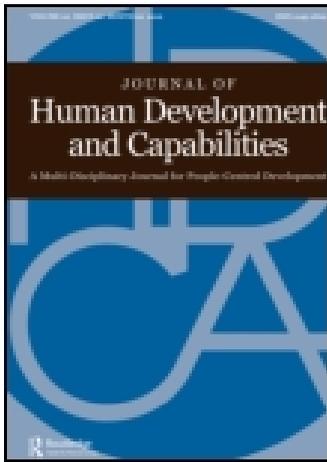


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Global Goals as a Policy Tool: Intended and Unintended Consequences

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ABSTRACT *Global development goals have become increasingly used by the UN and the international community to promote priority objectives. The Millennium Development Goals (MDGs) are the most prominent example of such goals but many others have been set since the 1960s. Despite their prominence and proliferation, little has been written about the concept of global goals as a policy tool, their effectiveness, limitations and broader consequences. This paper explores global development goals as a policy tool, and the mechanisms that have two types of effects: governance effects and knowledge effects. These effects lead to both intended and unintended consequences in influencing international development strategies and action. The paper analyses the MDGs as an example to argue that global goals activate the power of numbers to create incentives for national governments and others to mobilize for important objectives. But the powers of simplification, reification and abstraction lead to broader unintended consequences when the goals are misinterpreted as national planning targets and strategic agendas, and when they enter the language of development to redefine concepts such as development and poverty.*

KEYWORDS Global goals; Millennium Development Goals; Development indicators; United Nations; Poverty

Introduction: The Need for a Theory of Global Goal-setting as a Policy Tool

In *UN Ideas that Changed the World*, authors Jolly, Emmerij, and Weiss (2009) identify global goals as some of the UN's most important intellectual contributions. The Millennium Development Goals (MDGs) are the most widely known but not the only goals to have been set. They have been a regular feature of conference agendas since the first goals were set at the First UN Development Decade in 1961. While goals have been a minor element of these past conference declarations, the MDGs have come to define a consensus global development agenda. Goal-setting now dominates the process of negotiating the post-2015 international development agenda.

Despite their long use and growing importance, little is known about global goals as policy tools—their potential, limitations, and implications for how best to deploy them. Questions about their effectiveness start and end with asking whether the targets have been met. The assessment of Emmerij and co-authors is based on success in promoting specific agendas such as child survival and education. Recent assessments of the MDGs have similarly focused on the same criteria (see, for example, UN Task Team 2012). Numerous criticisms have been levelled at the MDGs but most of the controversy has been around issues of mis-specification—omission of important priorities, level of ambition set too high or too low, inconsistent methodology used in setting targets, and lack of participatory process in setting the goals—and their mis-use as national targets when they were set as global goals

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(UN Task Team 2012). These debates have not gone beyond the MDG agendas to the broader questions regarding the policy tool itself.

Questions about *how* global goals influence policy behaviour are rarely explored. Unlike other targets set by governments and organizations, such as national plans or performance contracts of public services or a marketing strategy of a business, global goals and targets are set by bodies that have no control over their implementation. So how do they achieve any influence? What kinds of incentives do they create and why? When are they most effective in achieving their policy goals? Beyond their influence in achieving the intended policy purpose, what kinds of unintended consequences do global goals lead to?

While the literature of development economics has not raised such questions, social scientists have long studied the sociological effects of numbers when used as tools of administration and governance (for example, Latour 1987; Merry 2009; Poovey 1998; Porter 1994). Recent studies have highlighted the growing use of quantitative indicators in global governance and the need to understand the political and technical processes by which the indicators are produced and used, and the effects they have on decision-making, defining concepts and framing narratives that become hegemonic (Davis et al. 2012; Merry 2009).

The purpose of this paper is to explore the mechanisms by which global goals have influence on development agendas by drawing on this social science literature on numbers. The paper starts with a conceptual discussion of the two sets of effects through which global goals influence agendas: the governance effects and knowledge effects. The following section then applies these concepts to understanding the effects of the MDGs on the international development agenda. It shows that transformation of the Millennium Declaration into global goals had far-reaching implications for the way that development is defined.

Goal-setting as a Tool of Global Governance

The Power of Numbers

Goals are set by the UN and other advocates to draw attention to important but often neglected global challenges. They prescribe a global norm—such as end poverty—and are intended to elicit policy and behaviour change on the part of national governments and other actors. But social scientists point out a second way in which global goals can influence international development agendas. The translation of a global norm into numeric goals shapes how the norm itself is defined and used in narratives about their implementation (Merry 2009). As Porter (1994, 338) argues, quantification is “not merely a strategy for describing the social and natural worlds, but a means of reconfiguring them. It entails the imposition of new meanings and the disappearance of old ones.” In other words, global goals have two types of effects: governance effects and knowledge effects. These dynamics together have powerful influences on the evolution of international development agendas.

Global goals translate qualitative norms into quantitative, time-bound targets using selected indicators. Numeric indicators carry a number of important features that give them power which are distinct from qualitative representations of social situations. First, numbers engender trust in what is being reported as people have faith in numbers as something that is scientifically derived (Porter 1994). Second, they are an abstraction that removes local context and specificity so that the concept becomes universally applicable (Merry 2009). Third, they create a single standard that can be applied to multiple cases and allow comparison amongst them. Fourth, they can be manipulated in calculations and provide a means of assessing trends in improvement or deterioration. Fifth, they express intangible and complex social objectives such as ending poverty in concrete outcomes such as the proportion of households with income/consumption of less than \$1.25 per day—a process of “reification.” Finally, and most importantly, they simplify and reduce a complex and multi-dimensional reality into a single number.

These characteristics are central to the appeal of global goals, and the power of numbers that have far-reaching implications for influencing international agendas through governance effects and knowledge effects.

Governance Effects—Norms to Change Behaviour

Global goals are prescriptive norms that define what “ought to be done” and are intended to lead to behaviour change. They set performance standards that can be deployed directly to promote behaviour change when they are applied in planning, and in performance monitoring. Because of their powers of calculation and abstraction, goals create universal standards that can be used to evaluate performance across a wide range of countries. Targets can strengthen accountability by providing social activists the tools to put pressure on authorities to do more.

Goals are also instruments of “self regulation”; they create incentives for these actors to align their priorities (Merry 2009; Porter 1994). Countries are motivated to improve their international reputation measured by international standards, and rankings encourage “healthy competition” among countries. Countries adopt policies to improve their ranking without being pressured to do so by some global oversight body or peer group countries. This works like many of today’s global indexes and country rankings that are used to control behaviour in a subtle way, by assigning a “score card” that creates incentives to improve performance. Country rankings that are made public to the international community work on national pride and create “healthy competition” among countries, just like the Olympic Games—a concept deliberately used by Mahbub ul Haq in developing the Human Development Index (HDI; Haq 1995). Indeed, the annual HDI rankings have come to be eagerly watched by prime ministers, finance ministers, and health and education ministers around the world. They have often led to policy response to do better in one area or another—for example, the HDI rankings in Egypt revealed poor performance in girls’ enrolment, which motivated the government to take action to improve the situation.¹ They have sometimes become points made in election campaigns, such as the first democratic elections held in Guinea in 1992.²

Knowledge Effect—A Shorthand to Describe a Social Objective

The translation of global norms into numeric targets influences how the norm itself is defined, and shapes narratives about their implementation. Indicators have a capacity to describe social situations in a particular way, redefining concepts and entrenching those concepts in language. This second effect, the “knowledge effect,” has far-reaching implications in shaping development ideas as the new language frames narratives about priority objectives and means to achieve them. Merry argues that “indicators produce readily understandable and convenient forms of knowledge about the world that shape the way policy makers and the general public understand the world. Those with long use have become naturalized, as well as hegemonic” (2009, 592).

Through the powers of abstraction, reification and simplification, indicators transform complex global challenges in declarations into a message that can be more easily understood and memorized and are more compelling than wordy and lofty statements. They are more powerful descriptions that are more effective in communicating the idea to politicians and the public at large, and mobilizing them to take action.

By simplification, goals overcome a major weakness of UN conference declarations: how to communicate a complex global challenge and a broad action agenda with hundreds of detailed action points in terms that can be understood by policy-makers and the general public. For example, the 1990 Children’s Summit’s Declaration and Plan of Action is about “Survival, Protection and Development of Children” and a commitment to the rights of children. It is hard to communicate what this is calling on political leaders and the general public to support. Embedded in this document are ethical principles of rights of the child to a free and dignified future, and the equality of all children to such a future. But the meaning was easier to grasp by considering the goals that were set, such as:

universal access to basic education, including completion of primary education or equivalent learning achievement by at least 80% of the relevant school age children with emphasis on reducing the current disparities between boys and girls, [and] the reduction of adult illiteracy by half, with emphasis on female literacy. (UNICEF 1991, para. 20)

Numeric goals are more convincing than wordy statements; they imply that the goals are not just utopian ideals but are achievable objectives that economists and planners had applied scientific logic to define. Commitments such as “We will work for programmes that reduce illiteracy and provide educational opportunities for all children, irrespective of their background and gender,” from the 1990 Children’s Summit, emphasize intangible values and human experiences. The quantitative goals transform them into tangible, concrete changes in the world. In this way, they reify and give concrete content to resolutions adopted by the UN or other assemblies that state general intentions.

Quantification is also a process of abstraction out of contextual specificities. This overcomes a problem in achieving global consensus on global challenges that are also embedded in very diverse local realities, and priorities. Qualitative descriptions do not always resonate universally while numeric goals are decontextualized.

Simplification, reification and abstraction are a recipe for crafting a message that is easy to communicate and memorize. But in the process, much is lost in terms of the intangible, the multiple dimensions of a complex concept, and the need for local specificities. For these reasons, most conference declarations that produce goals are careful to provide qualitative presentations that put the goals in context. The seven goals from the Children’s Summit were presented in a context of a short Declaration framed around the Rights of Children, and was accompanied by a Plan of Action. The Plan of Action elaborated the list of seven goals, with explanations of key challenges and solutions. The Plan included an appendix with more detailed goals and actions, including additional indicators for each goal. Most importantly, these documents were careful to recognize the limits of abstraction; they explained that:

The needs and problems of children vary from country to country, and indeed from community to community. Individual countries and groups of countries, as well as international, regional, national and local organizations, may use this Plan of Action to develop their own specific programmes in line with their needs, capacity and mandates. (UNICEF 1991, para 6)

Moreover, the goals should be adapted to the specific conditions of each country: “These goals will first need to be adapted to the specific realities of each country in terms of phasing, priorities, standards and availability of resources” (UNICEF 1991, para. 6).

While simplification, reification and abstraction are the appeal and the strength of numeric goals they are also the source of weakness. The transformation from a qualitative description of a norm to a numeric transformation is fraught with problems in distorting meaning and redefining concepts. Moreover, numeric indicators like global goals are seemingly objective but in fact “numbers are interpretive, for they embody theoretical assumptions about what should be counted, how one should understand the material reality, and how quantification contributes to systematic knowledge about world” (Poovey 1998, xii). Yet the interpretations are rarely explicit.

The MDG Experience—Intended and Unintended Consequences

How did these governance and knowledge effects explain the influence of the MDGs?

MDGs as a Norm—Governance Effects

The MDGs derive from the Millennium Declaration (United Nations 2000) adopted at the turn of the century in which world leaders laid out a vision of priorities that were central to the future of all the world’s people: development and poverty; peace and security; environment and democracy; and human rights. It was a powerful document that set out their determination to work towards common objectives, based on shared values. The Declaration reiterated commitment to the “fundamental values to be essential to international relations in the twenty-first century” (United Nations 2000, para. 1): freedom; equality; solidarity; tolerance; respect for nature; and shared responsibility.

The Declaration envisions development that is equitable and based on principles of human rights. The theme of equality both within and between countries is articulated throughout the document, including

gender equality (United Nations 2000, para. 6), equitable and non-discriminatory trading and financial systems (para. 13), with special attention to the poorest and vulnerable. It draws on the ethical framework set out in the Charter of the United Nations (United Nations 1945) and goes beyond the economic concept of “development with equity” and seeks a world that is “just” (United Nations 1945, para. 1). It draws explicitly on human rights principles that are reflected throughout the document, notably the principles of “human dignity and freedom, equality and equity” (United Nations 1945, para. 1), and the respect for economic, social, cultural, civil and political rights (United Nations 1945, para. 25), and reaffirms commitments to the Universal Declaration of Human Rights (United Nations 1948, para. 25), the Convention on the Elimination of All Forms of Discrimination against Women (United Nations 1979, para. 25), the Convention on the Rights of the Child (United Nations 1989, para. 26) and the Right to Development (United Nations 1986, para. 24).

The development priorities in the Declaration built on the UN Conferences held over the decade of the 1990s on diverse topics. The conference declarations had a common theme—inclusive globalization that emphasized human-centred, equitable and sustainable development (United Nations 2007)—broadly referred to as the UN Development Agenda. They also emphasized the participatory nature of international development, which would be driven not only by governments and donors but by civil society (United Nations 2007). Coming in the context of the rapid advance of globalization following Thatcher/Reagan-driven policies, and two decades of contentious debates about structural adjustment, the UN Development Agenda was an alternative to the Washington Consensus policies of the World Bank and the IMF. It emphasized the essential human ends of development, and promoted social and economic policy alternatives that would attend to the distributional consequences of liberalization reforms.

The Millennium Declaration contained some concrete goals. For all of the reasons identified in the previous section, these goals strengthened the “message” of the normative commitment. One year later, the Secretary General presented his implementation plan for the Declaration, in a document commonly known as the “Road Map” (United Nations 2001). This introduced the MDGs, comprised of eight goals drawn from the Declaration, each with concrete targets (18 in all), which in turn carried corresponding indicators (48 in all). This was the first time the term MDGs was introduced, and their purpose was not to define important priorities nor to propose national planning targets, but merely to harmonize reporting (United Nations 2001). In other words, they were intended to provide benchmarks for monitoring progress. The structure of goals, targets and indicators makes it possible to evaluate progress being made to achieve the broad goals because targets and indicators can be calculated and compared.

Yet the concrete goals in the Declaration and the MDGs carried an aura of scientific precision and acquired great significance beyond their intended purpose. Despite the fact that poverty reduction is an enterprise that is not amenable to such precise planning and commitment, they gave credibility to the seriousness of the intent. The pace of development is dependent on a multitude of factors including many exogenous factors such as epidemics and natural disasters. Moreover, the world leaders who made the commitment do not control the means to implement them. Top leadership in the UN and the development community responded to the promise of this apparently scientific plan. They took the Declaration and its goals as the centrepiece of its own work. The MDGs also strengthened a sense of global solidarity. They abstract from local context and specificity, setting a single—universal—standard of measurement and ambition.

Standards for performance evaluation. MDGs have been regularly reported by the UN, which set up a mechanism bringing together the entire set of relevant UN agencies. Numerous global and regional organizations report on progress, each with a specific focus and target audience. These monitoring reports are put to wide use, mostly to encourage more effort towards poverty reduction and achievement of the MDGs.

Civil society groups use the MDGs as frameworks for accountability and put pressure on governments to live up to their commitments and hold up outcomes against the benchmark goals. International non-governmental organizations and campaigners are using MDGs and associated aid commitments to

deplore failure of donors to live up to their promises. National civil society groups, such as the Philippine budget network, argue that domestic taxation should be raised and expenditure priorities should be revisited “to achieve the MDGs.” Opposition politicians can use them in election campaigns to criticize incumbent performance. Surprisingly, the use of MDGs to hold authorities accountable appears to have been relatively limited.

Planning targets. Economists have unquestioningly assumed that MDGs are intended to serve as planning targets. Introducing MDGs as targets in the Poverty Reduction Strategy Papers (PRSPs) became a major objective of the Millennium Project.³ Almost all countries preparing PRSPs used selected MDG targets without modification as their PRSP targets to guide the allocation of domestic and donor resources (Fukuda-Parr 2010).

Self-regulation. MDGs operate as instruments of self-regulation by creating incentives to do better. Countries are keen to present their MDG records in international fora to bolster their standing. Countries prepare MDG progress reports for international consumption, some for this purpose only rather than for national development planning and monitoring. The Prime Ministers of India and China have come to present and showcase their MDG reports at high-profile UN events.⁴

Political leaders also use the MDGs to show global leadership and draw attention to priority social objectives. UK Prime Minister Blair used the MDGs as a major rallying cry to mobilize aid for Africa at the 2005 G-8 Summit. At the 2009 G-8 meeting, UK Prime Minister Brown, US President Obama and others argued that the response to the global financial crisis should include measures to ensure that MDGs could be met. MDGs were used to argue for the “Development Agenda” at the World Intellectual Property Organization, an important shift in the principles governing intellectual property rights to take account of their impact on health, education and other development and poverty concerns. IMF reviews of PRSPs include an analysis of how well the country is doing against MDG benchmarks.

MDGs can raise awareness among actors outside the “international development community.” Businesses have adopted MDGs and taken initiative to offer awards. Non-governmental organizations, churches and other civil society groups have been inspired by the MDGs and have taken up global poverty as a cause (Manning 2009).

Contradictions—MDGs as planning targets: methodological incoherence. The use of MDGs as planning targets and for performance measurement has given rise to sharp criticisms. These include the methodology by which they were set: the arbitrary and inconsistent methodology used in defining each of the individual goals (Saith 2006; Easterly 2009); the resultant bias to Africa and other countries with low starting points (Easterly 2009); and the sheer implausibility of the goals for many countries (Clemens, Kenny and Moss 2007). For example, in order to halve poverty the average African country would require per-capita gross domestic product growth of 7% for 15 years. In the 15 years previous to the MDG implementation, 1985–2000, only five countries in the entire world averaged gross domestic product growth that high (Clemens, Kenny, and Moss 2007, 739).

A major controversy concerns whether the goals were intended to apply to the world as a whole or to each country. Earlier global goals were explicit in stating that the goals were intended for the world and encouraging national governments to adapt them to their own contexts,⁵ but the 2000 Declaration is silent and the 2001 Road Map document is ambiguous on this question, leaving the question open to conflicting interpretations.⁶ The UN itself is not always consistent, at once encouraging country adaptation,⁷ but monitoring and reporting on their target achievement and assisting countries in costing resource requirements to achieve them.

A global target applied universally to each and every country taking no account of the hugely diverse conditions would lead to distortions in national priorities. Some goals made no sense in countries where they had already been achieved. For example, most countries of Latin America and South East Asia had already achieved universal primary enrolment. Their education challenge was to improve quality,

reduce unequal quality and achieve higher levels of secondary education. MDGs were labelled “Minimum Development Goals” in these countries and were ridiculed for being a regressive agenda.

Applied at the country level as performance measures, these global targets are biased against the poorest countries because they have a reverse relationship to the starting point. For example the target to “halve” the income poverty rate means cutting 60% to 30% or cutting 10% to 5%. The less resources and capacities countries have, the steeper the mountain they must climb to achieve the goals. This only makes sense if we use the MDGs as a broad and general framework for evaluating needs rather than for judging the performance of countries.

Adoption of global goals as national goals without adaptation contradicts the principle of “national ownership.” National planning and programming processes are deeply entrenched institutional mechanisms with established procedures and a history of commitments and achievements. MDGs are nothing new to national and local development plans. How can national and local authorities take ownership of a “one-size-fits-all” agenda without relating it to this context?

The criteria and the metric used for judging success and failure is another issue that has generated critical comment. All UN and other monitoring reports evaluate whether global, regional and country progress is “on track” to achieving the 2015 goals. When interpreted as performance measures, this way of evaluating progress is particularly troubling since this one-size-fits-all target takes no account of starting points. Several authors (Degol and Tsukuda 2011; Fukuda-Parr, Greenstein, and Stewart 2012) argue that the criterion for success should be whether countries are improving progress, and the metric should focus on the rate of progress rather than on the level of achievement. If this metric was used, countries considered to be “off track”, mostly in sub-Saharan Africa, emerge as the top performers.

There are clearly serious problems with treating the MDGs as planning targets applied to countries and regions. This is not surprising since the goals were not set through national planning processes that take account of priorities, feasibility, resources and necessary trade-offs. They grew out of a normative process of political negotiations and consensus-building amongst world leaders. They were clearly not intended by their creators to be national planning targets. They were not defined as targets for countries and regions, but for the world. Yet confusion set in and monitoring tools came to be used as priority objectives. But these “goals” with their aura of scientific certainty in fact cannot be defended as an effective development strategy.

Contradictions—MDGs as agendas: narrow scope and distorting priorities. Interpreted as planning targets through self-regulation or direct application, global goals effectively define strategic priorities that would logically drive resource allocation and programmatic priorities of national governments, development agencies and other actors. Yet this was never their original intent. In national contexts, they make no sense as an agenda, as explained in the previous section—how can primary school enrolment be a priority goal in a country that has already achieved it?

Not only do these globally set targets that take no account of diverse national contexts and challenges, they are also a gross over-simplification of development objectives at both national and global levels. The list of goals in the Declaration and subsequently in the MDGs was kept deliberately short and simple to ensure that they would be memorable and easy to communicate.⁸ The objective of gender equality and empowerment is reduced to a single goal of eliminating gender disparity in schooling. In contrast, the Platform of Action agreed at the 1995 Beijing Conference on Women and Development lists 12 strategic objectives, of which one is education and training of women. Similarly, the entire agenda of the 1990 Cairo International Conference on Population and Development was reduced to maternal mortality. This selectivity applied to all goals and many important priorities are not even included. It was never the intent of the framers of the MDGs to set an agenda for development. Yet the MDGs came to be interpreted as a set of priorities.

Development challenges require multifaceted and contextualized agendas; quantification was one of reductionism to grossly simplified and narrow agendas that could distort national and global priorities.

Knowledge effects—re-defining development and poverty. Both development and poverty are complex and contested concepts that have generated considerable literature about their definition, measurement and strategies. While the MDGs asserted eradicating poverty as a norm, they have come to substitute for the term “development” and thus define its meaning. This brought a fundamental change in the definition of a concept, which had long been understood as a process of economic transformation of countries, and replaced it with a process of reducing absolute poverty of individuals. Although there have been many debates about how development should be defined, the mainstream concept of “development” focused on economic transformation and the process of national economic development. And while the neglect of the human factor was a major critique of this mainstream definition, even the critical perspectives such as the capability approach recognized the essential role of economic growth. The understanding of the development challenge then was to bring about structural change that enhanced the productive capacity of a country and improved the lives of its people and eradicated poverty. MDGs redefined this concept as the more narrowly focused objective of ending poverty, and poverty defined in multidimensional aspects of human life, and more specifically as those particular elements that were included in the list of eight goals, 18 targets and 48 indicators.

This has significant implications for international political and economic relations. With the MDGs as the consensus framework for international development, the focus is on the social sectors. This framework sidelines the issues of international economic environment and macroeconomic policies that have been the core elements of the Third World’s agenda in international negotiations, such as special and differentiated treatment in trade, finance, debt, technology and their lack of voice in international institutions such as the WTO and the World Bank. For these reasons, Gore (2010) has argued that the consensus on ending poverty as a global priority was a “Faustian Bargain” for developing countries in which they gave up the idea of national development for enhancing productive capacities.

The concept of poverty is also redefined by the MDGs. For a long time, the mainstream concept of poverty was focused on income and consumption deficits, and was measured by the number of households falling below a defined threshold. In a departure from the income/consumption definition of poverty, the MDGs emphasized the multidimensionality of poverty and focused directly on the conditions of peoples’ lives. Although the MDGs have this in common with alternative definitions proposed during the 1990s, the selected goals/targets and indicators do not reflect, nor were designed to reflect, any of these broader concepts, as later sections will elaborate.

Simplification and reification. The Secretary General and his advisers believed that numeric goals would be a way to strengthen the Declaration as a memorable historic document that would have significant public impact.⁹ They were inspired by the traction garnered by the International Development Goals set in 1996 by the donors in the Organization for Economic Cooperation and Development (OECD). For this purpose, simplification was an imperative, since “less is more”; limit the number of goals to just a few that could be easily memorized and recited.¹⁰ They fought the pressure and temptation to be comprehensive and include all of the important dimensions of development and poverty in its outcomes, process and causes. The goals needed to be “memorable” and powerful in communicating the message to the general public and in broad aggregate policy debates. The quantitative goals of the Declaration made concrete the vague and intangible commitments: “We will spare no effort to free our fellow men, women and children from the abject and dehumanizing conditions of extreme poverty, to which more than a billion of them are currently subjected” (United Nations 2000, para. 11).

Quantification increased the credibility of the commitments made. Without specific and measurable indicators, commitments made by governments to “pursue” such objectives as ending extreme poverty and reducing illiteracy would be wide open to different interpretation and thus have little real meaning, and would be impossible to monitor. Governments could not be held accountable. The numerical content gives an aura of scientific precision in what is intended, implying that there is a clear technocratic strategy behind achieving these goals. Such specific and quantitative targets communicate the aspirations of human progress more effectively than general terms such as “poverty” or even “education and literacy.” Yet these numbers remove much of the ambiguity embedded in the concept of poverty as a dehumanizing condition, and also remove the very concept of poverty as an affront to human dignity,

and a denial of human rights. They simplify the complex human condition, abstract it out of local realities and theories, and reify an intangible concept into a tangible, measurable condition.

Yet this simplification and reification also sheds essential concepts of equity and participation that were core themes of the Millennium Declaration, and the UN development conferences' agendas. The ethical values that the Declaration was careful to reaffirm were principles that should guide the international agenda and could not be reified and counted.

The MDGs are an important advance on the purely money-centric definition of poverty and accommodate some of the multidimensional human perspectives on poverty. Its widespread adoption as a norm signifies a consensus on poverty as broader than income poverty, as a human condition and as multidimensional. Nonetheless, the MDGs transform the meaning of poverty as an affront to human dignity in the human rights and capabilities perspective, rob it of the essential concerns with human agency and ethical demands on social institutions, and reconfigure the concept to a set of numerical and essentially material wants in the utilitarian perspective. It represents poverty as multi-dimensional material deprivation—lack of income, water, education and health services—stripped of the ethical principles and human agency that are essential to the human rights and capabilities perspectives. This is an inevitable result of the power that numbers have in simplifying complex concepts. It is also in part a reflection of the particular design of the MDGs in which numbers about lack of basic services and incomes are prominent, and where indicators of equity and participation are lacking.

Quantification untethers definitions from theory. Issues of measurement and definitions derive from theories about poverty and development, yet quantification disengages concepts from their theoretical frameworks. Mary Poovey (1998) explains that the use of numbers arose in the early nineteenth century in a process where description became separated from interpretation and theory. Even though numbers “embody theoretical assumptions about what should be counted, how one should understand material reality, and how quantification contributes to systematic knowledge about the world” (1998, xii), they are somehow “immune from theory and interpretation” (1998, xii). Numbers are the “bedrock of knowledge” used to “describe” a social condition without “interpretation” (1998, xii).

The conventional definition of poverty is lack of income (or income poverty), rooted in the utilitarian materialist perspective of human well-being, and measured by a headcount of individuals living with incomes below a specified standard or food consumption below a specified daily intake. But several new approaches emerged in the 1990s that broke new ground in conceptualizing poverty that challenged the income and consumption-based definition of poverty such as social exclusion, participatory approach, rights-based approach and human poverty (Stewart, Saith, and Harris-White 2007). These alternative approaches were part of broader theoretical debates in development economics about the meaning of development. As mentioned, the 1980s and 1990s were decades of intense debates about development policy strategies and advocacy for approaches that addressed the consequences of neoliberal reforms on people, distribution and power structures. A major theoretical advance came from Amartya Sen and his work on capabilities, and the idea of “development as freedom” (Sen 1999).

These perspectives emphasize multi-dimensionality of poverty and the role of income and consumption as means rather than ends. These alternative approaches are also concerned with human agency and with the central role of empowerment in a strategy for eradicating poverty. Poor people are not considered simple beneficiaries of a development process but active agents of change.¹¹ Development outcomes are then driven not only by economic dynamics but by political processes. In the human rights perspective, along with denial of core human rights—economic, social, cultural, political and civil—poverty is also a denial of equality, participation and empowerment. Analysis of the causes of poverty therefore requires an understanding of power structures.¹²

The design of MDGs in the utilitarian perspective—commission and omission. The Millennium Declaration conceptualizes poverty as a dehumanizing human condition, in the human rights and capabilities perspectives rather than in the utilitarian perspective of material deprivation. The central concerns are with poverty as an affront to human freedom and dignity. The Declaration conceptualizes poverty and development in the perspective of human rights and capabilities, or human development.

However, this conceptualization is not reflected in the MDGs. The numerical indicators selected, and for which data are most commonly available, are overwhelmingly about material means rather than human ends, and there are no indicators that reflect the central principles of social exclusion, capabilities and human rights perspectives, such as equality, universal attainment, ending discrimination and injustice, violence.

For example, Goal 1 aims to eradicate extreme poverty and hunger, defined by three targets: to halve the proportion of people living on less than \$1 a day; to achieve full and productive employment and decent work for all, including women and young people; and to halve, between 1990 and 2015, the proportion of people who suffer from hunger. These three targets are measured by 12 indicators including measures of income and consumption, employment levels, own account and family work, dietary consumption and body weight. From the human rights perspective, extreme poverty and hunger are dehumanizing in particular social contexts; for example, when a person has to resort to begging to overcome hunger, or to resort to prostitution to overcome lack of income. Such issues are admittedly difficult to measure, but the reduction of “dehumanizing poverty and hunger” to income and consumption measures not only over-simplifies the concept but redefines it to a utilitarian perspective of material deprivation. Measuring full and productive employment for all by average data on employment does not capture the discrimination against women and young people, while the proportion of own account and family workers is not a satisfactory measure of lack of guaranteed labour rights. Many self-employed workers enjoy labour rights if the country has universal social security benefits. Many family workers enjoy conditions of work where their dignity and freedom are respected. On the other hand, the proportion of employed people living on less than \$1 a day reflects work that is not adequately productive.

The issue that was most contested in the design of the Declaration and the MDGs was reproductive health. While the goals in the Declaration are virtually identical to the International Development Goals set by the OECD in 1996, the reproductive health goal was deliberately left out. For women’s movements, this was a critical issue because recognition of reproductive rights was a hard-won battle of the 1990s. Women’s access to reproductive health is a central question of women’s rights and agency, fundamental to a woman’s ability to have a say in decisions about her own reproductive life and surely reflects her ability to make many other life choices. It is quintessentially a basic capability on which many other capabilities and functioning depend. For women’s movements, the 1990 Conference on Population and Development was a landmark victory that achieved the recognition of this right. However, in defending the decision to omit this goal, those leading the negotiations over the Declaration and MDGs argued that it did not matter because the related goals were there; it was a means to reducing maternal mortality, increasing life expectancy, reducing income poverty and many other goals.¹³ This utilitarian perspective failed to understand the rights-based significance of access to reproductive health as a central issue for expanding capabilities and freedoms, and the obligations of the state to put in place the necessary institutions to realize women’s human rights.

The MDGs do not distinguish between ends and means, and treat some material means as ends. Capabilities are a freedom to be and do what an individual would value (Sen 1999). They are ends with intrinsic value and are important objectives of development for that reason. They are not to be confused with means, particularly material means such as income or schools, which have no intrinsic value but only instrumental value. Lack of income and lack of access to food are material constraints to capabilities to enjoy a decent standard of living and to many other capabilities. But they have no value in themselves. Enrolment as an indicator of universal primary education is about material access to school but says little about the right to education or the capability of being educated. Immunization is an indicator of child survival, not a valuable end in itself.

Omitted from the goals, targets and indicators are those that present and describe poverty as a dehumanizing condition that restrict human freedoms and address relational issues such as inequality and discrimination, lack of empowerment and lack of security. Out of a total of 21 targets and 60 indicators, only one target and three indicators relate to inequality and exclusion. For Goal 3 to promote gender equality, the target is to eliminate gender disparity in primary and secondary education, preferably by 2005, and in all levels of education by 2015. Three indicators include measures of male/female

ratios in school enrolment, female participation in non-agricultural wage employment and female participation in national parliaments.¹⁴

Designing the MDGs—the process and criteria. The translation from the Millennium Declaration into the MDGs involved a shift in the process of elaboration. The Declaration was driven by the UN Secretary General and his staff and was negotiated by diplomats. It was built on the agendas adopted at the UN development conferences driven by interest groups including sectoral ministries and social activists. The MDGs, on the other hand, were defined by technocrats—experts—from UN agencies with expertise in development data representing several multi-national agencies.

The chair of this group was Michael Doyle, another well-known international relations scholar who succeeded Ruggie as the chief strategy adviser to the Secretary General, who focused on the big picture issues of political negotiations and basic principles.¹⁵ But the dominant members were the representatives of the UNDP, the World Bank and the OECD who had worked together on reporting on the DAC's International Development Goals. It is worth noting that this was an unusual group for a UN initiative on data since the three individuals were not from the statistical units of UN Secretariat such as the Department of Social and Economic Affairs and of UN specialized agencies with thematic/sectoral mandates such as the WHO and UNESCO. They were development economists rather than statisticians. It was highly unusual for the World Bank and OECD to be participating in a UN exercise, but here the two organizations were playing a leading role. Statisticians from the UN agencies were also included in this group but did not dominate the process. Many voiced dissatisfaction that it did not reflect adequate consultation with the UN statistical networks and the knowledge and experience of specialized agencies in areas such as education and health.¹⁶

The process of designing the MDGs was guided by three fundamental principles: faithful reflection of the Millennium Declaration, data availability and simplicity.¹⁷ While the first principle follows a political imperative, the second and third follow professional imperatives. It makes no sense in the practice of development economics to include objectives and indicators that are not measurable and for which data are not available. While statisticians may have preferred to use as many data points as possible to assess trends, development economists had learned that too many indicators led to confusion in policy debates. The lessons of the HDI had been learned by the international development community; one number communicated more powerfully to “busy policy-makers” was more effective than a battery of tables.

Conclusions

The experience of the MDGs demonstrates the importance of global development goals as policy tools in mobilizing awareness, support and action for priority social objectives. However, the power of numbers has led global goals to many unintended consequences as they become used for purposes for which they were not designed. The MDGs were introduced as monitoring tools, to harmonize reporting on the Millennium Declaration. They then took on a life of their own and became transformed as normative priorities and planning targets that define a development agenda. They were intended to be global priorities requiring joint action but came to be interpreted as hard national planning targets, introducing distortions in policy priorities and creating biased performance evaluations.

Global goals are a powerful policy instrument in global governance because they impose a single standard to all countries and ignore the diversity of local contexts. Moreover, they can be manipulated to analyse performance, simplify complex social descriptions, and engender trust in what is being reported because people have faith in numbers as something scientifically derived. For these reasons, global goals facilitate global consensus over common goals in a world of diversity, and communicate complex challenges like poverty. With numeric goals, commitments to social objectives can be monitored with progress measures and governments held accountable. Yet these very features of global goals are a source of contradictions and unintended consequences.

The process of simplification, abstraction and reification in transforming the Declaration to a set of numerical goals was a deliberate attempt to develop a global norm that would have the power and

influence to be implemented. In doing so, it has recreated a new conceptualization of development as poverty reduction, while reverting to poverty reduction in the utilitarian perspective, shedding the Declaration's human rights and capabilities perspective. It has taken on some human dimensions into the conceptualization of poverty and development but not the full concept of development as capability expansion or the realization of human rights.

The abstraction disembodied the concept of poverty, as lack of freedom and dignity, from theory, and recreated it in the utilitarian perspective of material deprivation. As Merry points out:

The essence of an indicator is that it is simple and easy to understand. Embedded theories, decisions about measures, and interpretations of the data are replaced by the certainty and lack of ambiguity of a number. Like money, it appears to allow abstraction and easy comparison among groups and countries by converting values into numbers. (Merry 2009, 9–10)

This transformation of MDGs from evaluative benchmarks to global priorities to strategic priorities effectively distorts priorities and has major implications for effectiveness of development efforts. MDGs did not generate new thinking about development nor new political dynamics. They came to be used as a more powerful narrative of development aid to justify existing policy strategies and relationships between the donor and recipient.

The UN is careful to present the MDGs as extracted from the Declaration, and to explain that:

the goals and targets are inter-related and should be seen as a whole. They represent a partnership between the developed and developing countries to create an environment—at the national and global levels alike—that is conducive to development and the elimination of poverty. (United Nations 2008, 2)

But numbers powerfully communicate the oversimplified description of complex concepts. The fine wording of the Declaration and its statement of ethical principles, commitment to the right to development and commitment to goals of empowerment are overshadowed by the MDGs of halving the poverty rate and putting every child in school. The criteria that drove the design of the MDGs were simplicity for the goals and targets, while statistical measurability and data availability drove the selection of indicators. What the experts who designed the MDGs did not consider was that the global goals end up being taken more seriously and set agendas and policy priorities.

Notes

1. Author's experience as Director of UNDP Human Development Reports 1995–2004.
2. Author's experience as Director of UNDP Human Development Reports 1995–2004.
3. An independent technical arm of the UN effort for MDG implementation led by Jeff Sachs.
4. In India, for example, the national plan and budget are the main tools of planning, evaluation, priority-setting, programming and resource allocation. Planning Commission official Pranhab Sen explained that the government places high importance on the MDG report because of its impact on India's international standing. Author interview with Pranhab Sen, December 2008.
5. For example, the 1990 Children's Summit stated that the goals were global and encouraged national governments to define their own strategies and adapt the goals to take account of their specific national contexts. Manning (2009) notes: "The Jomtien Conference introduced its quantitative targets with a comment on the value of targets: 'Time-bound targets convey a sense of urgency and serve as a reference against which indices of implementation and accomplishment can be compared ... Observable and measurable targets assist in the objective evaluation of progress.' It pointed out that 'As societal conditions change, plans and targets can be reviewed and updated.' It argued that 'Targets need not be based solely on current trends and resources. Initial targets can reflect a realistic appraisal of the possibilities presented by the Declaration to mobilize additional human, organizational, and financial capacities within a cooperative commitment to human development.' This might be thought to bias its targets in something of an optimistic direction, but the Declaration also noted that 'Countries with low literacy and school enrolment rates, and very limited national resources, will need to make hard choices in establishing national targets within a realistic timeframe'."
6. The "Road Map" implies that the MDGs should be country goals, stating: "It is crucial that the millennium development goals become national goals and serve to increase the coherence and consistency of national policies and programmes" (United Nations 2001, para. 81) It is particularly concerned with implementation, going on to state: "They must reduce the gap

- between what needs to be done and what is being done. The widening gap between the goals and achievements implies that the international community has failed to deliver on crucial commitments made during the 1990s” (United Nations 2001).
7. See, for example, the UNDP evaluation report and guidelines of the UN Development Group (UNDP Evaluation Office 2003).
 8. Author interviews with MDG architects: Doyle of the UN Secretary General’s Office, 11 September 2008; Swanson of the World Bank, 10 September 2008; and Vandemoortele of the UNDP, 6 September 2008.
 9. Author interviews with Ruggie, the Secretary General’s chief strategy adviser, 6 September 2008; Mortimer, senior official of the Secretary General’s office, 14 September 2008; and Malloch Brown, Deputy Secretary General, 27 June 2008.
 10. Author interviews with Ruggie, the Secretary General’s chief strategy adviser, 6 September 2008; Mortimer, senior official of the Secretary General’s office, 14 September 2008; and Malloch Brown, Deputy Secretary General, 27 June 2008.
 11. In the human development and capabilities perspective, the capability to have a say in decisions that affect one’s life and enjoy the respect of others in a community are valuable aspects of life, while human agency is an important means to social progress that results not only from government action but from people demanding change.
 12. The 1996 UNDP *Human Development Report* argued that to eliminate poverty required pro-poor growth, investment in human capital, elimination of discrimination, an enabling environment for poor people to have access to economic, social and political assets, and political support for pro-poor policies. The World Bank’s flagship publication, the *World Development Report*, argues in the 2000/01 edition that to eliminate poverty, poor people need opportunity, empowerment and security (World Bank 2000).
 13. Author interview with Ruggie, 6 August 2009.
 14. Some of these omissions have been vigorously contested since the first publication of the MDG lists in 2001. As a result of lobbying, three new targets were added in 2005 relating to employment and decent work (Target 1B), universal access to reproductive health (Target 5B) and access to treatment for HIV/AIDS (Target 6B). The number of indicators increased from 48 to 60.
 15. Author interview with Doyle, 11 September 2008.
 16. Author interviews with Robert Johnson, former staff of the UN Statistical Division, September 2008.
 17. Author interviews with MDG architects: Doyle, 11 September 2008; World Bank staff member Swanson, 10 September 2008; and former UNDP staff member Vandemoortele, 6 September 2008.

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