

# **Advancing the global development agenda post-2015: some practical suggestions<sup>1</sup>**

Jan Vandemoortele

Co-architect of the MDGs  
Formerly with UNICEF and UNDP  
Now independent researcher, writer and lecturer

Bruges, Belgium  
April 2012

---

<sup>1</sup> Report prepared for the UN Department of Economic and Social Affairs. An earlier version was presented at the UN Experts Group meeting held in New York from 27-29 February 2012. I am grateful to Diana Alarcon and Robert Vos for their suggestions.

## Table of Contents

1. Introduction .....	2
2. Conceptual value of global targets.....	3
3. A plurality of options and scenarios .....	7
4. UN leadership.....	8
5. Four tasks for the UN.....	9
6. Design options.....	14
7. A nine-point agenda.....	15
8. Conclusion and practical suggestions.....	21
References.....	27

### Summary

*Most stakeholders want a global agenda post-2015. The question is who should develop it and what should its architecture look like. The main proposition of this paper is to define the process first and discuss contents later. One single process must be put in place and the UN must lead it. The process that was followed for creating the MDGs should not be repeated. Instead of experts and technocrats playing a central role, the new agenda should be formulated through a participatory, inclusive and bottom-up process. The two essential ingredients for success at this stage are time and leadership. The paper offers some practical suggestions for the formulation of the successor arrangement to the MDGs. It argues that change must be combined with a degree of continuity. As curator of its MDG-heritage, the UN will have to undertake four major tasks: (a) convene national reviews and debates; (b) promote participatory consultations; (c) aggregate outcomes; and (d) serve as gatekeeper. The redesign of the global agenda will require a discussion on the following points: (i) time horizon; (ii) structure; (iii) new targets; (iv) interim targets; (v) ambition; (vi) benchmarking; (vii) inequalities; (viii) cross-cutting issues and (ix) global custodian. Success will depend on the clarity, conciseness and measurability of the agenda. Global targets must always be seen as servants, never as masters. The role of the Panel of Eminent Persons and a UN Task Team will be to encourage all partners and stakeholders to be creative, inclusive and disciplined in the design of a global agenda that is fit for purpose. UN agencies, multilateral organisations, bilateral donors, global NGOs and think-tanks are strongly advised to look at the ‘big picture’ first, before ‘selling’ their particular agenda. If not, the process is likely to result in an agenda that will be unfocused, unending and unattractive.*

*“If you want to go fast, you go alone.  
If you want to go far, you go together.”*  
African proverb

*“Perfection is reached, not when there is nothing more to add,  
but when there is nothing left to take away.”*  
Antoine de Saint-Exupéry

*“We seek to confirm, not to question, our ideas.”*  
Thomas Kida

## 1. Introduction

In 2001 a group of mostly UN experts selected 18 targets from the Millennium Declaration, grouped them in eight goals, and identified 48 indicators to monitor global progress (Vandemoortele 2011a). The purpose was to rescue the Millennium Declaration from oblivion. That process should not be repeated; the formulation of the post-2015 agenda must follow a different approach.

Throughout the 1990s, world summits and international conferences were held regarding specific aspects of development – e.g. education, children, the environment, population, women, food security, human settlements, etc. Each concluded with a declaration that contained a number of specific or sectoral targets. The declarations captured the attention for some time before gradually receding into oblivion. This occurred again after the Millennium Summit of September 2000. The Millennium Declaration (UN 2000) was quoted in countless speeches, reports and articles for several months. But after a while the attention started to fade. It was then that the idea arose to lift selected targets *verbatim* from the Declaration and to place them into a free-standing list in order to keep them in the limelight for a longer period. In this sense, the MDGs have been quite successful.<sup>2</sup>

The objective of the MDGs was not to spell out a global agenda for human development; although that they have been gradually interpreted as such. This time around, it is widely expected that the post-MDG framework should express an international development agenda fit for the world of today; a world that is not only different from the one that existed at the start of the millennium but one that has learnt lessons from the MDG framework. Thus, the purpose of formulating the post-2015 agenda is quite different from the original one.

A post-2015 agenda that will emerge from a participatory, inclusive and bottom-up process will be quite different from one that will be defined by a group of experts and technocrats. The premise is that the former is preferable, albeit more challenging. Before deciding on the post-MDG agenda, world leaders would benefit from listening to a wider

---

<sup>2</sup> Success tends to have many parents. It is not surprising, therefore, that several players claim parenthood of the MDGs. Malloch Brown, for example, who was the Administrator of the UN Development Programme at the time, claims “I and several of [Kofi Annan’s] staff literally went into the proverbial windowless committee room and wrote the MDGs” (quoted in ‘Beyond 2015’, 2011).

range of stakeholders than is usually the case. The voice of the people must be heard to avoid that the post-2015 framework becomes overly technocratic and rather donor-centric.

The main proposition of this paper is that the architecture of the new agenda will be shaped, in large part, by the process by which it will be formulated. Therefore, the process must be defined first; contents should be discussed later. The paper offers some practical suggestions for the formulation of the successor arrangement to the MDGs. Furthermore, the paper emphasises that success will depend on the clarity, conciseness and measurability of the post-2015 agenda. The two essential ingredients for success are time and leadership.

## 2. Conceptual value of global targets

Before addressing how to replace the MDGs, it is fitting to reflect upon the conceptual value of global targets. While some question their validity and speak of ‘flawed targetism’ most actors agree that the MDGs represent a watershed and see them as “a good thing” (Pollard *et al.* 2011). The large majority of the 100 civil society organisations that were surveyed in developing countries wants “some kind of overarching, internationally agreed framework for development after 2015” (*ibid*). UNECA (2012) conducted a survey of 112 stakeholders (representatives from government, civil society organizations, research institutions and academia) in 32 African countries. The overwhelming majority agrees that the MDGs are “important development priorities for their countries” and that they “should feature in the post-2015 agenda”.

Global targets help focus the attention on human development and human rights, which are areas of universal concern that apply to all countries – not just the poorest ones. They are meant to stimulate efforts to improve human wellbeing through inter-sectoral and interdisciplinary work that extends beyond income-poverty.<sup>3</sup> Since all development is endogenous – and never led by international resource transfers – global targets mean more than the mobilisation of official development assistance. They encourage all nations to accelerate progress, yet their applicability can only be judged within the country-specific context, including the initial conditions. Global targets that have made a difference in the past share the following characteristics: engaging, clear, few in number, ambitious yet feasible, and measurable.

Over time, however, the MDGs have come to mean different things to different people. It is, therefore, essential to have a common understanding of what they mean. Three misconceptions need to be set straight.

### 2.1 *Collective targets*

First, the MDGs represent a numerical statement of what is feasible at the global level. Those who state that the MDGs are aspirational goals and lofty pledges overlook that they were set on the basis of global trends observed in the 1970s and 1980s. Their basic premise is that global progress would continue at a similar pace as it had been observed

---

<sup>3</sup> A paradox of the conventional discourse is that human poverty is multi-dimensional yet its quantification remains one-dimensional – i.e. money-metric, based on the international poverty line of \$1.25/day.

in the past.<sup>4</sup> This explains why the MDGs call for different numerical reductions: halving hunger but reducing infant mortality by two-thirds; achieving universal primary education yet halving the proportion of people without access to safe water. That is why the MDGs call for a reduction by one-half in poverty and not by two-thirds or by three-quarters. It is also why some critics refer to the MDGs as the ‘Minimum’ Development Goals because they do not call for accelerating the rate of global progress.<sup>5</sup>

The important implication is that global targets cannot be confused with national targets. Nevertheless, the MDGs are often misinterpreted as targets that need to be achieved by each and every country. It is incorrect to state that country X is off track to meet the MDGs because global targets are set for the world as a whole. They are not set on the basis of past trends for country X. The World Summit for Children of 1990 was quite clear about the distinction between global and national targets. It stated, “[t]hese goals will first need to be adapted to the specific realities of each country. [...] Such adaptation of the goals is of crucial importance to ensure their technical validity, logistical feasibility, financial affordability and to secure political commitment and broad public support for their achievement” (UNICEF 1990).

That wisdom seems to have been lost. Simple arithmetics imply that if all countries were to achieve the targets, the world would actually exceed the MDGs – because several countries will surpass them. It was never the intention of the Millennium Declaration to outdo the agreed global targets.

The post-2015 framework must explicitly caution against this misinterpretation. The MDGs are collective targets; they can never be equated with national targets. The straight transposition of global targets to the country level is mindless. To be meaningful, they need to be tailored and adapted to the national context and the initial conditions.<sup>6</sup> It must be stressed that collective goals must not be attained in each country for the world to attain them.<sup>7</sup>

## 2.2 *Good servants, bad masters*

The second misconception is that the MDGs do not cover all dimensions of human development. To be effective, they must focus on selected outcomes that serve to illustrate progress in human development. The MDGs cannot be comprehensive and concise at the same time. Nonetheless, the belief in the perfectibility of a set of global targets is widespread. Any attempt to cover all important dimensions of human wellbeing

---

<sup>4</sup> One notable exception is the target regarding maternal mortality. No evidence can be found to show that a reduction by three-quarters has ever been achieved over a period of 25 years. This target seems to reflect a normative goal rather than a realistic objective. Little wonder then that global progress is most off track vis-à-vis that target.

<sup>5</sup> The sad reality is that global progress has slowed down since 1990 and that the world will therefore miss the MDGs in 2015.

<sup>6</sup> More than 60 countries have integrated the global targets into their national development plans, their Poverty Reduction Strategy Paper or other national strategies.

<sup>7</sup> A simple analogy is that of a teacher who sets the objective for his/her class to attain 70% on the final exam. If the class as a whole meets the target, not every student in the class will achieve it. Approximately half will obtain a score above 70%; the others will score below it.

will be an exercise in futility. The post-MDG agenda will never be able to cover the many complexities of human development – no matter the number of targets included. If it were possible to perfect the framework, the resulting set would be so colossal that it would implode under its own weight. It is crucial, therefore, to consider global targets as servants, not as masters.

A key condition for the success of the post-2015 agenda is that global targets must be seen as good servants – for they are bad masters. Despite all their shortcomings and imperfections, the MDGs have served the cause of human development well; including those aspects that are not adequately captured. This requires, however, that the targets are seen as illustrative for all dimensions of human development, including the ones omitted. Regrettably, the common reaction of those whose dimension is not included is to push for new targets. In so doing, they implicitly consider the MDGs as the master, not as their servant. The danger, then, is that a post-2015 framework will become another wish list – unfocused, unending and unattractive.

### *2.3 Ends, not means*

Third, the MDGs set a global agenda; they do not prescribe that agenda. They represent ends or ultimate outcomes. They do not dwell on the means by which to achieve them. Yet, a widespread critique is that the MDGs point towards the destination but do not offer the roadmap; that they do not go far enough in identifying the appropriate policies for achieving the targets. A recent newspaper editorial argues that “it would be cynical to pledge new goals without a plan for achieving them” (The Guardian 2011).

It would be unwise, however, to spell out the strategy for achieving the post-2015 agenda in detail – this for two reasons. First, it is naïve to think that world leaders will ever agree on a particular strategy for achieving human development. Second, it would be utopian to believe that one set of macroeconomic, sectoral and institutional reforms can foster human development in each and every country. This would lead to *policy myopia* and to an artificial separation between development and politics. It would deny the principal lesson learnt from structural adjustment programmes of the 1980s and 1990s – that there are no silver bullets or one-size-fits-all solutions that apply to all countries all the time.

Development must be seen as a process of collective self-discovery – in rich and poor countries alike. The Spanish poet Antonio Machado (1912) expresses it well, “*no hay camino, se hace camino al andar*”.<sup>8</sup> Development cannot be reduced to a set of technical recipes imported from abroad. The way a country develops is always shaped and influenced by specific circumstances and local actors.

It cannot be over-emphasised that there are no techno-fixes for what are essentially political issues. Ultimately development is always context-specific and the manner in which it unfolds is shaped by domestic politics. This is why the recent discourse about development co-operation recommends that international partners must strive to enhance national ownership, alignment and policy space.

---

<sup>8</sup> Meaning “there is no path but the one you make by walking”.

Achieving the MDGs requires fundamental transformations in any society that transcends techno-fixes so that the most disadvantaged and vulnerable people receive higher priority – e.g. ethnic minorities, illiterate women, low-caste children, single mothers, slum dwellers, subsistence farmers, the unemployed, the disabled, households at the bottom of the ladder, ethnic minorities. Such transformations will never result from the application of standard recipes that often engender these discriminations in the first place. Those who claim that the MDGs should spell out the strategy for reaching the targets merely want to impose their own worldview onto others. They want to de-politicise the development process by reducing it to a series of standard interventions of a technical nature.

Defining the strategy cannot be done in the abstract. It is always place- and time-specific. It does not mean that no lessons can be drawn from experience elsewhere. Rather, it means that their replicability is considerably less than their technical validity. It cannot be known in advance with any degree of certainty how the MDGs will be achieved in a particular country. At the global level, only general points can be made about the development strategy – a kind of overall ‘theory of change’.

Ultimately, the definition of the strategy is the preserve of national sovereignty. It is not the domain of external actors, as implied by many recommendations of the Millennium Project (UN 2005).<sup>9</sup> Global targets should enlarge the domestic policy space, not diminish it. However, experts and donors have often used the MDGs in a rather patronising way.

General principles for equitable and sustainable development can be enunciated but they can only serve as overall guidance. Nayyar (2011) rightly argues that the post-2015 agenda needs to say something about process. “The absence of anything on means or process [...] provides vacant space in which prescriptive policies can be imposed” (*ibid*). While there can be no blueprints, the post-2015 framework could include “at least a few general propositions that might pre-empt misunderstanding or misappropriation” (*ibid*). Examples include “Economic growth is necessary but cannot be sufficient to bring about development [...] Public action is an integral part of this process. Employment creation provides the only sustainable means of poverty reduction [...] External finance is a complement to, but cannot be a substitute for domestic resources. The role of the State remains critical in the process of development” (*ibid*). Such guiding principles can be brought into the post-2015 agenda without resorting to prescriptive targets. The focus on ends – one of the characteristics of the current MDG agenda – must be retained.

In sum, global targets can be important drivers of change. Numerical and time-bound targets have stirred many people and mobilised countless actors to strive to overcome human poverty in the world. It took several world summits and international conferences before the 18 MDG targets (now 21) were accepted by all UN member states. Although the world will not achieve them, it cannot be denied that global targets have galvanised

---

<sup>9</sup> Deaton (2008) observes, “[t]echnical solutions buttressed by moral certainty are no more likely to help in the future than they have in the past”.

political commitment as never before. To dismiss the MDGs as a ‘Most Distracting Gimmick’ (Antrobus 2003) is exceedingly one-sided.<sup>10</sup>

### 3. A plurality of options and scenarios

Bilateral donors, think-tanks and non-governmental organisations are actively debating the post-2015 agenda. A glance at recent publications confirms the growing intensity of the debate about this topic – e.g. Christian Aid (2010), IDS (2010), Center for Global Development (Kenny and Sumner 2011), World Vision International (2011), ODI (Melamed 2012) and CAFOD (2012). In the Netherlands, the Advisory Council on International Affairs issued a 90-page report entitled ‘The Post-2015 Development Agenda – The MDGs in Perspective’ (AIV 2011). In November 2011, the German Development Institute (DIE), with the Federal Ministry for Economic Co-operation and Development (BMZ) and the Poverty Reduction, Equity and Growth Network (PEGNet) convened an international meeting to reflect on the ‘International Policy Agenda After 2015’. Several non-governmental organisations have joined forces in an initiative called ‘Beyond 2015’ set up to influence and campaign for the creation of a post-2015 development framework.<sup>11</sup>

The International NGO Training and Research Centre considers three options regarding the post-2015 framework (Giffen 2011): (i) more of the same, but with refinements and specific focus; (ii) wider goals differentiated by context, which include cross-cutting issues and human rights; and (iii) completely new approaches or alternative paradigms. It argues that there is “an increasing feeling that the MDGs are insufficient in and of themselves” (*ibid*). Pollard (2011) describes five scenarios for formulating the post-2015 agenda: (i) a clearly UN-led, legitimate framework; (ii) a framework from the inside-out, led by UN-experts; (iii) a framework from the outside-in, led by experts outside the UN; (iv) a jigsaw, piecemeal framework; and (v) failure. She concludes, “[i]n no sense should a successor to the MDGs be assumed” (*ibid*).

In June 2011, the International Federation of the Red Cross and Red Crescent Societies, together with the Centre for International Governance Innovation, convened a meeting in Bellagio (Italy) to discuss the post-2015 agenda. Later, Carin and Kapila (2011) proposed twelve development goals, grouped in three clusters: (i) those that deal with essential endowments necessary for individuals to achieve their fuller potential; (ii) those concerned with protecting and promoting collective human capital; and (iii) those regarding the effective provision of global public goods. Their proposal was recently commended by members of parliament in a donor country.<sup>12</sup> A follow-up meeting took place in April 2012 at the Organisation for Economic Co-operation and Development to move the proposal into the inter-governmental sphere – although they merely reflect the opinion of two individuals, based on a discussion held among a few academics and experts.

---

<sup>10</sup> In an interview with *Alliance Magazine* in 2005, Peggy Antrobus admitted that the MDGs can advance a broader agenda – <http://www.alliancemagazine.org/node/1387>.

<sup>11</sup> [www.beyond2015.org](http://www.beyond2015.org)

<sup>12</sup> <http://www.publications.parliament.uk/pa/cm/cmtoday/cmwhall/14.htm>



In sum, the post-2015 agenda is already keeping many actors busy. Several institutions – mostly based in the North – are issuing specific proposals with greater frequency, determined to shape the outcome based on the belief that early interventions will have the greatest impact.

#### 4. UN leadership

The examples mentioned above underscore the need for strong and assertive leadership to keep the process disciplined and the analyses empirical. Jim Collins and Morten Hansen (2011) assert that “the best leaders are not more visionary or more creative; they are more disciplined and more empirical”. A little discipline and a touch of empiricism will be crucial to ensure that the formulation of the post-2015 agenda yields the desired outcome.

The task of formulating the post-MDG agenda will not be easy. To underestimate its complexity would be a major miscalculation. Inter-governmental meetings on climate change in Copenhagen (December 2009); on commercial whaling in Agadir (June 2010); and on global trading (Doha round) exemplify how difficult it has become to conclude multilateral agreements. The context in which the MDGs emerged was one of financial stability and economic prosperity. At present, this is no longer the case. Fortunately, more than three years remain to work out an acceptable framework.

If the post-MDG framework is to have the necessary legitimacy, it must emerge from a process whereby the United Nations are perceived as the central platform. Groupings such as the G20, the Organisation for Economic Co-operation and Development or the World Bank will never generate the perception of impartiality, neutrality and global legitimacy. Therefore, strong and assertive leadership by the UN Secretariat will be critically important to steer the process in the coming months and years.

So far, the formulation of the post-2015 agenda has been left to the usual inter-governmental mechanisms, including the regular sessions of the UN General Assembly, of ECOSOC and its subsidiary bodies; the biennial Development Co-operation Forum; annual Ministerial reviews; various meetings of the UN Regional Economic Commissions; and the *Rio+20* Conference. These meetings could be useful as stepping stones, provided concrete proposals regarding the post-MDG agenda are put forward, based on bottom-up consultations. Without such proposals, however, they are unlikely to yield an improved and more relevant framework that is clear, concise and measurable. To be productive, the inter-governmental debate about the post-2015 agenda will need to be preceded by a thorough and inclusive review of the merits and shortcomings of the MDGs, grounded in concrete country experiences over the past decade.

Some leaders are exceedingly cautious to start a discussion about the post-2015 agenda. They perceive it as a potential distraction from the unfinished business regarding the 2015-targets. However, there is no trade-off between maximising progress by 2015 and reflecting on the post-MDG agenda. The two are actually complementary because the MDG-course will not change without changing the MDG-discourse.

World Vision (2011) observes, “[t]he UN’s own process is not entirely transparent. Indeed, one senior UNDP official commented that the state of the debate was extremely muddled and unclear”. Clarity is indispensable for effective leadership. CAFOD (2012) speaks of a “well-founded reticence at the UN to take responsibility for drawing up a final framework”.

Fortunately, the UN Secretary-General has initiated much-needed action. Last year, a UN Task Team was set up to undertake a system-wide review of the MDG framework. A high-level Panel of Eminent Persons, headed by two former heads of state, will be established in 2012. Four tasks will need to be undertaken to complete the process that the UN Secretary-General has initiated.

## 5. Four tasks for the UN

If the United Nations cannot assert strong and assertive leadership, it must play the role of curator. A curator is a specialist who cares for the heritage. As curator of its MDG-heritage, the UN must undertake four major tasks: (i) convene national reviews and debates; (ii) promote participatory consultations; (iii) aggregate outcomes; and (iv) serve as gatekeeper.

### *5.1 Convene national reviews*

Discussions about the post-MDG agenda have already started within several donor agencies, as well as by think-tanks and non-governmental organisations – mostly based in developed countries. While welcome, they risk creating two undesirable biases: an overly donor-centric view of the post-2015 agenda and an exceedingly technocratic approach to its formulation. In the absence of similar debates in developing countries – involving grassroots organisations and the voice of the people themselves – the default scenario at the UN General Assembly risks being the adoption of a rather aid-centric and academic view of the post-MDG framework. Another exercise in *donorship* is neither necessary nor desirable. If the global framework is to emerge from a debate among equal partners, then both sides must come equally well prepared to the negotiations.

Therefore, the UN must promote reviews and debates in a number of developing countries where the MDGs have been taken seriously.<sup>13</sup> Their purpose will be to reflect on the merits and weaknesses of the MDGs and to consider what their reincarnation should look like from the perspective of the country-level.

Reviews at the global level have been exceedingly focused on the list of countries that are off track vis-à-vis the global targets. They frequently suffer from a common flaw in socio-economic research today, namely ‘statistics without context’. However, there are countless cases where the impact of the MDGs cannot be captured by statistical trends alone. The MDGs have influenced local priority setting, shaped national and sub-national budgets, and enhanced community participation. Regrettably, the global reviews have neglected these dimensions. A national debate in developing countries – involving all

---

<sup>13</sup> The number of reviews cannot be predetermined in advance because they should emerge from the country level. The decision to conduct 50 such reviews seems to reflect a rather top-down approach.

major stakeholders – is likely to reveal how and to what extent the impact of the MDGs has gone beyond changes in national indicators.

When the two perspectives – from the donor side and the country level – will be equally well presented and documented, then the global debate on the post-2015 agenda will be balanced – a precondition for delivering a desirable outcome.

### *5.2 Promote participation*

Reviews and debates in developing countries will foster a more participatory, inclusive and bottom-up reflection than what is currently happening in donor countries, where the discussions are rather academic, technocratic and often far removed from country-level realities.

Quick and Burall (2011) make the point that, to date, few examples exist of international processes that engage citizens and stakeholders to influence global decision making. Recent years, however, have seen major advances in participative methods, both digital and face-to-face. New technologies and approaches present opportunities for a more inclusive post-2015 planning. Citizens assemblies, social media, global surveys, focus groups, integrated qualitative and quantitative techniques, and e-networks can enhance the degree of participation. Citizens assemblies in particular offer promising ways for putting inclusiveness and broad buy-in at the heart of the discussions about global development priorities. They have been used in numerous countries for different purposes, e.g. in Australia, Belgium, Canada, the Netherlands, New Zealand, the Philippines, the Sahel region, the Southern Cone, and Venezuela. They can potentially act as an antidote against an accountability mechanism that is biased in favour of the better-off segments of society, sometimes referred to as ‘elite-capture’.

The questions that arise are: How to balance the role of experts and of the people concerned? How to balance the voice of the elite and of ordinary citizens? How to balance the influence of developed and of developing countries? How should the power of each of these be held in check? Part of the answer is to design as broad a process as possible, one that captures the views of a maximum number of stakeholders; especially in developing countries.

At the same time, one must remain cognisant of the fact that the United Nations are an inter-governmental body where the views of member states come first. This does not mean, however, that the voices of stakeholders are irrelevant. They must be captured to inform world leaders before they decide on the post-2015 agenda. The high-level Panel of Eminent Persons and the UN Task Team must endeavour to collate such voices. Over the next three years, the Panel will have to consult widely to discuss, collect and collate ideas from a broad range of stakeholders on the post-MDG framework. In September 2013, when the UN General Assembly holds its next MDG-event, the Panel can table its initial ideas and suggestions; but this would not be the final version. The latter should only be presented in 2015.

Elsewhere, we argue that the members of the Panel should be of sufficiently high calibre so they are apt, able and ready to challenge world leaders and the conventional narrative in a credible way (Vandemoortele 2011b). The Panel must be led by members from the South so as to avoid undue *donorship* as the time to ‘de-aid’ the MDG-discourse is long overdue.

### 5.3 Aggregate outcomes

The third task is to aggregate the many and diverse ideas and suggestions that will emerge from a dialogue among a multitude of stakeholders. Only an independent party can ensure that all voices receive equal weight. Ideas should rise to the top based on merit; not based on money. A practical proposal that stems from an NGO in rural Malawi, for instance, must receive as much attention as an idea that originates from the Gates Foundation.

A consultation that is wide and deep will only yield a useful outcome if it is accompanied by an independent process of aggregation. The Panel and the UN Task Team could play that role, both at the country and global levels. Aggregation simply means the preparation of a systematic summary of the outcomes. It does not imply reconciliation. Reconciling the many valuable ideas will remain the domain of discussions and negotiations among the UN member states.

Such aggregation will offer the possibility of setting a post-2015 agenda that is genuinely universal in nature, not one that is perceived as limited to low-income countries. Setting an agenda for nutrition, for instance, should deal with overweight as well as with underweight because they simultaneously affect the world’s population. Malnutrition is most prevalent in poor countries; obesity is growing in rich countries. But in several countries they occur at the same time. The post-2015 agenda could also include youth unemployment, another universal problem. Gender equality and climate change are also universal challenges.<sup>14</sup> In other words, a ‘One-World’ view should be taken when setting the global agenda beyond 2015.

### 5.4 Gatekeeper

The fourth task for the United Nations will be the most challenging one; namely that of gatekeeper for new targets. The MDGs have had staying power because they are clear, concise and measurable. These features should not be tinkered with. Unfortunately, the common approach is to add more goals and to insert new targets in an attempt to address the perceived gaps in the MDG architecture. Several non-measurable targets will be proposed, which would introduce interpretative leeway and latitude. Without a strong gatekeeper, the ‘Tragedy of the Commons’ is likely to befall the post-MDG agenda. Global targets are only useful to the collective if individuals refrain from overusing them.

---

<sup>14</sup> The gender target cannot be defined as parity between girls and boys among the under-5 population, as some are proposing. This is a typical example of how not to formulate the post-2015 agenda because it would lack universal validity. Gender discrimination is universal and extends well beyond female infanticide.

The maxim that ‘not everything that counts can be counted’ is certainly valid but global targets must maintain a degree of objective measurability. Otherwise, tracking global progress objectively will be impossible and subjective interpretations will exercise undue influence.

Any new target in the post-2015 agenda must satisfy three simple conditions: (i) clarity of concept, (ii) solidity of indicator(s) and (iii) robustness of data. Several MDGs do not satisfy these conditions. The world is reportedly on track for three targets: halving poverty, halving the proportion of people without access to safe water, and improving the lives of at least 100 million slum dwellers.<sup>15</sup>

However, none of these targets satisfies the above conditions. All three are ill-defined, which means that they cannot be accurately measured. A universally accepted definition of ‘poverty’ does not exist; a ‘slum’ and ‘safe water’ are not clearly defined either. It is impossible, therefore, to know with any degree of precision how many people have been lifted out of poverty; how many slum dwellers have seen an improvement in their lives; or how many people have gained access to safe water.

The widespread use of the international metric for poverty may give the impression that the statistics are robust and solid. Yet they are flawed, if not misleading – as pointed out by Saith (2005), Kakwani and Son (2006), Reddy (2008), Kanbur (2009), Deaton (2010), Fischer (2010) and UNDESA (2010).<sup>16</sup> Easterly (2010) offers the sound advice of not citing “global numbers unless you know they’re trustworthy”.

A fundamental weakness of the statistics on global poverty is that they are not based on direct observation but result from complex calculations and reflect a series of assumptions. Malnutrition can be observed quite directly and objectively – by recording the height, weight and age of the child. But direct observation cannot determine whether a child lives below the poverty line of \$1.25/day. The latter needs a large amount of information, elaborate calculations and complex modelling; all based on assumptions and hypotheses – sometimes haphazard. As the number of assumptions increases, the reliability of the indicator decreases. Of all the MDG-related data, the \$1.25/day-statistics

---

<sup>15</sup> The world reportedly met the poverty and the water targets five years ahead of schedule. The latest poverty estimates of the World Bank claim that “by 2010 the \$1.25-a-day poverty rate fell to less than half of the 1990 rate. That means the developing world has achieved, ahead of time, the United Nation’s first Millennium Development Goal of cutting the 1990 extreme-poverty rate in half by 2015”. The latest data suggest that 620 million people have been lifted out of poverty since 1990. [<http://econ.worldbank.org/WBSITE/EXTERNAL/EXTDEC/0..contentMDK:23129612~pagePK:64165401~piPK:64165026~theSitePK:469372,00.html>]. Similarly, the UN recently claimed that the “world has met the MDG target of halving the proportion of people without access to safe drinking water” [<http://www.un.org/apps/news/story.asp?NewsID=41465&Cr=MDGs&Cr1>]. Over 2 billion people gained access to improved drinking water sources, such as piped supplies and protected well. Concerning the target for slum dwellers, it is argued that “[m]ore than 200 million of these people gained access to either improved water, sanitation or durable and less crowded housing” Global statistics claim that the proportion of urban population living in slums dropped from 46.1% in 1990 to 32.7% in 2010 [[http://www.un.org/millenniumgoals/11\\_MDG%20Report\\_EN.pdf](http://www.un.org/millenniumgoals/11_MDG%20Report_EN.pdf)].

<sup>16</sup> A debate on that topic took place between Ravallion on the one hand and Reddy and Pogge on the other; which is published in Anand *et al.* (2010).

get most attention yet they are the least meaningful.<sup>17</sup> Their main purpose is ideological rather than statistical (Vandemoortele 2011a). They mostly serve to generate evidence in support of the argument that poverty reduction results automatically from economic growth.

The global water statistics are not robust either. They frequently overstate access because they assume that all residents within a certain radius of a public water point are adequately covered. But a single pump or public tap may not cover the water needs of all the residents within that radius – assuming that the tap or pump is actually in good working condition. Moreover, studies indicate that between 15 and 35 per cent of so-called ‘improved water sources’ provide contaminated water (WHO/UNICEF 2011). A recent study that uses a more rigorous definition of ‘safe water’ shows that the world is off track for the water target. It concludes that “1.8 billion people used unsafe water in 2010, compared with the estimated 783 million people using the MDG indicator” (Onda *et al.* 2012). Thus, global statistics on access to safe water paint too rosy a picture.

Hence, the oft-repeated claim that the world is on track for meeting the targets regarding poverty reduction, slum upgrading and safe water must be nuanced. Not all statistics on human development are equally solid and robust. Some indicators are more imperfect than others. It is, therefore, advisable to block out the most problematic indicators from the post-2015 framework – such as the proportion of the population below \$1.25 per day; the proportion with access to safe drinking water; the number of slum dwellers; the proportion below a minimum level of dietary energy consumption; the primary school completion rate; the maternal mortality ratio; etc.

Everyone is entitled to having an opinion but not to generating one’s own evidence. Targets based on problematic indicators and for which data are tenuous will inevitably leave room for interpretative latitude and leeway; under the semblance of scientific rigor. They create the opportunity for making ideological positions look as if they were based on empirical evidence. Pseudo-scientific assessments can only be avoided by making sure that targets are clearly defined, use solid indicators and for which robust data exist. Otherwise, a plurality of facts and truths will emerge – often contradictory and subjective. The danger, then, is that the MDG-discourse will no longer be evidence-based.

This danger is illustrated by a recent assessment of the performance of 43 multilateral organisations (DFID 2011). The foreword of the report claims that the results are “rigorous and robust”. Yet institutional performance remains extremely difficult to assess in an objective manner. Imperfect methods, measurement errors, and incorrect assumptions undermine the scientific rigor of any such attempt. DFID’s assessment is based more on theories, judgments and impressions than on objective observations.

---

<sup>17</sup> The World Bank statistics imply that over 80 per cent of the people who were lifted out of poverty between 1990 and 2008 were from one single country – China. It is hard to take such statistics seriously. They do not quite conform to one of the basic tenets of the conventional narrative, namely that democratic governance is essential for reducing poverty. Gordon and Nandy (2012) point out that the use of purchasing power parities in estimating global poverty implicitly contradicts the neo-liberal claim that free markets are effective and lead to ‘correct’ prices – including exchange rates.

Although it uses 41 criteria it is unclear what is ultimately being measured. van Thiel and Leeuw (2002) call it the ‘performance paradox’ whereby the performance as measured frequently has little or no relation with actual performance. Bilateral donors have the sovereign right to decide which multilateral organisations to fund; but that is essentially a decision based on priorities, perceptions and politics. When such decisions are presented under the false pretence of science, they must be exposed for what they are. This particular assessment is ‘rigorous and robust’ only in appearance. It belongs to the category of ‘designed blindness’ (Friedman 2001); it cannot be called ‘evidence-based’.

Similar subjectivity will cloud the assessment of the post-2015 agenda if targets are included that cannot be objectively measured. It is obvious that the usefulness of results-based management critically depends on the measurability of the results. Nevertheless, targets will be proposed that violate the condition of clarity and measurability. Their proponents will make the case with force and vigour, often arguing that measurability will improve once their particular target is included in the new agenda.<sup>18</sup>

It will be vital to have a strong gatekeeper so that the post-2015 targets will satisfy the conditions of clarity of concept, solidity of indicator, and robustness of data. Otherwise, the post-MDG framework is likely to get overloaded with non-measurable targets. A comparison between the Millennium Declaration of 2000 and the outcome document of the MDG-summit in 2010 (UN 2010) shows that this danger is not theoretical or academic. With its 124 commitments, the 2010 text is already four times longer than the original Millennium Declaration. Brevity is an asset, not a liability.

## 6. Design options

When taking the MDGs beyond 2015, several of their current aspects will need to be modified or reconsidered. Broadly speaking, redesigning the architecture of the post-2015 agenda can follow three options: either the MDG1.1 option which is an extension of the current set with only minor adjustments; or the MDG2.0 version which involves major modifications; or a completely new design, possibly without goals or targets but focused on transformative structures and processes.<sup>19</sup>

A glance at the world of business offers some relevant insights about balancing change with the need for continuity. IBM, for instance, which recently celebrated its 100<sup>th</sup> anniversary, never walked away from its past; it always built on it. That firm did not undergo radical changes but gradually transformed itself from building mainframe computers in the 1970s to providing custom-made software and services today. Collins and Hansen (2011) confirm that radical changes are seldom successful. They conclude that great companies tend to change less than the ones that are less successful. Radical change must be balanced with the need for a degree of continuity.

---

<sup>18</sup> This is a flawed argument because the measurement of income-poverty and maternal mortality, for instance, did not improve after being included in the MDGs.

<sup>19</sup> UNECA (2012) briefly considers the case for each of the three options.

As the post-2015 agenda gets formulated it would be unwise to repeat the ‘Taurus debacle’. *Taurus* was one of Ford’s best-selling cars since its launch in the mid-1980s. By the mid-1990s, the company decided to redesign the model. In her book, Mary Walton (1997) recounts how the company set a few hundred designers and engineers to work on the project, investing nearly \$3billion in it. They decided to go for a radically new design to make the new Taurus stand out among all other sedan cars. The new shape was the oval to follow the Ford's logo. It was used for the headlights, the dashboard, the rear window, etc. The new model was launched in 1996. It was ingeniously put together; a technical marvel for its time. The only problem was that customers were turned off by the car's new shape. The result was that Taurus lost its bestselling status to Toyota’s Camry; despite steep rebates and a massive publicity campaign. Buyers stayed away in droves.

The tales about IBM and Ford serve to caution against too radical a change in the architecture of the new agenda. As with the old Taurus, the general public and most stakeholders liked the MDGs. Just as the engineers at Ford, the designers of the post-2015 agenda will face many technical challenges. But they will require more than technical skills. Political and communication expertise will be as important. Experts and technocrats, however, tend to dismiss the latter; thereby making the perfect the potential enemy of the good. Given that radical change is seldom successful or feasible within firms, let alone in the intergovernmental arena, it would seem that option MDG2.0 looks most advisable to aim for at this stage.

The third option may yield a new agenda that is conceptually perfect and technically watertight but that will be ignored by the general public and most stakeholders. That would be a step backward, not forward. Those who categorically state that the post-2015 agenda should not fall in the trap of excluding issues that cannot be readily measured risk condemning it to instant oblivion and neglect by everyone.

## 7. A nine-point agenda

Nine practical points are proposed for consideration by the Panel of Eminent Persons and the UN Task Team. They include: (1) fixing the new time horizon; (2) reshaping the structure; (3) including new targets; (4) devising intermediate targets; (5) balancing ambition with realism; (6) combining different types of benchmarks; (7) cross-cutting issues; (8) monitoring below the national average; and (9) establishing a global custodian. They are briefly highlighted below.

### *7.1 New time horizon*

The time horizon for the post-2015 agenda should use 2010 as starting year. The deadline year could range between 2035 and 2050.

A recurring feature in global target setting is that developed countries usually want to set ambitious targets, whereas developing nations call for a sense of realism. It seems that world leaders could not agree on the level of ambition at the Millennium Summit. Indeed, the Millennium Declaration is ambiguous and vague regarding the period over which the



targets had to be achieved. The architects of the MDGs decided to take 1990 as the baseline year, equating the MDG-period with that of a generation – i.e. 25 years.<sup>20</sup>

The post-MDG framework must clearly indicate the baseline year and the period over which the targets are to be achieved. The pros and cons of a time horizon of less than 20 years versus that of 25 years hence or more will have to be weighed carefully. Targets for at least 25 years hence have the advantage of allowing for adequate time to accomplish major transformations in the social and economic spheres. But they suffer from weak political accountability because their deadline will not occur on the watch of the leaders who approve them. This shortcoming can be overcome by accompanying longer term targets with intermediate ones (see point 7.4 below).

The selection of the base year will need to take into account the usual 3-5 year time-lag that exists for generating global statistics. This means that no statistics regarding the global state of human development in 2015 will be available by 2015. Many lament about this, especially journalists, diplomats and political leaders. But a delay of 3-5 years is perfectly reasonable for generating global statistics of good quality. Therefore, it would be advisable to start the period for the new agenda in the year 2010 – for which solid and robust data will become available from 2013 onwards when the inter-governmental discussions about the post-MDG agenda will gain momentum.

Thus, the time horizon for the post-2015 agenda should use 2010 as starting year, whilst the deadline year could range between 2035 and 2050.

### *7.2. Different structure*

The MDGs contain three health-related goals (i.e. child mortality, maternal health, communicable diseases). This is not surprising because the health sector is better covered by statistics than most other dimensions of human development. The three health goals can be collapsed into one overall health goal, thereby making space for including other areas of concern of a ‘universal’ agenda. The MDGs also include two overlapping targets – i.e. countries that achieve universal primary education automatically comply with the target on gender equality in basic education. Such overlaps are unnecessary and unfair. Several observers have rightfully criticised the MDGs for their poor coverage of gender equality and sustainable development. The results of survey by UNECA (2012) confirm this. These dimensions need to be thoroughly rethought and reformulated.

At the same time, ‘Ockham's razor’ will be indispensable to cut out unnecessary complexity.<sup>21</sup> While it cannot become a substitute for rigor and logic, the principle of simplicity and succinctness will be vital in keeping a sense of discipline when preparing the post-MDG agenda.

---

<sup>20</sup> As the MDGs came into being in 2001, there has been persistent confusion as to whether they are to be achieved between 2000 and 2015 or over the period 1990-2015. This confusion was exemplified by the many reports that were published after 2007 about the ‘mid-point’ – e.g. Bourguignon *et al.* (2008) and UNDP (2010). The ‘mid-point’ was not in 2007 but occurred in 2003.

<sup>21</sup> Named after an English friar of the 14th century, Ockham's razor is also known as the law of parsimony, succinctness or simplicity. The ‘razor’ refers to the need to shave away unnecessary assumptions or complexities.

### *7.3 New targets*

The number of goals and targets must be kept to a minimum. It is wrong to believe that the MDGs can be perfected. A set of targets can never cover all the complexities of human development; no matter the number of targets. However, several stakeholders will argue for a new architecture, with more goals and new targets. The candidates for inclusion range from climate change to secondary education, quality of education, human rights, infrastructure, economic growth, agriculture, good governance, security, population dynamics, migration, urbanisation and others. But more is not necessarily better; for it will undermine the intuitive understanding of the MDGs by the general public.

The MDGs are not a comprehensive or near-perfect expression of human development. They do not aim to offer a comprehensive log-frame for development. Rather, they give a shorthand version that can be easily communicated to a general audience. Most stakeholders value this branding and want it preserved. The reason why the MDGs have caught on so well is due to their clarity, conciseness, and measurability.

Defining the architecture and contents of the post-MDG framework will demand tough choices. A strong but fair gatekeeper will be called for; because ‘less is more’. The maxim that is commonly attributed to Antoine de Saint-Exupéry is relevant here: ‘A designer knows he has achieved perfection, not when there is nothing left to add, but when there is nothing left to take away’.

If all aspects of human development had been included ten years ago, the MDGs would not have been comprehended by the wider public. They would never have had the same staying power. While some may still adhere to the idolatry of literalism and posit that the MDGs must be perfected, it is crucial to consider the post-2015 targets as servants, not as masters.

The MDGs have been criticised from the perspective of human rights – e.g. Langford (2010). Human rights advocates often fault the MDGs for their negative externalities. In response, we recall that the MDGs were never intended to supplant existing human rights instruments. Actually, human rights conventions precede the MDGs by several decades. Treaty monitoring systems are well-established; they did not wait for the MDGs before becoming operational. The fact that reports by member states are increasingly delayed for several human rights conventions cannot be resolved by using the MDGs as a substitute.

The correct way is to consider global targets and human rights as complementary, not as substitutes or competitors. The MDGs represent social, economic and cultural rights, expressed as numerical targets; not by using legal terminology.<sup>22</sup> While they embody universal values, numerical targets are different from ideals and values. Targets are quantitative, values are qualitative; targets can be contextualised, values are absolute; targets can be clearly delineated, values are general and hard to define precisely; targets are concrete, values are abstract. These are the reasons why some people are not stirred into action by normative standards and values. Many prefer numerical and doable targets.

---

<sup>22</sup> Civil and political rights cannot be included at this stage because they still lack objective measurability.

The overarching goals of the post-2015 agenda should be formulated using the language of human rights to address the complaint that human rights are not mentioned in the MDGs. Numerical targets must then be set as stepping stones towards the gradual realisation of these rights. The indicators will validate the objective nature of a target's measurability. The latter is not to insist on statistical purity but to avoid the pitfall that the post-2015 agenda will be misappropriated by ideological factions. Global targets lose much of their power and appeal if they lack reliable statistics.

#### *7.4 Intermediate targets*

Intermediate targets must be set to serve as quantitative goalposts when world leaders gather every five years to review global progress vis-à-vis the longer term goals. Interim targets will be indispensable for addressing the accountability deficit associated with longer term targets. They will be essential for changing the current format of global summits in order to enhance the sense of mutual accountability among world leaders. Otherwise, the concept of 'international community' will continue to lack practical meaning. Interim targets will give the 'Global Custodian' of the post-MDG framework a solid basis for anchoring the debate at future global summits (see point 7.9 below).

#### *7.5 Ambition vs. realism*

Global targets that had the greatest impact are those that struck a judicious balance between the level of ambition and their sense of realism. As global targets, their level of ambition must be determined at the global level. It may seem superfluous to point out that global targets apply only to the global level. Unfortunately, this seemingly obvious fact has been missed by many. The majority of actors and observers have used the MDGs as one-size-fits-all yardsticks for measuring and judging performance at the country or regional level. Most have joined the chorus that Africa will miss the MDGs; or that fragile states are hopelessly off track.

However, that narrative distorts the picture. In some cases it has led to the tragic misrepresentation of respectable progress as failure. Facts and figures paint quite a different picture; namely that Africa has made considerable progress. Although the region will not meet the MDGs, Africa has contributed more than her fair share to global progress regarding most targets (Vandemoortele 2011b). Yet the region is systematically singled out for the fact that she will miss the 2015-targets. Her initial conditions in 1990 were such that the global MDGs set the bar exceedingly high for Africa. The interpretation of the MDGs as one-size-fits-all targets abstracts away such initial conditions. The oft-repeated statement that 'Africa is missing the targets' itself misses the point that Africa will not, cannot, and must not meet the MDGs for the world to meet the global targets by 2015. The MDGs were not set specifically for Africa but for the world as a whole. In the same logic, the post-2015 agenda must be global and universal; it cannot include targets for particular regions or specific types of countries.

#### *7.6 Benchmarking*

Performance can be measured in terms of absolute or relative progress (ODI 2010). Both are valid but incomplete. Most MDGs are expressed in relative terms – e.g. reducing poverty by half; cutting infant mortality by two-thirds; slashing maternal mortality by

three-quarters. Since proportional changes tend to be inversely related to initial levels (Vandemoortele 2009), their misinterpretation as one-size-fits-all targets has led to an unfair use of the MDGs vis-à-vis the least developed and low-income countries (Easterly 2009).

An unintended consequence of the way the MDGs were formulated has been an implicit discrimination against countries with low levels of human development. The post-2015 agenda must correct for this mistake. There are precedents in formulating global targets in ways that combine relative and absolute benchmarks. For example, the 1990 World Summit for Children set the target for the year 2000 of reducing the under-five mortality rate by one-third or to a level of 70 per 1,000 live births, whichever implied the largest reduction. The post-2015 agenda will have to carefully consider the implications in selecting a particular type of benchmark – or combination thereof.

### *7.7 Cross-cutting issues*

Covering cross-cutting issues in a global agenda for development is always challenging. Broadly speaking, three strategies can be followed: (i) highlight the issue, (ii) mainstream it or (iii) ignore it. Some argue that the latter two are essentially the same – that mainstreaming invariably leads to ignoring the issue. Whilst this has sometimes been the case, it would be wrong to assume that effective mainstreaming is not possible.

The choice of the appropriate strategy will depend on the type of cross-cutting issue at hand. Gender, for instance, deserves to be highlighted by setting a separate target, due to its intrinsic and instrumental value. Inequalities should be mainstreamed to avoid an insular treatment of the issue. No separate target should be set to highlight it. Governance should be neither highlighted nor mainstreamed because it is too difficult to measure objectively and too hard to deal with politically.<sup>23</sup>

Hence, there is no one-size-fits-all strategy for dealing with cross-cutting issues in a global agenda for development. While some aspects will merit to be highlighted in the form of specific targets, others will be better handled by mainstreaming them. Still others will be best kept off the agenda altogether. Based on wide consultations and expert advice, the Panel and the UN Task Team will have to consider the appropriate approach on a case-by-case basis.

### *7.8 Disaggregated monitoring*

Compelling evidence shows that disparities within most countries are growing – e.g. ILO (2004), UNDESA (2005), WHO (2008), IDS (Kabeer 2010), Oxfam International (Stuart 2010), Save the Children (2010) and UNICEF (2010). Over the past 30 years, income

---

<sup>23</sup> It is often asserted that human development is underpinned by good governance and hampered by its absence. Beyond the commonsensical argument that governance and development influence each other, their relationship is more complex and less linear than what is usually assumed. Too many exceptions on the general rule undercut the validity of any specific association between the two – e.g. Chang (2007). It can be asserted that equitable and sustainable human development is generally associated with good governance and the respect of human rights. Thus, the use of proxy variables may be preferable to pushing the issue of governance on the global agenda because it remains politically touchy, conceptionally unclear and statistically fuzzy.

inequality has worsened in three out of every four OECD countries (OECD 2011a). The editor-in-chief of *Finance and Development* recently penned the following storyline down: “We used to think that overall economic growth would pull everyone up. [...] But now research is showing that, in many countries, inequality is on the rise. [...] In fact, a more equal society has a greater likelihood of sustaining longer-term growth” (IMF 2011). For the first time ever, delegates at the 2012 World Economic Forum placed ‘income disparity’ on the list of global risk factors.

It is not exaggerated to posit that the world will miss the MDGs because disparities within the majority of countries have grown to the point of slowing down global progress. Monitoring must bring this to the fore. Virtually all stakeholders and observers agree on the need to incorporate inequalities in the post-2015 framework. Given the plurality of views about the post-MDG framework, this consensus is quite unique but not entirely surprising. Equitable development embodies the human rights principle of non-discrimination. Yet the evidence points to a systemic discrimination in human development across the majority of countries. Progress has frequently bypassed those who are excluded, marginalised or dispossessed in the majority of countries. Exogenous factors, such as gender, ethnicity, birthplace, mother’s education or father’s occupation are too often determining an individual’s participation in global progress and national prosperity.

Some call for a separate target on inequality. This is ill-advised, not only because it would add to the potential overload of the post-MDG agenda but also because it would lead to an insular treatment of inequalities. Instead, disparities need to be embedded into the development narrative. As Wilkinson and Pickett (2009) conclude, “[t]here is no one policy for reducing inequality [...] and another for raising national performance. Reducing inequality is the best way of doing both”.<sup>24</sup>

The indicator for measuring inequality in the original MDGs – i.e. the ‘share of the poorest quintile in national consumption’ – is either overlooked or the statistics are patchy and non-comparable. Fortunately, improved data make it possible to go beyond income and consumption. Disaggregated statistics regarding several dimensions of human development now exist in the majority of countries – by region, rural-urban location, gender, level of education, ethnic group, and wealth quintile. The coverage and quality of the Demographic and Health Surveys and the Multiple Indicator Cluster Surveys have steadily improved over time. Elsewhere, we explore various methods for adjusting standard statistics on human development to reflect its equitable pattern (Vandemoortele and Delamonica 2010).

Another approach is to formulate global targets so that they focus directly on the situation of the most vulnerable and marginalized segments in any society. Instead of calling for an

---

<sup>24</sup> *The Spirit Level* has been intensely debated and hotly contested. The Rowntree Foundation commissioned Karen Rowlingson (2011) of the University of Birmingham to review the literature. She concludes that general agreement exists about the correlation between income inequality and social problems but not about their causality. Yet several serious studies have found evidence that more inequality leads to more social problems, especially beyond a certain threshold of inequality.

overall reduction in infant mortality, for instance, the global target could set a specific decrease in infant mortality for the bottom half of the population, or among infants whose mother has a below-average level of education, or for the infants born in the most deprived regions of the country.

### *7.9 Global custodian*

The fact that world leaders meet at regular intervals to discuss trends in human wellbeing is a welcome development. Yet the current format does not lead to a real dialogue. Actually, world summits punch below their weight. The post-2015 targets must be accompanied by a different format for conducting global summitry in the future to give a practical meaning to the concepts of ‘international community’ and ‘mutual accountability’. A ‘Global Custodian’ of the post-MDG framework is necessary to make the format of global summits better fit for purpose. A small group of eminent persons – three perhaps – could play that role. They would serve as independent facilitator at world summits that review global progress regarding human development.

Their role would be to present an objective synthesis of global progress towards agreed targets – giving credit where it is due and pointing fingers where it is needed. They would challenge world leaders to go the extra mile so that the legacy will not be one of broken promises. Without an independent and objective custodian, targets set by world leaders will gradually lose credibility. The Global Custodian would form part of the accountability framework of the post-2015 agenda.

## 8. Conclusion and practical suggestions

For better or for worse, the MDGs have had staying power. They have become part of the UN heritage. At the same time, they have been misunderstood and severely criticised. Yet most stakeholders want a global framework beyond 2015. A tiny minority prays for 2015 to come and go so that the MDGs may never reappear on the international agenda. The options available for redesigning the post-2015 agenda are three-fold: (i) retain the MDGs ‘as is’; (ii) redesign the architecture of the current set of targets; or (iii) develop a completely different framework.

The central proposition of this paper is to start by defining the process and to debate the content later. This is critically important because the range of participants and the type of process will influence the outcome. The argument is also made to always consider global targets as servants, never as masters. Adequate time and strong leadership by the Panel and the UN Task Team must be allowed to formulate the draft post-2015 agenda in a participatory, inclusive and bottom-up fashion.

Collins and Hansen (2011) come to the conclusion that great companies tend to change less than unsuccessful ones. They also argue that the best leaders are not more visionary or more creative but that they are more disciplined and more empirical. It means that the post-2015 agenda must be built on the strengths of the MDGs, which include clarity, conciseness and measurability. The need for change must be combined with a degree of

continuity. Furthermore, a little discipline and a touch of empirical evidence will be indispensable to yield a post-MDG framework that is fit for purpose.

CAFOD (2012) sets a good example: “Like every agency, CAFOD have issues that are particularly close to our hearts and that we would like to see as priorities for international cooperation in the future [...] However, CAFOD’s advocacy on post-2015 will step back and look at the big picture, rather than being confined to single issues”. In the formulation of the post-2015 agenda, each partner will have to choose between focusing on the ‘big picture’ or on selling one’s particular agenda. So far, most actors seem to behave rather parochially.

Three dangers loom large for the post-MDG agenda. They risk turning it into an (i) overloaded, (ii) donor-centric and (iii) prescriptive agenda. First, the belief in the perfectibility of the post-2015 framework will inevitably lead to overload. The success of the MDGs is due to their clarity, conciseness and measurability. While most see them as servants, a few want them to be the ultimate master; hence the risk of overload. The MDGs have served the cause for human development well, yet some actors want to overexploit them for their individual concerns. If they prevail, this would lead to a wish list that is unfocused, unending and unattractive. A recent OECD report (2011b) illustrates how not to develop the post-2015 framework. It uses fuzzy and non-measurable concepts, such as social cohesion, social inclusion and social protection. When a concept needs to be explained over and over again, it means that it is not fit for purpose. An overloaded and fuzzy framework will not generate the same staying power with the general public as did the original MDGs. ‘Ockham's razor’ will be indispensable to prevent overload, fuzziness and needless complexity.

Second, another exercise in *donorship* is neither necessary nor desirable. So far, the reflections about the post-MDG framework have been dominated by actors from developed countries. The UN must stimulate similar reviews and debates in selected developing countries so that both parties – developing and donor countries – come equally well prepared to the global forum in 2015. The UN system must play an assertive role as convenor of national reflections, as promoter of participatory consultations, and as aggregator of the ideas about the post-MDG framework.

Third, the absence of something about the means has for some created a vacuum in which they have felt the urge to impose prescriptive policy recommendations. While overall guidance and general principles can be enunciated, specific recommendations about the strategy will always clash with the principles of national ownership, alignment and policy space. Hence, it would be misplaced and naïve to incorporate targets based on specific policy prescriptions. Lessons can be drawn from experience and analyses, but their validity in a particular context does not necessarily mean that they are replicable in another setting. As a process of collective self-discovery, development is always contextual. The post-MDG agenda should focus on a selection of ultimate ends of human development. Details about how to reach them will always be context-specific; and thus must remain the domain of the domestic policy space. The post-2015 framework is about setting an agenda for global development, not about prescribing one.

In sum, a strong gatekeeper will be crucial to ensure that the number of targets remains limited, that the targets can be objectively measured, and that they represent ultimate ends of human development.

Besides reshaping the architecture of the MDGs, the underlying narrative needs to change too. We will not change the MDG-course without changing the MDG-discourse. So far, the debate has focused on growth, aid and governance. Whilst important, these elements are not the only drivers of change. We argue that growing disparities within countries are the principal reason why the global targets will be missed in 2015 – both directly and indirectly as they slow growth and increase instability. As long as disparities in human wellbeing are not measured, societies are unlikely to address them – based on the axiom ‘what we measure influences what we do’. Disaggregated data make it now possible to adjust key national statistics for equity. Concerns about equitable development reflect the human rights principle of non-discrimination; and can, therefore, not be dismissed as ‘social engineering’ or as ‘politics of envy’.

Finally, the following practical points are suggested:

1. The proposal to set up a high-level Panel and a UN Task Team to help formulate the post-MDG framework is the right way forward.
2. The pressure must be resisted to have the post-2015 framework ready and agreed upon at the next global MDG meeting in 2013. Considering the complexity of the task, it is essential to make use of the full period that remains till the MDGs expire, i.e. 31 December 2015. The watchword should be ‘hasten slowly’.
3. The Panel and the UN Task Team will require more time than initially indicated. They are likely to co-exist over the next 3 years. Their relationship and division of labour need to be worked out as soon as possible.
4. The MDG review in 2013 will be an opportunity for the Panel and the UN Task Team to give feedback to the UN member states. But it should be seen as the starting point rather than the finish line.
5. The proposed time-line is detailed below:

<b>Suggested time-line for preparing the post-2015 agenda</b>	
<u>Mid-2012:</u>	establish Panel of Eminent Persons, with UN Task Team up and running
<u>2012-2014:</u>	wide consultation and national reviews; including the 9-point agenda spelled out above
<u>September 2013:</u>	interim report to GA by Panel and UNTT
<u>Early 2015:</u>	Panel and UNTT submit to the GA the final options and suggestions regarding the post-MDG agenda
<u>Late 2015:</u>	GA adopts the new framework
<u>Beyond 2015:</u>	a ‘Global Custodian’ facilitates future summits regarding the post-MDG framework



6. The principal role of the Panel of Eminent Persons and the UN Task Team will be to encourage all partners and stakeholders to be creative, inclusive and disciplined in the design of a post-2015 agenda that is fit for purpose.
7. Clear strategic choices must be made regarding the architecture of the post-2015 agenda. Among the options are versions MDG1.1; MDG2.0 or a completely new design. The second option seems most relevant as well as best feasible because it combines change with continuity. The third option may not only be too fuzzy statistically but also too ambitious politically, given the plurality of views among member states and within the multilateral arena.
8. The terms of reference of the Panel and the UN Task Team should cover the nine-point agenda discussed above, comprising: (i) time horizon; (ii) structure; (iii) new targets; (iv) interim targets; (v) ambition; (vi) benchmarking; (vii) disaggregate monitoring; (viii) cross-cutting issues and (ix) global custodian.
9. The Panel and the UN Task Team must caution against misinterpreting global targets. They must be seen as collective targets that need to be tailored and adapted to the national context. They cannot be used as one-size-fits-all yardsticks for measuring performance at the country level. The post-2015 agenda must be formulated so that it encourages each country to tailor the global targets to the national context. Global targets are only valid as collective targets; never as country-specific or regional ones. The post-2015 agenda must make it clear that global targets are not necessarily attainable in all countries or regions.
10. Goals, targets and indicators are distinct items. Goals should be formulated on the basis of the rights-language to address the criticism voiced by human rights advocates. Targets must then be seen as stepping stones towards the gradual realisation of these rights. Indicators will validate the objective measurability of the proposed targets.
11. It must be recognised that reaching international agreements has gotten harder in recent years. It took several world summits before the global targets were internationally accepted. It would be naïve to think that world leaders will now readily agree on a particular strategy for achieving global targets. Therefore, the focus on selected ends of human development – one of the characteristics of the current MDGs – must be retained. Targets must always be seen as servants, never as masters.
12. General guidance regarding the development narrative can be included – a kind of ‘theory of change’ – but specific policy prescription should not be included in the post-2015 agenda. The endeavour is about setting a global agenda for development, not about prescribing one.
13. Many observers consider the Millennium Declaration as a key document for elaborating the post-2015 framework. There is one critical problem with that argument – namely that a document that was written in the late 1990s can hardly be seen as up to date to address the challenges facing the world beyond 2015. Although key values and principles that are embedded in the Millennium Declaration are timeless, the world has changed too much to claim that the Declaration can serve as a basis for elaborating the post-2015 agenda. The rise of the South, population dynamics, growing inequalities and climate change are among the major changes in the global context that cannot be ignored.

14. While targets embody universal values, they are different from ideals and values. Targets are quantitative, values are qualitative; targets can be contextualised, values are absolute; targets can be clearly delineated, values are general and hard to define precisely; targets are concrete, values are abstract. It is for these reasons that many prefer numerical and doable targets since they are not stirred into action by normative standards and values.
15. The Panel should initially focus its work on conducting participatory consultations with leaders, stakeholders and the affected populations around the world. Most of the nine-point agenda is technical only in appearance; hence too important to be left to academics and experts alone.
16. The Panel will need to be supported by a small professional secretariat, with an adequate budget to conduct consultations with stakeholders that extend wide and deep over the next several months, if not years.
17. The UN Task Team should focus initially on reviewing the technical and substantive aspects of the post-2015 agenda; e.g. benchmarking, time horizon, initial conditions. It should quickly propose an outline of the process and timeline for preparing the post-2015 agenda. This is important and urgent because the range of participants and the type of process will shape the outcome.
18. The post-2015 world faces numerous challenges, no doubt. The question is how to bring them into the development agenda without overloading it. UN agencies, multilateral organisations, bilateral donors, global NGOs and think-tanks are strongly advised to look at the 'big picture' first before pushing their single issues onto the post-2015 agenda. If most players adopt the mentality of 'salesperson' of their particular agenda, then the process is doomed to fail.
19. Overload and needless complexity must be avoided. It must be recognised that the MDG's success is, at least in part, due to their clarity, conciseness and measurability. It would be of little use to formulate a new agenda that is technically sound and conceptionally neat but that is ignored by the public and most stakeholders. Repeating the 'Taurus debacle' is not quite advisable.
20. A gatekeeper will need to be designated among the Panel and the UN Task Team. Ockham's razor will need to be applied repeatedly by asking the following questions: Is the concept clear? Is the indicator solid? Are the data robust? Does it concern an end and not a means? Only if the answers to these are affirmative should the issue be considered in earnest.
21. Brokering the post-MDG framework can be done piecemeal or in its entirety. While less demanding initially, the former will eventually face the challenge of integrating the various components into a coherent framework. The Panel and the UN Task Team will best establish relevant working groups while steering a holistic course – to produce a 'One-World' framework. Unity of leadership will be vitally important.
22. The formulation of the current goal about a 'global partnership for development' (MDG-8) was politically acceptable at the time because it was largely seen as symbolic. The OECD-DAC goals of 1996 were rather one-sided because they ignored the international dimensions of reducing human poverty and omitted the responsibility of developed countries. This time around, all goals will need to be expressed in clear, numerical targets with a fixed deadline. Targets that apply to

- the North will need to be as precise and measurable as the ones that refer to the South. The imbalance in the current MDGs between performance criteria for some and delivery criteria for others can be overcome by formulating a universal agenda for human development.
23. The Panel and the UN Task Team must look into the appropriate mechanisms for establishing the ‘Global Custodian’ of the post-2015 agenda.
  24. The establishment of any other group of scientists, experts or academics to help with the formulation of the post-MDG agenda should be decided upon by the Panel and the UN Task Team; and not by others in order to maintain unity of leadership.
  25. Finally, individuals who were closely associated with the creation and the promotion of the original MDGs should not play a leading role in the process of formulating the post-MDG framework. This to prevent that the new framework will be seen as ‘more of the same’ and to avoid undue influence and potential conflict of interest – or perception thereof. It does not mean, of course, that such people cannot be consulted by the Panel and the UN Task Team.

## References

- AIV (2011) *The Post-2015 Development Agenda – The Millennium Development Goals in Perspective*, The Hague: Advisory Council on International Affairs.
- Anand S., Segal P. and Stiglitz J. (eds) (2010) *Debates on the Measurement of Global Poverty*, Oxford: Oxford University Press.
- Antrobus P. (2003) 'MDGs – Most Distracting Gimmick', *DAWN Informs*, Development Alternatives with Women for a New Era, pp. 6–8.
- Beyond 2015 (2011) *Towards a successor framework to the Millennium Development Goals – Next steps for the United Nations*, <http://www.beyond2015.org/sites/default/files/Towards%20a%20successor%20framework%20to%20the%20MDGs.pdf> (accessed January 2012).
- Bourguignon F., Bénassy-Quéré A., Dercon S., Estache A., Gunning J., Kanbur R., Klasen S., Maxwell S., Platteau J-P., and Spadaro A. (2008) *Millennium Development Goals at Midpoint: Where do we stand?*, paper written for the European Commission as background for the European Report on Development, Brussels: European Commission.
- CAFOD (2012) *Post 2015 policymaking – What is being planned, what might actually happen, and CAFOD's current policy lines*, London: Catholic Overseas Development Agency.
- Carin B. and Kapila M. (2011) *Toward a Post-2015 Development Paradigm*, <http://www.cigionline.org/publications/2011/8/toward-post-2015-development-paradigm> (accessed January 2012).
- Chang H-J (2007) *Bad Samaritans – Rich Nations, Poor Policies and the Threat to the Developing World*, London: Random House.
- Christian Aid (2010) *Poverty: We're All In This Together*, London: Christian Aid.
- Collins J. and Hansen M. (2011) *Great by Choice: Uncertainty, Chaos & Luck – why some thrive despite them all*, New York: HarperCollins.
- Deaton A. (2008) 'Maximum prophet', *The Lancet* 372, pp. 1535–6.
- Deaton A. (2010) 'Price Indexes, Inequality, and the Measurement of World Poverty', *American Economic Review*, Vol. 100, No. 1, pp. 5–34.
- DFID (2011) *Multilateral Aid Review – Ensuring maximum value of money for UK aid through multilateral organisations*, London: Department for International Development.
- Easterly W. (2009) 'How the Millennium Development Goals are Unfair to Africa', *World Development*, Vol. 37, No. 1, pp. 26–35.
- Easterly W. (2010) 'Don't cite global numbers unless you know they're trustworthy (They usually aren't)', *The Aid Watch blog* (New York University), <http://aidwatchers.com/2010/01/don%E2%80%99t-cite-global-numbers-unless-you-know-they%E2%80%99re-trustworthy-they-usually-aren%E2%80%99t/> (accessed March 2012)
- Fischer A. (2010) 'Towards Genuine Universalism within Contemporary Development Policy', *IDS Bulletin*, Vol. 41, No. 1, pp. 36–44.
- Friedman V. (2001) 'Designed Blindness: An Action Science Perspective on Program Theory Evaluation', *American Journal of Evaluation*, Vol. 22, No. 2, pp. 161–81.
- Giffen J. (2011) *After the MDGs – what then?* Policy Briefing Paper No. 28, Oxford: International NGO Training and Research Centre.

- Gordon D. and Nandy S. (2012) 'Measuring Child Poverty and Deprivation'; In: Minujin A. and Nandy S. (eds) (2012) *Global Child Poverty and Well-Being – Measurement, concepts, policy and action*, Bristol: The Policy Press.
- IDS (2010) 'The MDGs and Beyond', *IDS Bulletin*, Vol. 41, No. 1.
- ILO (2004) *A Fair Globalization: Creating Opportunities for All*, Report of the World Commission on the Social Dimension of Globalization, Geneva: International Labour Office.
- IMF (2011) 'All for One: Why inequality throws us off balance', *Finance and Development*, Vol. 48, No. 3, p. 1.
- Kabeer N. (2010) *Can the MDGs provide a pathway to social justice? The challenges of intersecting inequalities*, Brighton: Institute of Development Studies.
- Kakwani N. and Son H. (2006) *New Global Poverty Counts*, Working Paper No. 29, Brasilia: International Poverty Centre of UNDP.
- Kanbur R. (2009) 'Poverty Disconnected', *Finance and Development*, Vol. 46, No. 4, pp. 32–4.
- Kenny C. and Sumner A. (2011) *More Money or More Development: What Have the MDGs Achieved?* Working paper 278, Washington DC: Center for Global Development.
- Kida, T. (2007) *Don't Believe Everything You Think – The 6 Basic Mistakes We Make in Thinking*, Amherst, MA: Prometheus Books.
- Langford M. (2010) 'A Poverty of Rights: Six Ways to Fix the MDGs', *IDS Bulletin*, Vol. 41, No. 1, pp. 83–91.
- Machado A. (1912) *Proverbios y cantares XXIX*, [Proverbs and Songs 29], Campos de Castilla.
- Melamed C. (2012) *After 2015 – Contexts, politics and processes for a post-2015 global agreement on development*, London: Overseas Development Institute.
- Nayyar D. (2011) *The MDGs Beyond 2015*, Research Paper 38, Geneva: The South Centre.
- ODI (2010) *Millennium Development Goals (MDG) Report Card: Measuring Progress Across Countries*, London: Overseas Development Institute.
- OECD (2011a) *Divided We Stand: Why Inequality Keeps Rising*, Paris: Organisation for Economic Co-operation and Development.
- OECD (2011b) *Perspectives on Global Development 2012: Social Cohesion in a Shifting World*, Paris: Organisation for Economic Co-operation and Development.
- Reddy S. (2008) *The New Global Poverty Estimates: Digging Deeper into a Hole*, One Pager 65, Brasilia: International Poverty Centre of UNDP.
- Rowlingson K. (2011) *Does income inequality cause health and social problems?* York: the Joseph Rowntree Foundation. Available at [www.jrf.org.uk](http://www.jrf.org.uk)
- Pollard A., Sumner A., Polato-Lopes M. and de Mauroy A. (2011) *100 Voices – Southern perspectives on what should come after the Millennium Development Goals*, London: CAFOD and Brighton: IDS.
- Pollard A. (2011) *Getting to a post-2015 framework. What are the scenarios?* Catholic Overseas Development Agency, London: CAFOD.
- Quick A. and Burall S. (2011) *A global development framework after 2015 – Engaging poor people in its formulation*, Report of a workshop co-organised by CAFOD, Involve and DFID.

- Saith A. (2005) 'Poverty Lines versus The Poor: Method versus Meaning', *Economic and Political Weekly*, Special Issue on The Measurement of Poverty, Vol. 40, No. 3, pp. 4601–10.
- Save the Children (2010) *A Fair Chance at Life: Why equity matters for child mortality*, London: International Save the Children Alliance.
- Stuart E. (2011) *Making Growth Inclusive – Some lessons from countries and the literature*, Oxfam Research Report, Washington DC: Oxfam International.
- The Guardian (2011) 'Global development: reimagining the goals', *Editorial 30 December 2011*, <http://m.guardian.co.uk/commentisfree/2011/dec/30/global-development-reimagining-the-goals?cat=commentisfree&type=article> (accessed January 2012).
- UN (2000) *Millennium Declaration*, New York: United Nations.
- UN (2005) *Investing in Development: A Practical Plan to Achieve the Millennium Development Goals*, The Millennium Project, New York: United Nations.
- UN (2010) *Keeping the promise: united to achieve the Millennium Development Goals*, Outcome document of the High-level Plenary Meeting of the sixty-fifth session of the General Assembly on the Millennium Development Goals, New York: United Nations.
- UNDESA (2005) *The Inequality Predicament*, Report on the World Social Situation 2005, Department of Economic and Social Affairs, New York: United Nations.
- UNDESA (2010) *Rethinking Poverty*, Report on the World Social Situation 2010, Department of Economic and Social Affairs, New York: United Nations.
- UNECA (2012) *Note for the High Level Panel Discussion on "Articulating a Post-2015 MDG Agenda"*, E/ECA/CM/45/4, Addis Ababa: UN Economic Commission for Africa.
- UNDP (2010) *Beyond the Midpoint: Achieving the Millennium Development Goals*, New York: United Nations Development Programme.
- UNICEF (1990) *Plan of Action for Implementing the World Declaration on the Survival, Protection and Development of Children in the 1990s*, New York: United Nations Children's Fund.
- UNICEF (2010) *Narrowing the Gaps to Meet the Goals*, New York: United Nations Children's Fund.
- van Thiel S. and Leeuw F. (2002) 'The Performance Paradox in the Public Sector', *Public Performance & Management Review*, Vol. 25, No. 3, pp. 267–81.
- Vandemoortele J. (2009) 'The MDG Conundrum: Meeting the Targets without Missing the Point', *Development Policy Review*, Vol. 27, No. 4, pp. 355–71.
- Vandemoortele J. and Delamonica E. (2010) 'Taking the MDGs Beyond 2015: Hasten Slowly' *IDS Bulletin*, Vol. 41, No. 1, pp. 60–9.
- Vandemoortele J. (2011a) 'The MDG Story: Intention Denied' *Development and Change*, Vol. 42, No. 1, pp. 1–21.
- Vandemoortele J. (2011b) 'If not the MDGs, then what?' *Third World Quarterly*, Vol. 31, No. 1, pp. 9–25.
- Onda K., LoBuglio J. and Bartram J. (2012) 'Global Access to Safe Water: Accounting for Water Quality and the Resulting Impact on MDG Progress' *International Journal of Environmental Research and Public Health*, Vol. 9, No. 3, pp. 880-94.

- Walton M. (1997) *Car: A Drama of the American Workplace*, New York: Norton & Co.
- Wilkinson R. and Pickett K. (2009) *The Spirit Level – Why More Equal Societies Almost Always Do Better*, London: Allen Lane.
- WHO (2008) *Closing the Gap in a Generation: Health Equity Through Action on the Social Determinants of Health*, Report of the Commission on Social Determinants of Health, Geneva: World Health Organization.
- WHO/UNICEF (2011) *Report of the First Consultation of Post-2015 Monitoring of Drinking-Water and Sanitation*, Geneva: World Health Organization and New York: United Nations Children's Fund.
- World Vision (2011) *Reaching the MDGs 2.0: Rethinking the politics*, a policy briefing. Monrovia (USA): World Vision International.