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The Wheel of Development: the Millennium Development Goals as a communication and development tool

DORINE E VAN NORREN

ABSTRACT Despite the shortcomings of the Millennium Development Goals as a development tool, they have proven to be an important communication tool that is worth preserving after 2015. Inclusion of important themes of the Millennium Declaration and elements of the capability theory is essential in a post-2015 system, as well as putting human rights and gender principles at its core. Process orientation rather than end goals could lead to ‘Millennium Development Actions’ with ‘Progress Signs’, which, represented in a circular symbol, form a ‘wheel of development’, complemented by a Wheel of Governance.

The Millennium Development Goals (MDGs) are the elaborated synthesis of goals agreed at international conferences in the 1990s.¹ The Organisation for Economic Cooperation and Development (OECD) Development Assistance Committee was first in synthesising the goals agreed at the various world summits and attempting to formulate development goals (‘Shaping the 21st Century: the contribution of development cooperation’, 1996). In 2000 the leaders of the IMF, OECD, UN and World Bank embraced these goals in an unprecedented display of unity (‘A better world for all: progress towards the International Development Goals’). On 8 September 2000, the international community adopted the Millennium Declaration.² This led a year later to the formulation of eight Millennium Goals (UN Secretary-General’s report, ‘Roadmap towards the implementation of the Millennium Declaration’), approved by the UN General Assembly. At the world summits in 2005 and 2010 the intention to achieve the goals in 2015 was reiterated and some new issues were put on the table. However the Millennium Declaration remained the cornerstone of strategic direction. Mid-2011 the debate started concerning what a post-2015 agenda should include, with the UN Secretary General issuing its report in July.³

This article examines the merits of the MDGs as communication tool as against its merits as development tool. It is a follow-up of the report ‘The

Dorine E van Norren is in the Advisory Council on International Affairs, Ministry of Foreign Affairs, P.O. Box 20061, 2500 EB The Hague, The Netherlands

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development agenda post-2015: the Millennium Development Goals in perspective' of the Netherlands Advisory Council on International Affairs.⁴

Criticism

The literature claims four schools of thought regarding the MDGs. Optimists (or perhaps one should say 'architects') see the goals as a vehicle for transforming the human condition (including Jeffrey Sachs, leader of the Millennium Project, Vandemoortele and Pronk⁵); strategic realists see the MDGs as essential to achieving and preserving political commitment (Fukuda-Parr and Jolly); sceptics find the MDGs well-intentioned but badly thought out (such as Clemens and Easterly); radical critics see the MDGs as a diversionary manoeuvre to draw attention away from the 'real' issues of growing global inequality and gender disparity (including Antrobus, Eyben, Saith,⁶ Pogge and Ziai⁷).⁸ UNCTAD describes the fundamental problem of the MDGs as 'the lack of a more inclusive strategy of economic development'.⁹ Of course, this division is rudimentary; the position of 'optimists' may be explained by their executive responsibility for the design and/or implementation of MDG policy and not *per se* by a fundamental disagreement on the analysis of development processes. The position of some, such as Vandemoortele, is evolving over time.

The final report by the UN Secretary-General in 2010 does not address the criticism on the effectiveness of the MDGs in general, and does not question the concept as such. The report states that the goals are achievable and that the shortcomings in progress can be fully explained by a lack of political will, insufficient funds, a lack of focus and sense of responsibility, and insufficient interest in sustainable development.¹⁰ The report does, however, discuss themes not specifically mentioned in the MDGs, including violence against women, poverty among indigenous peoples, refugees, inequality, equitable growth, peace and security, agricultural production, good governance and human rights, climate, and the role of civil society organisations and the private sector. The UN does seem to have taken steps in the direction of an MDG-plus agenda by incorporating themes in the report that are not mentioned explicitly in the goals.

Besides these fundamental criticisms of the MDGs, a number of general objections can be made to results-based management: goals that focus on quantity do not measure quality and can undermine it. At the same time, narrowly defined indicators can, for example, encourage governments to send people to school without making sure there are good teachers or teaching materials, purely to achieve the MDG concerned. This is an unintended but nevertheless possible outcome of results-based management, leaving it open to abuse. Nor do the indicators take account of inequality, which is increasing worldwide both within and between countries. It is possible, for example, to achieve MDG 1 by ignoring the poorest and helping people who live just below the poverty line. China can achieve MDG 1 for the whole of Asia on its own, while other Asian countries still have large numbers of people living in poverty. What is more, short-term planning to achieve the

goals can undermine their sustainability. Focusing on the goals ignores the extent to which they are interconnected, which was precisely the major achievement of the world summits.

Conserve the good

However, it is questionable if all of this criticism of the MDGs is fair. The original 'group de réflexion' of the OECD wanted to come up with something that would appeal to politicians (in donor countries), would be understood by OECD publics and would contain a vision for the future that would mobilise action. They wanted to construct a convincing story about aid, which would enrol the support of a range of different actors.¹¹ As Poku and Whitman put it, 'neither the MDGs nor any other development framework can avoid contention, competing interests, defections and occasional failure'.¹² The issue of the lack of political will to change current power relations cannot be put on the plate of the MDGs; rather, current international trends and crises will probably lead to a change in these relations and in global governance.

In the meantime, it is still important to keep all, including emerging, economies focused on a common development agenda, as the strategic realists see it. The MDGs represent an important international consensus. It is also a hard-won focus of the development debate that is multidimensional, even if that focus is sometimes haphazardly implemented and Poverty Reduction Strategy Papers with a focus on economic growth¹³ still dominate. Abolishing the MDGs and the ambitious development agenda that goes with them, while this agenda will mostly likely not be reached in 2015, portrays the image of skipping responsibility. Lastly, developing countries (and their regional institutions) have invested in national MDG reporting systems, including indicators that can be used to build upon. The broader public, including politicians in donor countries, has become used to the symbolism of the MDGs. In order to preserve what has been achieved so far, a post-2015 system should therefore not significantly change in its outlook to the broader public. Rather it should adjust its content to accommodate some of the more radical criticism. At the same time, one should realise that differences about how to achieve development will always exist, which is a healthy debate that cannot be captured in a simple MDG model. The MDGs should be kept as a *communication tool*, but their content modified as a *development tool*.

Adjust the bad

It is important to maintain the indicators and benchmarks agreed so far as baseline measurements are now available. However, one needs to evaluate whether these indicators are fair in relation to the conclusions that are derived from it. Serious criticism has been levelled at the 'dollar-a-day', the poverty line and the method used by the World Bank to update it. Pogge's analysis shows that the poverty criterion has been successively adjusted downwards. The one-dollar criterion from 1985 was equal to \$1.85 in 2005

purchasing power parity. This results in an 'absurdly low' figure that does not cover even a quarter of the food requirement.¹⁴ Updating the poverty criterion also has the effect of making the change measured in global poverty appear more positive than it is in reality: the lower the poverty line, the better the result. Pogge shows that, if the poverty line is set at \$2.50, there was no improvement at all between 1981 and 2005.¹⁵

To address the criticism of the MDGs that completion of a goal is an unfair method of measurement,¹⁶ measuring progress (and whether trends have accelerated) is a better method. MDGs are primarily formulated in terms of the gap between the current and target situations, instead of considering the starting position.

Disaggregating data to make inequality and the positions of various disadvantaged groups visible¹⁷ is another way of building on the current system and meeting radical criticism. A difficulty persists with how to link national policies to global processes; focusing less on goals and more on trends may mitigate this.

What to do with the ugly?¹⁸

If the MDGs were devised to distract attention from the structural problems in this world, as radical critics see it, then my answer would be that the public is not that easily fooled; their world perception is not ruled by the MDGs. It is obvious that there is still starvation and underdevelopment in the world. Do we focus on the half-empty or the half-full glass? The reversal of orthodox policies on economic growth and introduction of a multidimensional focus on poverty does not happen overnight.

Richard Jolly argues that it is better to look not at whether goals have been achieved, but at how they have functioned as a catalyst for change and awareness-raising, and why some countries have not achieved them (because of both internal and external factors, such as global crises).¹⁹ This ties in with taking a critical view of the result-based management method and not taking a too narrow view on accountability and transparency. Success in development is not determined by these two only;²⁰ in other words, accountability does not ensure success and may at times curb creativity.

Towards a better model

This article will focus on how the communication tool can be improved, taking into account some of the suggestions made to improve the MDGs as development tool.

The hierarchy of interventions

The current MDGs are numbered 1–8, as summarised in Figure 1. Numbering always involves a hierarchy, even when this is unintended. Some people argue that MDG 8, dealing with trade, debt relief and aid, is the most important of all MDGs, without which progress in development cannot be reached. Global



FIGURE 1. The Millennium Development Goals.

power relations are at the core of this MDG. In fact, developing countries did not sign up to the MDGs until this last goal was added, and accused developed countries of putting the burden onto them. Other people put the onus more on developing countries themselves to achieve progress and prefer MDG 1, on income poverty, as a starting point. It was indeed the OECD, the rich and industrialised countries, who came up with the forerunner of the MDGs and the United Nations Development Program who subsequently formulated MDG 1–7. Most agree, however, that the issues of development are interrelated; hence the development of an MDG model in which the social and economic dimensions of poverty are expressed. Stressing the multi-dimensional nature of development was the strongest asset of the MDGs, after decades of structural adjustment and focus on economic growth. Compartmentalising the various dimensions in different separate goals, however, poses the danger of obscuring how progress in one issue really depends on progress in other areas.

In order to show the interrelation of all issues involved and the way several components of development contribute to each other, one can represent the MDGs in a circle. The MDGs are especially strong in communicating a complex development issue to a broad audience, but their visualisation so far does not show their interrelation.

Focus on action or strategy instead of goals

A post-2015 system should not be formulated in terms of goals but rather in terms of actions or processes. The result-based management method of the MDGs entails the danger of quantity before quality and an ‘ends justifies the means’ approach. I have therefore provisionally termed them Millennium Development Actions (MDA), so as to preserve the generally known concept of MDGs, but address some of the criticisms levelled against it. Setting new target dates does not seem useful when one is focused on strategies, indicators and reviews based on results. Of course, other terms could be used, such as ‘Global Community Goods’, if one wants to tie in with the internationally still controversial concept of Global Public Goods or with Global Commons theory.

Broadening of the agenda

The MDG agenda needs broadening on the one hand and a condensing of certain issues, especially in the area of health, on the other. Extra dimensions are derived from theories in human development or human ‘capabilities’ that constitute the broader idea of what development *is*. Different theories of wellbeing include objective and subjective wellbeing as well as future wellbeing (sustainability). Taking the objective wellbeing theories and Millennium Declaration into account, one can add to the current MDGs clusters on peace and security and institution building, as well as the importance of principles of human rights and gender balance in all areas. As many have argued, the agenda also needs broadening with some missing themes such as food security, infrastructure, new technology, climate and demography, and lastly with missing target groups.²¹ If one wants to hold onto the MDG symbolism as a communication tool, these could be brought under existing clusters. The rotated MDGs with extra clusters are represented in Figure 2 in the form of a ‘wheel of development’ that expresses interconnectedness.

The gender dimension is represented by the Chinese yin-yang symbol, which also symbolises the equality of male and female values. To make the ‘wheel of development’ turn, male and female values need to be on an equal footing. Male values include providing security and economic productivity, and female values are concerned with care and redistribution; both need sufficient attention in the post-2015 system. Gender thus concerns not only equal opportunities for men and women and gender statistics in all clusters, but also a representation in the clusters themselves of both feminine and masculine values.

THE WHEEL OF DEVELOPMENT



FIGURE 2. Rotated Millennium Development Actions.

The actions are formulated in verbs, close to the current wording and symbolism, but with the addition of two new clusters: produce and share, educate and alphabetise, equalise, care and cure, protect, build institutions, act responsibly, embrace in global partnership. This group of activities does (more) justice to the still relevant Millennium Declaration and the freedoms of Sen, albeit that political freedoms remain somewhat under-represented.

Unified development agenda

The wholeness of development can be expressed by turning the chart into a pie. The pie is not complete without any of the pieces, signifying a unified development agenda (Figure 3). It expresses the interconnectedness of themes, but also of countries and peoples. The wheel of development is the vehicle through which development is reached and it possesses the innate qualities of what ‘development’ is. Development needs all of these. It also signifies that issues are not new; rather, we tend to recycle the same issues, choosing different priorities over the years. After all, the development decades of the UN (1970 International Development Strategy) tabled similar issues to the Millennium declaration.²²

A unified development agenda also ties in with the notion of Global Public Goods (GPGs)—which is currently most strongly reflected in MDG 8—and linking the MDGs with GPGs: namely, considering the MDGs as GPGs, goods



FIGURE 3. Wheel of Development showing Millennium Development Actions.

that affect everyone and from which no-one *may* be excluded.²³ The term Global Community Goods may reflect this better than Millennium Development Goal/Action (in order to avoid the confusion about the word ‘public’, which to many denotes provided by the state). Some have argued for the term ‘public’ in GPG to mean publicness of decision-making, distribution of benefits and consumption, which is more adequately reflected in the term ‘community’.²⁴ Others prefer the term ‘global commons’. Strictly speaking, this term is derived from the common resource pool management theory (‘public commons’) of Eleanor Östrom and serves more as an example of private (self) governance as a management method, next to private sector and government. Its rules are, however, important governing principles.²⁵ Owing to the lack of clarity of these terms, the more neutral ‘millennium development action’ has been chosen.

Governance and needs assessments

As many have argued, there is a need to take into account current global trends and crises as well as the financing of development and actors in

THE WHEEL OF DEVELOPMENT

TABLE 1. For more background to themes in this table see AIV Report number 74 (note 4)

Millennium Development actions	Global Progress Signs (x progression in period y) Governing principles: equality, non-discrimination, accountability, participation, gender balance, and principles of Östrom	Needs assessment, financing tools	Actors in governance international organisations, governments, parliaments, the private sector, trade unions and non-governmental organisations
MDA 1: Produce and Share	Economy, poverty, food security, employment, wellbeing		
MDA 2: Educate and Alphabetise	Primary, secondary education and adult literacy		
MDA 3: Equalise	Gender and disenfranchised groups		
MDA 4: Care and Cure	Mother and child care, combatting diseases		
MDA 5: Protect	Peace and security		
MDA 6: Build Institutions	Institutional strength, transparency		
MDA 7: Act Responsibly	Environment, climate, demography		
MDA 8: Embrace in Global Partnership	Global governance, trade, debt, technology, infrastructure, ICT, knowledge		

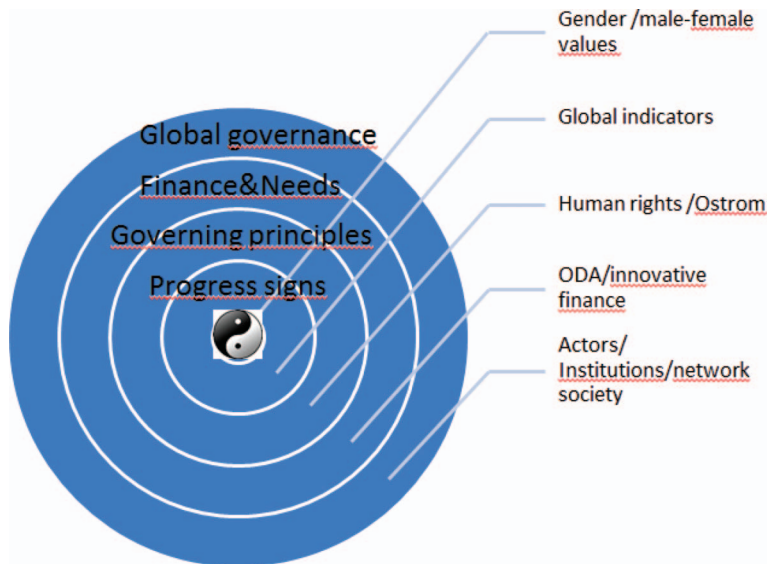


FIGURE 4. Wheel of Governance.

governance. This can be represented in a chart that is turned into a second 'wheel of development', The Wheel of Governance (see Table 1 and Figure 4). To address the measurement issue, the term 'global progress signs' instead of indicators is used in Table 1. Good Progress Indexes in relation to the MDGs have already been designed, for example by the Center for Global Development.²⁶ Measuring forms the inner core of governance, and thus in the inner circle, governing principles of human rights are part of the measuring and accountability. Needs assessments and (innovative) ways of financing are the tools with which to achieve progress. Finally, in each new goal or cluster, it would be necessary to describe action to be taken by donor countries, recipient countries and other actors, and to specify the roles and responsibilities of the various actors (international organisations, governments, parliaments, the private sector, trade unions and non-governmental organisations).

Concluding remarks

In the debate about the MDGs, optimist and strategic realists battle with sceptics and radical critics on whether the MDGs should be preserved. This article argues in favour of gradual change. Erasing what has come before is dangerous, as one may be left with less than the consensus that has been achieved now (issues such as gender equality are not obvious to all). It may also undermine credibility. The effectiveness of the MDGs as a communication tool should not be underestimated by those who primarily focus on it as a development tool. The indicators of the MDGs still have value and could be used in a different way (to measure progress and inequality, for example). Missing themes can be incorporated; clusters can be reshaped; interconnect-edness can be made more visible; and the goal orientation can be attenuated by a strategy orientation. What cannot be resolved by the post-2015 system, nor by any other model, is the reshaping of global power relations. It can, however, attempt to make them visible. Some argue that community is a non-antagonistic word that conceals power relations; the global public good discussion, however, shows us the increasing awareness of the interconnect-edness of people, countries and development. To go back to speaking of 'here and there', and 'us and them' underscores the importance of global community thinking.

Shaping a new post-2015 system will not be easy, given the number of issues that are on the table. The above visual model tries to make the complex interplay of issues easier to grasp for a large audience. A post-2015 system in the form of a 'wheel of development' will clearly demonstrate the integration of development dimensions and the necessity of a holistic approach. Progress or movement can only be reached when the wheel is whole. It needs to embrace the objective and subjective criteria of wellbeing, taking into account the future wellbeing of people (sustainability) and human rights and gender perspectives.

The first wheel of development includes the current MDG themes, with the addition of peace and security and effective state governance. The wheel turns

around the axis of the equal relation between male and female and masculine and feminine values. Its spokes are essential themes that constitute development. Its rim signifies the necessity of a holistic approach. The second wheel of development, the Wheel of Governance, visualises the necessity of interplay of measuring progress in these areas with the governing principles of participation, non-discrimination, accountability and (gender) equality, as well as needs assessments, finance tools and global governance. This way the second wheel is the driving force of the first. Of course, other models and different emphases are thinkable. Nevertheless, a picture is worth a thousand words. This is a symbol to mobilise and communicate an analytic view of what development entails.

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Notes

- 1 For a full overview, see M Loewe, 'The Millennium Development Goals: chances and risks', German Development Institute, discussion paper 6/2008, Bonn 2008, p 3.
- 2 The Declaration is clearly divided into eight chapters: (1) Values and principles; (2) Peace, security and disarmament; (3) Development and poverty eradication; (4) Protecting our common environment; (5) Human rights, democracy and good governance; (6) Protecting the vulnerable; (7) Meeting the special needs of Africa; and (8) Strengthening the United Nations.
- 3 UN General Assembly, 'Accelerating progress towards the Millennium Development Goals: options for sustained and inclusive growth and issues for advancing the United Nations development agenda beyond 2015', A/66/126, New York, 11 July 2011.
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- 8 D Hulme, 'The Millennium Development Goals (MDGs): a short history of the world's biggest promise', BWPI Working Paper 100, September 2009, p 4 (with additions as annotated).
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- 15 *Idem*, p 62 and Table 3.2.
- 16 W Easterly, 'How the MDGs are unfair to Africa', Brookings Global Economy and Development, Working Paper 14, Washington, November 2007 and S Fukuda-Parr and J Greenstein, 'How should

- MDG implementation be measured: faster progress or meeting targets?', International Policy Center for Inclusive growth, Working Papers 63, May 2010.
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 - 18 The term good, bad and ugly was introduced by J Vandemoortele, 'If not the Millennium Development Goals, then what?', *Third World Quarterly*, 32(1), 2011, pp 9–25.
 - 19 R Jolly, 'Global goals: the UN experience', Background Paper, Human Development Report, 2003.
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 - 21 Advisory Council for International Affairs, 'The post 2015 development agenda, the Millennium Development Goals in perspective', report no 74, The Hague, April 2011.
 - 22 A Ziai, 'The Millennium Development Goals: back to the future?', *Third World Quarterly*, 32(1), 2011, pp 27–43.
 - 23 This definition is controversial and derived from the Advisory Council for International Affairs, 'The post 2015 development agenda'.
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Notes on contributor

Dorine E van Norren is a Dutch diplomat who served in the Southern Africa desk, Sri Lanka, Turkey and North-America desk. She is currently seconded as the Executive Secretary to the Netherlands Advisory Council on International Affairs, Development Committee in The Hague. This is an independent advisory body to the Netherlands government: "<http://www.aiv-advice.nl>" She holds a master in international and Dutch law. This article is an expression of personal views.