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THE MILLENNIUM DEVELOPMENT GOALS: WHERE ARE THEY NOW?

Depending on whom you ask, the United Nation's Millennium Development Goals (MDGs) are either the world's long needed panacea, or merely another UN publicity stunt, cashing in on the poster child of 21st century economics: sustainable development. This series of goals, certainly ambitious and broad, seems to address the most despicable problems of the world today: poverty, inequality, HIV-AIDS and other infectious diseases, environmental instability, and a fragmented global community. Such a united and well monitored program has infrequently been seen in development planning. The basic premise however is not new - to bring self sustaining development to those nations and states which are considered to be lacking in education, in health, in disease control or in environmental sustainability. This leads us to question whether the MDGs have finally hit at the heart of the problems faced by developing states. Are these goals, which have been laid out by the UN in a mere thirty-seven words, at all appropriate for the complex position the world finds itself in? And finally, have they any hope of success?

The world's problems are certainly not simple, and nor will be the path to their resolution. Torn by both internal and external conflict, suffering disease of pandemic proportions, experiencing population stress and unprecedented environmental challenges - there are no painless solutions. What's more, the recent financial crises have only managed to further complicate the aforementioned challenges, partially undoing hard won advances. The MDGs on the other hand are a series of eight very simple goals (refer to Table 1) with the hope of righting these complex wrongs. Does this suggest a design flaw inherent in the scheme? One could suggest for example that the goal of eradicating extreme poverty and hunger is simply too ambitious when faced with the multidimensional nature of poverty in the real world. Upon closer examination however, such is not the case. Rather, this broad nature is one of the MDGs' defining features and undoubtedly an ingenious and effective one at that. The goals have enjoyed unprecedented and rapid support internationally, having worked their way into the policy framework of all 191 United Nation member states.¹ Few other supposed global targets in any policy discipline have enjoyed such support. One needs only to look at the difficulties experienced by the formation and implementation of The Kyoto Protocol, a treaty with similar aspirations of ubiquity to see that the MDGs have excelled where other programs have lacked. They have managed to effectively summarise the problem(s) whilst maintaining relevance at both the macro (government) and micro (individual) scale.

TABLE 1

- 1 Eradicate extreme poverty and hunger
- 2 Achieve universal primary education
- 3 Promote gender equality and empower women
- 4 Reduce child mortality
- 5 Improve maternal health
- 6 Combat HIV/AIDS, malaria and other diseases
- 7 Ensure environmental sustainability
- 8 Develop a global partnership for development

Similar to the \$1-a-day poverty line, the MDGs have successfully made the transition from the field of development economics to the daily broadsheets and tabloids and, to a large extent, the public eye. In the case of the \$1-a-day poverty line however, the statistic's ability to draw public attention was offset by its rather weak theoretical base (see note 2).² The MDGs do not appear to suffer a similar weakness. Their simple outer-layer is constructed upon strong foundations with the eight goals each having various targets (twenty in total) and each target relying on over sixty specific indicators. This web-like structure then allows its different users to extract as much or as little information as necessary, remaining relevant to the layman whilst providing sufficient direction for policymakers and national governments. In this way, the design of these goals is one of their greatest strengths. By being succinct and accessible they are able to command popular support. This popular support in turn commends the goals to national governments who, despite the broad range of the MDGs, are able to delve deep enough to construct realistic policies.

We must remember however, that it is the substance that counts. All the genius that the MDGs contain in their structure will count for nothing if their content cannot address the problems at hand. Undoubtedly, designing the content of the policies is a much more complex task than designing their structure and, lamentably, this policy design has been based on much less experience and information. Development economics is, after all, a relatively young field. Effectively born after World War II, it must be recognised that despite what is now known, there has been little time to develop a good understanding of policy design and the most effective manner to augment the chance of success with money spent. To put things into perspective, at a similar age, the field of political economics was still coming to terms with the writings of Adam Smith. While his work remains relevant, the passage of time has brought with it many more theories and a much enhanced understanding.

The goals are reasonably well designed when considering recent development experience. They set specific targets, rely on specific indicators, and most importantly are frequently assessed, albeit internally.³ Whilst a self-monitoring program seems blindingly obvious, many development programs of the past, both bilateral (government-to-government) and multilateral (generally an international body made up of various parties - eg. the World Bank) have effectively used their balance sheets as a measure of their success. Whilst easily measurable, this assessment fails to accurately reflect the programs' effect on its underlying goals. By setting themselves up as such, they serve as little more than money shifters, declaring themselves successful for moving X amount of millions every year and overlooking physical successes and failures. For once it seems the UN is willing to offer an honest assessment of its progress towards its goals, considering both their gains and their losses.

- 1 United Nations Secretariat, *The Millennium Development Goals Report 2009*, United Nations, New York, 2009.
- 2 The \$1-a-day poverty line can be criticised for not being based on an actual basket of goods and hence having no base in reality. The World Bank now considers 1.08 USD (at 1993 purchasing power parity) as the realistic international poverty line. The grace of this poverty line however is its simplicity and understandability.
- 3 See for example *The Millennium Goals Report 2009, 2008, 2007, 2006, 2005*, United Nations, New York.



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Borrowing a line from the 19th century English poet Robert Browning,⁴ "a man's reach should exceed his grasp." Historically, this has been the attitude taken in development planning, where unfortunately, unfulfilled goals result in large scale suffering. Once again it may appear that the UN has over-reached when designing such a broad policy agenda. William Easterly, a talented economist and notable foreign aid sceptic, calls for "piecemeal interventions" rather than a "big plan" to address the inequality in outcomes between nations.⁵ According to Easterly, such piecemeal interventions are much more successful as they provide obvious benchmarks which can be used to judge the performance of aid providers. Such accountability tends to be a strong incentive to these aid organisations. Whilst one would be very hard pressed not to include the MDGs in the "big plan" basket, a black and white classification such as this fails to recognise the whole truth. The goals, although contained in an umbrella plan which has undoubtedly been designed on a macro scale, each contain various of Easterly's "piecemeal solutions." One such example, is a school feeding program (SFP), included in the design of MDG 1. Although such a program⁶ is not going to solve the various large scale problems faced by a poor country, nor launch it into self sustained growth (a development pipe dream), it does address various daily challenges. SFPs have been shown to improve physical and psychosocial health when properly employed, at the same time increasing school attendance rates and creating demand for goods produced close to home.⁷ These programs, along with various other locally based, small-scale initiatives can be found included throughout the MDGs. Whilst their inclusion does not signify that the goals can be considered a series of piecemeal interventions, it does demonstrate that the UN has attempted to address past shortcomings and has not fallen into the trap of designing a completely "top-down big plan."

Since the MDGs give the appearance of simplicity, perhaps the best way to assess their content is equally simple. Using a pair of basic criteria this assessment can be undertaken. Firstly, the value of the ideal in question must be examined. This is to say, we must examine whether the goal is sufficiently beneficial that UN member-countries have an incentive to pursue it. Secondly, we must consult reality and ensure that the goals are achievable. The criteria are effectively in competition, presenting to those developing the MDGs a trade off between the size of the goals and their achievability. In terms of the first criterion, the MDGs can be considered effective. All eight goals provide unequivocal benefits to a large and definable group of beneficiaries. These groups range from the 73 million children worldwide who remain unenrolled in primary school (MDG 2), the nearly 10 million children who die annually before their fifth birthday⁸ (MDG 4), to every single being on the globe (MDG 7). Whilst cumbersome and unnecessary for the purpose of this article, the same analysis can be run for every MDG and sub-target and in each case a large group of deserving beneficiaries can be found, thus justifying its adoption. The suggestion that the MDGs be taken further is shown to hold little water as, according to our second criterion, this expansion is hard to justify. When considering the scope of the goals, along with the time frame and resources available to fulfil them, we must conclude that the goals have pushed far enough, or indeed have already crossed, the boundary of achievability.

What chance do we have to achieve these targets by 2015? Unfortunately, when looking at the MDGs as a whole, considering every region, every goal, and every target it can safely be concluded that we simply will not achieve what we hope. This is not to suggest that the outcome will be a failure. Far from it. Indeed much progress has been made and there is still time for improvements. Notably, an improvement in the rate of primary education, a large reduction in the number of people living in extreme poverty, and a significant decline in the under five mortality rate, count among the greatest successes of the program.⁹ However, due to the enormous nature of these goals, complete fulfilment was always far from likely. It seems in fact, that the

UN may have once again taken heed of our poet Browning's advice, reaching (albeit with the best intentions possible) beyond their grasp.

There are areas which require urgent attention; specifically the pressing nature of environmental sustainability, which every day is becoming a greater challenge. Yet another 'climate change summit' has recently passed us in Copenhagen and unfortunately has left many questions on the table. Once again, serious binding resolutions have not been set down, suggesting that perhaps this summit was a failure. Indeed, Gary Becker, a Nobel laureate in economics, posits just this in his article "Failure in Copenhagen".¹⁰ Unfortunately the problems faced in creating such an accord go far beyond pure administrative or bureaucratic impediments. Economically speaking, this is an international tragedy of the commons. Despite the fact that every individual and country has the incentive to restrict their greenhouse gas emissions, it is difficult to align these incentives. Thus, rather than abstain from using the common land, and risk that others will not, every individual is rational to revert to their second choice of maximizing their short-term profit at the expense of their long-term well being. Of course there are ways to align the interests of the parties, for example by charging the user to pollute, or by capping emissions using vendible credits (so called carbon credits). As a matter of fact, these solutions are within the reach of an international organization such as the UN however the difficulty arises in trying to reach a binding agreement, as once again, national interests come into play. If opposing interests cannot be aligned the seventh goal of environmental sustainability will not be fulfilled, and in fact, we seem to be moving away, rather than towards a successful resolution. Incidentally, by managing to coordinate the incentives of the parties involved, this will go a long way towards developing a so called "global partnership for development" (MDG 8).

Further complications, entirely unforeseeable at the turn of the millennium, have only acted to slow or set back the progress enjoyed. As recently recognised by the United Nations Secretariat, the global economic crises along with rising prices of food have pushed more people into extreme poverty, undoing some hard-earned improvements.¹¹ This challenge puts the MDGs in an increasingly compromised position, demanding some sort of action to re-take lost ground and continue in the right direction.

- 4 R. Browning, *Andrea del Sarto*, 1855, archived in The University of Toronto's on-line Representative Poetry, <http://rpo.library.utoronto.ca/display/index.html>, consulted 7 August 2009.
- 5 W. Easterly, *The White Man's Burden: Why the West's Efforts to Aid the Rest Have Done So Much Ill and So Little Good*, Penguin Press, New York, 2006, p. 10.
- 6 Effectively students receive a free meal at school as a reward for their attendance. These programs are generally paid for using development aid but are managed and implemented locally.
- 7 E. Kristjansson et al., *School feeding for improving the physical and psychosocial health of disadvantaged elementary school children*, Institute of Population Health, School of Psychology and Centre for Global Health, Ottawa, 2007.
- 8 United Nations Secretariat, *The Millennium Development Goals Report 2008*, United Nations, New York, 2008, p. 3.
- 9 United Nations Secretariat, *The Millennium Development Goals Report 2009*, p. 4.
- 10 G. Becker, "The Becker Posner Blog" 20 December 2009, *Failure in Copenhagen*, University of Chicago Law School, Chicago, <http://uchicagolaw.typepad.com/beckerposner/>, consulted 21 January 2010.
- 11 United Nations Secretariat, *The Millennium Development Goals Report 2009*, p. 1.

Whilst it is easy, and at times popular, to criticise such an ambitious set of goals, particularly when additional challenges are encountered, criticism alone does little to turn the development tide. What then can we suggest to increase the chance of success? By now it should be clear to bilateral aid providers that it is time to embrace the 0.7% gross national product (GNP) target. For nearly 40 years, the members of the UN General Assembly have committed themselves to providing 0.7% of rich countries' GNP to development activities. Realistically, with the ratification of the MDGs it could be expected that member countries would finally fulfil this long ignored commitment. Lamentably, this has not been the case. The Australian Government through AusAID recently committed to providing 0.5% of Gross National Income (GNI) to official development assistance by 2015-16.¹² Whilst this is a much needed improvement, it begs the question: when will we finally reach 0.7%, a target which is currently being met by various other nations?¹³ Obviously we can not postulate *a priori* that such a commitment would lead to the fulfilment of the MDGs. The prominent economist Jeffery D. Sachs however is an outspoken proponent of this plan and puts forward a convincing and reasoned argument in its support.¹⁴ Ignoring this advice is entirely possible, although if this means continuing down the current path of inequality and poverty, it would count as a tragic missed opportunity.

Without a doubt the Millennium Development Goals are a much needed undertaking and, for once, manage to address the shortcomings of many other programs initiated by large NGOs. For this the United Nations should receive due recognition. Unfortunately, due to the enormous scope of the project as well as a number of unfavourable and unpredictable events, the progress towards the achievement of these goals has fallen slightly off-track. This does not mean this project is bound to be a failure or should be listed as such, and certainly does not mean we should consign the MDGs to the dustbin (or too-hard-basket). If anything, this calls for a concerted, determined effort in the face of the recent set-backs. These events could be used as a catalyst for change in the way that development assistance is structured around the globe. It is easy in times of 'crisis' to take a short-term view, and lose sight of the things which are not directly in focus. This simply cannot be allowed to happen, as by the time these issues re-appear at centre stage, it will not be because the solution is close at hand. Rather it will be because the situation is tragically out of hand due to our short-sightedness and neglect, signalling that we have failed to grasp the opportunity we are holding right now. We must unite our collective reach and collective grasp.

¹² Australian Government, 'AusAID' 5 January 2010, *Building on the 2010 Blueprint - A reform agenda for 2015*, AusAID, Canberra, http://www.ausaid.gov.au/publications/pdf/Building_on_2010Blueprint_public%20version%20final.pdf, consulted 29 January 2010.

¹³ Denmark, Luxembourg, Netherlands, Norway, Sweden plus commitments from various other nations

¹⁴ See for example *Common Wealth - Economics for a Crowded Planet* (2008)

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