

Views on Development

No 8, 14 September 2012

Millennium Development Goals Post-2015: What to Do?

By Prof. Stephan Klasen

Stephan Klasen is Professor of Development Economics at the University of Göttingen und speaker of the Courant Research Center "Poverty, Equity and Growth in Developing and Transition Countries".



In the series "Views on Development", KfW periodically publishes personal views from renowned development researchers on current development policy topics. The authors bear full responsibility for the content of their texts. KfW does not necessarily share the views expressed.

The world community is slowly gearing up to developing a follow-up process to the Millennium Development Goals which are to expire in 2015. While the last summit on the issue in 2010 was focused on accelerating achievements until 2015 and most formal discussions at the global level have focused on procedural issues, it is high time to develop concrete substantive proposals for a post-2015 framework. This is also the task of the recently appointed High-Level Panel that is due to recommend a new framework for a post-2015 development agenda by the middle of next year. My note is meant to provide some inputs to these discussions.

In this note I will first argue that, despite a much changed international environment, a successor process remains desirable, but much would be gained if such a successor process learnt from the successes and failures of the current MDG process and made due recognition to the drastically changed international environment when developing a new set of goals. To do that, one first has to correctly identify what the MDGs have achieved, to be clear about the shortcomings of the goals and the associated processes, pay due recognition to the current world economic situation in developing, emerging, and industrialized countries, and frame a new set of goals and processes with this in mind.

Successes and Failures of the MDGs

The MDGs were, at their best, a rallying cry of the world community to make measurable

progress in the most pressing development challenges of the time. After two decades of stagnation and regress in large parts of the developing world (most notably in Sub-Saharan Africa and Latin America), and rather slow progress in South and Central Asia, the aim was to galvanize action of the international community to change this state of affairs. In the world of the 1990s where the MDGs developed, this mainly meant more and better aid from rich countries to address a wider variety of development challenges, combined with better policies and a focus on these issues in poor countries. The MDGs certainly succeeded in reversing the decline in aid flows and made a particular contribution in accelerating action on key development challenges in the health and education field. Particularly in the health field, they contributed to a much greater focus in channeling resources to tackle AIDS, other intractable diseases such as malaria and tuberculosis, and greater attention to comprehensive approaches to tackle infant, child, and maternal mortality. In education, they succeeded in accelerating progress in boosting enrolment rates.

At the same time, there had been a number of problems and shortcomings:

a) When interpreted as country-specific goals, the MDGs were highly unrealistic and unfair to the world's poorest countries; when properly measuring achievements, it is precisely these countries that have made the most progress and they

are now erroneously singled out as 'failing' to meet the MDGs.

- b) The goals were most successful at the global level, for donors, and the UN system. As they were devoid of country-specific realism and did not link to country-specific goals and indicators, they were much less successful in framing a development agenda at the country level.
- c) Some of the goals and targets were meaningless as the data to measure baseline or progress was (and often still is) not available. Examples include the maternal mortality goal, some of the environmental sustainability targets, and many of the partnership targets.
- d) The goals were at their best when seen as shared commitments to overcome poverty in its multiple manifestations, staying explicitly silent on the precise mechanisms to overcome multidimensional poverty. They were at their worst when interpreted as blueprints for immediate action or as ways to generate a cost estimate for overcoming global poverty.
- e) Every step in the process of defining and revising the MDGs (from the International Development Goals and the Millennium Declaration in 2000 to the Millennium Development Goals in 2003 to the revised MDGs in 2005) was driven too much by special pleading of UN agencies and other global players to promote their agendas which made the MDGs increasingly complex, less useful, and in parts downright bizarre.

A successor framework should heed these successes and failures of the previous system. At the same time, it must recognize the dramatically changed international environment where aid from traditional DAC donors is much less relevant, most of the world's poor live in middle-income countries that do not require financial assistance, and where these middle-income countries are now powerful players on the global arena that need to play an important role in a successor process. Despite this, I argue that a follow-up process remains desirable that should reflect a shared global commitment to eradicate absolute

poverty (in its multidimensional manifestations).

A Proposal for a new Set of Goals

The discussion above suggests that a continuation of the current system will not work and, given the flaws of the details of the current MDGs, is not desirable. At the same time, a broad global commitment on further reducing the most egregious forms of multidimensional deprivation across the world remains as valuable as ever. I propose a follow-up set of goals that should be simple, measurable, transparent, and focus on the well-being outcomes of deprived individuals.

Based on these criteria, I would propose to focus on a new MDG system to be based on a shared commitment to reduce deprivation of people in five dimensions:

- Income poverty, measured using national income poverty statistics (rather than the current "dollar-a-day" approach) where poverty lines are calculated using a consistent and comparable methodology;
- hunger, using childhood stunting rates;
- education, using schooling completion rates and test scores;
- mortality, using under-five mortality rates;
- and sustainability, using adjusted net savings and consumption-based greenhouse gas emissions per capita as the relevant indicators.

As I emphasized above, this does of course not mean that other issues are unimportant (such as human rights, decent work, political freedoms, loss of biodiversity, etc.) but that it will not be useful to devise goals and targets for essentially unquantifiable concepts which additionally do not command consensus across the world. This also largely applies to the sustainable development goals which are unlikely to generate goals that meet the criteria above.

These overarching global commitments should then translate into country-specific targets in these five dimensions. These country-specific targets should reflect global aspirations but also importantly reflect national plans and targets and also be based on realistic assessments of what can be achieved, based on the assessment methods suggested below. For each goal, there should be an accompanying effort with clear commitments of all parties to generate and improve the

measurement of well-being in that dimension and to rigorously evaluate policies that address these goals. Each goal should be accompanied by a discussion of the shared commitments of different players (the countries where the poor live, donors, the world community, and global civil society), although these cannot be included quantitatively. A sixth goal should summarize these commitments and work towards clear targets for all parties. Table 1 summarizes the proposed goals and the associated measurement issues and shared commitments.

Process Issues

Currently many processes are going on to make proposals for a post-2015 MDG system. Most donors are beginning to make proposals, academics and activists are actively debating and at the UN (with a recent report from a UN task team outlining an overall vision and the next steps), a high-level process is underway that is guided by a High-Level Panel co-chaired by Liberia's President Ellen Johnson Sirleaf, British Prime Minister David Cameron and Indonesia's President Susilo Bambang Yudhoyono with working groups within the UN supporting the process. While this high-level group is an important and critical step to advance the process of developing a post-2015 development agenda, there are two serious challenges that will need to be considered:

- a) When designing the new set of goals, active participation and buy-in from emerging countries (including China, India, Brazil, Indonesia, etc.) in the process is critical as these countries still are home to a large share of the world's deprived, are important donors themselves, are currently outside the DAC donor coordination system, and are key global players.
- b) While the UN system must own and drive the process, it must resist the temptation to saddle the process with pushing for an all-encompassing set of goals and targets that would reflect the interests of each and every UN agency.

Conclusion

It took about 10 years, several major UN conferences, and a confluence of fortuitous circumstances to produce the first set of Millennium Development Goals and helped focus the global development agenda. We are now two years away from trying to come up with a credible follow-up process. In this note I

have suggested that the most useful way forward is to devise a much reduced set of goals that command broad consensus, are quantifiable, set in motion important advances in the measurement of development, and cover key aspects of the most egregious deprivations still haunting the planet. If emerging economies can be credibly brought on board, I believe that pursuing this agenda is politically feasible and would ensure that the development agenda in coming decades would continue to be shaped by a shared global vision to eliminate the most egregious forms of deprivations. ■

Literature

Stephan Klasen (2012), "Policy Note: MDGs post-2015: What do to?", CRC-PEG Discussion Papers, No. 123. <http://www.uni-goettingen.de/de/67061.html>

Table 1: Proposed MDG goals system post-2015

Goal	Indicator	Target	Measurement issue
<i>Substantive Goals</i>			
Reduce absolute income poverty	National income poverty headcounts	Country-specific targets based on feasible paths	Apply consistent method to national income poverty measurement
Reduce chronic hunger	Childhood stunting rates	Country-specific targets based on feasible paths	Extend nutrition monitoring to more countries and more time periods
Promote education	Schooling completion rates	Country-specific targets based on feasible paths	Commit to global measurement of educational quality via regular and comparable achievement tests
Reduce mortality and morbidity	Under-five mortality rate	Country-specific targets based on feasible paths	Support global birth and death registration and monitoring
Achieve sustainable development and mitigate climate change	Adjusted net savings (using domestic savings), globally equal consumption-based GHG emissions/capita consistent with 2 degree goal	Adjusted net savings rate to exceed population growth (possibly with country-specific adjustment paths), country-specific paths based on contraction and convergence scenarios of IPCC	Extent measurement of depreciation of natural capital, improve measurement of consumption-based emissions
<i>Process goals</i>			
Assist developing countries through financial and technical assistance and a conducive policy environment to meet 6 goals	Aid flows, provision of global public goods, preferential trading system, global governance reforms (including UN reforms), addressing measurement challenges for 6 goals, peer-reviewed transparent aid program owned by countries, robust impact evaluations, analytical support on transmission mechanisms	Country-specific targets for old and new donors to be negotiated	