



The Millennium Development Goals and Human Rights

Past, Present and Future

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Preface

During the last decade, development and human rights have occupied increasingly prominent places in international relations. Traditionally, the fields were perceived as being largely exclusive and independent but now it is just as common to find the view that the two are highly complementary or downright contradictory. As a particular expression of international development policy, the Millennium Development Goals (MDGs) are no exception. Debate over the relationship between the MDGs and human rights has been intense since **the adoption of the former in 2001.**

This volume seeks to delve deeper into these tensions and synergies. The chapters evolved from a workshop at Harvard University that was held on 22–23 March 2010 and hosted by the Human Rights Program at Harvard Law School, the Office of the UN High Commissioner for Human Rights, UNICEF, LEVE (Livelihoods in Developing Countries, University of Oslo), the Norwegian Centre for Human Rights (University of Oslo), and the Institute for Development Studies (University of Sussex).¹ Since then, a number of chapters were added in order to address additional themes.

The resulting volume draws scholars and practitioners together from a range of disciplines and perspectives. The aim is not to provide a coherent view of the relationship between MDGs and human rights but rather a diversity of insights. We would like to deeply thank the authors for their invaluable contributions and their patience in dealing with endless questions and queries from the editors.

This book would not have been possible without the generous support of the Norwegian Ministry of Foreign Affairs, NORAD, UNICEF, UN OHCHR, and LEVE for the workshop as well as assistance with research assistance and dissemination. We would particularly like to thank Mindy Roseman, Academic Director

¹ The conference report can be found at: <http://www.jus.uio.no/smr/english/about/programmes/serp/projects/mdgs-and-human-rights/>.

TABLE 1.1. MDG targets¹**Goal 1 – Eradicate extreme poverty and hunger**

Target 1.A: halve the proportion of people whose income is less than \$1 a day (between 1990 and 2015)

Target 1.B: achieve full and productive employment for all, including women and young people

Target 1.C: halve the proportion of people who suffer from hunger (1990–2015)

Goal 2 – Achieve universal primary education

Target 2.A: ensure that, by 2015, all children will be able to complete a full course of primary schooling

Goal 3 – Promote gender equality and empower women

Target 3.A: eliminate gender disparity in primary and secondary education, preferably by 2005, and in all levels of education no later than 2015

Goal 4 – Reduce child mortality

Target 4.A: reduce by two-thirds the under-five mortality rate (1990–2015)

Goal 5 – Improve maternal health

Target 5.A: reduce by three-quarters the maternal mortality ratio (1990–2015)

Target 5.B: achieve by 2015, universal access to reproductive health

Goal 6 – Combat HIV/AIDS, malaria, and other diseases

Target 6.A: have halted by 2015 and begun to reverse the spread of HIV/AIDS

Target 6.B: achieve, by 2010, universal access to treatment for HIV/AIDS for all those who need it

Target 6.C: have halted by 2015 and begun to reverse the incidence of malaria and other major diseases

Goal 7 – Ensure environmental sustainability

Target 7.A: integrate the principles of sustainable development into country policies and programmes and reverse the loss of environmental resources

Target 7.B: reduce biodiversity loss, achieving, by 2010, a significant reduction in the rate of loss

Target 7.C: halve, by 2015, the proportion of people without sustainable access to safe drinking water and basic sanitation

Target 7.D: have achieved by 2020 a significant improvement in the lives of at least 100 million slum dwellers

Goal 8 – Develop a global partnership for development

Targets 8.A–8.D cover aid, trade, debt, landlocked, and small-island States

Target 8.E: in cooperation with pharmaceutical companies, provide access to affordable essential drugs in developing countries

Target 8.F: make available the benefits of new technologies, especially information and communications technologies

¹ Note that some targets were added in 2005 by the General Assembly: the inclusion in Target 5B on reproductive health (see discussion in Chapter 9 in this volume), access to HIV treatment in Target 6, and the loss of biodiversity in Target 7. The targets were also rearranged: the original target on youth unemployment under Goal 8 was transferred to Goal 1 and broadened to include a wider range of beneficiaries (UN OHCHR, 2008).

these rights at home, whereas the MDGs are equally oriented towards international assistance and cooperation; and (iv) participating donor countries were willing to contribute to realising the MDGs but not to recognise a nondiscretionary duty to do so.

A possible explanation that we should reject for why they were not formulated as rights is that goals can have targets and indicators but rights cannot. Targets and indicators are readily used to measure levels of compliance with rights. **Article 14 of the ICESCR requires participating countries that have not been able to implement a system of free and compulsory public education to write and adopt “a detailed plan of action for the progressive implementation, within a reasonable number of years, to be fixed in the plan”.** The treaty body for this Covenant, the UN Committee on Economic, Social, and Cultural Rights, has strongly encouraged participating countries to formulate targets and benchmarks for realising particular economic and social rights.³ Beyond this, the ICCPR treaty body, the Committee on Civil and Political Rights, could perfectly well urge countries that are far from compliance with, say, the right to a fair trial or the right to vote in free and regular elections to set quantitative targets and measure their progress, if any, towards meeting those targets.

Whatever the reasons, the international community now uses both the language of human rights and the language of goals. This is not a bad thing because many rights presuppose that their objects are valuable goals and because human rights and MDGs can – and do – work together. Imagine some education activists in an international NGO who know that education is a right within international human rights law *and* who are personally strongly committed to the goal of making good educational opportunities available to all of the world’s children and insufficiently educated adults. They take the value of education – and the harmfulness to a person’s life chances of never getting educated – to form a key part of the justification for the human right to education and to provide reasonable grounds for their own strong commitment to the goal of educational opportunities for all. They may not see much difference between the human right to education and MDG 2, which deals with education. If urged to think about any differences, they might note that human rights are matters of moral or legal duty and that they have dedicated, standing international institutions for ongoing scrutiny and accountability, whereas the MDGs are more aspirational, have a less-than-universal focus and limited lifespan, and have very specific targets.

If these activists are lawyers they are likely to be more comfortable with rights talk, and if they are social scientists or have business backgrounds they are likely to prefer talking about needs, goals, and targets. But these professionals all use both vocabularies and think of them as closely related. When they deal with a country in

³ *General Comment 3, The nature of States parties’ obligations* (Fifth session, 1990), U.N. Doc. E/1991/23, annex III at 86 (1991).

Master or Servant? Development Goals and Human Rights

*Mac Darrow**

1. INTRODUCTION

Global summitry has been a veritable industry since the 1990s, convened at great expense to the international taxpayer, generating (and recycling) a great wealth of largely pre-scripted and partially implemented promises to improve the human condition. Global promises are, it has been noted, “easily set but seldom met” (Vandermoortele, 2002). If past global summit commitments had been achieved, we would all have been healthy by 2000, trade would be “fair,” and twenty-four thousand children would not be dying each day through poor sanitation and easily preventable causes.¹ Given this track record of unmet goals, why should they continue to merit our attention?

Certain global conferences have enjoyed comparatively strong political support, have established institutional frameworks for long-term cooperative action, and, arguably, have contributed positively to global social progress (Jolly, 2010: 48–49).² The 2000 Millennium Summit³ is especially noteworthy because, in the first half of 2001, to prevent the **Millennium Declaration** from lapsing into oblivion,

* Ph.D. Chief, MDGs Section, Office of the United Nations High Commissioner for Human Rights (OHCHR). This chapter partly replicates and draws on an earlier article: “The Millennium Development Goals: Milestones or Millstones? Human Rights Priorities for the Post-2015 Development Agenda”, Yale Human Rights and Development Law Journal, vol. XV, March 2012. The views in this chapter are expressed in a personal capacity and are not necessarily the views of the United Nations or OHCHR. The author is grateful to Alicia Yamin, Malcolm Langford, John Tobin, Sally-Anne Way, Stephen Humphreys, and Varun Gauri for comments on an earlier draft.

¹ Declaration of Alma-Ata, International Conference on Primary Health Care, Alma-Ata, USSR, 6–12 Sept., 1978, ¶ V; World Declaration on the Survival, Protection and Development of Children, World Summit for Children, New York, 29–30 Sept., 1990, ¶ 20; United Nations Millennium Declaration, G.A. Res 55/2, U.N. Doc. A/Res/55/2 (2000) (Sept 18, 2000), ¶ 13.

² Scherr & Gregg (2006: 439–46, 460–63) discussing the contributions of the 2002 World Summit on Sustainable Development to a global partnership approach to global environmental problems.

³ The outcome document of the **Millennium Summit** was the Millennium Declaration, which contains a raft of **commitments** on development, peace and security, human rights and humanitarian action.

a UN inter-agency expert group **extracted** a small number of quantifiable human development commitments **from its voluminous content** and established a global campaign and international monitoring regime under UN auspices. These goals (the MDGs) encapsulate an important subset of internationally recognised socio-economic rights and set global targets from the baseline year of 1990 to (for the most part) a 2015 end date. Although a global assessment of their impact is premature, the MDGs have undoubtedly raised the profile and popular awareness of development issues, changed the terms of international development policy, and helped bring a stronger focus to neglected social rights, such as the right to food, education, and health.

In September 2010, world leaders met for the High Level Plenary Meeting on the Millennium Development Goals ('MDG Summit'). The MDG Summit took place with great fanfare, attracting close to 140 Heads of State and government, as well as leaders from civil society, foundations, and the private sector. It launched important aid initiatives and involved unprecedented agreement by Member States on the importance of human rights in efforts to achieve the MDGs. But how successful was this event, measured against its goals, and what are the human rights implications of the MDG Summit with regard to future development and aid policy?

The key premise of this chapter is to show that the agreed upon global summit commitments are alone insufficient; equally if not more important for progress are sustained political mobilisation and innovative use of the commitments. This chapter begins with a short history of the MDG initiative, along with an appraisal of its significance (Section 2). A short analysis of the process and outcomes of the MDG Summit follows, evaluated through the prism of human rights (Section 3). The chapter then turns to evaluate arguments for both integrating human rights in national MDG-based development planning and positioning human rights more clearly and strategically in policy debates for the post-2015 development agenda.

2. THE MDGs THROUGH A HUMAN RIGHTS LENS

2.1. *History and Significance of the MDGs*

The MDGs comprise eight time-bound, measurable human development goals, with eighteen globally agreed targets and forty-eight indicators. Examples include the following: (i) between 1990 and 2015, halving the proportion of people suffering hunger and living on less than US\$1 per day; (ii) achieving universal primary education; (iii) halting and beginning to reverse HIV/AIDS by 2015; and (iv) reducing by three-quarters the maternal mortality ratio. Significantly, in MDG 8, donor countries agreed to a number of commitments in connection with aid, trade, debt relief, access to essential medicines, and technology transfer. The inclusion of donor commitments in this global compact for poverty reduction helps explain why the

Poverty, Hunger, and Cosmetic Progress

*Thomas Pogge**

PROLOGUE

Having spent trillions of dollars on combatting the severe financial crisis of 2008–9, the affluent North Atlantic States and their citizens have found themselves constrained to generate similarly massive savings and new revenues to sustain their substantially enlarged public debts. In this context, the World Bank’s recent update from the global poverty front has been especially welcome. Released on 1 March 2012, this wonderful news has been extensively reported and celebrated by hundreds of news media around the world. Annie Lowrey’s report in the *New York Times* is representative:

Dire Poverty Falls Despite Global Slump, Report Finds

WASHINGTON – A World Bank report shows a broad reduction in extreme poverty – and indicates that the global recession, contrary to economists’ expectations, did not increase poverty in the developing world.

The report shows that for the first time the proportion of people living in extreme poverty – on less than \$1.25 a day – fell in every developing region from 2005 to 2008. And the biggest recession since the Great Depression seems not to have thrown that trend off course, preliminary data from 2010 indicate.

The progress is so drastic that the world has met the United Nations’ Millennium Development Goals to cut extreme poverty in half five years before its 2015 deadline.

“This is very good news,” said Jeffrey Sachs, director of the Earth Institute at Columbia University and the United Nations’ special adviser on the Millennium Development Goals. “There has been broad-based progress in fighting poverty, and accelerating progress. There’s a lot to be happy about.”¹

* Professor, Yale University. All figures in US dollars.

¹ *New York Times*, 7 March 2012, available at <http://www.nytimes.com/2012/03/07/world/extreme-poverty-down-despite-recession-world-bank-data-show.html>.

Having read dozens of reports in the mainstream media about the news from the World Bank, I have yet to find one expressing even a scintilla of doubt. Many news reports about new data or findings provided by physicists, climate researchers, astronomers, or biologists show some journalistic effort to find other experts who are unconvinced and perhaps prepared to offer alternative findings, data, or estimates. But the World Bank's data from the poverty front are treated as beyond all reasonable doubt – reported as straightforward unassailable facts on a par with the current temperature at Kennedy Airport.

1. INTRODUCTION: QUESTIONING THE CELEBRATION

What triggered all the celebration was a six-page briefing note – three pages of tables showing the 1981–2008 evolution of the number and proportion of poor people in various regions and countries, plus three pages of comments conveying, *inter alia*, the additional good news that extreme poverty has declined even further in the 2008–10 period as well: “Using the \$1.25 a day line, the developing world as a whole reached the MDG 1 in 2010” – referring to the target of halving the proportion of extremely poor people by 2015 (Chen and Ravallion, 2012a: 2). The message is that we have reached our principal goal five years early and so surely deserve to relax a bit after all our great work in the fight against severe poverty.

Before we do so, however, let us look a little more closely. According to the Bank's latest figures presented in the ‘Update’, more than one-third of all human beings – 2,471 million – live on less each day than what \$2 could buy in the United States in 2005.² Pause for a while and reflect on what it would be like to live on this sort of a budget, equivalent in 2012 to \$16.50 per week or \$71.70 per month or \$860 for the entire year. Think here about what you could buy in the way of food, shelter, clothing, medical care, water, and other utilities. Ask yourself **whether you would consider** such an existence to accord with what is affirmed in **Article 25** of the Universal Declaration of Human Rights: “Everyone has the right to a standard of living adequate for the health and well-being of himself and of his family, **including food, clothing, housing and medical care and necessary social services.**”³ And then realise that, if you and your household did indeed subsist on such a meager per capita

² All World Bank poverty lines are denominated in ‘international dollars’. These are US-dollars of a certain base year, which get converted at that year's purchasing power parities (PPPs) into local currency units of that same year. For example, while 90 Indian rupees were required to purchase 2 US-dollars in 2005 (market exchange rate), a mere 31.20 Indian rupees in India were deemed sufficient to match the purchasing power of 2 US-dollars in the United States. So the \$2/day (2005 value) poverty line is translated for India into an INR 31.20/day (2005 value) line, and from there further translated, by means of the Indian consumer price index (CPI), into Indian rupees of other years. By this method, currency amounts from any year and location are made mutually comparable by being translated first (via the local CPI) into local currency units of some base year and then (via this base year's PPPs) into US-dollars of that same base year.

³ Universal Declaration of Human Rights, G.A. res. 217A (III), U.N. Doc A/810 at 71 (1948).

budget of \$US2.00/day (2005 value), you would be living *fully 60 per cent above* the \$1.25/day (2005 value) poverty line that is now actually used, within MDG 1, for tracking the world's progress against poverty.

Can it be argued that using the higher \$2/day poverty line would be overly ambitious because, by classifying nearly 2.5 billion people as poor, it would make the goal of poverty eradication unrealistically demanding? This is not a plausible argument. At market exchange rates, those living below the \$2/day line have a collective annual shortfall of about \$300 billion from this line – about 0.8 per cent of global household income. A mere 1.2 per cent of the income of the richest tenth of humanity, which collectively receive two-thirds of global household income, would theoretically suffice to cover this shortfall.⁴ It would not be asking too much of the top tenth that they relinquish such a tiny fraction of their incomes for the sake of fulfilling the human rights of one-third of humankind.

Even if a great deal of very serious poverty remains, should we not be glad about its 'drastic' decline? Well, certainly not without further thought! A reduction in the number living in poverty **might be due, for example, to many poor people having died.** During the MDG reporting period, the ranks of the poor have been continuously thinned by some 50,000 deaths each day from poverty-related causes, such as communicable diseases exacerbated by undernourishment. These 18 million annual poverty deaths constitute about one-third of all human deaths (WHO, 2008: Table A1, 54–59).⁵ Given the World Bank's method of tracking the evolution of world poverty by counting the number of poor, such deaths improve the results: the poor person who dies at age four or at age forty thereby improves the next poverty count. Any snapshot view of poverty has this perverse consequence that it ignores those who have died prematurely and thereby gives less weight to the fate of persons whose lives are short. If the poorer half of all human beings born live, on average, half as long as the rest, then they will all fit into the poorest third of the World Bank's snapshot view. If the poorer half live only one-third as long as the rest, then they will all fit into the poorest quarter of the World Bank's snapshot presentation. The latter scenario looks like an improvement – a smaller proportion of human lifetime is spent in poverty. But the apparent improvement actually hides a disaster: those born into poverty have fallen even further behind in terms of life expectancy.⁶

⁴ Global household income distribution data for 2008 from Branko Milanovic, principal economist in the World Bank's Development Research Group, in a personal e-mail communication on 7 December 2012. See also Milanovic (2012).

⁵ To keep my estimate conservative, I have included only those causes of death which occur almost exclusively among the poor. Of course, many poor people die from causes that also kill affluent people, and often at earlier ages due to more severe disease vectors and inferior medical care. But no such premature deaths are included in the 18-million figure.

⁶ For a more detailed statement of this point, see Pogge (2002: 98). For a full elaboration of the point in the language of economics, see Kanbur and Mukherjee (2007).

Leaving behind this **immensely important and yet widely ignored flaw** in the World Bank's poverty measurement exercise, let us examine more closely the figures presented in the tables of the 'Update'. We find there that the number of people living below the \$2/day poverty line is reported to have been 2,585 million in 1981. So the number of human beings living below this \$2/day poverty line declined by 4.4 per cent in 27 years (1981–2008). Looking at this minuscule decline, it does not seem so clear anymore that we really have cause to celebrate or reason to relax in the fight against poverty.

But how can these two findings go together: that we have done miserably by reducing the number of very poor people by only 4.4 per cent in a twenty-seven-year period and that we have been spectacularly successful by cutting poverty in half fully five years before the 2015 target date?

It all depends on which numbers one picks from the tables and how one presents them. MDG 1 tracks the poor not in terms of their *number*, but as a *proportion* of the population of the less developed countries. Because this population increases rapidly, the proportion of poor people declines even when their number remains constant. To illustrate, the very same 1981–2008 progress in regard to people living below the \$2/day poverty line can be expressed as a 4.4 per cent decline in their *number* or as a 38.2 per cent decline in their *proportion* (from 0.696 to 0.430 of the population of the less developed countries).

As we have seen, MDG 1 also uses a much lower \$1.25/day poverty line, counting as poor only those households that are living on less per person per day than what \$1.25 could buy in the United States in 2005. This choice leads to an even steeper decline in the proportion of poor. Using as the baseline the poverty prevalence of 1990, ~~chosen as the base year for all MDGs~~, we find that by 2008 the proportion of \$1.25/day poverty had reportedly declined by 48 per cent (from 0.431 to 0.224 of the population of the less developed countries), whereas the proportion of \$2/day poverty had reportedly declined by only 33.4 per cent (from 0.646 to 0.430 of the population of the less developed countries). Previous communications from the World Bank had given figures also for a higher poverty line of \$2.50/day (2005 value), which showed an even less rosy trend.⁷

Accepting for now the figures in the World Bank's tables, one can spin the news in very different ways depending on which data one selects and on how one presents them. Thus the tables support both of the following statements: (1) the period 1981–2008 has seen a 4.4 per cent decline in the number of human beings living on less than \$2/day (2005 value), and (2) the period of 1990–2008 has seen a 48 per cent

⁷ The present 'Update' provides no figures for this line, but they can be obtained at <http://iresearch.worldbank.org/PovcalNet/index.htm> – enter "\$76/month" to find a decline in poverty prevalence of 27 per cent during 1990–2008. The number of people living on less per person per day than what \$2.50 could buy in the United States in 2005 has reportedly evolved from 2784 million in 1981 to 3178 million in 1990 to 3008 million in 2008.

TABLE 8.1. “Halving World Poverty” as interpreted in the Millennium Declaration

Millennium Declaration	Millions of people in extreme poverty	World population in millions	Proportion in poverty	Progress against poverty (%)
2000	1708.7	6123	0.279	
2008	1289.0	6740	0.191	31.5%
2015 target	1016.1	7284 est.	0.1395	50.0%

TABLE 8.2. “Halving World Poverty” as interpreted in MDG 1

MDG1	Millions of people in extreme poverty	LDC population in millions	Proportion in poverty	Progress against poverty (%)
1990	1908.6	4431	0.431	
2008	1289.0	5753	0.224	48.0%
2015 target	1351.2	6270 est.	0.2155	50.0%

decline in the proportion of people in the less developed countries living on less than \$1.25/day (2005 value). Given that the evolution of world poverty can be presented in such dramatically divergent ways, it is hardly surprising that our politicians and international officials prefer the rosier picture.

2. MOVING THE GOAL POSTS ON INCOME POVERTY AND HUNGER

It is worth recalling in this context that the MDGs – though they are said to originate in and to derive their authority from the Millennium Declaration that the UN General Assembly adopted in the year 2000 – represent a substantial revision of this Declaration. Article 19 of the Millennium Declaration articulates the resolve of the world’s governments “to halve, by the year 2015, the proportion of the world’s people whose income is less than one dollar a day and the proportion of people who suffer from hunger”.⁸

There are three noteworthy discrepancies between this formulation in the Millennium Declaration and the subsequent text of MDG 1 (see Tables 8.1 and 8.2). First, the Millennium Declaration stipulates a poverty line of \$1/day in 1985 US dollars,⁹ which is substantially higher in most countries than the MDG 1 poverty line of \$1.25

⁸ United Nations Millennium Declaration, G.A res 55/2, U.N. Doc. A/Res/55/2, 18 September 2000.

⁹ This was the World Bank’s international poverty line fixed in 1990. In 2000 the Bank then started using a revised international poverty line of \$1.08/day in 1993 US dollars, before revising again in 2008 to an international poverty line of \$1.25/day in 2005 US dollars. These changes are reflected, inter alia, in the World Bank’s annual *World Development Reports*.

in 2005 US dollars (Reddy and Pogge, 2010).¹⁰ As we already saw, a lower poverty line tends to produce a better looking poverty trend. Second, MDG 1 relates the number of poor not to the population of the world but to the faster growing population of the less developed countries. Third, ~~all MDGs use 1990 as the base year~~, whereas the Millennium Declaration uses the time of its own adoption: the year 2000. Back-dating the baseline to 1990 is triply significant: it increases from 15 to 25 years the time in which poverty reductions can be achieved, it magnifies the increase in the base population to which the number of poor is being set in proportion, and it takes advantage of the substantial poverty reduction that China achieved in the 1990s.¹¹

Because the World Bank no longer provides figures for the old poverty line denominated in 1985 US dollars, I cannot quantify the impact of the first discrepancy.¹² However, using the new extreme-poverty line of \$1.25/day (2005 value) throughout, we can illustrate the significance of the other two ways in which the formulation of MDG 1 departed from the text of Millennium Declaration.

Table 8.2 shows clearly how the latest World Bank data support the message that we can now relax on the poverty front: even a 62 million *increase* in the number of extremely poor people during the 2008–15 period would, thanks to population growth in the less developed countries, still suffice to ensure that the relevant proportion of extremely poor people declines to less than half of what it was in 1990.

The two tables together show how the reformulation of our goal adds 335 million human beings to the number of those whose extreme poverty in 2015 will be considered acceptable or even celebrated as success. Had we stuck to the Millennium Declaration, solemnly adopted by the General Assembly of the United Nations, we would be aiming to reduce the number of extremely poor people by 692.6 million between 2000 and 2015. Having switched to MDG 1 instead, we are now aiming for a reduction by only 357.5 million. Nearly half the work against poverty promised in the Millennium Declaration was accomplished by a stroke of the pen, simply by moving the goal posts. The other half happened without much effort – simply through ordinary growth in global average income. As Branko Milanovic has extensively documented, **the world's poor have actually done worse than humanity at large**

¹⁰ In the United States, for instance, \$1 (1985 value) corresponds to \$1.815 (2005 value) which is 45 per cent more than \$1.25. Expressed in dollars of 2012, the two benchmarks of \$1 (1985 value) and \$1.25 (2005 value) correspond today (May 2013) to \$2.16 and \$1.49, respectively. Available at www.bls.gov/data/inflation_calculator.htm.

¹¹ The World Bank's 'Update' reports that the number of Chinese living below the \$1.25/day poverty line has declined by 265 million or 39 per cent during the 1990s. Thanks to this feat, the world's most populous region, East Asia and the Pacific, actually achieved MDG1 already in 1999 — fully two years before the MDGs were even announced! See *Implementation of the United Nations Millennium Declaration, Report of the Secretary-General* (Fifty seventh session, 2002), U.N. Doc. A/57/270 at 8 and 22 (2002).

¹² But see the eighth paragraph of section 1, indicating that the choice of a lower poverty line tends to be associated with a rosier poverty trend.

during the relevant period, suffering declines in their share of global household income (Milanovic, 2012).¹³

The great ease with which this massive fraud against the poor was perpetrated illustrates the most important point we need to realise: how utterly indifferent we more privileged people are to the fate of the world's poor. Perhaps it was to be expected that Kofi Annan would come under pressure to dilute the goal and that he would succumb to this pressure. But what about all the others? **Thousands of government officials** were involved in drafting the Millennium Declaration; thousands of **journalists** reported on it; thousands of **economists, statisticians,** and other **academics** examined the goals it was setting forth. Many of these thought leaders knew, and all of them could and **should have known**, that the express resolution of the UN General Assembly was being **subverted at the expense of the poor**. But no one cared about 335 million additional people condemned to extreme poverty – not enough, anyway, to speak out or even just to let the real story be told.¹⁴

MDG 1 also contains the additional target: “to halve between 1990 and 2015 the proportion of **people who suffer from** hunger”. This target, too, is the diluted successor of an earlier promise. At the World Food Summit in Rome in 1996, the assembled governments had made this solemn promise: “We pledge our political will and our common and national commitment to achieving food security for all and to an ongoing effort to eradicate hunger in all countries, with an immediate view to reducing the number of undernourished people to half their present level no later than 2015.”¹⁵ Although this promise envisioned that the *number* of chronically undernourished people would be halved from the 1996 level, the MDG 1 promise envisages halving the *proportion* of chronically undernourished people in the population of the less developed countries from the 1990 level (see **Tables 8.3 and 8.4**).¹⁶

Once again, the effect of the reinterpretation is dramatic: fully 202 million human beings are added to the number of those whose chronic undernourishment in the year 2015 will be considered acceptable or even celebrated as success. Instead

¹³ Milanovic's data concerning the evolution of global inequality at market exchange rates are reproduced in **Table 8.9**.

¹⁴ **I tried in 2003–4 to interest news media in the deceit and was turned down by many, including the *New York Times*, *New York Review of Books*, and *London Review of Books*.** I finally managed to publish an 800-word essay in the *Frankfurter Rundschau* (12 February 2004) as well as an academic article (Pogge, 2004). Neither publication had any discernible echo.

¹⁵ Rome Declaration on World Food Security, FAO, 13–17 November Rome Italy, available at www.fao.org/docrep/003/w3613e/w3613e00.htm. The UN Food and Agriculture Organization is also the source for the number of chronically undernourished people as shown in **Tables 8.3–5**. See FAO (2010: Table 1, p. 50), www.fao.org/news/story/en/item/8836/, www.fao.org/news/story/jp/item/45210/icate/, and www.fao.org/hunger/en/ (accessed April 5, 2011).

¹⁶ It should be clear that, in highlighting this revision, I attach no importance at all to whether governments track poverty as a number or proportion. My concern is with the *dilution* of our goal and with the effort to obscure this dilution by retaining the ‘halving extreme poverty by 2015’ language.

TABLE 8.3. *Halving hunger as interpreted in the Rome Declaration*

Rome Declaration on world food security	Millions of chronically undernourished	Progress against chronic undernourishment (%)
1996	788	
2010	925	-17%
2015 target	394	50%

TABLE 8.4. *Halving hunger as interpreted in MDG 1*

MDG 1	Millions of undernourished in LDCs	LDC population in millions	Proportion chronically undernourished in LDCs	Progress against chronic undernourishment (%)
1990	843	4431	0.190	
2010	925	5899	0.157	17%
2015 target	596	6270 est.	0.095	50%

of aiming to reduce the 1996 number by 394 million, we are now aiming for a reduction by merely 192 million – achieving more than half the initially promised progress against chronic undernourishment again by a stroke of the pen, simply by moving the goal posts. Instead of admitting in 2010 a shameful 17 per cent setback in the fight against chronic undernourishment, we are announcing a 17 per cent advance. And once again, this massive fraud against the world’s poor is perpetrated without so much as a whisper from the more affluent populations that have control of and access to means of mass communication.¹⁷

3. BRINGING FOOD COSTS INTO THE EQUATION

A close look at [Table 8.4](#) reveals the massive divergence of the trend of chronic undernourishment from the extreme-poverty trend. Although one would expect these two trends to be strongly correlated, they in fact go in opposite directions. [Tables 8.5](#) and [8.6](#) present these trends in more detail.

¹⁷ It is worth noting that the creative accounting is not confined to MDG1. The annual MDG reports state generally that “[m]ost of the MDG targets have a deadline of 2015, using 1990 as the baseline against which progress is gauged” (UN, 2011: 66). The year “1990” occurs hundreds of times in these reports, but **not one single time in the entire UN Millennium Declaration**. For example, in current UN phrasing, MDG 4 and MDG 5 require that we “reduce by two thirds, between 1990 and 2015, the under-five mortality rate” and “reduce by three quarters, between 1990 and 2015, the maternal mortality ratio” (Ibid.: 24 and 28). **What the UN General Assembly had actually agreed** to promise is rather different: “By the same date [2015], to have reduced maternal mortality by three quarters, and under-five child mortality by two thirds, of their **current rates**” (UN Millennium Declaration, Article 19, emphasis added).

TABLE 8.5. *The reported evolution of chronic undernourishment worldwide (FAO)*

Year	Undemourished persons in millions	As a percentage of world population
1969–71	878	26
1979–81	853	21
1990–92	843	16
1995–97	788	14
2000–2	833	14
2005–7	848	13
2008	963	14
2009	1023	15
2010	925	14

The headcount figures of [Table 8.5](#) are most comparable to those related to the lowest poverty line included in the latest World Bank ‘Update’. In regard to this \$1/day (2005 value) poverty line, the ‘Update’ provides the data displayed in [Table 8.6](#).

The striking discrepancy between the trends depicted in [Tables 8.5](#) and [8.6](#) has long been ignored, with media attention focusing on the rosier poverty data – the Food and Agriculture Organisation (FAO) has nothing like the visibility, prestige, or financial resources of the World Bank. Yet the latest MDG Report (UN, 2011) does finally comment on this discrepancy. After depicting the fall in reported poverty between 1999 and 2009 and the rather less pretty evolution of chronic undernourishment, it comments with a carefully crafted sentence: “The disconnect between

TABLE 8.6. *The reported evolution of \$1/day (2005 value) poverty worldwide (World Bank)*

Year	Persons living below \$1/day (2005 value) in millions	As a proportion of the population of the less developed countries
1981	1545.3	41.6
1984	1369.3	34.7
1987	1258.9	30.1
1990	1364.7	30.8
1993	1338.1	28.7
1996	1150.0	23.5
1999	1181.9	23.1
2002	1096.5	20.6
2005	886.1	16.0
2008	805.9	14.0

poverty reduction and the persistence of hunger has brought renewed attention to the mechanisms governing access to food in the developing world” (UN, 2011: 11). The sentence suggests a possible explanation for the discrepancy: food distribution systems in less developed countries have been deteriorating so that poor people cannot find food to spend their money on. This wholly unsupported speculation defies common sense, and the MDG Report is careful not to endorse it, but merely to convey vaguely that some people apparently find this explanation worthy of attention.

Is there a better explanation of the discrepancy? The World Bank adjusts all incomes for inflation. So in judging how a household has fared over the 2005–10 period, the Bank compares its *per capita* income with the – typically national – inflation rate. If a household’s *per capita* income rises faster than the rate of inflation, the Bank concludes that this household has become less poor.

Inflation is tracked by national consumer price indices (CPIs). These indices are sensitive to the evolution of the prices of all commodities that households consume, weighting each commodity in proportion to its share in national household expenditure. An increase in the CPI of, say, 15 per cent between 2005 and 2010 reflects a weighted average of the five-year price changes for thousands of commodities. Many commodities became cheaper over this period – consumer electronics and real estate, for instance – while the prices of other commodities rose by much more than the rate of inflation.

Here is then a better explanation of the poverty-hunger ‘disconnect’. In the 2005–10 period, food prices rose much faster than inflation. The FAO publishes detailed monthly food price statistics for the major food groups as well as an aggregate index that tracks world market prices in both nominal and inflation-adjusted (real) terms. As can be seen from the FAO data displayed in [Table 8.7](#), food prices increased by 58 per cent – 35 per cent more than the general rate of inflation – during the 2005–10 period and then increased some more in the period from 2010 to the release of the World Bank’s ‘Update’ on 1 March 2012.

It is clear that this dramatic doubling of food prices is bad for consumers and especially for the poor. But it may seem that the World Bank’s poverty measurement exercise fully takes account of the rapid increase in food prices: nominal changes in a household’s income are deflated by the rate of inflation, which in turn takes account of the prices of foodstuffs alongside the prices of everything else that households consume. When a household’s income keeps pace with the national inflation rate, then the divergent price changes of the different commodities are a wash: even if food prices go up much faster than the rate of inflation, the household can still afford to maintain its accustomed diet. This is so because the expansion of the income share that it must now spend on food is compensated by the contraction in the income share it now needs for purchasing other commodities whose prices have not risen as steeply as the rate of inflation.

TABLE 8.7. *The evolution of world food prices 2000–2012*¹⁸

World food price index	Nominal	Real (deflated)
2000	90.4	92.9
2005	117.3	103.3
2006	126.7	108.2
2007	158.7	127.7
2008	199.8	147.6
2009	156.9	123.9
2010	185.3	139.4
2011	227.6	154.0
2012	211.7	141.5

The reasoning displayed in the preceding paragraph is applicable to households that consume commodities in the same proportions as do households in general; the inflation rate, after all, weights the prices of the various commodities according to their share of national household consumption expenditure. But the reasoning is dubious when applied to poor households whose per capita income may be only one-tenth, say, of the national average. The income share that such very poor people spend on consumer discretions and services – on cars, stereos, DVDs, furniture, vacation travel, entertainment, computers, alcohol, cosmetics, handbags, taxis, domestic help, hairstyling, and so on – is much smaller than the share of national household expenditure devoted to these commodities. The reason is not that poor people dislike such discretions and services, but rather that they must spend a larger than average share of their incomes on basic needs, especially food. Their nutritional requirements, after all, are the same as those of rich people – or even greater, because many of them perform heavy physical labour. To be sure, poor people can substitute cheaper foodstuffs and can then obtain an adequate diet for one-third or perhaps even one-quarter of what their average compatriot is spending. But they cannot get by on one-tenth of that amount. If in a poor country a household subsisting on one-tenth the national average income were to spend no more than the nationally typical share of its income on food, its members would simply not survive.

Because very poor people must spend more than the average share of their incomes on food, the national rate of consumer price inflation understates the impact on them

¹⁸ See www.fao.org/worldfoodsituation/wfs-home/foodpricesindex/en/ for the FAO Food Price Index data. They reflect international food prices prevailing on world markets. National and local governments have various ways of cushioning the impact of rising food prices – subsidies and tax reductions, for example – and in many countries food prices have not risen as sharply as the Food Price Index suggests. Still, they have risen sharply in most countries and well above the rate of inflation.

TABLE 8.8. *The reported evolution in the number of poor, 2005–2008*

Poverty Line in 2005 international dollars	Reported millions of poor in 2005	Reported millions of poor in 2008
\$1.00/day	886.1	805.9
\$1.25/day	1389.6	1289.0
\$2.00/day	2595.8	2471.4

of extraordinary movements – up or down – of food prices. The resulting error is magnified by the fact that the much larger expenditures of rich households dominate the national household expenditure pattern. In a typical poor country, the richer half of the population may spend 40 per cent of its income on food and the poorer half 80 per cent. But when the richer half accounts for nine-tenths of national household expenditure, the average share works out to 44 per cent of national household expenditure devoted to food. Given the way a national CPI is calculated, it is all but guaranteed to be more inappropriate to the consumption of the poorer half of the population than to that of the richer half: when food prices rise much faster than inflation, then a poor household whose income keeps pace with inflation becomes much worse off, whereas a rich household whose income keeps pace with inflation becomes just slightly better off.¹⁹

Could this be the explanation for **the discrepancy between the FAO's shocking undernourishment statistics and the Bank's much rosier poverty statistics?** This question is impossible to answer so long as all we have from the World Bank are the numbers (Table 8.8), which show a substantial decline in poverty during the 2005–8 period, without any explanation of how the local incomes of households were converted into 2005 US dollars.

What we do know already is what importance the world's affluent people are attaching to the missing knowledge: none. The World Bank published its triumphalist update in advance of a proper explanation of what the numbers mean. And the

¹⁹ I have made analogous points about the purchasing power parities (PPPs) that the Bank is using to convert 2005 US-dollars into 2005 local currency units of other countries. The Bank uses purchasing power parities for individual household consumption, which weight food prices according to the share of food expenditures in international household consumption spending. This is highly problematic because poor people do and must spend much larger shares of their meager incomes on food than consumers in general. Because foodstuffs are highly tradable, i.e. can easily be shipped across national borders, their prices tend to reflect market exchange rates more closely than commodities in general do. It is not surprising, then, that the PPPs used by the Bank overstate, in each and every poor country, the purchasing power of local currency units in regard to food. Food prices in poor countries tend to be about 50 per cent higher, on average, than the PPPs used by the Bank would suggest. This means that the local currency amount the Bank deems equivalent to \$1.25 (2005 value) will buy, in the typical poor country, only as much food as could be bought in 2005 for \$0.83 in the United States. For details, see Pogge (2010: 68) with endnote 127.

experts, media, politicians, and officials celebrated on cue without a moment's hesitation occasioned by the FAO's reports of massive increases in food prices and undernourishment.

4. THE LATEST DEVELOPMENTS²⁰

A yearlong delay in the publication of this essay prompts me to bring it up to date on two fronts.

In August 2012, the World Bank released its explanation of the methodology underlying its earlier 'Update'. The explanation frankly acknowledges that "our international poverty line of \$1.25 per day in 2005 [dollars] is deliberately lower than the 2005 value in the United States of our old international line", which was \$1.00 per day in 1985 dollars (Chen and Ravallion, 2012b: 4). ~~Although no justification is given for the deliberate choice of a lower international poverty line,~~ a useful diagram (Chen and Ravallion, 2012b: 22, Figure 20.3, Cumulative Distribution Functions Up to U.S. Poverty Line) shows clearly that the choice of a lower poverty line entails a much steeper decline in the prevalence of poverty over the 1981–2008 period. The authors note, "The number of people living *between* \$1.25 and \$2.00 per day almost doubled between 1981 and 2008, from 648 million to 1.18 billion. The marked bunching up just above the \$1.25 per day line points to the fact that a great many people remain vulnerable" (Chen and Ravallion, 2012b: 27).

The methodology paper shows awareness of the special problem of food prices:

Given the steep rise in food prices around 2008, we made an extra effort to ensure that the price indexes we were using adequately reflected those increases at the country level. This step was carried out in consultation with the World Bank's poverty experts for each country. In some cases, such as India, we were already using CPIs that were anchored reasonably well to the consumption behavior of the poor, so nothing needed to be done. However, for about 15 countries (including China) for which food prices increased faster than other prices, we determined that the currently available CPI attached too low a weight to food, and we reweighted the index to assure that its food share accorded reasonably well with food spending patterns in a neighborhood of the poverty line. For another 22 countries, we used CPIs provided by the Bank's country offices that were deemed to adequately reflect the rise in food prices (Chen and Ravallion, 2012b: 11–12).²¹

²⁰ This section was inserted in March 2013.

²¹ It is not as obvious as the authors seem to think that a poverty measurement exercise should weight prices of the various commodities according to the actual consumption of the poor. Consider an urgently needed medicine, for example: the fact that poor people do not consume a certain medicine does not show that its price is unimportant to them – indeed, its exorbitant price may be the cause for their sickness or death. Conversely, the fact the poor people spend a portion of their small incomes on cigarettes may not show that fluctuations in the price of cigarettes affect how poor they are – cigarettes are not needed to avoid poverty. But then again, a rise in the price of cigarettes may

Such law is binding on States (and under certain conditions, arguably many non-state actors) regardless of treaty ratification. A traditional school of thought has only been prepared to admit a small group of civil rights (such as life and protection from torture) into this revered corpus (Tomuschat, 2004: 35). However, the constant reaffirmation of the MDGs, particularly since 2005, may support an alternative case: that the minimum core of each international human right has now attained customary law status (Skogly, 2002). Alston (2005: 774) concludes that “at least some of the MDGs reflect norms of customary international law” because “halving the number of people living in hunger, achieving primary universal primary education, assuring only minimum rates of child mortality, assuring very low levels of maternal mortality, and taking essential measures to combat HIV/AIDS and other major diseases, are all quantifiable goals that, if not met, involve the denial of fundamental rights to a large number of individuals”.

This argument can clearly be advanced in general terms, but it is less clear whether all the targets are commensurate with the envisioned minimum core of many social rights. Simplistic targets may not correspond to more contextualised human rights requirements, which demand structural changes in institutions, as well as laws and policies.

What about the *negative* side of the ledger? Has the goal-based approach weakened the authority of rights-based duties or even contributed to violations? The chapters in this volume highlight a number of negative consequences. First, whereas the MDGs helped shift the focus of international development closer to social objectives and to individuals, this shift came with various Faustian bargains, to borrow from Gore (2010). Since indicators embody a ‘theoretical claim about the appropriate standards for evaluating actors’ conduct’ (Davis, Kingsbury and Merry, 2012: 9), they can also reshape their parent norms, creating regressive as well as progressive normative effects. For Pogge, the conservative and watered-down target on extreme poverty is not only problematic for its lack of material ambition; it also entrenches rather than denaturalises the global institutional order that produces patterns of poverty in many low- and middle-income countries. The targets “lure us into a false sense of normalcy, a sense that the poor have always been and therefore always will be with us”. Although Pogge accepts that a large proportion of humanity has always lived in extreme poverty, he argues that “today’s extreme poverty is radically different from that of the past because today we have the resources – technical, economic and administrative – to defeat such poverty once and for all, without excessive cost to anyone”.

Exclusion from the agenda can have the same effect: what is not counted, does not count. Stein, McClain-Nhlapo, and Lord highlight how equality rights were eclipsed in the MDGs framework: although the framework emphasises the rights of some (children and partly women), it fails to mention the rights of persons with disabilities, an absence that “exists despite evidence-based research indicating that