

International Targets for Poverty Reduction and Food Security

*A Mildly Sceptical
But Resolutely
Pragmatic View
With a Call for
Greater Subsidiarity¹*

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1 Introduction

International development targets have become a prominent feature of development discourse in recent years. Many different targets have been adopted by consensus at UN conferences on child health, gender equality, education, poverty reduction and nutrition; and a selection of these targets has been brought together and widely disseminated by the Development Assistance Committee (DAC) of the OECD, in a publication entitled 'Shaping the 21st century: the contribution of development cooperation' (OECD 1996) (Table 1). This document, in turn, has influenced national policy statements like the recent UK White Paper on international development, which committed the British government to the DAC targets, especially the goal of reducing absolute poverty by half by 2015 (UK 1997).

Set aside for a moment the question of whether the right targets and time-scales have been chosen – though it is notable that nutrition and food security seem to have dropped through the DAC net for the 21st century. Are targets in general a good idea? The case in favour was summarised in the 1997 *Human Development Report*, in the following words, using the example of the World Summit for Children (WSC) in 1990:

Goals set at UN Conferences are often met with scepticism. But the achievements following the World Summit for Children in 1990 show that a different response may be warranted. The first-ever summit on human issues set 7 major (and 20 supporting) goals, most to be achieved by the year 2000. Mid-decade goals were added later ... Progress has been made ... The summit ... helped raise general awareness ... Low cost and cost-effective actions (made) it possible to achieve the goals by restructuring budgets rather than by making big increases in spending. Monitoring was also vital ... Up-to-date information (is) widely used to assess progress and mobilise and maintain support. [UNDP 1997:111]

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Table 1: International development targets

Economic well-being	
Reducing extreme poverty	The proportion of people living in extreme poverty in developing countries should be reduced by at least one-half by 2015 (Copenhagen)

Social development	
Universal primary education	There should be universal primary education in all countries by 2015 (Jomtien, Beijing, Copenhagen)
Gender equality	Progress towards gender equality and the empowerment of women should be demonstrated by eliminating gender disparity in primary and secondary education by 2005 (Cairo, Beijing, Copenhagen)
Infant and child mortality	The death rate of infants and children under the age of five years should be reduced in each developing country by two-thirds the 1990 level by 2015 (Cairo)
Maternal mortality	The rate of maternal mortality should be reduced by three-fourths between 1990 and 2015 (Cairo, Beijing)
Reproductive health	Access should be available through the primary health-care system to reproductive health services for all individuals of appropriate ages, no later than the year 2015 (Cairo)

Environmental sustainability and regeneration	
Environment	A current national strategy for sustainable development should be in the process of implementation in every country by 2005, to ensure that current trends in the loss of environmental resources are effectively reversed at both global and national levels by 2015 (Rio)

Source: DAC 1996

Based on this information, targets provide political impetus as well as funding which is perhaps more generous, but certainly more finely tuned. The monitoring of targets helps in programme implementation and helps mobilise and maintain public support. Targets, in other words, do good.

A contrary view exists, however. I have argued elsewhere that targets do not go far enough in specifying the commitments that states will make to their citizens, or in providing a framework of accountability (Maxwell 1996a, 1998).² A more general argument against international targets might be formulated as follows:

International targets over-simplify and over-generalise complex problems. They distort public expenditure priorities, both because they misrepresent the problem, and because they privilege some sectors at the expense of others. Monitoring progress is extremely expensive and detracts from action on the ground. And the political benefits, though appreciable at first, may rapidly decrease if targets are not achieved.

We need to test this argument, and apply it specifically to food security. We must then ask whether there is a way forward that meets the objections while preserving the benefits. As we do so, we will

² In this connection, it is worth re-emphasising that international targets adopted by UN Conferences are voluntary and have no status in international law.

come to see that 'subsidiarity', or devolution to lower levels of authority, is an appropriate guiding principle. It has significant implications for the interpretation and measurement of targets.

2 The Sceptical Argument Unpacked

In the brief summary above, I have ascribed to the sceptics four questions about a target-driven approach.

2.1 Are targets reductionist?

First, there is a question about whether simple international targets abstract from and therefore misrepresent the complex reality of life as it is lived by poor people. This form of reductionism is, of course, a general issue in development studies, one Robert Chambers has done much to publicise. In a recent book, he remarks that

Reductionism is reducing the complex and varied to the simple and standard... Problems arise because the simplifications, standardisations and controls which work (in the natural sciences) have been transferred to the human sciences, and to the other more complex intersections of the ecological and biological sciences with people and their needs. In diverse, dynamic and uncontrollable conditions with continuous variance and multiple linkages, reductionist methods can be both costly and misleading. Yet many professionals seem driven compulsively to simplify what is complex and to standardise what is diverse. [Chambers 1997: 42]

Poverty provides a good illustration of the problem. In the DAC 21st century document, the target is to reduce the proportion of people living in extreme poverty by one half by 2015, where poverty is defined as an annual income of less than US\$ 1 a day (in 1985 purchasing power parity dollars). The measure is simple and standard, in Chambers' terminology, but also deeply misleading.

This is because poverty is multi-dimensional, and it contains a large element of subjective feeling. UNDP has argued this point and presents a wider framework of human capability suggesting that

poverty is too complex to be reduced to a single dimension of human life. ...although income focuses on an important dimension of poverty, it gives only a partial picture of the many ways human life can be blighted...deprivation (cannot) be fully captured by the level of ...income. [UNDP 1997: 15-16].

The debate between broad and narrow perspectives on poverty is very well established in the literature (see, for example, Baulch 1996a). Poverty has been given a new piquancy by the debate in developed countries around the new concept of social exclusion, which again emphasises multiple deprivation as a key component of the concept of poverty (de Haan and Maxwell 1998). In both the old and new literatures on alternative definitions of poverty access to health, education and other services plays an important part. Subjective feelings are also important. Poverty and social exclusion are often defined as powerlessness, lack of autonomy and loss of self-esteem (Chambers 1983, Schaffer 1996).

From the point of view of international targets, multi-dimensionality does not matter if all the indicators are closely correlated. In such a case, any one indicator will stand as a proxy for the others. Thus, income poverty might not capture the full reality of poverty on its own, but it would serve perfectly well both to identify the poor and to measure the extent of their deprivation.

Unfortunately, this view is hard to sustain. In some circumstances, multiple deprivation may mean that all the indicators agree. In other circumstances, however, they may not. For example, the UNDP argue the following

Someone can enjoy good health and live quite long but be illiterate and thus cut off from learning, from communication and from interaction with others. Another person may be literate and quite well educated but prone to premature death because of the epidemic ecological characteristics or physical disposition. Yet a third may be excluded from participating in the important decision-making processes affecting her life. The deprivation of none of them can be fully captured by the level of their income. [UNDP 1997: 16]

Examples of lack of correlation in this sense abound. For example, Kabeer (1997) cites that a high income will not allow an 'untouchable' to drink from the village well, or parents from a socially conservative area to send their daughters to school. In these circumstances, a single poverty target can point policymakers in the wrong direction. This matters because of the second objection to a target-driven programme, namely that targets distort policy.

2.2 Do targets distort policy?

The distortion issue arises at various levels. First, which sectors are privileged and which are not? Sectors that are fortunate enough to have been the subject of an international conference are likely to benefit from high visibility and from target-driven increases in resources. Sectors that are not so fortunate are likely to become the orphans of public expenditure reviews. Writing elsewhere, I have tried to give a graphic illustration of the problem:

Pity the poor minister who has to fight their corner without the benefit of the President's signature on the latest (international) declaration. If I were running the International Civil Aviation Authority or the Universal Postal Union, I would be organising a summit before you could say 'potholes in the runway' or 'queues at the post office. [Maxwell 1996a: 6]

This is, of course, a serious matter. The DAC targets provide a case in point. They have become hegemonic in the international discourse, but are deliberately selective. From a food security point of view, we can understand that they were published before the World Food Summit (WFS), and therefore do not mention the WFS target of halving the number of undernourished people by 2015 (WFS 1996: 1). However, it is harder to understand why the DAC did not incorporate the nutrition goals of the WSC (UNICEF 1991) or the International Conference on Nutrition (FAO and WHO 1992). Is it assumed that low birth weight, anaemia and iodine deficiency are somehow subsumed in a general poverty target? Or are they considered to be less important? Remember that leaving them out would not matter

if everything were related to everything else, but everything isn't.

Adopting targets, therefore, does risk making policy more blinkered. In the quotation about the WSC, reproduced above from the 1997 *Human Development Report*, the implication was that international goals could be achieved by restructuring budgets, rather than by increasing the level of expenditure. This might suggest that worries about distorting policy are misplaced. That interpretation would be too generous, however. Even if it were true, which is debatable, choices within individual sectoral budgets, taking the form of legitimate 'restructuring', could well mean that some dimensions of poverty were privileged over others. For example, the ministry of health might have to decide between a straight income transfer to families, designed to bring per capita income up to one dollar a day, and a vitamin-A supplementation programme, which may not increase income, but which may have pronounced health benefits.³

2.3 What is the opportunity cost of monitoring progress?

This example of choosing between income transfers and Vitamin-A supplementation illustrates an important truth about scarce resources. In a liberalised economy, public expenditure is the main instrument of economic policy, and the public expenditure process the main arena in which arbitration takes place between competing policy priorities. In this context, monitoring progress toward targets is itself a public expense, and therefore has an opportunity cost.

How high this cost is depends on the complexity of the targets. Simple-sounding targets, like halving dollar-a-day poverty, may themselves be difficult to measure: a dollar-a-day, yes, but what assumptions must be made about purchasing power, variability in price levels, the valuation of subsistence production, seasonality or other variation in income, intra-household distribution and a multitude of other technical issues? These are not trivial problems. A recent review of World Bank poverty assessments in

³ Vitamin-A supplementation can have a marked impact on morbidity and mortality. For example, a meta-analysis of eight large-scale trials showed that

supplementation in areas characterised by xerophthalmia (an indicator of Vitamin A deficiency) reduced child mortality by a startling 23% (Beaton *et al.* 1993).

sub-Saharan Africa concluded that the evolving practice was 'problematic at several levels':

First, the many problems of collecting data to support analyses of poverty over time and space which build analytically on a money metric measure of well-being income or consumption have yet to be adequately solved and it may even be that the present degree of reliance on such an approach should be reduced. [Hanmer *et al.* 1997: 8.3]

If the targets are broadened to include other aspects, the difficulties increase commensurately. For example, the discussion in Europe about social exclusion has generated many alternative indicators of poverty, including such aspects as employment rights, participation in community institutions and social esteem (Oppenheim and Harker 1996). A recent study of non-monetary indicators of poverty and social exclusion produced an eleven-page list of indicators, including self-image, social identity and ability to cope with stress (CESIS 1997).

Some have argued that the use of participatory methods can cut through the complexity, give a higher priority to people's own perceptions and simultaneously cut costs. Participatory methods are certainly ethically attractive, and they greatly enrich analysis (Chambers 1997), but their very diversity makes it difficult to use them to monitor international targets. This is because of the well-known problem of aggregation. Baulch makes the point succinctly:

...the participatory approach empowers the poor. But at the regional and national level, it is usually impossible to aggregate the matrices of poor peoples' priorities generated by participatory methods. One or two common themes, such as the lack of synchronicity between agricultural earnings and the payment dates for school fees, or the importance of all-weather roads, may emerge. With many issues, however, the realities of the poor in different locations are simply too diverse to yield any coherent recommendations for policymakers at the national or regional level. [Baulch 1996b: 39-40]

This is an important philosophical point, to which we shall return. Baulch accepts that participatory

methods yield very diverse pictures of poverty, and dismisses them because no simple, replicable answers emerge. The proponents of participatory methods would argue that this is one of their core strengths, and that there are no simple, replicable answers. Policy, they would argue, needs to abstract from reductionism, and adapt to the complex and diverse reality on the ground (Chambers 1997). This is an approach I have dubbed 'post-modern' (Maxwell 1996b).

Be that as it may, we are still left with a problem. If international targets work at all, they work because progress toward them can be monitored. But monitoring is expensive, and the cost must be weighed against other claims on public expenditure. The more subtle the targets, the more expensive monitoring is likely to be.

There is one further point, which is that cost must be measured in the time of scarce, skilled professionals, as well as in money. One of the arguments against targetry is that the very measurement process becomes the dominant activity of policy-makers, caught up in workshops to decide indicators, and expensive projects to collect data. The DAC targets themselves have already given rise to a large work load for statisticians and professional advisers in the development ministries of OECD countries (DAC 1997). A similar point can be made about the follow-up to the WFS. There is an analogy here with work on early warning systems for drought in Africa: the investment in information may not be matched by investment in action, so that the link between early warning and response becomes 'the missing link' (Buchanan-Smith and Davies 1995). To paraphrase Marshal McLuhan, 'the message itself becomes the message'.

2.4 Can unrealistic targets destroy political momentum?

A final question is about the political value of targets. The justification for targets is that they help mobilise and sustain political support for actions to help the poor. Indeed they do. The use of the DAC targets has been impressive, for example, in the UK White Paper on development, and in the political discourse that surrounds it.

It should not be surprising that international targets should be expected to help focus the mind. Targets

are commonplace in private and public sector organisations. Targets are used here to motivate employees, and to monitor progress. For example, a recent text on team management argues that

The purpose of clear goals is to ensure that people know what the team is trying to achieve, mobilising their enthusiasm, curiosity, energy, creativity and talent. Goals justify the team's existence. [Leigh and Maynard 1995:52]

This text could be inscribed without shame on the portals of UNICEF, the DAC or Britain's Department for International Development. There are practical implications, too. The same management text reminds us that teams thrive on clear goals, and suggests using SMART goals, which are (a) Stretching, (b) Measurable, (c) Agreed, (d) Recorded, and (e) Time-limited. [Leigh and Maynard 1995: 220]

At first sight, the DAC targets for the 21st century appear to qualify as SMART goals, with one possible exception – the core poverty target is stronger than the wording of the international conference from which it was derived, namely the Social Summit held in Copenhagen in 1995. The Summit merely stated that countries would define their own poverty targets and work toward them. In this sense, the DAC target, which is more specific, is not 'agreed' upon by those who will have to carry the main burden of implementation, the governments of developing countries.

If there is a problem, it is that the goals may appear to be unrealistic and set too far into the future. In principle, goals should be stretching and it is acceptable that they may initially appear unrealistic. There are problems, however, if targets appear to be hopelessly unrealistic or too long-term. Consider these quotations from the same management text:

Without agreement, goals are likely to remain aspirations, rather than becoming successful outcomes. [*ibid*: 62]

Deadlines of two or three years are hard to get excited about. They may need to be reduced to more practical, shorter-term steps. [*ibid*: 64]

Seen in these terms, it is not difficult to be a little cynical about the latest enthusiasm for ambitious

international targets, set twenty years in the future. Many past targets have not been achieved, and run the risk of becoming discredited as a result: the UN target that 0.7% of GNP should be provided as aid is a good example. Remember also Henry Kissinger's pledge, adopted at the World Food Conference in 1974, that 'within a decade, no child should go hungry to bed'. There is something disturbingly aspirational about many targets, and the DAC 21st century targets are no exception. A time line of 20 years is part of the problem. How many of the civil servants who devised these targets, and how many of the politicians who use them, will still be active in 2015? UNICEF, perhaps, has had the right idea, with the development of mid-decade targets for the goals of the WSC. A five-year perspective would seem to be the outer limit of realism for SMART goals.

In sum, a target-based approach to international development policy is like a curate's egg – excellent in parts. We should not neglect the obvious political attractions, nor the galvanising effect of targets. The translation of SMART targets from the management arena to the international development arena has many benefits. At the same time, it is surely not irresponsible, as the title of this article suggests, to be mildly sceptical. Targets are indeed reductionist, they do run the risk of distorting spending plans; they can be expensive to monitor; and there are political risks if they are not met. We need a pragmatic solution to the dilemma, and we will come to it. First, though, we must ask how far the general debate can be applied to the arena of food security.

3 An Application to Food Security

Food security has not been exempt from the enthusiasm for targets and, as has been the case in other sectors, the fashion has gathered momentum with the years. Henry Kissinger's remark aside, the 1974 World Food Conference was not over-weighted with targets. The Universal Declaration on the Eradication of Hunger and Malnutrition, adopted as the principal policy statement of the conference, contained no precise quantitative targets. However, the first supporting resolution stated that

all Governments should accept the removal of the scourge of hunger and malnutrition, which at present afflicts many millions of human beings,

as the objective of the international community as a whole, and should accept the goal that *within a decade no child will go to bed hungry, that no family will fear for its next day's bread, and that no human being's future and capacities will be stunted by malnutrition*. [emphasis added] [UN 1975: 4]

The objective here is phrased in general, even mellifluous, terms, effectively as a target to eliminate under nutrition within a decade (i.e. by 1984). It is then interesting to find one of the new institutions set up by the World Food Conference, the World Food Council, adopting a similar target in 1989, a full 15 years later. This body's ministerial meeting, held in Cairo in 1989, adopted the Cairo Declaration and Programme of Cooperative Action, which committed countries to work toward four key goals for the 1990s:

- the elimination of starvation and death caused by famine
- a substantive reduction of malnutrition and mortality among young children
- a tangible reduction in chronic hunger
- the elimination of major nutritional deficiency diseases (WFC 1990: 2).

It seems that by 1989, the target of reducing under-nutrition had not only been watered down (from 'elimination' in 1974 to a 'tangible reduction' in 1989), but also postponed, from 1984 to the end of the 1990s.

Conferences following the Cairo Declaration produced variations on similar themes. In 1990, the WSC addressed a wide range of issues, including food and nutrition, and set targets for malnutrition, low birth-weight and micro-nutrient deficiency, all to be achieved by 2000. The ICN, meeting two years later but working to the same time frame, adopted and amended some of these targets, adding the elimination of famine-related deaths, and specifying a 'substantial reduction' in chronic hunger. The main food-related targets of these two conferences are reproduced in Table 2.

The WFS, held in 1996, might have reaffirmed earlier targets and reviewed the time frame. The WFS plan of action did, in principle, 'strive to consolidate

the results of other UN Conferences since 1990 on subjects having a bearing on food security' (WFS 1996: 9). However, in practice, the only target that survived the intense negotiations leading up to the Summit was a commitment in the 'Rome Declaration on World Food Security', to 'reduce the number of undernourished people to half their present level no later than 2015' (WFS 1996: 1). The key number presented to the Summit was that 840 million people were currently chronically under-nourished, so that the target for 2015 could be rewritten as a total of no more than 420 million people under-nourished by 2015.

As with other meetings, the WFS laid special emphasis on monitoring progress toward the target. It called for a mid-term review, to see whether the target could be reached by 2010 and, more generally, for a continuous process of planning, monitoring and reporting, nationally, regionally and internationally. Priority was given to developing a food insecurity and vulnerability information and mapping system (FIVIMS) that would generate analysis useful to the overseeing body, the FAO's Committee on World Food Security (WFS 1996: para 60).

Since the WFS, there has been a good deal of activity on monitoring, particularly in the context of FIVIMS. An initial meeting was held in Rome in March 1997, at which the kinds of indicators needed were discussed (Boutrif 1997). Work since that time has concentrated on developing practical guidelines for the monitoring system. The technical experts at the March meeting felt that a simple balance-sheet method would not be sufficient to capture the main elements of food insecurity.

[They] suggested that increased use be made of national household surveys that include actual distribution data related to income, expenditure and consumption ...[to help determine] the prevalence of food insufficiency. The participants also felt that qualitative perceptions of food insecurity and vulnerability should be taken into consideration. [Boutrif 1997: 37–38]

Taking these ideas further, the meeting discussed factors affecting chronic and structural vulnerability to hunger. It recognised that the factors would 'vary among and even within countries' (*ibid*: 38), and concluded that

Table 2: Food security goals for the year 2000

Nutrition Goals of the World Summit for Children (1990)	Goals of the International Conference on Nutrition (1992)
<ol style="list-style-type: none">1. Reduction in severe, as well as moderate malnutrition among children under 5 by half of 1990 levels.2. Reduction of the rate of low birth weight (2.5kg or less) to less than 10%.3. Reduction of iron deficiency anaemia in women by one-third of the 1990 levels.4. Virtual elimination of iodine deficiency disorders.5. Virtual elimination of vitamin-A deficiency and its consequences, including blindness.6. Empowerment of all women to breast-feed their children exclusively for four to six months and to continue breast-feeding, with complementary food, well into the second year.7. Growth promotion and its regular monitoring to be institutionalised in all countries by the end of the 1990s.8. Dissemination of knowledge and supporting services to increase food production to ensure household food security.	<ol style="list-style-type: none">1. To eliminate:<ol style="list-style-type: none">a. Famine and famine-related deaths;b. Starvation and nutritional deficiency diseases in communities affected by natural and human-made disasters; andc. Iodine and vitamin-A deficiencies.2. To reduce substantially:<ol style="list-style-type: none">a. Starvation and widespread chronic hunger;b. Undernutrition, especially among children, women, and the aged;c. Other important micronutrient deficiencies, including iron;d. Diet-related communicable and non-communicable diseases; ande. Inadequate sanitation and poor hygiene, including unsafe drinking water.

Source: UNICEF 1991, FAO 1992

[it] was unlikely that a single set of indicators could be developed that would be applicable across all countries at all times [ibid: 38]

At the same time, the design of the system had to reflect the need for international standardisation, thus,

the partners will have to agree on a well-defined, simple set of national indicators for which all countries will need to provide data for the international database ... [different] databases must be accessible to all partners, and could be combined to give a full assessment of the food insecurity and vulnerability situation [ibid: 39]

We can immediately see here the tension that has affected other attempts to develop international targets, between global simplification and standardisation on the one hand, and local complexity and specificity on the other. This is not to cast aspersions on the professional credibility of those

involved in all these various exercises. But is the attempt to define universal targets ultimately self-defeating?

Six other points must be made about the use of targets in the field of food security.

First, history shows that targets have played an interesting role over the past 25 years in discussions about food security. Targets have been repeatedly set, repeatedly not achieved, and repeatedly, so to speak, repeated. Does this say something about the 'smartness' of the goals?

Second, the very concept of undernutrition needs some discussion. It is not clear from the WFS text whether it is intended to refer to an input measure (in the sense that people are not getting enough to eat), or an outcome measure (in the sense that people show manifestations of undernutrition, for example by being thin or stunted). In fact, we know from the background technical papers, and from the FAO's own World Food Survey, from which the

figure of 840 million people is derived, that the intention is to refer to an input measure, daily per capita dietary energy supply (DES) (FAO 1996). FAO specialists know well that this is difficult conceptually, because people need different amounts of food, not just according to age and gender, but also according to physical environment, temperature, altitude, and activity pattern. In a review on this topic, Pacey and Payne concluded that all estimates of nutritional requirements have to be treated as value judgements:

... something which is specifically excluded ... is the notion of an 'optimum' state of nutritional health, achievement of which might be the criterion for a requirement level. Any views of 'desirable' or 'optimal' food intakes for human individuals or groups can only be value judgements. [Pacey and Payne 1985: 70–71]

Third, the concept of undernutrition does not sit very well with the distinction, which is central to food security analysis, between 'chronic' and 'transitory' food insecurity (World Bank 1986). The number of people suffering an energy (or calorie) deficit at a point of time will reflect the state of the economy at that time. If the measurement is taken in a year of abundant rainfall, just after a bumper harvest, the number will be relatively low. If it is taken in a drought year, just before the normal time of year for harvest, it will be much higher. This is not simply a practical measurement problem that could be solved, for example, as it is for estimates of agricultural production, by taking a three-year average. Rather, it is a question of what food insecurity is, and how it can be measured. The standard definition of food security is 'secure access to enough food at all times for an active, healthy life', and the key word here is 'secure'. Thus, someone well-fed this year but with a high risk of not being so next year could be adequately nourished in the FAO sense of undernutrition, but deprived in the normal sense of the term food insecurity.

Fourth, even allowing for the problems posed by variability and risk, undernourishment is a rather poor proxy for food insecurity. This is because current thinking on food security loads more onto the concept than simple access to calories. A recent review found that the term had evolved in very similar ways to the term poverty, with greater emphasis on subjective

perceptions, and on non-material aspects, including respect, self-reliance and autonomy:

Flexibility, adaptability, diversification and resilience are key words. Perceptions matter, intra-household issues are central; importantly, ... food security must be treated as a multi-objective phenomenon, where the identification and weighting of objectives can only be decided by the food insecure themselves. [Maxwell and Smith 1992: 4]

In the field of food security, the idea of quantitative 'food entitlements' has been dominant for nearly two decades. Reviewing the new thinking, there is a strong case for considering, not just the quantity of food entitlement, but also the quality (Maxwell 1996b). Can this be captured in an international target?

Fifth, there are real problems in measuring the level of undernutrition. DES data are not available for most countries by age, gender or activity level, and must be interpolated from national food balance sheets and from information about the distribution of food within countries. The latter, in particular, is rarely available – nationally representative household food consumption surveys were only available for 18 out of 99 countries covered in the 1996 World Food Survey; for the rest, the distribution was simply assumed (FAO 1996). Reviewing the FAO methodology, Smith (1997) accepted the need for internationally comparable data, but concluded regretfully that the FAO calculation of undernutrition had

limited practical use as an indicator of food insecurity for planning and monitoring food security interventions. It should not be used, in particular, ... to make cross-country and regional comparisons of food insecurity ..., to track changes in food insecurity over time ..., and to understand the causes of food insecurity. [Smith 1997: 6]

This is a damning indictment of the figure at the heart of the WFS action plan and target.

Finally, it is worth asking how the food security targets relate to the poverty targets of the Social Summit and the DAC. The food security target is to halve the number undernourished by 2015, from

840 million to, presumably, 420 million. The DAC target is to halve the proportion living in absolute poverty by 2015. It cites World Bank figures to the effect that 30% of the population of developing countries, or 1.3 billion people, live below the dollar-a-day poverty line, implying that the proportion should fall to 15% by 2015 (DAC 1996: 9). No number is given for those who would then be poor, but the document states elsewhere that the population of the world will rise from 5 billion in 1990 to 7.5 billion in 2015, with virtually all the increase in developing countries (*ibid*: 5). Simple arithmetic enables us to calculate that the number of poor people expected in 2015 will be just over one billion. Putting these figures together implies that in the mid-1990s over two thirds of poor people were undernourished, and that in 2015, only 40% will be so. Something is wrong here, surely, at least in terms of consistency between the targets.⁴

In addition to these five points, there are additional questions to ask about the WFS target. How does a focus on undernutrition relate to the other targets adopted by the WSC and the ICN? In particular, how has the adoption of the new target influenced resource allocation decisions at country level and in the international agencies?

None of these points will be new to the professionals engaged in measuring hunger. We are all, it seems, trapped between a rock and a hard place: anxious to serve the political purpose of developing international SMART targets, yet all too aware of the dangers of so doing. Is there a way forward?

4 The Way Forward: Subsidiarity

The argument so far, and the dilemma we have identified, can be summarised as a series of propositions:

- Everyone recognises that international targets over-simplify a complex reality. For example, poverty is more than low income, and food insecurity is more than lack of access to calories. Poverty and food insecurity are multi-dimensional.

- The simple targets are relatively easy to measure – there are accepted indicators (poverty gap measures for poverty, anthropometric or calorie intake measures for hunger). However, the many other dimensions can also be measured, and a portfolio of indicators is available. Some are location-specific, others are not.
- What might crudely be called ‘material’ and ‘social’ indicators are obviously closely related, and might in some circumstances move together. In these cases, any one indicator can act as a proxy for the others. For example, money-metric measures (income or expenditure) can serve as portmanteau indicators for poverty. However, this is not always true – there are cases where social and material indicators will move in different directions, in which case no single proxy will serve.
- Whatever definition is taken, variability and vulnerability (exposure to risk) must be tracked. Indicators must illuminate the dynamics of poverty and food insecurity.
- Any serious poverty or food security analysis depends on understanding the causes of poverty and food insecurity, and the impact on poverty and food insecurity of local and national interventions.
- Most of this is going to be location specific. There is a strong consensus that local conditions vary and that local perceptions matter. Furthermore, there are ethical reasons not to impose outside values.
- This means that poverty and food security analyses need to be diverse and decentralised, carried out by and with poor people themselves. Participatory methods are sometimes problematic in practice (over-routinised, skill-intensive, time-consuming for participants), but the participatory paradigm can offer a route to efficient, accurate and ethically acceptable data collection.

⁴ Arithmetically, the numbers could be made to fit if undernutrition were a higher criterion than dollar-a-day poverty, and if it was assumed that the distribution of

people below the poverty line shifted closer to the line by 2015 – however, these are both somewhat implausible assumptions.

- International and even national targets can be over-simplistic and reductionist, driven by the 'tyranny of replicability'. The DAC target of reducing absolute poverty by half by 2015, defining poverty in income-metric terms, may be a poor guide to what we are collectively trying to do and how we might achieve it. Much the same can be said for the WFS target of halving undernutrition by 2015.
- At the same time, however, we must recognise that simple targets have real value, and that politicians have a perfectly legitimate need to find simple messages that will galvanise public opinion.

There are three ways to solve this dilemma.

First, we might argue that international targets should simply be abandoned, however, this must surely be the wrong answer. International targets are useful. They do galvanise opinion. They do help to raise resources. So, we do need them.

Second, we might argue that targets should be refined to reflect the complexity of poverty and food insecurity. In other words, define and collect more indicators at the international and national levels. But it is difficult to find good universal indicators, and it may not be fair or realistic to expect developing countries to collect them. Furthermore, multiple indicators raise many questions about weighting and about priorities and resource allocation. The last thing we want to come out of the DAC review or the WFS follow-up is a huge, global, centralised planning system.

The third option is more promising: keep the international targets universal, unambiguous and simple, and do little to measure them. Instead, responsibility for definition and measurement can be devolved to lower levels, mainly national, but also sub-national, since many of the arguments we have made apply nationally as well as internationally. In effect, follow the principle of subsidiarity. The outcome is that the two discourses co-exist. In other words, we allow the politicians to focus on the simple indicators, and find space underneath that umbrella, working in action-research mode with poor people themselves, on multi-dimensional poverty, food insecurity and human development. If

we want to monitor progress, a good way to do it might be by means of regular, location-specific 'poverty reports', similar to poverty assessments or human development reports: these can be as rich and diverse as we like.

The third option presents problems, particularly for those concerned to identify and quantify cross-country comparisons. That is probably unavoidable. Politicians and international civil servants will have to make do with the kind of indicators already easily available. Any new resources will instead be concentrated on helping countries and lower levels of administration to capture the richness and diversity of the lives of their own poor and food insecure. In place A, this might mean that dowry featured strongly; in place B, it might be violence; in place C, it might be income. The data would not be comparable. So what?

In the field of poverty, and particularly in relation to the DAC targets, it seems that monitoring is moving in this direction, with a core set of easily available indicators being adopted for international monitoring (Table 3). These may be too many, and some of the indicators on the list (ironically, including undernutrition) are difficult and expensive to collect. More important, simplifying indicators is not enough: the DAC must also commit itself to supporting local-level, participatory action-research, in order to provide the other half of the equation.

In the field of food security, it is too early to tell whether FIVIMS will adopt an approach consistent with the option recommended here. If it does, it will simplify the data collection problem internationally, and help countries carry out meaningful local planning. If it does not, then we are likely to be lumbered with an expensive and cumbersome layer of statistical bureaucracy.

5 Conclusion

We seem to have reached a conclusion, or rather three. First, let us allow that there is a theoretical case for SMART targets, and that, in some cases, they are effective at galvanising opinion and concentrating minds. This does not mean that all international targets are SMART targets; nor does it mean that a certain degree of cynicism is not in order when the same targets reappear at regular intervals. International civil servants, whose job it is

Table 3: Indicators of international development

Economic well-being	
Reducing extreme poverty	
Incidence of extreme poverty: population below \$1 per day	
Poverty gap ratio: incidence times depth of poverty	
Inequality: poorest fifth's share of national consumption	
Child malnutrition: prevalence of underweight under-fives	

Social development	
Universal primary education	
Net enrolment in primary education.	
Completion of fourth grade of primary education	
Literacy rates of 15 to 24 year-olds	
Gender equality	
Ratio of girls to boys in primary and secondary education	
Ratio of literate females to males (15 to 24 year-olds)	
Infant and child mortality	
Infant mortality rate	
Under-five mortality rate	
Maternal mortality	
Maternal mortality ratio	
Births attended by skilled health personnel	
Reproductive health	
Contraceptive prevalence rate	
HIV prevalence in 15 to 24 year-old pregnant women	

Environmental sustainability and regeneration	
Environment	
Countries with national sustainable development strategies	
Population with access to safe water	
Intensity of freshwater use	
Biodiversity: land area protected	
Energy Efficiency: GDP per unit of energy use	
Carbon dioxide emissions	

General indicators	
Other selected indicators of development	
GNP per capita	Aid as % of GNP
Adult Literacy Rate	External Debt as % of GNP
Total Fertility Rate	Investment as % of GDP
Life Expectancy at Birth	Trade as % of GDP

Source: DAC <http://www.oecd.org/dac/htm/indic.htm>

to devise targets, might think hard in the future both about appropriate time lines (perhaps a five-year maximum), and about the scope of their ambition (stretching, yes, but not to breaking point).

Second, however, we should agree that international targets have only a tenuous connection to the real world of national planning and national resource allocation. These activities need to be

guided by quite a different epistemology, one that recognises the richness, diversity and complexity of real-world situations, and builds on the knowledge, insights and ideas of poor people themselves. There are narratives to be reported about poverty and food insecurity, and they will bear very little relation to the narratives implied by international targets.

Finally, we should also recognise that we have done more here than simply to say that countries should produce national action plans to implement the targets agreed internationally. National action plans are a popular next step in the follow-up to international conferences. The very number of plans

required now poses real problems to planners in developing countries, or would do so if there were not a large degree of overlap between the plans required for different purposes. More importantly, however, national action plans exhibit a top-down approach, in which the international targets drive the policy agenda at country level. Indeed, this is exactly how SMART targets are supposed to work. In fact, the approach we have recommended is much more open, participatory, subversive and potentially deviant than this. In a process planning approach, we can be sure that poverty and food insecurity will feature prominently, but there is no guarantee that the particular targets set internationally will feature at all.

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