

THE IMPACT AND DESIGN OF THE MDGS: SOME REFLECTIONS

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Introduction

There can be no doubt that the MDGs have become highly influential at least at the level of international discourse about development. Significant resources are allocated to tracking them; the UN leads the production of annual reports about them, convenes regular Summit Sessions about them, and sponsors an ongoing 'Millennium Campaign'; the World Bank and the IMF put together an annual 'Global Monitoring Report' about them; and no G8 summit is complete without some reference to them. The year 2010 will see a special summit session of the UN General Assembly to review progress, and there will be much discussion of a 'big push' to secure the maximum progress on the various Goals by 2015.

How have the MDGs affected policy?

Most individual donor governments (and the EU collectively) have made specific and regular use of the MDGs in domestic dialogue about the purpose and effectiveness of development spending. Most international agencies have also paid much attention to progress or the lack of it against the MDGs, particularly where the agency has a mandate closely relevant to one or more MDGs. The Global Fund for AIDS, TB and Malaria is a particularly clear example of a funding agency where the MDGs (specifically MDGs 4, 5 and 6) are central to the agency's DNA. A study of 21 DAC members by Sakiko Fukuda-Parr (2008) however points out that donors' policy documents typically pay considerable attention to issues not explicitly covered in the MDGs, notably in the areas of promoting peace, security and human rights. These are aspects covered by the Millennium Declaration, but not specifically addressed by the MDGs as such. There is still however a solid core of coherence between donor policy statements and the MDGs.

As to whether the existence of the MDGs has affected resource allocation by donors, for the reasons given above it is not possible to give an unambiguous answer. Undoubtedly the proportion of aid going to the productive sector (not directly covered by the MDGs) has fallen, and the proportion to social sectors (well-covered by the MDGs) has risen.

Perhaps the most far-reaching and positive influence of the MDGs on donors – though one hard to measure - has been in strengthening the view that if support for aid is to be sustained measurable progress must be shown in areas that the public in donor countries view as desirable. This shift in perception is by no means universal, and knowledge of the MDGs in donor countries is still not widespread, but it has arguably made it harder for governments to 'sell' development aid that does not contribute to real development progress.

Sakiko Fukuda Parr's study also examined 22 Poverty Reduction Strategies, covering 17 LDCs, two other low income countries and three lower middle income countries. She found that almost all stated a commitment to the MDGs, but that the focus was quite selective. In some respects, this mirrored the approach of the donors (eg serious attention to social sector spending, but little attention to hunger and nutrition, decent work, and technology transfer), and in others it differed significantly (a greater focus on economic growth, little attention to democracy, freedom of the media or human rights).

UNDP conducted its own survey of progress against the MDGs in 30 countries in 2009. This demonstrated the wide variety of situations, some countries (generally the better off, such as Bahrain) making virtually no use of the MDGs as a way of measuring or incentivising progress, but a large number having integrated the MDGs (or often a locally-adapted version) into their own development planning.

Indeed, the ‘customisation’ of the MDGs is a notable feature brought out by the study. Of the 30 countries, ten had added or modified Goals. Thus for example Albania, Iraq and Mongolia had added a Goal on good governance and/or fighting corruption; Armenia, Cambodia, Kyrgyzstan and Tajikistan had included eight or nine years education for all children as modification of Goal 2; and Colombia and Mongolia had added relevant national infectious diseases to Goal 6. Fifteen countries had added, expanded or modified targets, and no fewer than 25 had added, expanded or modified indicators, for example to reflect national poverty lines. Such steps imply at least a measure of local ownership of the MDGs among a wide variety of countries.

What lessons might be drawn?

The Millennium Development Goals appear to have been more influential than most other attempts at international target-setting in the field of development, at least at the level of international discourse. Post-2015, any similar indicator set should address issues such as rights, inequality and connectivity – and maybe wider global public goods. Indicator sets such as the MDGs should not be oversold as some sort of magic bullet to accelerate the achievement of desirable targets. All such achievements require hard work, commitment and financial and human resources. But they can affect the way that people think, and over time that influence may well affect how people and institutions behave.

References

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