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Post 2015 – What Comes After the Millennium Development Goals

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POST-2015

WHAT COMES AFTER THE MILLENNIUM DEVELOPMENT GOALS?

In June 2013, a High Level Panel appointed by the United Nations (UN) Secretary-General Ban Ki-moon called on UN member states to adopt a sustainable development agenda that will “Leave No One Behind.” **Michael Switow** shares civil society’s analysis of this report, taking a look at what it got right, what was wrong and where it missed out altogether.



Michael Switow is a Singapore-based writer, producer and anti-poverty campaigner. He serves on the Global Council of the world’s largest anti-poverty coalition, the Global Call to Action Against Poverty (GCAP) and is the co-founder of ONE (Singapore) which is dedicated to raising public awareness and taking concrete actions to Make Poverty History. Michael has participated in several post-2015 stakeholder discussions.

A global conversation is underway—from rural villages and capital cities across Africa, Asia and Latin America to the UN headquarters in New York City¹—to create a new development framework; one which should encompass rich and poor countries alike, guiding our nations and communities on a path of sustainable development while eradicating extreme poverty once and for all.

The goal may seem utopian, but the discussion is rooted in practical experience. We know that the right policies can make a very real difference in people’s lives. We also know that the major crises facing our planet—climate change, poverty, war, economic and financial crises—are intricately linked.

“We cannot talk about food security without regulation of financial markets, poverty without (addressing) unfair trade, peace and security without small arms control, land degradation without talking of climate,”² former German

President and IMF Managing Director Horst Kohler told an international gathering of civil society delegates in Bonn in March 2013.

And while some fatalists may say that there will always be poverty in this world, one of my favourite quotes is from Nelson Mandela, who reminds supporters and policy-makers that we are the masters of our fate. “Like slavery and apartheid, poverty is not natural,” Mandela told more than 20,000 people packed into London’s Trafalgar Square in 2005.³ “It is man-made and can be overcome and eradicated by the actions of human beings.”

THE MILLENNIUM DEVELOPMENT GOALS⁴

At the end of the last century, UN members tried to address these issues with the adoption of the Millennium Development Goals (MDGs), a set of eight interlinked concrete time-bound targets to halve extreme poverty, improve access to education, promote gender equality, address serious diseases and more.

While the Millennium Declaration was well-received, the MDGs themselves were derided by many observers at the time as the “Minimalist Development Goals,” because even if the targets were met, half of the people living in extreme poverty would still be impoverished. Focusing on specific diseases and health issues like malaria and HIV/AIDS could be at the expense of social safety nets and strengthening health systems as a whole. And the only MDG focused on wealthy countries, the “Global Partnership for Development,” lacks binding commitments.

Despite these and other shortcomings, the MDGs have made an impact. The goals provide a basis for mobilising resources, such as the US\$23 billion Global Fund⁵ to Fight AIDS, Tuberculosis and Malaria—which has



Figure 1: A set of eight interlinked targets adopted at the end of the 20th Century. Source: UNDP Brazil

provided AIDS and tuberculosis treatments to some 14 million people and delivered over 300 million insecticide-treated mosquito nets—or the G8’s Muskoka Initiative on Maternal, Newborn and Child Health and the UN Every Woman Every Child initiative which have mobilised more than US\$20 billion for maternal and child health. The UN reports that the under-five mortality rate has dropped by more than 40 per cent from 1990 to 2011 (which means 14,000 fewer child deaths per day⁶), and that maternal deaths have declined by 47 per cent over a similar period.⁷ More children are in school and nearly two billion people have gained access to basic sanitation. The MDGs also encourage data collection to assess progress, and they are a useful vehicle for civil society to hold governments to account.

Yet, by focusing on national and global metrics, the MDGs also mask inequalities between and within communities and countries. The daughter of a farmer from a marginalised caste in rural India, for example, is unlikely to have access to the same education, health care and opportunities of a boy growing up in New Delhi. We must also not get lost in the percentage reductions or lose sight of the reality that we *can* and *must* do better. We live in a time of sharply rising inequality in which planetary boundaries are not respected, and the human rights of billions of people living in poverty are denied on a daily basis.

POST-2015 GOALS



Figure 2: Twelve goals by “A New Global Partnership: Eradicate Poverty and Transform Economics through Sustainable Development.”

Source: High Level Panel/ United Nations

POST-2015

In July 2012, UN Secretary-General Ban Ki-moon appointed a High Level Panel on Post-2015 (HLP) to hold consultations and develop recommendations on a post-2015 development framework. The HLP⁸—consisting not only of 27 members chosen largely from governments, but also including a few prominent activists like Nobel Peace Prize winner, Tawakkol Karman and The Elders’ Graça Machel—was chaired by Indonesian President Susilo Bambang Yudhoyono, Liberian President Ellen Johnson-Sirleaf, and British Prime Minister David Cameron.

For nine months, the HLP received inputs from the private sector, civil society, youth, parliamentarians and others at regional stakeholder meetings, national consultations, thematic consultations, online discussions, plenaries and more. The panel’s report, authored by Homi Kharas of the Brookings Institution, provides a vision to “end extreme poverty” by 2030 and establish “building blocks of sustained prosperity for all.”

The report, entitled “A New Global Partnership: Eradicate Poverty and Transform Economies Through Sustainable Development,”⁹ proposes five “transformative shifts” and 12 post-2015 goals. It has also informed the UN Secretary-General’s recommendations to the General Assembly in September 2013.¹⁰

The biggest proposed shift is a promise to “leave no one behind.”¹¹ According to the authors of the report, “this is a major new commitment to everyone on the planet who feels marginalised or excluded, and to the neediest and most vulnerable people, to make sure their concerns are addressed and that they can enjoy their human rights.”¹² The post-2015 development agenda “must ensure that ... neither income nor gender, nor ethnicity, nor disability, nor geography, will determine whether people live or die, whether a mother can give birth safely, or whether her child has a fair chance in life.”¹³

The HLP Report has received mixed reviews though, from activists, people’s movements and development organisations. While the report does include a number of long-standing civil society recommendations, it fails to provide the transformative agenda that it promises and neglects key issues that perpetuate poverty and inequality.

THE POVERTY LINE

Let’s start with the measure of extreme poverty. The HLP is using a baseline of US\$1.25 per day. This is the same as the figure used in the MDGs. (When the MDGs were first adopted, the measure was US\$1 per day, but this was updated in 2005.) The panel hopes this global poverty line may rise to US\$2 by 2030, but it continues to base its measurements on the current figure. Taking inflation and real prices into account, US\$1.25 obviously buys a lot less in 17 years than it does now. In addition, as people migrate from rural to urban areas, an ongoing trend, basic expenses do rise.

Even today, how much can US\$1.25 actually buy? Photog-

rapher Stefen Chow and economist Lin Hui-Yi in their project, *The Poverty Line*¹⁴ provide an interesting visual representation of the poverty line in 20 countries, including the choices that someone with this income level may face. In China, for example, US\$1 buys four bananas or one egg tart. In Switzerland, the poverty line is much higher at more than US\$10 per day. But this still only buys two sausages or one bunch of romaine lettuce. (Read more on the work by Chow and Lin on page 67 to 71.)

“(\$1.25 per day) is not a poverty line but a starvation line,” notes the Post-2015 Women’s Coalition, a grouping of nearly 100 women’s networks from Afghanistan to the US, in its response to the HLP Report. “It measures how many people are likely to soon die of malnutrition, exposure, etc., rather than a measurement of living with dignity, which is what eradication of poverty should indicate.”¹⁵

According to the UN and the World Bank, the global community has actually already met the first MDG, halving extreme poverty, two years ahead of schedule, based on the US\$1.25 line. But, to most observers, it does not feel as if poverty is on the decline.

“Why are the bells not ringing? Where are the fireworks celebrating that humanity is (or will soon be) finally free from want?” asks Roberto Bissio,¹⁶ the director of Social Watch, an NGO network that monitors government commitments. “(The) optimistic statistical conclusion (that the first MDG has been met) in fact hides much more complex realities.”

Not only does the basic basket of consumer goods continually change over time (think about the importance of mobile phones, school supplies or being able to afford quality health care), poverty is also relative. It’s relative to where you live and to those around you. “Poverty under a fixed line is not the poverty that the public perceives,” notes Bissio, bringing us back again to the issue of inequality.



Switzerland, Romaine Lettuce, Geneva, 2011,
CHF7.97 (US\$10.25, €7.15) for food
(Image: Stefen Chow / The Poverty Line)



Switzerland, Sausages, Geneva, 2011,
CHF7.97 (US\$10.25, €7.15) for food
(Image: Stefen Chow / The Poverty Line)



China, Egg Tarts, Beijing, 2012,
Chinese Yuan 6.30 (US\$1.00, €0.75)
(Image: Stefen Chow / The Poverty Line)



China, Bananas, Beijing, 2012,
Chinese Yuan 6.30 (US\$1.00, €0.75)
(Image: Stefen Chow / The Poverty Line)

A RED FLAG¹⁷

In March 2013, the Berlin Civil Society Centre (since renamed the International Civil Society Centre) convened a gathering of international activists in Bonn to discuss the Post-2015 development agenda and present proposals to the HLP. Kharas, who would later write the panel's report, gave a summary of the HLP's work to date as well as his thinking on where the discussions were headed. His speech frustrated many of the attendees, leading them to draft a "Red Flag Statement," outlining eight key issues that must be addressed for civil society to support the panel's work.

We caution against developing a set of reductive goals, targets and indicators that ignore the transformative changes required to address the failure of the current development model, which is rooted in unsustainable production and consumption patterns and exacerbates inequality as well as gender, race and class inequities.¹⁸

Attendees were particularly concerned about the roles and relationships being staked out involving government, business and multilateral institutions.

Initial reaction from the Panel to this "Red Flag" was positive, both in a town hall meeting and by a HLP staff member who wrote that the letter was recognised as "an important input by the panel" which would hopefully "continue to be a strong point of reference in their work."

So how did the HLP report actually measure up?

Let's begin with the overarching theme and concern of inequality. If the HLP report were to be adopted by the UN as the new global development framework, would no one be left behind?

INEQUALITY

Across the planet, income inequality is rising sharply. We've felt this in Singapore where the monthly wages of the top 10 per cent have risen three times faster than the wages of the bottom 10 per cent.¹⁹ Globally, the top 0.5 per cent of the population holds over 35 per cent of the wealth and the billion richest people account for 72 per cent of world consumption. What about the bottom billion? They account for less than one per cent of consumption.

To provide a forum for people living in impoverished and marginalised communities to share their stories and concerns, three civil society networks—the Global Call to Action Against Poverty (GCAP), Beyond 2015 and the International Forum of National NGO Platforms—facilitated a series of national and local consultations in nearly 40 countries across four continents. (Other networks and organisations like CIVICUS and the United Nations Development Programme funded additional consultations.)

This vast and growing gap was clearly reflected from the participants, whose comments were quoted in the *Civil Society Demands for the Post-2015 Agenda from 39 Countries*.²⁰

"The economy is growing, but poverty is increasing. Clearly we need to change the way we define progress." – Nigeria²¹

"The most disadvantaged have seen few or no improvements and the disparities between them and others have only increased." – Finland²²

"Poverty continues to exist in our society because of unequal access to resources and services such as land, education, health and opportunities such as employment." – Nepal²³

The HLP notes that inequality is a cross-cutting issue, and in its promise to “leave no one behind,” it argues that the root causes of inequality must be addressed. However, the HLP report emphasises equality of opportunity, leaving the trickier issue of redistribution to national governments. Inequality is also largely absent from the HLP’s 12 proposed goals and 56 indicators.

Civil society campaigners have been unified in calling for a top-level post-2015 goal to address inequality and have proposed that indicators could be linked to a nation’s Gini Index or Palma Ratio.²⁴ Furthermore, a key to ensuring that no one is left behind—that marginalised, excluded and disadvantaged individuals and communities have access to social services and opportunities—is that development be grounded in human rights.

HUMAN RIGHTS

Every individual on our planet has a right to live in dignity. The rights to food, education, housing, social security and decent work are enshrined in international law. Yet human rights violations are “both a cause and consequence of poverty.”²⁵

Without a rights-based approach to development, people are left out. The interests of powerful groups can trump the needs of people living in poverty, just as the supporters of a government may benefit more than its opponents.

A rights-based approach ensures that people living in poverty are empowered and recognised to be “key actors in their own development, rather than passive recipients of commodities and services.”²⁶

“The Post-2015 agenda must be rooted in the existing international human rights architecture, which has been developed over six decades,” notes the Red Flag statement. “Human rights law provides a universally-recognised framework that clearly delineates the common but differentiated responsibilities of all actors to respect, protect and fulfill human rights, both within and between countries.”

At first glance, the HLP acknowledges and accepts this point of view. Their report states that “new goals and targets need to be grounded in respect for universal human rights” and that we must “achieve a pattern of development where dignity and human rights become a reality for all.” It also says that human rights are a key principle for global partnership.

Yet, the HLP does not make any direct mention of economic, cultural or social rights. Instead, it narrowly frames its recommendations in terms of civil and political rights. It also fails to address the need for access to justice and remedy when rights are denied.

PEACE AND HUMAN SECURITY

Freedom from fear is another basic right. But violent conflict affects people and communities in nearly one out of every three countries. Families are torn apart, livelihoods disrupted, communities decimated. The story is all too familiar, whether it be in a Burmese town devastated by religious violence, the Mexican countryside where fighting between drug cartels and the government has claimed 86,000 lives or the Central African Republic where a total breakdown in law and order has left 1.6 million people in need of assistance of basic necessities.²⁷

Development is impossible without peace, just as enduring peace is impossible without development.

“We need to sit and honestly reflect on what we are telling the children and mothers and fathers living in conflict-affected areas,” writes Paul Okumu of the Africa Civil Society Platform on Principled Partnership.²⁸ “We should aim to make justice and prosperity a reality for everyone, not because they are fundamental—they are—but because we respect life and decency.”

Fortunately, on this issue, the HLP seems to agree. It notes that peace is “a core element of well-being, not an optional extra” and is suggesting a post-2015 goal to “ensure stable and peaceful societies.” Proposed indicators include reducing violent deaths; eliminating all



Matryoshka dolls from India



Art installation in Christchurch, New Zealand

forms of violence against children; ensuring that justice institutions are accessible, independent, well-respected and follow due process; and enhancing the capacity, professionalism and accountability of the security forces, police and judiciary.

However, there is nothing about budgeting for peace rather than war (curbing military expenditure, which often comes at the expense of social programmes). The HLP report also ignores the reality that most contemporary conflicts are caused by greed and competition for natural resources, as GCAP points out in its critique.²⁹ The proposed indicators and targets currently focus solely on domestic governments, but do not mention global and regional actors who fuel conflicts.

GENDER JUSTICE

I still have a T-shirt from my Peace Corps days. There's an outline of a woman's profile, drawn in gold against a black backdrop, with the slogan "*Instruire une femme, c'est instruire une nation,*" translated as "If you educate a woman, you educate a nation."

The benefits of investing in women and girls, and the perils of ignoring half a nation's population, were as clear then as they are now. In addition, gender equality and access to education are issues of basic justice and enshrined in international law as human rights. At the time, though, there were few girls in the schools where I taught, perhaps only six in a class of 50.

The MDGs, which were adopted more than half a decade after I returned from Africa, sought to address this imbalance by making gender equality a topline goal. The MDG framework, though, actually has very limited gender targets and indicators. The MDGs seek parity in primary school education for boys and girls, fewer women dying in childbirth and more women in parliament and the wage economy.

Yet the reality for too many women and girls, who constitute the majority of the world's poor, is that if there is not enough food in the rice bowl, they eat last after their husbands and sons. Women are most affected by violence, war and climate change (which can eliminate their income and independence as gardens and grazing lands dry up) and they are paid less than men for the same work.

The HLP addresses many of these gaps—and several long-standing civil society demands—by proposing indicators for:

- Zero violence against women
- An end to child marriage
- Universal sexual and reproductive health and rights
- The elimination of gender discrimination, and
- Equal rights to own and inherit property, sign a contract, register a business and pen a bank account

The report also calls for women to have an equal voice in decision-making, with "full and equal rights in political, economic and public spheres."

Significantly, the HLP calls for governments to gather disaggregated data (by gender, social group, age, income, disability and location) for every post-2015 target and indicator, and says that a goal will only be considered "achieved" if it is met for all relevant income and social groups.

"A statistical discussion may seem academic," notes GCAP's response to the HLP report, "but we know that if we are to eradicate poverty and inequality, it is essential to track a government's performance across different communities and not just at a national level."³⁰

While this inclusive approach marks a significant improvement over the MDGs, it still falls short. There are no references to the care economy, the growing feminisation of poverty or the rights of people with different sexual orientations and gender identities.

THE PRIVATE SECTOR

As the HLP was conducting consultations and preparing its report, the British Prime Minister and HLP co-chair David Cameron frequently spoke of the “golden threads” of society – the rule of law, lack of corruption and conflict, strong institutions and property rights – which “would enable open economies and open societies to thrive.”

Cameron wrote in an article in the *Wall Street Journal*,³¹ “It is only when people can get a job and a voice that they can take control of their own destiny and build a future free from poverty.” He further adds:

Here in Britain we believe that the way out of poverty is to help people stand on their own two feet, incentivise and reward hard work, and make aspiration the engine of growth. Developing countries are no different. Spending money on the symptoms of poverty will never be enough when the failure of institutions in developing countries actually causes poverty, by crushing any hope people have for a livelihood and a fair say over how their country is run.

Cameron and the HLP see the private sector playing an important role here, from being a source of capital for new infrastructure projects to institutions that create jobs and fuel economic growth. The HLP argues for “simple regulatory frameworks” so that businesses can function best, though the report states that “this is not a call for total deregulation” as social and environmental standards are important. The HLP goes on to ask companies to voluntarily adopt good practices and pay fair taxes.

It’s as if the 2008 financial crisis or 2007-2008 speculation-driven food crisis never happened!

And while Cameron’s “golden threads” are important, so too must we acknowledge and address the large negative impact of some businesses. Amitabh Behar, a co-chair of GCAP and convener of one of India’s largest anti-poverty coalitions, *Wada Na Todo Abhiyan*, has coined the term “poison threads”³² to describe this issue.

“Corporate land grabs, mega-mines, unjust global trade rules, financial speculation, corruption and the privatisation of essential social services are heightening

inequalities, ruining our environment and impoverishing communities across the globe,” Behar argues. “We need to urgently address the poison threads in society.” “These poison threads often fuel violence and conflict as well,” adds Behar’s colleague Marta Benavides, a GCAP co-chair who was also once nominated for the Nobel Peace Prize. “Greed, struggles for resources and a lack of decent work are behind so many of the world’s wars.”³³

Extraction, mega-mines, land and water grabs which displace people and communities are on the top of the Red Flag list of issues that must be addressed if we are to truly eradicate poverty. Unfortunately, the HLP is largely silent when it comes to the poison threads.

CREATING THE WORLD WE WANT

While Ban Ki-moon has already forwarded the HLP report to the UN General Assembly, we are only at the beginning of this process. Over the next one to two years, UN member states will debate development both in the context of post-2015 as well as in something called the “Open Working Group,” which is tasked with producing a set of Sustainable Development Goals. At some point, these two processes will likely come together, just as the issues discussed above—inequality, the poverty line, human rights, gender justice, peace and human security, the role of the private sector—are all interlinked together with other issues that we have not discussed in detail in this article like financing for development (it’s time to adopt a small universal Financial Transactions Tax), the international trade regime, climate change and planetary boundaries. From now until 2015, UN members also need to double-down to achieve the MDGs.

But let’s not get bogged down in the process.

This is a time to dream and to dream big, a time to envision a world where our economies create prosperity for all and not a select few, where we respect and treasure our planet so that it will be habitable, not just for us but for generations to come.

Together, we can make this dream a reality. ■

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- 21 Ibid., 4.
- 22 Ibid., 9.
- 23 Ibid., 7.
- 24 The Gini coefficient or Gini Index, the most-frequently cited metric for inequality, is a function of income distribution. The Palma Ratio compares the upper and lower strata of society by dividing the richest 10 per cent's share of national income by the share of the bottom 40 per cent.
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