

# **UN System Task Team on the post-2015 UN Development Agenda**

## **Review of the contributions of the MDG Agenda to foster development: lessons for the post-2015 UN Development Agenda**

**16 March 2012**

### **Introduction**

More than ten years have passed since world leaders established goals and targets to free humanity from extreme poverty, hunger, illiteracy and disease. In 2000, the UN General Assembly adopted the Millennium Declaration.<sup>1</sup> It was a visionary document which reiterated the global commitment to solidarity, equality, dignity and respect for nature as the core values and driving motives underlining global commitments. Moreover, it was especially powerful as it outlined concrete and specific development goals to be achieved by 2015. These objectives were elaborated in the Millennium Development Goals (MDGs), introduced as the Secretary General's "road map" for the implementation of the Declaration. Eight goals and initially 18 targets and 48 indicators were laid out to harmonize reporting on the Millennium Declaration.<sup>2</sup>

The Millennium Declaration and the MDG framework have inspired development efforts, helped set global and national priorities and focused on subsequent actions. Yet, it is difficult to measure the impact of the MDG framework and subsequent actions on poverty reduction and progress in education, health and other MDG areas. Trends clearly indicate that important progress has been made in most countries, particularly towards the goals of eradicating poverty and improving access to education. However, trends have been uneven across countries and regions and among social groups. Success in poverty reduction, for instance, was concentrated in Eastern and South-Eastern Asia—China, in particular. In other parts of the world, including sub-Saharan Africa, and in countries in conflict or emerging from conflict, progress towards poverty reduction was modest. Moreover, the assessment of progress towards the MDGs has repeatedly shown that the poorest and those disadvantaged because of gender, age, disability or ethnicity are often bypassed. Only one third of those countries that have reduced child mortality rates at the national level, for instance, have succeeded in reducing the gap between child mortality in the richest and poorest households.

The Secretary-General's most recent report on MDGs indicates that progress has been most significant in those countries managing sustained economic growth and lending support to targeted interventions in critical areas.<sup>3</sup> In contrast, progress has been more modest when structural changes and strong political commitment are required to guarantee sufficient and sustained financial support over a longer period of time. This is probably the reason behind the

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<sup>1</sup>United Nations (2000), United Nations Millennium Declaration, General Assembly resolution, A/RES/55/2, para.11.

<sup>2</sup>United Nations (2001), Road Map towards the Implementation of the United Nations Millennium Declaration, Report of the Secretary-General, A/56/326, 6 September 2001, p. 56.

<sup>3</sup>United Nations (2011), "Accelerating progress towards the Millennium Development Goals: options for sustained and inclusive growth and issues for advancing the United Nations Development Agenda beyond 2015: Annual report of the Secretary-General," A/66/126.

poor performance of many countries in reducing maternal mortality and increasing access to improved sanitation facilities by the rural poor. Similarly, progress was sluggish in providing access to safe sanitation, with over 2.6 billion people still lacking access to flushable toilets or other forms of improved sanitation.

This note is not about providing new detail to the observed progress made towards the MDGs; rather, it aims to assess the strengths and weaknesses of the MDG agenda in steering global development processes towards the human development goals and to draw lessons for the post-2015 UN Development Agenda. The note is not based on new studies or analyses, but draws on existing assessments as well as consultations within the UN Task Team for the post-2015 UN Development Agenda regarding the UN experience in support of the implementation of the MDG agenda.

## **Characteristics of the MDGs and their contribution to global development**

### *Perceived strengths*

The MDGs have been an influential framework for global development cooperation, not only in shaping the international discourse, but in driving the allocation of resources towards key global development priorities and improving policy monitoring. They have received unprecedented political commitment which reflects a strong consensus for tackling poverty eradication and other key priorities. The MDGs have proved to be a useful tool because their established time bound and concrete targets which galvanized political leaders, CSOs, the media and international organizations around a clearly defined agenda intended to improve human development.<sup>4</sup>

In the past, target setting also proved successful in raising awareness, directing resources and coordinating international action to achieve goals embraced by consensus. This was the case of the education goals set by UNESCO in the 1960s, which had a significant influence in the then recently independent countries. It was also the case for the goal to eradicate chicken pox in the late 1960s and, perhaps, the target to increase the annual rate of economic growth in developing countries to 5 percent.<sup>5</sup>

However, it was the MDG framework that defined, for the first time, an integrated set of time-bound quantitative targets in an attempt to give operational meaning to some of the basic dimensions of human development and to strengthen the global partnership for development. The MDGs have been instrumental in building a common agenda of broad priorities and have induced governments to take concrete actions and improve coordination in support of poverty reduction efforts. As a result, many developing countries have designed national development strategies explicitly oriented at achieving the MDGs and have aligned these objectives with other national priorities. For instance, it has been argued that the MDGs strengthened the commitment

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<sup>4</sup> Recent reviews of the MDG agenda include: Vandemoortele (2009, 2010, 2011), Vandemoortele and Delamonica (2010), Fukuda-Parr (2010), Manning (2009), Hulme (2009), Sumner and Tiwari (2009), Langford, Yamin and Sumner (2012) among others.

<sup>5</sup>See Jolly (2010) and Vandemoortele (2009). The indicated economic growth target was set in 1961 and developing countries surpassed that target during the First Development Decade.

of African governments to implement poverty reduction strategies and improve policy monitoring, as well as improved support from donor countries.<sup>6</sup>

**Table 1: Strengths and weaknesses of the MDG agenda**

Strengths	Weaknesses
<b>Key conceptualization and characteristics of the MDG agenda</b>	
<p>The integrated agenda influenced policies by giving priority and operational meaning to various dimensions of human development;</p> <p>Simple, transparent and easy-to-communicate agenda;</p> <p>It provided the basis for converging advocacy, thereby helping to strengthen the global partnership for development and directing global and national resources towards poverty reduction and human development;</p> <p>It recognized the special needs of Africa and LDCs and strengthened international commitments to address those needs.</p>	<p>Lack of consultations at its conception to build ownership;</p> <p>Excluded some important issues embodied in the Millennium Declaration, such as peace and security and human rights;</p> <p>Inadequate incorporation of other important issues, especially environmental sustainability, increasing agricultural and industrial production, productive employment and decent work, inequality, social protection, gender and vulnerability to shocks;</p> <p>Limited consideration of the enablers of development,, such as infrastructure and institutional capacity-building in facilitating socio-economic advancement;</p> <p>Failure to account for differences in initial conditions resulting in unambitious targets for many middle-income countries and too ambitious for low-income countries;</p> <p>Emphasis on outcomes led to insufficient attention to processes in the implementation of the agenda, including lack of attention for ensuring that adequate resources were in place for the expected results;</p> <p>Many poorly defined targets for strengthening the global partnership for development.</p>
<b>Format of the MDG agenda</b>	
<p>Clear definition of goals, targets and indicators helped improve policy monitoring and accountability;</p> <p>Supported the development of countries' statistical capacity and the use of robust data in support of development policies;</p> <p>Improved statistical system coordination at national and international levels.</p>	<p>Imprecise quantitative targets were set for on some dimensions, such as for reducing the number of slum-dwellers and several targets related to MDG 8;</p> <p>The definition of targets in relative terms (halve poverty, reduced child mortality by two thirds, etc.) Failure to account for population dynamics and, as a result, progress could be "adequate" against the targets as defined, even as the absolute number of people in poverty and suffering from other forms of deprivation would have increased;</p>

<sup>6</sup>Nhema, 2010.

Strengths	Weaknesses
	<p>Created tensions between national and international statistics due to discrepancies between national and international monitoring systems and data;</p> <p>Perception of a top-down exercise (from the international to the national statistical systems);</p> <p>Lack of clarity on how to tailor global targets to national realities and regional dynamics such as NEPAD, among others;</p> <p>The MDG agenda did not address issues of concern for middle income countries;</p> <p>Lack of alignment between some goals and targets (especially those related to MDG 8)</p> <p>Lack of attention to: i) data disaggregation to monitor progress among vulnerable groups; ii) qualitative dimensions (as in education); and iii) interdependencies across the MDGs.</p>

**MDG implementation**

<p>MDG agenda promoted concrete actions to address human development shortfalls and the goals and targets were made explicit in national development policies;</p> <p>Provided a common framework and an improved coordination opportunity for development actors;</p> <p>Facilitated various forms of intra-regional cooperation;</p> <p>Some countries tailored the MDG agenda to reflect their own realities, including adding relevant goals, targets and indicators and using disaggregated data across regions and vulnerable groups.</p>	<p>MDGs influenced the setting of rather rigid national policy agendas, following international benchmarks, rather than local conditions and often ignoring the complexities of the development process;</p> <p>Policies and programmes did not consider the synergies between achieving the different goals and targets;</p> <p>The way in which “on-track” and “off-track” progress was measured failed to adequately account for considerable progress made by countries with low initial levels of human development (especially in Africa);</p> <p>In the global debate, the MDGs led to overemphasizing financial resource gaps to the detriment of attention for institutional building and structural transformations;</p> <p>Employment creation and improved rural livelihoods for poverty reduction were not clearly addressed in the MDG framework;</p> <p>Monitoring of average results failed to account for inequalities. Sub-national and regional heterogeneity were ignored when assessing progress and challenges at the national level;</p> <p>Global bias to concentrate attention and resources on quick result interventions (e.g., malaria nets, ATRV drugs) to the detriment of dealing with problems requiring more complex interventions (e.g., to reduce maternal mortality).</p>
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The recognized success of the MDGs has been associated with several of their key characteristics. Their embedded priority for human development objectives and the associated framework provided: (i) a clear focus to national policy efforts; (ii) a set of clear, simple, quantitative and easily communicable targets, while providing an integral approach to key human development dimensions; (iii) a starting point for improved accountability through the use of simple but robust indicators; and (iv) a tool for advocacy to strengthen international development cooperation, including through the explicit recognition of the special needs of Africa and LDCs.<sup>7</sup>

### *Perceived weaknesses*

The MDG agenda has been criticized on a number of counts.

First, some question the ownership of the MDG agenda to the extent that there were no consultations with all stakeholders. The original 18 targets were selectively drawn from the text of the Millennium Declaration signed by 191 Heads of States which, in turn, reflected much of the consensus that had been built through various development conferences and summits in the 1990s.<sup>8</sup> But, the MDGs did not reflect all dimensions emphasized in the text of the Millennium Declaration. The decision to include the original 18 targets and not others was made on the basis of the targets that contained previously agreed indicators and robust data for proper monitoring, although that choice was seen by some as reflecting a more politically palatable agenda on access to social services,<sup>9</sup> rather than politically more difficult issues such as inequality or human rights.<sup>10</sup>

Second, defined as global targets, the MDGs were structured following global trends in key development areas. The assumption behind the quantitative targets was that progress in the past 25 years could be sustained in the next 25 years (the life span of a generation). This is what defined the target to reduce poverty by half and to cut child mortality by two-thirds in relation to the benchmark year of 1990, for example.<sup>11</sup> This formulation, however, led to the criticism that the target setting was blind of “non-linearities” in trends: for instance, in the case of child mortality, when getting closer to the target and/or when rates are already low, reducing them further tends to become more difficult and costly. Furthermore, the definition of targets in relative terms (halve poverty, reduce child mortality by two-thirds, etc.) failed to account for population dynamics. As a result, progress could be perceived as “adequate” against the defined targets and indicators, despite the increase in the absolute number of people in poverty and suffering from other forms of deprivation, for instance.

Third, in connection with the previous point, the MDGs have been criticized for failing to take into account the initial conditions of the various regions and countries. In addition, the

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<sup>7</sup>Langford (2010), Vandemoortele(2011), and Mekonen (2010).

<sup>8</sup>Some consensus involved extensive consultations with a broad range of stakeholders.

<sup>9</sup> In relation to social services, the MDGs were silent on different models of service provision and the dangers of exclusion in the context of commercialization of public services, mainly in health.

<sup>10</sup>Vandemoortele (2009 and 2011).

<sup>11</sup>Vandemoortele (2009).

differences in efforts countries would need to make in order to make the same relative degree of progress (e.g., countries with high initial levels of poverty, as those in Africa, would need to make much greater efforts to halve the poverty incidence coming from, say, an initial level of 70 per cent, than a country with an initial poverty incidence of, say, 10 per cent). On a related issue, the MDG framework failed to account for the vulnerability of countries to natural disasters and the possibility of sudden reversals of years of development gains.

Fourth, their focus on minimum achievements (halve extreme poverty as opposed to relative or multidimensional poverty, the focus on primary school enrolment as opposed to secondary education, or the lack of reference to the quality of education) did not capture the challenges of middle-income countries and it overlooked the danger of perpetuating developmental bottlenecks where, for instance, lack of adequate secondary education and teacher training defies the goal of universal primary education.

Fifth, much MDG criticism focuses on what are seen as the “missing targets”, such as decent work, human rights, governance, and peace and security; elements of the international human rights framework not already captured in the MDGs; and the inadequate incorporation of some human development dimensions in the goals and targets such as employment, gender equality, and inclusive, sustainable and resilient development. While all these issues are clearly delineated in the principles and values of the Millennium Declaration, they were not (fully) operationalized as goals and targets within the MDG framework. Lack of concrete (or inadequate) reference to these issues in the MDG agenda did not help to bring resources and proper attention to important development dimensions. This is clearly the case of MDG 3, which only concerns the elimination of gender disparities in education and for the sustainable development targets under MDG 7, which were reduced to the loss of biodiversity.

Sixth, the MDGs present an agenda rather than a development strategy. While clearly rooted in the “human development approach”, they have been interpreted in isolation from the Millennium Declaration. The MDG agenda is not explicit as to the perceived structural causes of poverty and social exclusion, nor in regard to the strategies and policy actions necessary to address the structural causes to facilitate their achievement. The overemphasis on “outcomes”, rather than on development “processes” is seen by some as a major drawback to the effectiveness of the MDG agenda. The fact that strategies/policies have to be context-specific does not mean that some general policy principles cannot be spelled out based on the available evidence. For example, macroeconomic policies should not merely seek to preserve price stability, but should also take heed of employment generation and social goals, while ensuring universal access to social protection and social services critical for consolidating achievements and sustaining further improvements in well-being.

Seventh, while the MDG agenda galvanized broad support for an international development agenda and has arguably strengthened development cooperation, it has not delivered on all the commitments it made to the global partnership for development. Important shortfalls, and even some setbacks, remain in delivering on aid commitments, establishing a fairer multilateral trading system, dealing comprehensively with the debt problems of developing countries, and providing affordable access to new technologies and essential medicines, as stipulated under MDG 8.<sup>12</sup> Lack of progress in these areas reflects, at least in part, political difficulties in

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<sup>12</sup> See United Nations, MDG Gap Task Force Reports of 2008, 2009, 2010 and 2011.

agreeing on more precisely defined targets and commitments on several dimensions of the global partnership for development. Target 8B, for example, reads as “address the special needs of the least developed countries”, but neither identifies the time frame for delivery nor a quantitative target or indicator to monitor progress.

## **The format of the MDG agenda**

### *Perceived strengths*

The format of the MDG agenda (that is, the sequence of goals, targets and indicators) is generally considered effective. As said, it has provided a much more operational framework to the international development agenda, thereby helping mobilize support for development, fostering cooperation and influencing global policy debates. Arguably, it has also helped create stronger accountability mechanisms for the international community. The MDG monitoring requirements and their political importance has also brought the recognition that better monitoring and data are vital for effective design and implementation of development programmes and policies.

Over the years, the MDG indicators, based on established principles and practices of official statistics have become a well-established and widely recognized framework for monitoring and statistical development. They are now widely accepted and used in national, regional and international programmes for monitoring and evaluating the implementation of the goals and have formed the basis for initiatives to develop statistical capacity building programmes in countries and at the global level.

In general, the emphasis on results has served to increase the demand for data and to give wider recognition to the need to develop statistical capacity. Since their adoption, countries and international partners have worked intensively to build and strengthen statistical programmes for the production of the MDG indicators. While discrepancies between international and national data have caused friction, they have also led to a useful discussion about data quality according to international standards and recommendations. Increasing availability of quality data and enhanced use of such data in policy making have improved policy implementation and monitoring.

In many countries, the monitoring exercise at the national level has also contributed to a much improved coordination of the statistical system and collaboration among ministries and various government agencies. Often, a coordination body was established to bring together agencies responsible for data production in various areas and to ensure the data flow from national to international statistical systems.

The regional and sub-regional level responses, in terms of MDG advocacy, monitoring, and good practices and lesson sharing have served as effective and powerful mechanisms that have pushed the MDG agenda forward. The regional dimensions of development and regional responses have emerged as essential building blocks that provided the critical link between global agenda and national level MDG implementation. This is well reflected, for example, in Asia and the Pacific through the long-term partnership between UN/ESCAP, the Asian Development Bank (ADB) and UNDP.

### *Perceived weaknesses*

Despite the positive developments for the statistical community, the MDG monitoring process has, on occasion, been criticized by national statisticians and created tensions between international and national statistical systems. Most of the criticism originated because MDG monitoring was often perceived as a top-down exercise, where the selection of indicators was the result of consultations limited to the international agencies. But also friction was arising from the discrepancies between the global and the national monitoring processes and questions were raised about the sustainability of recently improved statistical capacities in a number of countries.

Many Asia-Pacific and African countries for example, are still not able to conduct household surveys without external financial and technical support and derive most of their MDG data from internationally sponsored household survey programmes, such as those for the Multiple Cluster Indicator Surveys (MCIS) and Demographic and Health Surveys (DHS). Furthermore, improvements in availability of survey data have often been unaccompanied by a strengthening of administrative data recording systems, such as the civil registration or those for social service provisioning, which are critical for continuous monitoring of vital aspects of population trends and availability of basic services.

One of the most important shortcomings of the monitoring framework has been the lack of clarity on how national targets should be defined vis-à-vis global targets. Over the years, more and more countries have adapted the global framework to their national circumstances, both in terms of the numerical targets and the selection of indicators. Quite a number of middle-income countries have overcome the initial concern that the MDGs would not adequately correspond to their development challenges by adding goals and targets or making them more ambitious than the internationally agreed ones. In some cases, new goals, targets and indicators were introduced to give prominence to dimensions not or inadequately captured in the global MDG framework (such as, governance, employment, human rights, and inequality). Nonetheless, while it was never the intention of the original MDG framework, many observers and policy makers have worked with the assumption that every country had to meet the same set of global MDG targets, which has created tensions with setting national priority based on a more country-specific approach.

Another problem that has been signaled is the lack of alignment between some of the MDGs and other frameworks that underpin the Millennium Declaration. One important critique is that the MDGs fall short of human rights standards. While the MDGs overlap with many economic and social human rights principles, their definition in the goals and targets does not always correspond with State's commitments under international treaties and inadequately reflects some of the key human rights principles, including concern with the most vulnerable and marginalized, removing discrimination and respecting the equal rights of all, participation, and rights that require universal access to services.<sup>13</sup> In the case of women's human rights, the lack of reference to CEDAW<sup>14</sup> in the MDG framework diverted attention to an otherwise effective mechanism for stimulating action at the country level to advance gender equality.

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<sup>13</sup> See e.g., OHCHR (2008) and Langford (2010).

<sup>14</sup> Convention on the Elimination of all Forms of Discrimination.

Other limitations of the MDG monitoring framework have been highlighted over the years, including concerns that the structure and content of the framework: (a) are too focused on national averages and do not mandate progress monitored at sub-national levels and across different population groups; (b) are too quantitatively oriented and pay no attention to the quality of the outcomes (e.g., school attendance versus effective learning); (c) put insufficient emphasis on the linkages and interdependencies among the different dimensions of human development as captured by the MDGs; and (d) some of the goals lack well-defined targets that can be unambiguously monitored (in particular in relation to the case of monitoring MDG 8, as already mentioned and as highlighted by the MDG Gap Task Force reports).

Finally, some critics observe that the focus on “measurability” resulted in the exclusion of some key development issues from the framework. While statistical rigour is vital for monitoring, that objective is not sufficient justification for excluding from this global agenda issues of intrinsic importance that may presently elude precise quantitative expression.<sup>15</sup>

## **MDG implementation**

### ***Perceived strengths***

As mentioned above, one of the strengths of the MDG agenda was that it provided policy guidance towards priority human development objectives. Indeed, some countries have made important efforts to adapt the MDGs to their national and local needs. In some cases, new goals, targets, and related indicators have been added to address specific policy priorities, and mechanisms were established to localize the MDGs and engage local authorities in the achievement of national goals through the use of disaggregated data.<sup>16</sup> In those countries, governments typically succeeded in achieving greater national ownership of the goals and targets and in integrating the MDG agenda—or an adaptation of it—into their national development plans. In some countries, the MDGs provided a strong incentive to undertake concrete actions on human development priorities. However, much of this work and related achievements by countries in terms of improving the MDG agenda and framework have been poorly reflected in the international MDG debate.

### ***Perceived weaknesses***

In many countries, however, the MDGs eventually became a prescriptive agenda detached from the discussion about the kind of structural transformation that had to take place to achieve them. Especially in those cases where the internationally agreed MDGs and targets were mechanically used as benchmarks to assess nationwide progress, this has often obscured actual development achievements. Considerable progress made by countries with low initial levels of human development (especially in Africa) would still be categorized as being “off track” for not coming close enough to the target, whereas much less progress made in absolute terms could count as

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<sup>15</sup> For example, the elimination of violence against women, would be an important issue that requires better data for proper monitoring.

<sup>16</sup> For example, Afghanistan formulated additional goals in pursuance of enhanced security; Mongolia did so for governance ; and Lao PDR and Cambodia added targets to overcome the threat of landmines.

“on track” because it would relate to more advanced initial conditions.<sup>17</sup> Such possible insufficient recognition of actual progress may have weakened support for the policy agenda. Going forward, recognition of the initial conditions of countries will help to provide adequate global support for the implementation of successful national policies.

With respect to the global partnership, the MDGs have often been misinterpreted as being about meeting additional aid commitments (which, in turn, would be enough to fill the financing gaps for achieving the goals). This would have created unreasonably high expectations about the role of aid and downplayed the critical importance of domestic revenue mobilization in financing MDG-oriented development strategies.

Some critics have suggested that the MDGs have introduced an undue and mechanistic association of poverty reduction with economic growth with no reference to the structural causes of poverty to deprivation and to inequality as a core development challenge. This static approach has not helped to stimulate an assessment of policy options to achieve desired outcomes and has overemphasized social expenditures and narrowly defined sector-specific interventions to achieve results.<sup>18</sup> International agencies unduly would have promoted a particular set of best practices suggesting that “the most effective interventions to accelerate progress are well known”. Such a technocratic perspective of development did not pay enough attention to the complexities of the development process, including limits set to change and progress by factors such as established power structures, lack of leadership, and weak accountability mechanisms.<sup>19</sup> Similarly, the insufficient explicit recognition of the interdependencies between the MDGs has been seen as a cause of an emphasis on sector-specific as opposed to more integral approaches in the implementation of MDG-oriented development strategies.

It has been argued that the MDGs may have unintentionally obscured persistent inequalities. A monitoring framework that focused attention on average progress may also have led to policies and programmes where interventions would deliver quick results, as in the case of large programmes for the distribution of malaria nets or ATRV drugs. These “quick-fix” interventions appear to have diverted attention away from attending the multiple needs of more structurally disadvantaged groups requiring more costly and more complex interventions, sustained funding and political commitment for prolonged periods of time.

In addition, there was no adequate account of sub-national and regional heterogeneity when assessing progress and challenges at the national level—sub-national inequalities between different population groups did not receive adequate attention. This is particularly important for middle-income countries that report reasonable progress in many areas but may present longstanding unmet needs for sub-national territories and specific social groups.

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<sup>17</sup> These points have been elaborated extensively by several authors, including Easterly (2009), Vandemoortele (2009, 2011), Nayyar (2011, 2012), Fukuda-Parr (2010), Richard, et al. (2011), among others.

<sup>18</sup> Fukuda-Parr (2010).

<sup>19</sup> UNRISD (2010), Solheim (2010).

## **Lessons learned for the post-2015 UN Development Agenda**

It is not easy to weigh all MDG strengths and weaknesses to reach firm conclusions about their impact and added value. For one, we lack a counterfactual to determine the precise added value of the MDG agenda, that is, it is hard to say what progress would have been made without the internationally agreed agenda. Yet, arguably no previous agenda has resonated worldwide and provided a common cause to address poverty and put human progress at the forefront of the development agenda.

In a way, some of the indicated weaknesses have also proved to be strengths. The MDGs were not meant to be comprehensive in the sense of including each and every dimension that determines human development and/or in the sense of spelling out all complexities of the development process. Rather, the design aimed to provide a clear and transparent focus, in order to shift global attention to development beyond the narrow domain of economic growth, which dominated the policy agenda at the time of the Millennium Declaration, and to focus on key dimensions of human development.<sup>20</sup>

The MDG agenda put the focus on end results (reduction of poverty, school enrolment, etc.), rather than on the means to achieve them. It was therefore up to each country to decide the particular development approach or policy framework to achieve the goals.<sup>21</sup> So, the weakness of not providing clear directions regarding the strategy could be seen as a strength by putting national stakeholders in the drivers seat, thus creating greater ownership of the development process. Of course, this strength is by itself no guarantee for success. Some have argued that this silence on policies “was transformed into an opportunity by orthodoxy”<sup>22</sup> in the sense that, despite the broader goals of the MDG framework, in many instances development policies retained their core focus on faster aggregate growth and reliance on aid financing, rather than stimulating structural change for more inclusive and equitable growth patterns and strengthening domestic resource mobilization to finance the expansion of social services and supportive infrastructure.

Stable, affordable and long-term finance remains a constraint on sustainable and inclusive growth in many developing countries. Indeed, and despite some favourable trends in aid flows, in part thanks to the MDGs, trade and investment agreements, and the conditionalities attached to international lending have increased the vulnerability of developing countries to shocks, crises and contagion, and reduced their ability to respond to these challenges. These, moreover, have often restricted the space to design and implement policies tailored to local needs and aspirations, including those connected to the MDG agenda

The MDG agenda format has proven to be another key strength. It established a clear association between overall, inspirational goals and concrete and time-bound targets which could be monitored by statistically robust indicators. This has not only helped keep the focus on results,

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<sup>20</sup> Vandemoortele (2011).

<sup>21</sup> Some critics have argued that by placing the focus on outcomes, the MDG framework did not incorporate elements of the global consensus on the means of achieving development goals through, for example, institutional development, technology diffusion, and capacity development.

<sup>22</sup> Nayyar(2012, p.7).

but also contributed to the strengthening of statistical systems and use of quality data to improve policy design and monitoring by national governments.

Much criticism of the MDG agenda has been attributed to: its lack of attention to monitoring inequalities in MDG progress; its imprecise definition of certain targets and indicators (especially for MDGs 7 and 8); its undervaluation of environmental constraints and related dimensions of sustainable development; missing targets such as full and productive employment and decent work for all including women and youth, social protection, gender and vulnerability to shocks, and the non-operationalization of important development dimensions that were an integral part of the Millennium Declaration (e.g., peace and security, governance and human rights).

Moving forward, the challenge will be to build on the main strengths of the MDG agenda, while recognizing the need to incorporate a number of key development dimensions that have become even more pressing than they were when the Millennium Declaration was conceived. The review of this note suggests that the consultations for the post-2015 UN Development Agenda should seriously take into account the following *Twelve* considerations:

1. The core values contained in the Millennium Declaration seem to be as valid today as an expression of the development challenges as they were in 2000. The core values of equality, respect for nature, solidarity, freedoms, tolerance and shared responsibility unify the UN vision and discourse on global development that integrates economic and social issues and environmental sustainability, equality, respect and fulfillment of human rights. In this sense, the Millennium Declaration may equally inspire a renewed global compact for development based on these principles.
2. More so than was the case in setting the MDG agenda, the “road map” that translates those values into the post-2015 UN Development Agenda would need to build on broad consultations with main stakeholders at global, regional and national levels to generate consensus and ownership from its inception.
3. The new agenda should be tailored to serve as an overarching tool for advocacy on global development priorities, a guide for policies at the national and global level, a framework for global monitoring and progress incentive, and a set of principles and targets that ensure policy coherence and underlie the transformative change suggested by the MDG agenda.
4. A revamped, post-2015 MDG framework should be more sensitive to sub-national disparities and regional specificities (particularly for middle-income countries where more ambitious targets and indicators are feasible).
5. The format of concrete goals, targets and indicators, arguably one of the major strengths of the MDG agenda, should be retained. While target setting should be realistic to be credible, it should not be restricted to what seems easiest to reach or best to measure, as was the case to some extent with the MDGs. For instance, reaching human development goals, while preserving environmental sustainability will require transformative changes,

thus setting targets based on the historical trends of what has proven feasible would likely set the bar too low.

6. Assuming the post-2015 UN Development Agenda is to pursue an inclusive and sustainable global development process, a long-term timeframe (of, say, 25 years) should also be considered for the new agenda. However, for enhanced policy accountability and transparency, it could be meaningful to consider including intermediate targets (say, at five-year intervals).
7. The global agenda should leave great flexibility to tailor targets to regional, national and sub-national realities. National stakeholders should consider appropriate ways to tailor development targets to national and local circumstances through participatory processes. However, with the MDG experience in mind, such processes should not be given a “carte blanche”, but take place within the contours of – perhaps – certain minimum degrees of achievement and the internationally agreed basic principles relating to sustainability, inclusion and equity, full employment and decent work for all, and human rights.
8. It has become increasingly recognized that the regional dimension of development is critical for an effective and coordinated response to addressing an ever-growing number of transboundary development challenges. Therefore, due consideration should be given at the outset to regional responses as they are essential building blocks that provide the critical link between global agenda and national level implementation of the post-2015 UN Development Agenda.
9. Everything considered, it seems meaningful to retain the focus of MDG agenda on *ends*. However, given the transformative changes that would be needed to achieve inclusive and sustainable development in the post 2015 framework, it may be important to give consideration to the means and intermediate processes that underpin sustainable human development, making sure that policy recommendations do not become prescriptive and have the flexibility to take account of national realities, but include a mechanism to revisit National Budgets and Plans against development gaps. Explicit reference may be needed to policies that foster productive investment and greater consistency between growth-promoting macroeconomic policies with developmental industrial policies and redistributive measures. One possible set up could be to identify a framework consisting of (global) goals and targets defining the ambitions for human development and limits of sustainability that cannot be surpassed, alongside certain principles that would guide strategies and policy coherence (without prescribing the policies themselves) and a minimum set of conditioning and enabling factors to be reckoned.
10. To avoid one important weakness of the MDG agenda, more prominence would need to be given to the goal of promoting substantive equality between and within countries, as part of the post-2015 global development agenda, including better use of data disaggregation. To that end, greater attention should be given to: i) data disaggregation to monitor progress among vulnerable groups; ii) to qualitative dimensions; and iii) to interdependencies across the goals.

11. Goals and targets should better account for demographic dynamics, including expected population growth and changes in the age structure and geographical distribution of the world population. Demographic pressures, particularly those associated with a rapidly urbanizing planet are placing increasing pressure on labour markets and social services in many developing countries, while adding to the demands on agricultural systems.
12. Goals and targets for the global partnership should be more precisely defined to improve accountability. The post-2015 framework should avoid interpreting the global partnership for development as a partnership of developed versus developing countries and donors versus recipients.

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