



Creating consensus: political opportunities and barriers for a post-2015 agreement on development

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Introduction

Despite the rising enthusiasm among academics and NGOs for researching and advocating on what should happen after the MDGs, a post-2015 agreement will not be based on academic analyses, NGO campaigns, nor even on the views of poor people. All of these will, we hope, be inputs which shape an eventual post-2015 framework. But in the end an agreement is a political deal between governments, and it is they, and their ideas and interests, that set the boundaries of what is possible to achieve. This time round, unlike in the 1990s when the current MDGs were developed, the emerging economies will be key to getting agreement on any post-2015 agreement.

This paper explores how a consensus between current trends in thinking among some of the newly influential middle income countries, and the aid preoccupations of traditional donors, could form the basis of a new global agreement on development. It starts with a summary of current challenges to the MDG framework, derived from recent trends and new understandings of how to define and measure poverty. It then considers which trends in thinking among key emerging economies could form the basis of a new agreement to address these challenges and build on the gains of the MDGs.

The MDGs have had many successes, not least in mobilising aid resources and providing a clear narrative on development to maintain popular support for aid in donor countries and political pressure for action on poverty in some developing countries². However, the framework has also come under a series of challenges from recent research on poverty and development, which would have to be addressed in any new framework. These challenges can be grouped into two – the ‘who’ and the ‘what’ of poverty reduction.

Challenge 1: Who is being left behind by progress?

While the overall picture on MDG progress is positive almost everywhere, gains have not been equally distributed. A set of targets that call for partial achievements: the halving of poverty, or the reduction of maternal mortality by three-quarters, for example, can conceal quite large inequalities.

Even in countries and regions where targets are being met, there are considerable differences in improvements between urban and rural populations, and worse than average outcomes for some ethnic and religious groups. These and other inequalities have increased in many countries since 2000, and this has led to slower progress on poverty reduction. Globally, between 1981 and 2005, while the impact of economic growth was to lift hundreds of millions of people out of poverty, increases in inequality meant that nearly 600 million people who would have escaped poverty had inequality remained static were denied that chance³.

The people who have not benefitted from progress on MDGs 1-7 are not randomly distributed within countries – they tend to be from ethnic minorities, and/or to live in remote areas, and/or to be from religious groups who are discriminated against. Disability is another common and widely ignored source of inequality: UNESCO estimate that one third of the approximately 75 million children who do not attend school suffer some disability⁴. Within these marginalised groups women and girls often fare worse than men and boys.

MDG indicators are consistently worse for disadvantaged groups in every region⁵:

Latin America:

- In **Peru**, the national average years of schooling for young adults is just under 10 years. For indigenous people the figure is 7 years, while for poor, indigenous women the figure is 5 years.
- In **Brazil**, 74 per cent of households in the bottom 10 per cent by income are of African descent.

Asia

- In **China**, the percentage of underweight children in the richer Eastern provinces (5.8 per cent) is less than half that of the poorer Western provinces (12.5 per cent).
- Ethnic minorities comprised 46 per cent of **Chinese** living in extreme poverty in 2003
- In **Nepal**, under five mortality rates among Dalit communities (90 per 1000 live births) are more than double those of the Newar caste (43 per 1000 live births).
- In **Vietnam**, only 7 per cent of ethnic minority households have access to improved sanitation, while the figure for the majority Kinh and Chinese groups is 43 per cent

Africa

- In **Nigeria**, the Southwest region has a childhood mortality rate of 32 per 1000 live births, while the Northwest region has 139 deaths per 1000 live births
- In **South Africa**, black African incomes are around 13 per cent of white incomes
- In **Kenya**, among the Mijkennda/Swahili ethnic groups, 27 per cent of women giving birth have a skilled attendant with them, while for Kikuyu women the figure is 71 per cent.

While the exact dimensions of inequality vary from country to country, depending on the ethnic, regional and religious picture, when aggregated, a systematic picture of inequalities in MDG outcomes between rural and urban populations, and between the poorest and the rest is quite clear for almost all regions. These pictures will of course be created by the type of intersecting inequalities described in the examples above. Interestingly, the data show that women as a group are not systematically discriminated against – though women in groups that suffer inequalities are likely to be worse off than men in those groups.

Table 1: Selected MDG and national averages vs. women, rural population and the poorest

	National Average	Women	Rural	Poorest 20%
MDG 1 – Underweight prevalence in children under five (%), 2003–9				
Developing countries excl. China	23	24	28	40
Sub-Saharan Africa	22	21	25	29

South Asia	42	42	45	56
LDCs	28	27	30	34
China	6	7	8	n.a.
India	43	43	46	57
MDG 4 – Measles coverage %, 2008				
Developing countries excl. China	81	64	61	51
Sub-Saharan Africa	72	58	55	45
South Asia	74	59	58	44
LDCs	76	65	62	56
China	94	n.a.	n.a.	n.a.
India	70	56	54	40
MDG 5 – skilled attendant at delivery, 2003-9				
Developing countries excl. China	63	-	50	28
Sub-Saharan Africa	46	-	36	24
South Asia	42	-	33	17
LDCs	38	-	29	24
China	98	-	97	n.a.
India	47	-	38	19

Source: [UNICEF \(2010: 51-63\)⁶](#).

As progress is made against absolute poverty worldwide, people who remain in absolute poverty are more likely to be from groups that suffer discrimination of various kinds. Unless action is taken to deliberately address the inequalities they face, then it is possible that progress on global poverty reduction will slow and perhaps even stall. A future global agreement on development will need to incentivise action by governments to address these deep seated inequalities if the aspiration in the Millennium Declaration – to eradicate global poverty – is to be realised.

Challenge 2: What is progress?

The MDGs cover a discrete set of issues, focusing on income poverty and on health and education as the primary outcomes against which to measure the success or failure of development policy. However, new research and a growing understanding of how poor people think about their lives pose something of a challenge to the view of progress embedded in the MDGs⁷.

Policy makers and researchers know a great deal more about how poor people themselves define poverty, and their priorities for action in tackling it than they did in the 1990s. During the 1990s the World Bank and other donors started to invest more in participatory exercises to complement the quantitative analysis based on poverty lines and other indicators. The most ambitious of these was the Bank's 'Voices of the Poor' study⁸, published in 2000, which involved tens of thousands of people across the world. More recently, survey companies such as Gallup and Globescan have started to include representative samples of people from developing countries in their regular polling exercises, generating extra information on the needs and concerns of poor people⁹.

These new approaches have thrown up some challenges to the human development approach as encapsulated in the MDGs. Firstly, a range of issues not included in current metrics for poverty monitoring – such as the threat of violence, or emotional issues such as the humiliation involved in being poor – turned out to be high on the agenda of poor people, as ways of defining poverty and as priorities for action. Secondly, they revealed that existing issues should be looked at through a different lens – so that material dimensions of poverty are seen as important, but for poor people assets are as important an indicator of material poverty as incomes, the more commonly used measure in the MDGs as elsewhere.

Thirdly, within the MDG approach, the priority given by poor people to different dimensions of poverty often does not reflect what donors prioritise through their spending. A recent Gallup World Survey exercise surveying 26 countries in Sub-Saharan Africa to establish African views about the relative importance of different MDGs found that, unsurprisingly, reducing poverty and hunger ranked top, followed by reducing the spread of HIV and Aids and then providing more jobs for young people¹⁰. Despite its inclusion in the survey, providing jobs is an area that did not figure highly in the MDGs, and has been neglected by donors for many years. There is clearly something of a disconnect between the outcomes considered important by poor people and those prioritised by donors through the MDGs framework, a disconnect that should be rectified in any new post-2015 strategy.

Also informed by an understanding that people's own understanding of their welfare can differ in quite substantial ways from what policy makers have traditionally measured and monitored, ideas around 'human wellbeing' are emerging as a complement to the more traditional and material ways of conceptualising and measuring poverty and deprivation in OECD countries as well as in the development literature. The commission recently appointed by President Sarkozy of France is one of several recent attempts to look at alternative measures of progress. The commission, which included both Joseph Stiglitz and Amartya Sen, identified eight dimensions of wellbeing which are critical to happy and fulfilled lives¹¹:

- Material living standards
- Health
- Education
- Personal activities including work
- Political voice and governance
- Social connections and relationships
- The present and future environment
- Security, both economic and physical¹²

The first three dimensions in this list map clearly on to the existing MDGs, while the last five are arguably missing from the current framework. For the architects of any post-2015 agreement, the wellbeing approach offers a further challenge to incorporate more subjective and holistic concepts of progress. The question will be which of these can usefully be measured and incentivised at a global level, and which should remain at the national or even sub-national levels of analysis.

These two challenges can be met in different ways. Within the current framework, the first challenge – who benefits from progress – could be met by including distributional targets within any new set of goals and targets, and make explicit commitments to ensuring that indicators of progress are disaggregated by, for example, gender, geography and ethnicity. The second challenge – what defines progress – could be met by including new targets, such as for security or connectivity, and for environmental sustainability.

But finding new targets is not the point. The point is to find an agreement which best mobilises political action on poverty and development¹³. For that, more attention to the current politics of development among key players is needed. The MDGs can be seen as an agreement between donor and recipient countries about a set of priorities for collaboration and a monitoring framework. The goals and targets approach worked well for that. But the world is different now. Most poor people live in middle income countries that are both donor and recipient, or neither¹⁴. Action at a national level, rather than by donors, is what will determine the success or failure of any future global deal on poverty. Why should the governments of emerging economies be interested in a global agreement? What would be in it for them? And what might the traditional donors who would also need to buy into such a process be interested in seeing in a new global framework?

There are clearly personal motivations for individual leaders who want to get involved in spearheading an agreement on a global stage, diplomatic motivations for governments who see involvement in the formulation and promotion of a new agreement as a way of making an impact and increasing their global stature, and more technical considerations based on the value of an agreement for improving aid coordination, policy coherence, global statistical capacity and so on. The particular combination of factors driving support (or lack of it) for an agreement, and how they play out in each country, will vary over time. But studying the current development priorities and policies of some key countries can provide some insights into aspects of an agreement likely to get their attention and interest.

From challenges to solutions: the current politics of poverty reduction in emerging economies

A big part of getting any kind of post-2015 global agreement on development will be getting the interest and the involvement of emerging economies. It is they that are home to the majority of the world's poor people. And as aid donors and trading partners, their influence over low income countries is growing, and as creditors and potential saviours of the struggling global economy, their influence over Europe and the USA continues to increase. What are the political trends and currents that might indicate a distinctively emerging economy approach to the challenges posed above?

The first place to look is their policies to fight poverty at home. In sharp contrast to the 1990s, an era when structural adjustment policies dominated the landscape of low income countries, with their focus on cost-cutting, user fees and private sector provision, today's trends in social policy are towards a more universalist system of provision. Two things in particular stand out.

- **'Social protection'**, a term given to a range of measures including, but not limited to, cash transfer programmes, is an idea which, among developing countries, began in Latin America and has spread to every continent. The idea that if people are poor one remedy might be to give them money was surprisingly slow in coming to development practice, despite the fact that cash transfers of one sort or another are the cornerstone of welfare policies in most OECD countries. Social protection policies can offer protection against just the sort of risks and shocks that are becoming a larger feature of the landscape of many people's lives. They have also been part of the reason for declining inequality in several Latin American countries. Sometimes the cash is conditional on certain behavior such as sending children to school. Conditional or not, the impact of these programmes is quite remarkable: high school enrollment in Mexico, for example, doubled for children whose families are in the *Oportunidades* social protection programme¹⁵. Social protection schemes now exist on every continent, and more are being introduced almost daily. The costs can be small – a few percent of GDP, and the benefits substantial.
- **Free health and education.** During the 1980s and 90s the received wisdom was that user fees had to be charged for health and education services, to raise funds and to ensure that those using the services really needed them. This view had many critics – the idea of charging already poor people to use essential services was anathema to many NGOs and social movements in developing and in donor countries. In recent years a number of developing country governments have chosen to make these services free to users. The Mexican government is aiming to provide universal health care by 2012¹⁶, and a recent expert report to the Indian government proposed the setting up of a tax funded health service free to users¹⁷. Increased government investment in China's health insurance scheme has increased coverage from around 10 per cent to over 90 per cent in just a few years¹⁸.

It is not just emerging economies who are taking the universal services route. Kenya's announcement in 2003 that primary education would be free to all was met with a mass

influx of students to schools, and a halving of families' expenditure on education. However, standards seem to have fallen as the resources available to state schools could not cope with the increased numbers of students, and the proportion of children enrolled in private schools has gone up, possibly leading to the opening up of new inequalities in educational attainment¹⁹. In Sierra Leone, a basic package of health care for pregnant and lactating women and for children under five has been free since April 2010. Many more women and children attended clinics, but as with Kenya's experience in education, increased demand was hard to meet given shortages of staff and of drugs and other equipment²⁰

Whatever the limitations of existing schemes, this changing approach to social policy in developing countries makes the universalist aspirations of the Millennium Declaration a much more realistic prospect than they were when the MDGs were being negotiated. The idea of a basic package of income and social services for all is no longer a utopian ideal but a real project that many governments, including some extremely poor ones, are working to achieve within their own countries.

Increasingly, those governments are also seeking to showcase these approaches on a global stage. Some new donors, for example Brazil, draw an explicit link between their successful policies at home, in the areas of agriculture and social policy, and their priorities and comparative advantage as donors.²¹ In this, they provide funds and technical support to developing countries wanting to invest in similar policies, and use this experience too to shape global debates on aid and development: as one example, the communiqué from the 2011 G20 summit in Cannes recognised 'the importance of investing in nationally determined social protection floors'.

Domestic policy in developing countries, and the ways that informs their global stance, provides one indication of what a new global approach to development could be. The second place to look is at the actions taken by emerging economies to fight poverty overseas. There are two pieces of evidence to draw on here. Firstly, their own behaviour as donors is the strongest indicator of their priorities for action on global poverty.

Emerging economies are now becoming aid donors rather than (or in some cases as well as) being recipients. Aid from non-OECD members reached \$11.2 billion prior to the financial crisis²². This is still small compared to a total of \$129 billion in ODA spent by OECD DAC members in 2010, but the volumes are increasing fast.²³ Perhaps more fundamentally, many low income countries increasingly regard emerging economies as providing the development models that they aspire to follow. As *The Economist* sums it up, "the establishment donors' aid monopoly is finished".²⁴

Precise figures are hard to come by, but it is clear that a large amount of new donors' aid is spent not on the traditional, MDG-friendly sectors of health or education, but on infrastructure. Around two thirds of concessional loans from China, for example, are for infrastructure and transport projects²⁵. India's aid to its neighbours has focused on energy infrastructure – partly with a view to its own growing energy needs.

This approach is welcomed by many aid-dependent developing country governments, weary of the MDG focus of many traditional donors and anxious for resources to boost growth and employment²⁶. Certainly, this approach chimes with a common critique of the MDGs from both academics and from within low-income countries, that in focusing attention on the social sectors, the MDGs have downplayed the importance of growth, jobs and the development of the productive sectors for long term development and poverty reduction²⁷.

A second indicator is the 'G20 development agenda', first articulated in the 'Seoul Development Consensus' of 2010. In total three of the G20's 'nine pillars' of the development agenda were focused on growth – infrastructure, private investment and job creation and

growth with resilience. Other issues among the nine are human resource development and financial inclusion, also trade, food security and knowledge sharing, and domestic resource mobilisation. The last is clearly of concern to countries seeking to break free of aid dependence, and is a concern increasingly echoed by traditional donors as well.

Actual progress on all of these in the G20 working group on development has been slow, but the list gives some indication of areas where it may be possible to build a consensus in the future, whatever the limitations of current actions.

From solutions to results: the current politics of aid in traditional donors

If a post-2015 agreement is to be truly global, traditional donors – those who form the OECD's 'Development Assistance Committee' and which provided the impetus for the original MDGs, will also have to be part of the consensus.

With the exception of the USA, which was late in coming to the MDG party, most of the donor countries in the OECD DAC have increasingly used the MDGs, or the priorities they imply, as the public rationale for aid. The last Labour government in the UK was explicit about using the MDGs as the results framework for evaluating the impact of the UK's aid programme²⁸

A new generation of political leaders among aid donors since 2008, and a new set of problems and politics in the OECD since the financial crisis of the same year, has changed this consensus. While the MDGs are still the benchmark for much of what donors do, the day to day politics of aid have changed.

Changes in the political approach to aid are driven largely by the need to justify aid to the taxpaying public in donor countries. Aid is increasingly seen as a luxury that cannot be afforded in the new climate of austerity. Public debates about aid, at least in the UK, are dominated by two questions – 'does aid work', and 'should aid go to middle income countries'.

Domestic responses to this new challenge have taken a number of forms. Firstly, in the face of increased scepticism about whether aid works among the public of many donor countries, politicians keen to justify their spending are focusing more on a tighter definition of 'results' and on instruments to link aid from particular countries to specific, quantified, outcomes in developing countries. The 'results agenda' in the UK's DFID, and the ensuing 'results-offer' process for allocating the UK's bilateral aid is one example of this, and the US Agency for International Development has also been putting more focus on results in recent speeches and strategy papers.²⁹ A post 2015 global agreement would have to offer quantifiable targets, in the same way as the existing framework, if it were to be easily absorbed into current mechanisms for planning and resource allocation among donors.

Apart from results, other recurring themes among traditional donors at the moment are also greater focus on growth and the private sector, and on security and conflict, informed by the fact that the countries making the least progress on most indicators are those where insecurity and conflict are rife³⁰. This is often framed as part of a narrative around ending aid: economic growth, and peace, will, it is argued, usher in a new era when countries can deal with their own poverty problems and no longer need aid. In order to demonstrate that ending aid will indeed become a reality, the UK government has recently ended aid to China, and seems likely to wind up the programme in India within the next five to ten years.

For a new global agreement to be truly attractive to OECD politicians who want to continue with global development efforts but who want to remove some of the domestic political problems involved in doing so, it would have to offer a compelling new story which inspired increasingly cynical publics and in some way changed the debate on development to get away from the increasingly sterile debates which dominate the national politics of aid.

What global consensus?

How could the gains of the MDGs be married to the new development preoccupations of the emerging economies, the current political agenda in traditional donors, and the experience of poverty reduction in all countries to create a new development consensus that is both effective and truly global? Three principles, on which there is likely to be consensus, could form the basis of a new agreement.

The first principle should be one of universality and inclusiveness. Going with the grain of anti-poverty policies in many developing countries, a focus on universal provision will address some of the inequalities that pose the first challenge to the MDG framework, but will also provide clear continuity with that framework. Why halve poverty when, with adequate investments in both growth and in social protection, it is now a feasible goal to end the extremes of poverty entirely? Why seek to reduce maternal mortality by two-thirds, as in the current MDG, where with universal health care coverage one could ensure that all women receive an adequate package of care in pregnancy and childbirth? Such aspirations are no longer out of reach, and it is developing and emerging economies who are leading in the development of universal solutions.

A new global agreement could help by providing a boost to civil society campaigns in countries reluctant to take that step, by ensuring that it is not lack of resources that is the barrier to countries unwilling to adopt such policies, and by enabling learning and support between countries involved in testing out different approaches and institutional set ups. A practical agreement aimed at finally ending the extremes of poverty might also provide renewed inspiration for development organisations in traditional donor countries, currently fighting a defensive battle against a media and public increasingly convinced that aid doesn't work.

A second principle could be about building resilience and reducing vulnerability. Many of the instruments would be the same as those designed to achieve universal goals on poverty reduction – cash transfers, universal and free provision of a package of health and education. This focus would speak to many of the current political concerns in all countries, but would provide a strong link to how poor people themselves understand poverty: for example through a focus on strengthening communities or on assets as well as incomes in material measures of poverty.

Built into this could also be a financing element, with agreements on shared responsibility between national governments and donors for the financing of these new instruments. This would fit well with the growing attention among emerging economies, aid recipient countries and donors being paid to domestic resource mobilisation and issues of capital flight, tax avoidance and the like. Providing a resilient funding basis for poverty reduction – one that is more diversified and less dependent on the whims of donor governments or NGOs – must be a key part of building systems that can withstand shocks, and again chimes well with the current politics of poverty reduction among all the major groups who would need to agree a post-2015 consensus. A focus on domestic resource mobilisation would also, of course, allay the fears of taxpayers in traditional donor countries, fearful of being asked to pay a growing bill for poverty reduction at a time of domestic austerity.

A third principle could be about building national economies. Again, this would link to the earlier principle of resilience. But it would also be a response to the challenge posed by many emerging and low income countries to the MDG framework focus on social sectors. And it would be a response to the high priority poor people place on jobs and financial security as part of their own approach to tackling poverty. It would be with the grain of new donors priorities, and of traditional donors' current concerns, and, as the MDGs did before them, could provide a way of rationalising and coordinating diverse aid efforts in this area, to the benefit of both donors and recipients.

The type of agreement required to actually create a consensus, whatever the final shape that emerges, might look quite different to the MDGs. Universality can of course be monitored

using outcome measures not too different to those included in the MDGs – though with a much higher level of ambition. But resilience and the strength of national economies might better be incentivised through a league table approach like the Human Development Index, or a system of peer review like the WTO’s trade policy review mechanism.

Points of tension

There are of course multiple and complex trade-offs here. The three principles outlined above are derived from what seems to be the meeting point of emerging economies’ agendas, the politics of aid in traditional donors, and current poverty problems.

However, they miss out some crucial aspects of development, on which consensus seems less likely. Any attempt to use an agreement to alter the political balance within developing countries is likely to be resisted by new donors, who have consistently taken a stance on aid that is staunchly against ‘conditionality’ and the idea of donors intervening in other countries’ political or social affairs³¹. Therefore, using a new agreement to address conflict, or to promote the development of new political norms and institutions within developing countries might make agreement very difficult. Some of the new insights from wellbeing work about the important of participation and social connections would also not make it into this consensus – though there is a question over whether it would be useful to address these through the framework of a global agreement in any case. For similar reasons, much of the ‘rights’ discourse currently popular among NGOs would also be unlikely to gain traction in an agenda constructed to gain the support of key emerging economies.

An agenda around economic growth would also have its red lines – while migration, and freeing up the international movement of labour, is an issue of high priority for many developing countries, it is one that traditional donors are extremely unlikely to support in the current climate. Similarly, any attempt to loosen intellectual property laws, in order to promote growth through technology transfer, is likely to be considered too damaging to core economic interests in many OECD countries and to be strongly resisted. There is also the all-encompassing issue of climate change, not discussed here, which will be crucial in many ways to progress on development but on which global politics are not, at the time of writing, looking particularly hopeful.

Conclusion

At this stage, it would be both brave and extremely foolish to predict the shape, the organising principles, or the level of ambition of any future agreement. But it is certain that building in a good understanding of the politics of the process – and how they can be marshalled to provide positive solutions to today’s poverty problems – will increase the chances of a post-2015 agreement that is both effective and politically feasible.

Currently, those politics offer hope that an agreement is possible, and that it could tackle some of the most pressing poverty problems of the moment. However, there are also likely to be considerable political barriers in some key countries for tackling some of the crucial elements of development at a global level, together with a fairly gloomy outlook for multilateralism in general.

How far such an agreement could go, and where the barriers are that cannot be crossed, will depend very much on the two great uncertainties of the moment: the rapid unfolding of the economic crisis in OECD countries, and the slow drama of climate change. Rapid movement on one or both of those between now and 2015 might change the nature of the politics outlined here in all sorts of unforeseen ways. This paper has not offered predictions, but rather a starting point for those wanting to observe how those politics unfold, and a guide for those wanting to influence them as to where some useful pressure points might be.

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