

Holding on to the MDGs (For Now)

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Abstract As we move into 2010, this article argues that there are three questions to ask in the MDGs review. First, have MDGs maintained their political resonance? Second, are the MDGs still realistic? Third, are the MDGs still an adequate proxy for the complexities of development? It considers some of the capacity constraints to progress in Africa, and the range of inputs required to reach desired outcomes – the MDGs.

1 Introduction

At the Millennium Summit in 2000, the Millennium Development Goals (MDGs) were adopted as an expression of joint political will, a declaration of intent around specific and measurable goals which reflected a commitment to the right to development and the creation of an environment in which there could be progress towards the elimination of poverty. That commitment was reinforced by other conferences in subsequent years, which included the Monterrey Conference on Financing for Development, the G8 Kananaskis Summit and the Johannesburg World Summit on Sustainable Development in 2002, and the G8 Evian Summit in 2003. The political momentum was boosted in 2005 by a combination of the work of the Commission for Africa, the Gleneagles Summit and the UN General Assembly Summit – which recognised that there had been good progress in reducing poverty in a number of countries, but that this was slow and uneven elsewhere. World leaders underscored their commitment to making progress across the board, noting in particular the interdependent nature of the modern world.

2 Do the MDGs still have political resonance?

This interdependence has become increasingly evident as the G20 (a body whose precise remit, and indeed composition, has yet to be defined) has gained momentum over the past year, as authority has almost palpably seeped away from the G8 – not least because of the global financial crisis, with its epicentre in the G8 countries but affecting economies the world over. The risk is that a Continent that was marginalised when the economic affairs of the world were largely

dictated by a Club representing 1 billion people will be even more marginalised when it is effectively unrepresented in a Club representing 5 billion people.

There are, however, reasons for optimism. Within the UK, this includes the very welcome consensus which has developed around the commitment to reach the 0.7 per cent of GNI among the leadership across the political spectrum, but there are real signs that the new US Administration is ready to play a leadership role, which has not existed in the USA hitherto. At his first address to the UN General Assembly in September 2009, President Obama eloquently made the case for a stronger focus on development: ‘Far too many people in far too many places live through the daily crises that challenge our common humanity – the despair of an empty stomach; the thirst brought on by dwindling water; the injustice of a child dying from a treatable disease or a mother losing her life as she gives birth’. He made a specific commitment to supporting the MDGs – something which the USA had not been ready to do at the Millennium Summit – and committed the USA to ‘approach next year’s summit with a global plan to make them a reality’. More than this, he asserted that: ‘We will set our sights on the eradication of extreme poverty in our time’.

There is a growing sense that the poorest countries of the world are suffering most from the double whammy of a global economy weakened by the financial crisis and the consequences of climate change. This, combined with a growing sense of the world’s

interdependence, seems to be having a generally positive effect on the development debate, and there is reason for cautious optimism as we move towards the Summit planned for September 2010 to review progress towards the MDGs and the performance of the international community in supporting their achievement. Far from losing their political resonance, in fact the MDGs have retained their ability to act as a rallying point for development progress.

3 Are the MDGs still realistic?

A second reason in theory for abandoning the MDGs at this stage is that they no longer provide an appropriate 'stretch target'. They are often described as 'aspirational', giving a sense of a worthy objective, but one which is too far in the distance to be a realistic goal. The truth is not only that the MDGs are realistic, but that they are well on the way to being achieved. The Goals – and particularly the over-arching Goal of halving the proportion of people living in absolute poverty by 2015 – were not plucked out of the air in New York in the Millennium Year. They are based on outcomes from some of the major UN Conferences and Summits of the 1990s – a decade when, for the first time in 50 years, issues like education and health, opportunities and empowerment, could be discussed for the first time free from the shadow of the Cold War, which had so distorted the development landscape. They were the result of careful thought and consideration not just in the UN but in other bodies like the Development Assistance Committee (DAC) of the Organisation for Economic Co-operation and Development (OECD).

Indeed, the 'Goals' have a pre-history as 'Targets'! In 1997, the (new) Government in the UK produced its first White Paper on international development (DFID 1997). At the centre of the Paper are what were then called the International Development Targets (IDTs). The Paper had some striking graphs and statistics, showing the positive changes in some key Indicators in developing countries – increases in life expectancy and access to safe water, decreases in infant mortality and adult illiteracy. Perhaps the key phrase about the Targets in the White Paper was this: 'They are achievable'. And that was the right judgement.

Progress has not been uniform, and it is largely the performances of China and India (and other

South and East Asian countries which have been through the Green Revolution and which have enjoyed relative political stability) that have ensured such significant steps forward – although interestingly, those countries which have made the best progress against the MDGs rarely refer to them specifically. The picture elsewhere has been more mixed, and in Africa particularly, there are risks of a significant shortfall against a number of the Goals. But even here, there are many successes to record, with significant health and education Indicators improving in many countries. There remains a huge hill to climb in many places in the years leading up to 2015; but significant progress remains possible.

4 Are the MDGs still an adequate proxy for the complexities of development?

The third charge levelled against the MDGs – that they do not adequately reflect the complexities of development – is potentially the most serious. Because the MDGs focus so strongly on basic health and primary education, they are – it is sometimes alleged – severely flawed. The world is more complicated than that, people say, and it is naive to define the objectives of development just in those terms – as a result of which huge efforts have been made over the past decade to add further Goals (clean water and shelter, for example) to the mix.

There are criticisms too that the impetus for having the MDGs at the centre of the development paradigm has come largely from the donor community (which is undoubtedly true), and that they take inadequate account of local aspirations and priorities. Up to a point, this is true but countries like China and India, while tending not to use the 'MDGs' as an explicit guide to progress, in fact have very much the same objectives in mind.

Far from being driven by donor ideology, the MDGs are in fact ideologically neutral. They have nothing to say, for example, about whether they can best be achieved through a system of State provision, through the private sector, or through something in between. What might be for some a weakness, however, can also be seen as a strength – the MDGs do not seek to legislate on the sort of system that is required to achieve them, but only aim to set out the outcomes which any sort of system is expected to deliver.

Whatever market or State-controlled system is in place, the truth is that those desired outcomes in basic health and primary education require a huge range of inputs across the board to ensure that they happen. The 1997 White Paper already referred to is quite clear about this – after listing the IDTs, it states very clearly that: ‘While not amenable to quantification, there is a range of qualitative elements of development that are essential to the attainment of the quantitative targets. These include democratic accountability, the protection of human rights and the rule of law’ (DFID 1997).

5 The MDGs and Africa

The Commission for Africa (2005) Report sought to develop the argument about the links between the various elements required to make progress towards the MDGs, and the need to address them in a holistic way. Briefly, at the heart of that integrated package lie governance, peace and security. Progress in those areas gives the possibility of rebuilding broken education and health systems, essential for making progress towards the MDGs. This progress cannot be sustained without significant and sustained economic growth, in which the private sector will have a crucial role to play. Trade development is hugely important; this depends not just on a fairer international system, but also on the capacity to trade – requiring not only higher quality products, but also the physical infrastructure to transport them. External assistance can have an important role to play in any or all of these areas – but only if it is in support of internal developments.

In order to show how support in areas beyond the objectives specifically set out in the MDGs is essential to make progress towards them, let us look in a little bit more detail at education. The MDGs focus, in the education sector, essentially on the achievement of universal primary education and gender equality. The second of these takes us straight into the area of human rights – essentially the recognition of the inherent equality and dignity of all human beings. The first really should make us think about the other inputs that are required to achieve universal primary education – education infrastructure such as buildings and books (which requires economic growth), teachers, etc. It is crucial to fund the whole education sector – not just primary, but secondary and higher as

well, including adult learning and vocational training. It is vital to invest in teacher training, staff retention and professional development, and making the curriculum more relevant.

The Commission for Africa (2005) Report has the following to say on this:

The shortage of skilled professionals in Africa is a critical issue. It has its roots in a tertiary education system that is in a state of crisis. The emphasis in Africa in recent years has rightly been on the need for primary education. An unfortunate side-effect of this has been the neglect of secondary and tertiary education from which are produced the doctors, nurses, teachers, police officers, lawyers and government workers of tomorrow.

There is another important paragraph in the Report which is particularly relevant in this context, and is worth quoting in full:

Specific action for strengthening science, engineering and technology capacity is an imperative for Africa. Scientific skills and knowledge enable countries to find their own solutions to their own problems, and bring about step-changes in areas from health, water supply, sanitation and energy to the new challenges of urbanisation and climate change. And, critically, they unlock the potential of innovation and technology to accelerate economic growth, and enter the global economy.

All roads lead to the MDGs. It is fairly evident that quality universal primary education is impossible without qualified teachers; or basic healthcare without qualified doctors and nurses. It is less obvious – but no less true – that either of these objectives is also impossible without the roads to get people to schools or clinics, or to take goods to market which will generate the economic growth required to sustain these services. Or that the clean water and food which is required to sustain children in school can only be produced with the support of trained engineers and soil scientists. Or that the type of governance structures that will ensure disadvantaged people have access to essential services will only work with the support of trained lawyers and administrators. In other words, a whole range of activities and

interventions is required to bring the MDGs about; they are desired outcomes, the achievement of which requires many other elements – perhaps above all reasonable levels of governance, peace and security – to be in place.

6 Conclusions

Ownership of the MDGs must rest with developing countries; the role of the international community is to support them in their efforts. Political will is – as it has always been – the key to progress. And recognition that there has already been progress is the key to further progress. Few people would believe that economic growth has been at well over 6 per cent in recent years or that there are currently no

wars between states in Africa, a continent that is so often portrayed in a negative light. It is vital to build on this progress, particularly at a time when the global economic and financial crisis threatens to put it into reverse.

The debate about the need for a new development paradigm beyond 2015 is already well advanced. This is welcome and appropriate. But as we move into 2010, and the opportunities and challenges it presents, we need a clear set of guiding principles behind which all those who believe that the world should and can become a more peaceful, prosperous, just and equal place can rally. We have them. They are called the MDGs.

References

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