

From MDGs to SDGs: We Need A Critical Awakening To Succeed



This is an important year for international development with big implications for how we approach future efforts toward poverty eradication. An **Oxfam report** published in January 2015 showed that a small elite (1 percent) controls nearly as much wealth as the bottom 50 percent of the world's population. After 15 years, the Millennium Development Goals (MDGs) - the eight targets agreed in 2000 to harness global efforts toward reducing extreme poverty - appear to have done very little to arrest inequalities in wealth accumulation and distribution. Around **one billion people still live on less than a \$1.25 a day and more than 800 million people don't have enough food to eat.**

Later this year, world leaders will agree new targets - Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs) - which are themselves an acknowledgment of the failings of the MDGs. Perhaps the biggest failing of the MDGs was their lack of critical analysis of the fundamental causes of global poverty and the persistently high levels of regional disparity in wealth, employment, infrastructure, food security and education within the global South and between global North and South. The MDGs appeared to isolate the causes of poverty within the domestic policies of Southern governments, an approach that ignored the impact of 'development' programmes implemented, or enforced, by Northern governments and financial institutions on the South. Critical policies in the areas of globalisation, trade, debt and migration, which are pivotal to the question of development in the global South, were largely spared analysis and criticism in the MDG framework.

15 years later we can't afford to agree another set of targets that dance around the primary cause of poverty; the neoliberal economic medicine disastrously imposed on countries in the South. Neoliberalism comprised a series of rigid, uniformly enforced economic 'adjustments' designed to allow the market, rather than governments, to lead economic policy. These adjustment programmes cut public services, accelerated privatisation, reduced tariffs on imports, and encouraged production in commodities for export rather than an industrial policy informed by local needs. The removal of social protections and reigning in of the state inevitably increased poverty, reduced living standards and weakened economic performance. These problems have been exacerbated by the 2008 financial crisis, which has not only completely discredited neoliberalism, but brought entrenched poverty and economic instability to the door of the global North.

Where once they preyed only on low and middle-income countries, the International Monetary Fund (IMF) and World Bank, have brought structural adjustment and austerity programmes to Ireland and other parts of Europe. In developed countries that have struggled to reach the 45 year old target of 0.7 percent of their Gross National Income (GNI) for overseas aid, a king's ransom was found to bailout failing banks. In Britain alone, a 'peak outlay' of **£1,162 billion** was provided in support to UK banks in the immediate aftermath of the crisis while a comparatively paltry sum of **£8.62 billion** was provided in official development assistance in 2011. If this travesty were not enough to endure, governments across Europe proceeded to implement belt tightening cuts to public services and welfare to pay for the bailout. As happened for years in the global South, profits were privatised, debts were socialised.

"Will the SDGs will be sufficiently radical and resourced to propose the kind of regulatory measures needed to bring global capitalism to heel?"

A key question for the development sector in 2015 is therefore whether the SDGs will be sufficiently radical and resourced to propose the kind of regulatory measures needed to bring global capitalism to heel? Debt, illicit financial flows, and corporations operating with impunity are all issues that can be directly linked to neoliberal policies and institutions, and can be hugely damaging to Southern countries. For example, developing countries **lose \$1 trillion a year in illicit financial flows** arising from crime, corruption and tax havens used by corporations. This represents a major loss of revenue by developing countries and is already ten times the amount of foreign aid these countries are receiving. What many of these nations need, therefore, more than anything else is for Northern governments and institutions to get off their backs and allow them to plot their own path to development.

Critical awakening

Walden Bello has argued that we need to complement the post-2015 development framework with 'a critical exercise in development assessment' that will 'illuminate the structural causes of poverty and underdevelopment'. Worsening levels of inequality and the existential threat of climate change mean that we can not afford a 15 year period in which new development goals are used to mask the real undercurrents of poverty.

We need the awakening of a critical consciousness that engages the public with the structural causes of poverty and pressures governments to change tack. The post-2015 policy agenda will not be achieved if it simply becomes a 'measuring rod in poverty reduction'. We need a concerted education programme mounted by the development sector that names and challenges neoliberalism as an unsustainable and grossly unfair means of propelling development. As Paulo Freire suggested, education is the means by which 'men and women deal critically and creatively with reality and discover how to participate in the transformation of their world'.

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