

# Book Review: Poverty and the Millennium Development Goals: A Critical Look Forward edited by Alberto Cimadamore, Gabriele Koehler and Thomas Pogge

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In 2015, *The UN Millennium Development Goals* reached their deadline – but what has been their legacy? **Poverty and the Millennium Development Goals**, edited by **Alberto Cimadamore, Gabriele Koehler and Thomas Pogge**, brings together scholars to interrogate their success in reducing global poverty. **Jason Hickel** welcomes this as a refreshing and vital critical perspective on the MDGs and recommends it to readers looking for an alternative paradigm for development.

***Poverty and the Millennium Development Goals: A Critical Look Forward*. Alberto Cimadamore, Gabriele Koehler and Thomas Pogge (eds). Zed Books. 2016.**

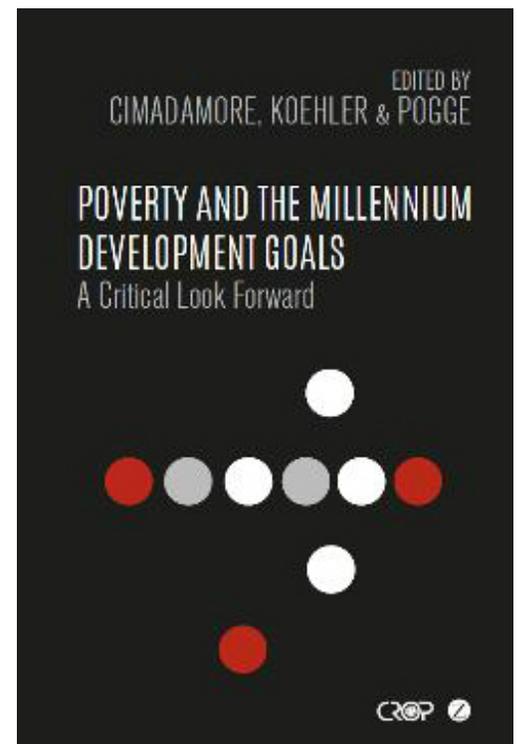
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In 2015, with plenty of fanfare and celebration, the Millennium Development Goals (MDGs) came splashing to an end. UN officials and heads of state pumped hands, slapped backs and congratulated one another on their achievement. Official reports announced that the MDGs had been ‘the most successful anti-poverty movement in history’, having accomplished their headline goal of cutting global poverty in half. This happy, good-news narrative was embraced by the media and repeated around the world, with very little scrutiny.

But scholars have been pointing out – for a number of years now – that this good-news narrative simply isn’t accurate. In this new publication from Zed Books, Alberto Cimadamore, Gabriele Koehler and Thomas Pogge join 14 other scholars to interrogate the legacy of the MDGs. *Poverty and the Millennium Development Goals: A Critical Look Forward* emerges from a 2012 workshop convened by the Comparative Research Program on Poverty (CROP) to assess whether poverty has really declined in line with international commitments, and to ask what role the MDGs have played in this.

Their assessment is not a happy one. First of all, they point out that the UN’s official poverty metrics have been massaged to make progress seem much more rapid than it really is. While initial commitments called for a 50 per cent reduction in the absolute number of poor, the MDGs shifted the goalposts to focus instead on reducing the *proportion* of the population in poverty, enabling them to create the illusion of success even while the poverty headcount remains high. What is more, the most substantial gains against poverty have come from China, which the UN claims for the MDGs even though they had nothing to do with it. Take China out of the picture, and it becomes clear that little, if any, progress has been made in the rest of the world.

But that’s not all. These 17 experts argue that the poverty line itself, set at \$1.25 per day (2005 PPP), is too low for even basic human existence. And to make matters worse, the line has been adjusted *downward* in real terms over time. All of this allows the MDGS to grossly understate the true extent of global poverty. Take Mexico, for example. According to the international poverty line used by the MDGs, Mexico’s poverty rate is a relatively insignificant 5 per



cent. But Mexico's own national assessments suggest a much bleaker picture, with poverty rates as high as 50 per cent, or even 80 per cent.



**Image Credit: Eight Development Millennium Goals Event, Bremen, 2005 (Tarawneh CC 2.0)**

In light of these problems, Cimadamore, Koehler and Pogge argue that we need to improve our definition of poverty to give us a more accurate picture of the crisis at hand. We need to adjust the poverty line upward, probably by a factor of 4; we need to take account of the multi-dimensional nature of poverty, looking beyond just income; and we need to refocus our attention on the absolute number of poor as our key benchmark of progress.

What of the MDGs as a development model? In the book's final chapter, Koehler concludes that while the MDGs succeeded in making the poverty crisis more visible to policymakers, they failed in that the majority of the targets were not met. This, coupled with the fact that the real poverty rate remains so high, forces us to ask serious questions about our general approach to development.

On this front, the most egregious shortcoming of the MDGs is that they refused to address the macroeconomic policies that actually cause poverty in the first place. Jomo Sundaram points to the structural adjustment programmes of the 1980s and 1990s as an example. Not only did structural adjustment constrain the ability of states to provide social services and welfare protections, it also sabotaged economic growth and employment. Many Global South countries were systematically denied the policy space they needed to achieve development and poverty reduction. The MDGs did little to rectify this.

Manuel Montes's contribution sharpens this critique. For him, the problem with the MDGs is that by blaming developing countries for their own failures, they 'draw attention away from the treacherous features of the international system whose structure serves mainly the economic and political interests of powerful factions of donor countries'. Montes points to the tax evasion system that drains developing countries of much-needed investment and revenue; the free-trade regime that keeps developing countries dependent on commodity exports; overindebtedness that has resulted from volatile short-term financial flows; speculation in food markets that drives food prices up; and asymmetrical agricultural subsidies that disadvantage poor countries.

In short, the global economic system is fundamentally unfair and actively precludes development. Poverty is a

*political* problem: it has to do with power imbalances. The MDG model refuses to recognise this basic fact, and proposes instead to paper over it with aid. Montes insists that we adopt a more structural approach: force Western exporters to back down from their unfair subsidies; abolish structural adjustment conditions on finance; allow developing countries to regulate capital flows and multinational activity in the interest of the public good; and democratise the IMF and the World Bank.

Developing countries need the policy space to industrialise, grow and – most importantly – generate employment. For Montes, and many of the book's other contributors, this is the primary goal of development.

But in Chapter Eight, Julio Boltvinik and Araceli Damian throw a bucket of cold water on this view, in what I think is the most exciting and challenging contribution in the book. They remind us that we can no longer pretend employment offers a solution to mass poverty. On the contrary, as capitalism moves inexorably toward ever greater automation, workers are becoming increasingly unnecessary to production. Before long, even the clothing and electronics industries – the last major sources of employment in the developing world – will be automated.

Yes, we need a fairer global economy. But, to quote Jeremy Rifkin, who Boltvinik and Damian cite at length: 'If jobs are the solution, we are in big trouble.' The old Keynesian model of development that worked so well for the Global South in the 1960s and 1970s no longer holds any promise.

The only way to prevent the mass impoverishment that automation will cause is to delink livelihood from work. Boltvinik and Damian call for a **universal citizen's income** – a direct, unconditional cash transfer to each individual in amounts sufficient for livelihood. How to fund it? Through high and progressive taxes on commercial land use (the **land value tax** so famously advocated by Henry George), and through taxes on **financial transactions**, **foreign currency transactions** and **capital gains**.

Not only would a universal citizen's income eliminate poverty, it would also have a number of other salutary effects. By distributing income downward, it **would generate** aggregate **demand** and help resolve capitalism's present crisis of stagnation and overaccumulation. But it would also do something much more radical: it would **liberate** people from the threat of starvation – the whip that drives them into **exploitative** relationships – and restore their ability to **choose** their own **work**. Boltvinik and Damian never go this far, but to me it seems that if we applied this idea globally, and rooted it in the **concept of the global commons**, a universal citizen's income would help dissolve nationalisms and generate a new consciousness of human solidarity.

While this book is packed with interesting critiques and creative alternatives, it does have its shortcomings. As with many edited volumes, it doesn't cohere very well; it's a bit disjointed, and repetitive at times. It also suffers from unfortunate timing: the chapters were written before the final report of the MDGs was published, and so some of their observations feel slightly outdated. Similarly, while the book seeks to offer an assessment of the new Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs), the authors only have an early draft at their disposal (the final text of the SDGs wasn't agreed until after the book was already in press), so on this front too it feels dated. The project could have benefited from waiting a few months longer.

Nonetheless, this book offers a refreshing and much-needed critical perspective on the MDGs and the dominant development paradigm – a must-read for anyone hungry to move beyond a failing model.

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**Dr Jason Hickel** is an anthropologist at the London School of Economics and the author of *Democracy as Death: The Moral Order of Anti-Liberal Politics in South Africa* (University of California Press, 2015). In addition to his academic research, Jason writes regularly for *The Guardian* and *Al Jazeera*. [Read more by Jason Hickel](#).

*Note: This review gives the views of the author, and not the position of the LSE Review of Books blog, or of the London School of Economics.*

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