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The polarized post-2015 development puzzle > The poorest still fall behind

2015 will mark a moment of truth for the international community as the era of the Millennium Development agenda (2000–2015) comes to an end. The polarization of world poverty into “fragile” and “strong” states poses a puzzle that requires rethinking at both global and national levels.

The commitment to eradicate world poverty is a highly complex task. Much of the success hinges on the national and international capacity to put in place adequate and jointly adopted measures to address poverty in different situations. Increasingly, world poverty is divided into two types of disadvantaged groupings.

The first group consists of poor citizens in 45 low-income, conflict-prone countries that are often referred to as “fragile” states. The second group of people also suffers from poverty but in diverse contexts of 86 middle-income countries. The strongest of these countries include emerging powers such as China, India, Brazil and Indonesia. Although their economic growth has polished global poverty statistics, the internal inequality remains pressing.

Therefore, the future development agenda must catalyze both global and national responses across the board. To this end, the United Nations (UN) has launched a very broad consultative process on several preparatory tracks. These include a high-level panel co-chaired by the Presidents of Indonesia and Liberia as well as the Prime Minister of the United Kingdom. In turn, the UN Development Group is in charge of national and global thematic consultations. The purpose of this exercise

is to produce a “holistic but realistic agenda” for the years 2015–2030.

Ideally, the development puzzle would be structured around one concise list of future development goals as well as concrete targets, with the means and makers to attain them. At best, the consultative processes generate much-needed ownership for the future agenda. They may also open up an avenue for different interests to intervene in the consensus building.

In comparison, the process that led to the successful approval of the UN Millennium Declaration (2000) and the eight UN Millennium Development Goals (MDGs 1–8, in 2001) was more in the hands of the UN secretariat and the United Nation’s Development Programme.

The first seven MDGs form the core of the current consensus. They were targeted to improve the prospects of the most vulnerable, namely women and children. Indeed, progress has been made regarding all these goals since the baseline year 1990. Most importantly, the fight against poverty and HIV/AIDS has been successful, although progress has been very uneven regionally. Access to water and primary education, as well as gender equality in education have also improved. Yet, child and maternal mortality lag

alarmingly behind on the MDG track to meet the global targets.

To complete the national goals and targets, the eight MDGs under the heading “global partnership for development” aimed to link these objectives to global governance and shared responsibility. In this respect, high hopes were invested in international trade talks, access to affordable medicines and technology, as well as adequate management of the developing countries’ debt problem. In addition, special attention was promised to the poorest of the poor countries, which are often fragile states as well.

Unlike the first seven goals, “global partnership for development” was left without quantifiable, time-bound targets. The linkages between national poverty and global politics also remained unclear.

In parallel with the MDG stock-taking, the UN Rio+20 Conference on Sustainable Development (June 2012) put forth the idea of identifying sustainable development goals that could be combined with the MDG review. This makes sense as it is a well-recognized fact that poverty is triggered around social, economic, environmental and security questions both in national and global governance. Increasingly, this debate is phrased in human rights

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terms that are not shared by all the governments and stakeholders.

Whilst the Millennium Declaration and the MDGs are still a valuable foundation to build on, there is a need to revise the way in which poverty is approached. The two polarized groups are a case in point. In fact, none of the 45 fragile states has met a single MDG so far. Instead, 1.2 billion people continue to fall behind. They are also the hardest hit by the lack of good governance and democracy at all levels. Consequently, they are the ones to pay the highest price in an international crisis – be it related to food, the environment or finance. At the same time, global failures to manage natural resources and extractive industries – not to mention the arms trade – intertwine alarmingly with weak governance at national and local levels.

Yet an even larger group, nearly 70 per cent of the world's poor, now live in middle income countries. The concentration of poverty pockets in the emerging powers poses an additional challenge for the global agenda.

At a general level, the first seven Millennium Development Goals have been relatively easy to endorse. In fact, who would oppose goals such as better education, child health and combating communicable diseases?

However, the assessment of these targets in a specific national context may quickly inflame defensive reactions. When it comes to the question of social, political and economic rights, national sovereignty always enters the equation. Yet, there will be no global consensus without their commitment.

At the same time, population growth and the need for decent livelihoods is becoming ever more pressing both in “fragile” and “strong” developing states. At the global level the governance of responsible investments and trade, access to technology and medicines, as well as debt management remain key. If the parties fail to reach consensus before the 2015 UN General Assembly, it may be too late.

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