



ESSAYS

MDGs to SDGs: Have We Lost the Plot?

5/27/15

Charles Kenny

A version of this essay originally appeared in *Politica Exterior* No. 163 as “¿ [Hemos perdido el rumbo? De los ODM a los ODS?](#)”

In September this year, world leaders will meet in New York at the United Nations General Assembly. Top of the agenda will be the passage of a resolution laying out global development goals for the 15 years to 2030, covering progress in areas from poverty reduction to forestry preservation. They will follow on from the Millennium Development Goals (MDGs), which have become a common yardstick of global progress over the past decade and a half.

The MDGs, born out of the Millennium Declaration agreed to at the UN General Assembly in 2000, are widely seen as a considerable success of the international system. And they may well have played a role in speeding global progress toward better health and education outcomes over the last few years. That alone might justify coming up with a new set of global goals for the post-2015 period.

But the power of the original MDGs to motivate was in their simplicity and clarity. Sadly, the process that has created proposals for the new set of goals has guaranteed the opposite outcome. The over wrought and obese drafts proposed by negotiating committees so far almost ensure that the post-2015 goals will have comparatively limited value and impact. While it is probably too late for the process to be rescued, particular post-2015 goals and targets might still be useful, and the broader hopes for sustainable development may well be salvaged by other UN meetings this year.

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A Brief History of the MDGs

In May 1996, the OECD Development Assistance Committee — the club of rich world aid donors based in Paris — issued a report on development assistance after the end of the Cold War. *Shaping the 21st Century: The Contribution of Development Co-operation*, framed aid as a tool to help the world meet a number of global development targets drawn from a decade of UN conferences on development and environment. The “International Development Goal” proposed covered poverty, nutrition, water, education, gender, and health. While the authors suggested, “the targets are aspirations for the entire development process, not just for co-operation efforts,” the title of the report made clear that they were fundamentally about shaping the dialogue between aid donors and recipients.

Four years later, collected heads of state at the United Nations agreed on the Millennium Declaration. [\[1\]](#) Among language on the equitable and sustainable world we wanted for all children, the importance of human rights, and upholding the Olympic Truce, that document included numerical goals for global progress lifted from *Shaping the 21st Century*: targets to halve absolute poverty, hunger, and the number of people lacking access to clean water, to

ensure universal primary education and gender equity in education access, to reduce maternal mortality by three-quarters and under-five mortality by two-thirds, and to reverse the spread of HIV and malaria.

In 2001, the Millennium Development Goals were crafted out of that text in an effort by UN staff and supporters to rescue Millennium Declaration from the neglect of forgetting. The eight goals focused in on the numerical targets from the document at the cost of narrowing the scope to areas where there were politically uncontroversial measures of progress (“to respect fully ... the Universal Declaration of Human Rights,” and “comprehensive reform of the UN Security Council” are two examples of sensitive areas that were discarded in the process). As a public relations exercise, this was a triumph. But given their history, it is hardly surprising that the Millennium Development Goals were widely seen in the same way as the Development Assistance Committee’s International Development Goals — as a justification and framework for aid.

What Did the MDGs Achieve?

In those terms the MDGs can probably be declared a success. They may have helped reverse an aid decline that began at the end of the Cold War, continued through the 1996 International Development Goals and reached a nadir in 2001 at 0.21 percent of the Development Assistance Committee countries’ collective Gross Domestic Product. By 2010 that had climbed back to 0.32 percent — less than half the UN target of 0.7 percent (which is itself unambitious), but still progress.

The MDGs may have helped sustain support for aid because they provided a new narrative for what aid was *for* in the post-Cold War world. For all they were a non binding aspirational statement, they provided a useful tool of leverage for campaigners and politicians by providing a concise and easy to communicate program of (broadly) achievable progress, a consensus of leaders from countries rich and poor, that was numerical and time bound. The Millennium Development Goals became a global brand, at least in the development community. At some point around 2003 they became more frequently referenced in published books than the United Nations’ previous favored measure of progress, the Human Development Index (the HDI remains more popular as an internet search term). [\[2\]](#)

Skeptics might note a role for other factors beyond a framework in promoting new support for development assistance, including the September 11th, 2001, attacks and resulting wars. But further evidence that the goals themselves may have made at least a marginal difference to aid flows is that the post-2000 period saw an increased donor focus on low-income countries and the social sectors (health and education) that were at the heart of the MDGs. Sub-Saharan Africa was the region where meeting the MDGs would be the greatest challenge, and its share of total overseas development assistance climbed from below 20 percent in 2001 to nearly 35 percent by 2006. [\[3\]](#)

It is more difficult to calculate the impact of the Millennium Development Goals on actual development outcomes. There is, at least, some evidence of progress to take credit for. Not least, we met the first MDG — to halve the proportion of the population living on \$1.25 a day — in 2010. The target to reduce the proportion without access to clean water by half was met the same year. We now see gender equity in access to primary education, and for all we may not reach the goals of a two-thirds reduction in child mortality or a three-quarters reduction in maternal mortality, we have made dramatic strides.

Of course the World had been seeing improved development outcomes before 2000 — under-five mortality in developing countries fell from 14 percent of all children born to 8 percent between 1980 and 2000, for example — suggesting much of the progress we have seen since 2000 would have been expected MDGs or no. But Andy Sumner and I [calculated](#) that over the first decade of the 21st century there had been slightly faster than expected progress on some developing-country MDG indicators.

Based on historical trends up to the year 2000, we might have expected primary education rates in developing countries to reach 76 percent in 2010. In fact, the developing-country average reached 81 percent. We might have expected girls’ enrollment as a percentage of boys’ enrollment to be 96 percent; in fact it was 98 percent in 2010. Child mortality was predicted to be 5.4 percent; in fact it was 5.1 percent, and maternal mortality was 203 per 100,000 births compared to the predicted value of 221 per thousand. These are not huge differences, but they are notable. Other authors have suggested that as many as 64 percent of developing countries saw significantly faster reductions in under-five mortality from 2000 to 2010 than they did from 1990 to 2000. [\[4\]](#)

At the same time, Howard Friedman of Columbia University has argued that child and infant mortality started to

decline more rapidly before the Millennium Declaration in 2000, suggesting that the role for the MDGs in that historically impressive performance may be limited. For the MDG indicators he had data to study “there was no trend in statistically significant accelerations in the MDG indicators after 2000 ... about half of the MDG indicators exhibited no acceleration or deceleration during the time period from 1992 to 2008 and about one-third exhibited accelerations before 2001.” [\[5\]](#)

One reason for the limited evidence or extent of more rapid progress will be because of limited policy change in developing countries. Available measures I collected with Andy Sumner could find little change in health and education policy or spending as a percentage of gross domestic product in the developing world in the period after the MDGs were signed. Despite that, even in low-income countries, domestic spending on health and education was more than five times the total level of aid flows (and so around 10 times aid spending on social sectors). Aid would have to have an outsized influence to dramatically improve outcomes, then. [\[6\]](#) As might be implied by the marginally more rapid progress we have seen in development outcomes since 2000, it is hard to find evidence of this outsized aid impact.

With my colleague Sarah Dykstra, I studied the link between aid flows and the rate of progress on MDG indicators. [\[7\]](#) Cumulative aid flows per capita from 2001 to 2010 were negatively related to progress toward access to clean water, and insignificantly related to progress against poverty, under nutrition, child mortality, primary completion, gender equality, maternal mortality, and the HIV targets. Using another measure, countries which received more aid per capita did not see more rapid progress than would be expected given historical trends in the case of primary completion or gender equality in education. While countries that made more rapid than expected progress in child mortality did receive more cumulative aid from 2001 to 2010 than those countries which did not, the result is not statistically significant. The evidence on rates of progress and the role of aid combined suggest that, if the main channel for the MDGs to deliver development outcomes was through aid, their impact was probably marginal.

Marginal is different from irrelevant, however. At the mortality rates prevalent in 2000, 9.7 million children born in the developing world at the turn of millennium would be dead within five years. Reducing the under-five mortality rate just one percent would mean 97,000 fewer deaths a year. Given the MDGs were at heart simply a declaration of intent made by the world’s leaders and international bureaucrats, if they managed even such a marginal impact, they were well worth the effort.

The New Deal

It is in large part the sense that the MDGs have been a success that spurred the global community into a frenzied round of discussion about what happens this year, when the current round of goals run out. The decision that there should a follow-on set of goals and targets is long foregone. But there was a lot left to argue over when it came to what was in and what was out. And rather than the closed-door processes that created the International Development Goals and their MDG successors, the post-2015 process has been marked by an orgy of consultation and debate.

The UN has organized numerous conferences and outreach efforts, including an online poll that has attracted more than seven million votes. The secretary-general convened a High-Level Panel co chaired by the Liberian and Indonesian presidents alongside the British prime minister to come up with proposals. Somewhat to the secretary-general’s surprise, it actually came up with a draft list of goals and targets. One of the (few) outcomes of the Rio Plus 20 UN conference in Brazil in 2012 was to mandate an Open Working Group of government representatives at the General Assembly to think through a set of Sustainable Development Goals. It produced its own report in 2014, leaving UN system with an embarrassment of riches when it comes to goal proposals for the post-2015 period.

Both processes ended up suggesting a far broader set of areas and targets than contained the original MDGs. Where the 2001 set had eight goals and 18 subsidiary targets, the High-Level Panel proposed 12 goals and 54 targets for the post-2015 period. The Open Working Group bested that, managing 17 goals and 169 targets. (For those keeping score, that’s twice the goals and nine times the targets of the original set). And the Open Working Group’s draft won out as the basis for formal negotiation this year. The UN permanent representatives from Ireland and Kenya, who labor under the weighty title of “co-facilitators of the plenary on the organization and modalities of intergovernmental negotiations and remaining issues related to the summit for the adoption of the post-2015 development agenda” suggested that there is a consensus at the General Assembly that “the targets — but not goals —

proposed by [the Open Working Group] may require ‘tweaking’ before they are adopted — but the deal is largely done. [\[8\]](#)

Perhaps it is no surprise that such an open process has ramped up ambition. Where the MDGs were essentially about focusing aid on the poorest and most disadvantaged in a few narrow areas, the mantra has become that the new goals should be universal. Not just about poor people in poor countries but about everyone on the planet. Not just about a few narrow areas, but a holistic vision of human flourishing that is inclusive of the myriad concerns of sustainability. Target areas proposed by the Open Working Group spread from animal poaching through ocean acidification, recycling, tourism, housing, inequality, industrialization, training, irrigation, genital mutilation, traffic accidents, and child stunting.

So sprawling is the agenda that some activists focused on an issue already in the draft targets decided that, given there are so many issues covered, they should be focusing on ensuring their topic is the subject of *multiple* targets in order to demonstrate a suitable level of importance. The 2014 Global Nutrition Report highlights the fact that nutrition is mentioned but once in the Open Working Group’s targets for example, and calls for intensified efforts to embed the topic in the post-2015 goals.

And ambition is manifest in scale as well as scope: some of the progress suggested for 2030 is jaw-dropping. According to the Open Working Group, in just sixteen years’ time we will have been able to end poverty in all its forms everywhere; achieve full and productive employment and decent work for all; end hunger and malnutrition; attained universal health coverage; wipe out AIDS, tuberculosis, malaria, and neglected tropical diseases; provide universal secondary education and universal access to tertiary education; end gender discrimination and eliminate all forms of violence against all women and girls; ensure adequate and affordable housing, water, sanitation, reliable modern energy, and communications technology access for all; and (strangely) both prevent *and* significantly reduce marine pollution of all kinds alongside preventing species loss. If that’s not enough, we will have also eliminated all discriminatory laws, policies, and practices.

On the one hand, the Open Working Group’s proposal is a utopian vision rather than a plausible set of goals for progress by 2030. The declaration of development goals doesn’t demand a detailed roadmap of *how* they are going to be accomplished. But surely it should be plausible that the goals *could* be accomplished. And, simply, it isn’t plausible. If there is a scenario laid out anywhere that sees us completely wiping out the scourge of violence against half the world’s population by 2030 — or even just wiping out all neglected tropical diseases — it would be wonderful to see.

On the other hand, the document fails even as a utopian vision. Because it is a consensus report of a large number of the world’s countries, it is notably silent on the importance of regular, open, free and fair elections, or freedom of speech, prohibition of forced labor, or laws against discrimination on the grounds of sexual orientation, or the right of women to freedom of movement.

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The proposed goals’ unfinished utopianism raises the fundamental question: what are they for? Their universalism makes them poorly designed for the original purpose of the MDGs: as a tool to focus aid flows. But as a broader rule book for trammeling government action they are both woefully incomplete and maddeningly impossible to implement. The list of targets put forward is a category of indicators with sufficient political support to merit a mention without sufficient opposition to destroy consensus among global leaders. They will be bound together in a document with some visibility but no legal standing. Beyond that it is hard to see what they amount to.

Do We Need a Global Agenda?

Do we want Sustainable Development Goals if they are going to look like this? The question is moot. We are going to get goals that look like this. The better question is, what value can we still milk out of them? And in that, there is some hope around the margin. Given focus and practicality is an unattainable dream, perhaps “providing an authorizing environment” should be the new target.

Getting new indicators into the category of “sufficient political support to merit a mention without sufficient opposition to destroy consensus” in a United Nations document might at least signal expanded areas for global cooperation and provide civil society with a justification to advocate around that indicator. Having the previously neglected issue of maternal mortality in the original MDGs may have been a factor behind the effort made to actually measure the scale of mortality in childbirth over the last 15 years, for example. Perhaps some similar level of progress could be achieved with other neglected development priorities that have made their way into the agenda in edited targets.

In that regard, the Open Working Group’s language contains some welcome innovations, not least a target to “facilitate orderly, safe, regular and responsible migration and mobility of people, including through implementation of planned and well-managed migration policies.” Clarifying that migration is a powerful tool for development is a departure for many governments — even if the target is still too imprecise to monitor. Better in this regard is the governance target to “provide legal identity for all including birth registration.” It deals with a significant global issue. More than one-third of births go unregistered, making it much harder for those children to get national identification and citizen services as they grow up. [9] The target also deals with the issue in a way that can be measured. To the extent that there is still space to increase targets, the more negotiators can add to the list of important but previously neglected topics included in the SDGs, the better. Perhaps we could have specific target language around access to an all-weather road or enough electricity to run a refrigerator or publication of government contracts, for example.

Of course, making the goals even more encompassing will make the problem of “what activity they are meant to focus” even worse. But a new exercise built around the idea of channeling aid looks anachronistic, regardless. My estimates with Sarah Dykstra suggest that aid as a percentage of GDP in low-income countries could actually climb over the next thirty years. But that is because low-income countries will contain an ever smaller part of the global population. Aid will be a declining factor in achieving the global progress called for in the draft Sustainable Development Goals. Perhaps it matters less that the draft language around the global partnership to support development progress is weak: the perennial call for aid to reach 0.7 percent of rich-country output is the most robust element, but, sadly, it is even less plausible today than it was when it was included in the Millennium Declaration 14 years ago.

Aid will be a declining factor in achieving the global progress called for in the draft Sustainable Development Goals

The upcoming UN conference in Addis Ababa on the subject of financing for development looks more positive in that regard. The draft declaration suggests the potential for it to unleash a range of initiatives around issues from trade through tax transparency, remittances, energy subsidies, and public guarantees of private investments. In terms of global impact, these would dwarf any additional official aid that might plausibly appear, even if still being completely inadequate to accomplish the historically unprecedented levels of progress contemplated in the sustainable development goals.

But then, development progress has always been primarily about poor people and poor countries achieving things for themselves. The last 20 years has seen a massive amount of that progress, and hopefully the next twenty years will as well. The most focused, plausible and measurable set of development goals would have had at best a marginal impact on that rate of progress. Perhaps a sprawling and implausible set can do almost as well.

Acknowledgments

CGD is grateful for contributions from the UK Department for International Development and the William and Flora Hewlett Foundation in support of this work.

[1] United Nations General Assembly Fifty-Fifth Session, "55/2. United Nations Millennium Declaration," September 2000, <http://www.un.org/millennium/declaration/ares552e.pdf>.

[2] This according to Google [Ngrams](#) and [Trends](#) data.

[3] Charles Kenny and Andy Sumner, "More Money or More Development: What Have the MDGs Achieved?" CGD Working Paper 278, 2011, http://www.cgdev.org/sites/default/files/1425806_file_Kenny_Sumner_MDGs_FINAL.pdf.

[4] Declan French, "Did the Millennium Development Goals Change Trends in Child Mortality?" April 14, 2014. Available at SSRN: <http://ssrn.com/abstract=2424695> or <http://dx.doi.org/10.2139/ssrn.2424695>.

[5] Howard Steven Friedman, "Causal Inference and the Millennium Development Goals (MDGs): Assessing Whether There Was an Acceleration in MDG Development Indicators Following the MDG Declaration," August 2013, http://mpira.ub.uni-muenchen.de/48793/1/MPRA_paper_48793.pdf.

[6] Charles Kenny and Andy Sumner, "More Money or More Development: What Have the MDGs Achieved?" CGD Working Paper 278, 2011, http://www.cgdev.org/sites/default/files/1425806_file_Kenny_Sumner_MDGs_FINAL.pdf.

[7] Charles Kenny and Sarah Dykstra, "The Global Partnership for Development: A Review of MDG 8 and Proposals for the Post-2015 Development Agenda," CGD Policy Paper 26, July 2013, http://www.cgdev.org/sites/default/files/global-partnership-development_0.pdf.

[8] International Institute for Sustainable Development, "Governments Conclude Initial Exchange of Views on Post-2015 Negotiations," November 10, 2014, <http://sd.iisd.org/news/governments-conclude-initial-exchange-of-views-on-post-2015-negotiations/>.

[9] UNICEF, "Every Child's Birth Right: Inequities and trends in birth registration," December 2013, http://www.unicef.org/mena/MENA-Birth_Registration_report_low_res-01.pdf.