

Reflecting on the MDGs and Making Sense of the Post-2015 Agenda

In the year 2000, world leaders adopted the Millennium Declaration. A commitment to a peaceful, prosperous, and just world, the declaration included a set of targets for development and poverty reduction to be reached by 2015. These came to be known as the Millennium Development Goals (MDGs).

Over the past decade, the MDGs have become a central reference point for aid and international cooperation, not only providing a compelling vision for international development, but also a set of quantitative benchmarks against which development progress can be measured. As the 2015 end date approaches, policy-makers have turned their attention to what will replace the MDGs. Preoccupation with the post-MDG agenda has led to a proliferation of analyses, discussions, and summits on what should come next.

This is the Executive Summary of a longer NSI Report, “Reflecting on the MDGs and Making Sense of the post-2015 Agenda”, published in May 2013. It highlights key findings and conclusions from the report, including lessons from the MDGs, and the processes, issues, architecture and emerging challenges that are framing and influencing the post-2015 agenda.

Lessons from the MDGs

The MDGs are a set of eight global development goals, 21 targets, and 60 indicators. They were designed as *global goals* with *global targets*. Much effort has been devoted to measuring progress against the MDGs and on the whole progress has been mixed. Some goals and targets, such as those focused on extreme poverty reduction, primary education, and HIV/AIDS, look set to be met by the 2015 deadline. Progress against others, such as maternal mortality and vulnerable employment, has been less impressive.

While the direct development impact of the MDGs is difficult to determine, they have been credited with shaping international development discourse and debates, generating popular awareness for ending poverty, and supporting increases in aid. Much attention has been devoted to identifying the strengths and limitations of the MDGs and, based on this analysis, lessons for the post-2015 framework.

These lessons include:

- Adopt a simple, clear, and time-bound framework that is compelling, easy to communicate, and measurable.
- Support an inclusive, accessible, and transparent process to develop the post-2015 framework that is bottom-up rather than donor-dominated and top-down.
- Select goals and targets that are ambitious yet reasonably achievable.
- Select targets and indicators that are clearly specified and underpinned by robust data, or targets and indicators where the opportunity exists to develop robust data.
- Adopt global goals that reflect global priorities but targets that can be tailored to national and sub-national contexts.
- Capture the distributional nature of progress (i.e., inequality) by tracking progress in a disaggregated way.
- Expect industrialized countries to take concrete, time-bound, and measurable action beyond aid.
- Prioritize and do not overburden the agenda.

Changing Global Context

The MDGs were conceived in an era of relative stability and strong growth, when global power was more concentrated and the development lexicon was largely focused on more and better aid from rich countries and better policies in poor ones. While many of the principles outlined in the Millennium Declaration remain relevant, it is clear that the context today is considerably different from that in which the MDGs were agreed. The geopolitical map is more complicated and fragmented today than it was in 2000. Stakeholders outside government, such as the private sector, philanthropic foundations, and citizens' movements, are more woven into global affairs. The front-and-centre issues in international development have changed. While aid remains a critical resource for many low- and middle-income countries, other sources of finance for development, including taxation, remittances, and investment, are of greater importance now than in 2000. Today many of the challenges that the world faces, including climate change, financial regulation, tax avoidance, and insecurity, require global solutions. But this is at a time when confidence in the multilateral system is waning. For the post-2015 framework to be a success, decision makers will need to take this changing context into account to ensure that the framework is fit-for-purpose not only in 2015 but also the decades beyond.

Post-2015: Process

The wheels for establishing the post-2015 framework are in motion. Two United Nations (UN) processes are running in parallel: the post-2015 development agenda, which is currently being informed by the High-Level Panel of Eminent Persons on the Post-2015 Development Agenda, and the Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs), which were agreed on in principle at Rio+20 and are being developed by an intergovernmental Open Working Group on the SDGs. The High-Level

Panel will present its report to the UN secretary-general on May 30, 2013. The Open Working Group is expected to submit a report to the UN General Assembly during its 68th session (September 2013 to September 2014).

Stakeholders have consistently expressed their desires that the post-2015 development agenda and the SDGs processes converge to establish just one set of global development goals.

In addition to these two processes, there is the UN System Task Team on the Post-2015 UN Development Agenda, which is mandated to coordinate, in consultation with all stakeholders, UN system-wide preparations for the post-2015 agenda. Beyond this, the UN Development Group has undertaken the most comprehensive global consultation ever undertaken by the UN. Given the success of the MDGs as a mobilizing and organizing framework for international development, many other stakeholders, including civil society, the research community, and the private sector, are engaging in substantial analysis, debate, and lobbying to influence the post-2015 framework in their favour.

Post-2015: Issues

Perhaps unsurprisingly, there is a broad range of issues that have been proposed as priorities for the post-2015 development agenda. Many of these reflect contextual shifts that have occurred since the MDGs were established in 2000.

There appears to be overall support for the post-2015 framework to have sustainable development at its heart, but there is no consensus yet on which priorities should receive the most attention. Some observers are calling for a framework that prioritizes “finishing the job” of the MDGs and “getting to zero”—effectively ending extreme poverty and basic deprivations. Others see the new framework as a chance to be more ambitious and an opportunity to not only focus on ending extreme poverty but also coordinating global action to manage pressing

transboundary challenges and global public goods.

A number of the issues that are gaining traction feature in the MDGs, such as health, education, poverty reduction, and gender equality. But a range of other issues are attracting attention, largely in response to analyses of the world's most pressing problems. These include environmental sustainability, inequality, growth, jobs, and governance, including governance in fragile and conflict-affected states.

Post-2015: Architecture

While there appears to be consensus that the post-2015 framework will retain the goals, targets, and indicators format of the MDGs, there will likely be some changes in the architecture that frames the goals. The MDGs were designed as global goals with global targets, where the “locus of change” was overwhelmingly expected to be in developing countries. It is likely that while the next set of global goals will retain a focus on ending extreme poverty and supporting sustainable development in developing countries, the “locus of change” will be broadened to track development progress in industrialized countries and/or expect more from industrialized countries in terms of domestic policy commitments to supporting global development and securing global public goods.

An approach to structuring the post-2015 framework that appears to be gaining considerable attention is having global goals that resonate universally, but tracking progress through targets at the national level. This approach would reflect collective global priorities while taking into account the different starting points and diverse needs of individual countries. It would also enable a more meaningful connection between global goals and domestic priorities, and make new targets more useful for national monitoring purposes.

Post-2015: Emerging Challenges

There is still considerable time before the next set of global goals will be agreed on by the UN General Assembly in September 2015. While much work has already been done to move the post-2015 agenda forward, a number of issues remain unresolved and will likely be subject to lengthy negotiations.

Moving from aid to sustainable development and managing global public goods

Many of the analyses of contemporary global challenges point to the need to do a better job at promoting sustainable development, tackling transboundary challenges, and managing global public goods through internationally coordinated collective action. This shift is hotly political, however. Least developed countries are concerned that the shift may result in less aid for them and more resources diverted to middle-income countries. Middle-income countries have expressed concern that they might be constrained in their choice of development pathway. Donors are uncomfortable with linking development cooperation, which has historically been grounded in the notion of solidarity, with sustainable development and the principle of common but differentiated responsibility. Further, while it may make sense in principle to move toward a framework that is more focused on sustainable development and securing global public goods, experience with MDG 8, which lacks specific targets for industrialized countries and where progress has been mixed, suggests that this may be difficult to achieve in practice.

Accepting a universal framework

There is much energy behind the idea of adopting a universal framework that tracks progress on contributions toward global goals in all countries. But the political feasibility of such a framework needs attention. Will industrialized countries commit to a universal framework, where their progress on sustainable development in their own countries and their

contributions to sustainable development globally are scrutinized internationally? And even if they do commit, will this result in action?

Enabling prioritization

A key challenge in negotiating the post-2015 framework will be balancing the need to prioritize the issues that should be captured by the goals with expectations that a broader and more complex range of issues will make up the framework. Given that the simple and limited nature of the MDGs has been hailed as one of their best attributes, the post-2015 framework should not be overburdened with too many goals and priorities.

Developing a framework that makes sense to a diverse range of stakeholders

The actors engaged in international development are more diverse than when the MDGs were established. Aid donors today are a more diverse set of countries, philanthropic foundations play a much larger financing role in development, and the private sector is considerably more engaged in global development issues, through initiatives such as the UN Global Compact. Emerging economies are playing a more assertive role in global politics and many developing countries have strong opportunities for growth. At the same time, there are countries that continue to face conflict and humanitarian crises. Decision makers will need to take this diversity of actors into account when developing the post-2015 framework. It will be important for this range of stakeholders to see how they can usefully contribute to the agenda.

Balancing measurement with norm setting

One of the strengths of the MDGs is that they are goals against which development progress can be measured. This feature will likely be retained in the post-2015 framework because there appears to be much interest in connecting aspirational goals with metrics that measure

development progress. But it will need to be balanced with the important norm-setting role that global goals can play, which can signal the collective development priorities of all countries. Balancing the role that global goals can play as norm setters, with demands for robust data and measurement, will likely be a difficult balance to strike.

Conclusion

If the MDGs are anything to go by, the post-2015 framework will have significant influence on global and national development priorities in the decades beyond 2015. But to be relevant and meaningful not only in 2015 but also the decades that follow, the framework will need to respond to the changing global context and numerous long-term challenges. It will also need to be structured in a way that will generate buy-in from a diverse range of countries and stakeholders.

The post-2015 framework presents a major opportunity to mobilize the world around a set of global goals that have the potential to catalyze real action on development priorities that can no longer go ignored. The process of developing and agreeing on goals is consuming a lot of time, energy, and money, and critics are questioning its relevance in the context of fiscal austerity and waning faith in multilateralism. But this is a process that should not be taken lightly. Based on the experience with the MDGs, the framework will likely play an important role in framing national and global policy and decision making for decades to come. Doing our best to get it right is not only an opportunity, but this generation's responsibility.

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