 Expand and develop the existing MDG framework.

3 Create a new and different framework for development.

A total of 54 per cent of respondents indicated that they would prefer to expand and develop the existing framework, while nearly 30 per cent said that there should be a new and different framework after 2015. There was a very limited appetite for keeping the existing MDG targets and simply extending the deadline. The prevailing opinion was that there was a need to learn the lessons from MDG experience, and revise the framework in view of the current context and new issues that have arisen. There was a strong sense that extending the deadlines would undermine accountability and the value of time-bound indicators – but also that the investments of time, infrastructure and energy in the current MDGs should be built upon.

4 Conclusions

For all the diverse voices we have heard through this report, there is one clear, unequivocal message: as a matter of urgency, the international community must kick-start a global process of deliberation to construct a new overarching framework for global development after 2015. We can also point to the following additional points: first, policymakers, politicians and leaders in both North and South should work together in partnership to lead the new framework. Second, everyone with a stake in development should prepare for a demanding debate – it will be difficult to reconcile opposing views. Third, development thinkers, practitioners, academics and policymakers must address the trade-offs a new framework must contend with, especially that of formulating a framework that takes account of country context and yet galvanises development internationally. Finally, as well as the core development concerns and issues neglected by the MDGs, a new framework must make the environment and climate change a priority.

Indonesia (1); Kenya (6); Liberia (1); Mozambique (4); Nicaragua (1); Nigeria (8); Pakistan (3); Peru (3); Philippines (5); Sierra Leone (2); South Africa (2); Sudan (2); Tanzania (2); Uganda (9); Zambia (1) and Zimbabwe (11).

Notes

1 The full report is at www.cafod.org.uk/100voices/.
2 Research participants by country: Afghanistan (1); Angola (2); Bangladesh (3); Bolivia (3); Brazil (8); Burma (3); Cambodia (3); Colombia (4); Democratic Republic (DR) of Congo (7); Timor-Leste (2); Ethiopia (9);

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