

## **From Universal Values to Millennium Development Goals: Lost in Translation**

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### **ABSTRACT**

Are the Millennium Development Goals just a string of global wish lists? Are they simply a distraction or gimmick? This contribution argues that there is more to the enveloping global exercise of the MDGs than meets the eye. Despite its alarming and terminal weaknesses with regard to theory, method and scope, and notwithstanding its multitude of errors of commission and omission, the MDG phenomenon carries the potential for distorting meaningful intellectual and research agendas, and could function as the catalyst and vehicle for a fundamental realignment of the political economy of development at the global level. The question is whether this realignment will be of a benign character that reflects the emancipatory aspirations so readily evoked in the Millennium Declaration.

### **THE CONTEXT**

The Millennium Development Goals are here, there and everywhere. They envelop you in a cloud of soft words and good intentions and moral comfort; they are gentle, there is nothing conflictual in them; they are kind, they offer only good things to the deprived. They give well-meaning persons in the north-west a sense of solidarity and purpose; they provide a mechanical template of targets and monitoring indicators aptly suited to the limits of the bureaucratic mind; they form ready populist seasoning for politicians; and of course, they provide another gravy train for development consultants — and this one is scheduled to run for another decade, cover every country, and it has meals and targets galore for everyone. No wonder it is the juggernaut of all bandwagons. But is the bandwagon big enough to carry a billion poor persons? Who drives the bandwagon? Does it have an engine, or is it all band

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This contribution was first presented at a seminar at the Institute of Social Studies on 3 October 2005; a second version formed the basis of a Keynote Address to the Global Labour Forum, New Delhi, in December 2005. I am grateful for comments from participants in both events, especially from James Galbraith, Shobha Raghuram, Louk de la Rive Box, Alakh Sharma, Ben White and the referees of this journal. The excellent research support provided by Roy Huijsmans is gratefully acknowledged.

*Development and Change* 37(6): 1167–1199 (2006). © Institute of Social Studies 2006. Published by Blackwell Publishing, 9600 Garsington Road, Oxford OX4 2DQ, UK and 350 Main St., Malden, MA 02148, USA

and wagon? How is the price of the passage to be paid for? And if and when it does reach its destination of poverty reduction, into what sort of world will the poor alight off the wagon? What might be societal attributes of this brave new world?

The United Nations Millennium Declaration was signed by leaders of 189 countries assembled in New York on 8 September 2000. An extra-terrestrial beaming in and reading the Millennium Declaration would surely wonder: if all the leaders are so full of good intentions, and express them collectively in some form in some global city every five years, why does Planet Earth continue to be the way it is? Is there an answer to such a simple question? And is there any evidence this time round that the good intentions are likely to succeed? What are the new elements in place to avoid another cycle of disappointment and despair? Perhaps the world leaders needed a powerful gesture to confirm their relevance and to legitimize their authority or, more optimistically, to marshal the energies of the world community for a global good cause with which everyone could identify.

A year later, to the week, New York was in turmoil. But this was not the beginning: the previous twenty odd years had been little short of disastrous for world development, and the decade prior to the dawn of the new millennium had been remarkably unsettled. It started with the First Iraq War. It was punctuated at regular intervals with major economic and financial crises: Japan continually threatened, and partially delivered, an economic meltdown throughout the decade; Europe experienced a financial crisis in 1992; a major financial collapse occurred in Mexico in 1994; in Thailand, Korea, Malaysia and Indonesia in 1997 and 1998; in Brazil in 1999, with Argentina to follow in 2001. Each crisis cost billions of dollars in bail-outs which usually went disproportionately to the rich, while workers and small-time savers suffered. The Soviet Union disintegrated, with some help, in 1990 and the subsequent 'transition' was marked by some of the most spectacular economic and social declines in the erstwhile socialist economies as they went through a second cycle of primary capitalist accumulation (or plunder); social welfare levels plummeted, often with virtually no floor except the one at the bottom of the grave. Mid-decade, there were crises of a different kind in Rwanda. There seemed, to the lay-person, to be an increasing frequency of cataclysmic natural disasters such as the Mozambican floods, Hurricane Mitch, the Chinese, Indian and Iranian earthquakes. The health pandemic of HIV/AIDS had now registered its real scale and dire prognosis in Africa and Asia. In the meantime, the love affair of convenience between the USA, the Pakistani Army and the Taliban in Afghanistan had survived the decade and led up to the Kargil crisis in 1999, and to the barbaric act of blowing up the Bamiyan buddhas. All the while, the open veins of Palestine went untended. Alongside all this, there was an air of market triumphalism and fundamentalism: capitalism was indeed the only game in town. Market reforms in the developing economies were being extended and intensified from Washington where ideologues were insisting on instituting user costs for water, health

and education from the poor who had no money to pay. The Chiapas protests broke out in 1994; 1999 saw the emergence of the anti-Globalization protests in Seattle; and April 2000 witnessed the landmark protests in Cochabamba against hikes in prices for privatized water services.

The decade of the 1990s saw robust performances from China, and to some extent India; but the average annual GDP per capita growth rate was 1.3 per cent for Latin America and the Caribbean, and  $-0.6$  per cent for sub-Saharan Africa. The US government withheld its contributions to UN agencies unless reforms to its liking were instituted. The WTO came into being with all the packaged promises about the medicinal powers of free trade. Despite the spectacular stock market crash early in 2000, the ideology and practice of neoliberalism ruled the new uni-polar world in which the USA was the undisputed hegemon. The UNDP scratched and scrambled hard for an alternative to the prevailing model of the Washington Consensus, and produced a decade of Human Development Reports and Indicators — an honourable effort to questionable real effect. The stage was set, if not for a break with the past, at least for the kind of grand gesture that the UN system can orchestrate with silken smoothness — a global summit conference. Leaders of the entire world community got together, and in the full public gaze, reaffirmed their vows to human development; then they went home, and mostly carried on cheating on their promises as before.

The Millennium Development Goals (MDGs), *per se*, were not part of the Millennium Declaration, but were fleshed out and agreed to subsequently; their origin can be traced to a process of the consolidation of different waves of earlier unachieved goals and promises made in various UN and other international summits and conferences. The earliest of direct relevance was the International World Summit for Children in 1990 which set up seven major goals for child survival, development and protection to be achieved over the 1990–2000 decade;<sup>1</sup> this summit took place within a year of the adoption by the UN General Assembly of the Convention on the Rights of the Child. The second source for the MDGs is provided by the UN's landmark International Conference on Population and Development (ICPD) held in September 1994 in Cairo.<sup>2</sup> This platform was strengthened at the next relevant event, the Fourth World Conference on Women in Beijing in 1995. The Beijing Platform for Action (BPA) which emerged from it established

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1. These seven were further articulated with a wider set of six supporting, sector goals focusing on women's health and education, nutrition, child health, water and sanitation, basic education, and children in difficult circumstances. They listed a total of twenty-seven targets, most of which were numerically specified.
  2. With 179 countries participating, the final Programme of Action adopted in Cairo specified extensive listings of objectives and goals to be attained in the following twenty year period, although these were not always set numerically. They put heavy emphasis on dimensions of reproductive health and rights and on issues of gender equality and empowerment. There have been five- and ten-year reviews of the ICPD.

twelve critical areas of concern and action for ensuring the full participation, empowerment and equality of the world's women.

A year later, in 1996, the OECD's Development Assistance Committee (DAC) published its own international development goals<sup>3</sup> citing, in addition to those mentioned earlier, various other UN conferences, including those at Jomtien in 1990 on education; Rio de Janeiro in 1992 on the environment; Vienna in 1993 on human rights; and Copenhagen in 1995 on social development. The goals here are clustered under three heads — economic well-being, social development and environmental sustainability and regeneration — leading to the specification of seven time-bound targets, most of which are numerically explicit. The objective of halving extreme poverty in developing countries by 2015, using the World Bank's \$1/day criterion, is made explicit for the first time, while recognizing that this sets the target at half the level demanded in the Copenhagen conference. It is significant to note here that the OECD/DAC listing has a different character to the earlier declarations, since this formulation emerges from a small club of rich nations, and not from the global community as such. This list is also much less ambitious in its scope and aspirations with regard to the broader and deeper dimensions of emancipatory development. There is a clear shift in the perspective in favour of a narrower frame focusing essentially on absolute aspects of some key measurable facets of poverty and deprivation, and away from a broader, more essentialist rights-based approach.

The first full enunciation of the MDGs occurs in the controversial report issued jointly by the UN, the OECD, World Bank and IMF in October 2000 (UN, 2000), where the earlier template of the OECD/DAC exercise is further developed and disaggregated. This report drew strong criticism from civil society organizations, NGOs, and even some Church bodies on the grounds that this was an unwarranted and unilateral narrowing down of the development agenda. Under some pressure, President Bush announced US support for the MDGs on the eve of the pivotal International Conference on the Financing of Development, held in Monterrey in March 2002.<sup>4</sup> Here the US unveiled and established the so-called Monterrey Consensus which effectively and firmly embedded the MDG implementation process within the mainstream neoliberal strategic and policy framework, significantly emphasizing the responsibility of the poor countries themselves in addressing their development agendas, making external assistance contingent on such efforts, and at the same time heavily underscoring the role of the private sector in the development process. Indeed, the US set up its independent parallel track of funding, referred to as the Millennium Challenge Account, headed by the US Secretary of State. While paying lip service to the MDGs, the US used this

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3. See OECD (1996), especially pp. 8–11 where the goals are specified.

4. In contrast to the Millennium summit of 2000, this conference was attended, amongst others, by only fifty heads of state.

device and its attendant conditionalities to further push the UN development agenda and policy instruments into close convergence with the neoliberal prescriptions.

Rapidly, the UN system announced its Global Compact which brought the UN into development partnerships with the private sector, an opening immediately utilized by a range of major multinationals. This was epitomized by the remarkable and bizarre partnerships between UNESCO, McDonalds and Disney to give 'Millennium Dreamer' youth awards; and shockingly, of UNICEF, the prime promoter and protagonist for the well-being of children, with McDonalds, in a fund-raising venture on World Children's Day in November 2002. Predictably, these links, which stretched credulity beyond tolerable limits, attracted serious and widespread disdain and critique.

This was but one example of a new raft of public-private partnerships (PPPs) in a widening and increasingly intimate relationship between the UN and business. At the level of implementation, the Monterrey Consensus led to an expansion from Type-1 PPPs, where government mainly created a favourable environment for the private sector to involve itself in development, to Type-2 PPPs which were based on joint activities of private and public players. It is within this broad perspective of the controlling and rather visible hand of neoliberalism that the MDG exercise needs to be scrutinized. If the Monterrey Consensus embedded privatization firmly into the UN efforts in development strategy, the subsequent World Summit on Sustainable Development (WSSD) in Johannesburg in 2002 saw this cosy arrangement ensconced and entrenched in the redefined development agenda and process, with the UN falling into line with the neoliberal edict. WSSD was attended by over 100 CEOs and had 700 business delegates from 200 different corporations.<sup>5</sup>

Goals galore! But is there more to the MDGs than a succession of global wish lists? Despite its weakness and failings, could the MDG phenomenon function as the catalyst for a fundamental realignment of the political economy of development at the global level? And if so, would this realignment be of a benign nature that might be recognized as reflecting the emancipatory aspirations evoked in the Millennium Declaration? The following section discusses a clutch of issues pertaining to the coherence, viability and reliability of the MDG goal- and target-setting exercise. The subsequent section raises some concerns regarding the potential diversionary impact of the MDG phenomenon on the orientation of social science research agendas. Thereafter, the final two sections deal with major biases inherent in the architecture of the MDG frame, both in terms of the design it adopts, and the alternative issues that it shuns.

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5. For a critical review of the pro-corporate Global Compact and its context, see Patrick Bond (2006).

## **WISH LIST OR PROGRAMMING TOOL?**

The MDGs have been seen by many to represent the agenda of the Human Development (HD) initiative of the UNDP, expanded to embrace also the key income poverty monitoring measure generally used by the World Bank. The targets are set out at a more detailed level, using rather more indicators, and also set to a time frame. Those that follow the HD paradigm could regard this as an advance, in that it constitutes a desirable step in the direction of operationalization. The extension of the focus of the human development approach from its short list of three main group of indicators (education, health and income) could also be welcomed by those that found the earlier list too narrow and specific.<sup>6</sup> Environmental and public health concerns are incorporated into the structure of goals and targets. While these extensions could be welcomed, questions can be raised about the usability of the MDG approach. Can it function as a programming tool for delivering on the targets that are set?

It would be both unrealistic and questionable to expect UN agencies to serve as the drivers and key implementation actors in developing economies. While the larger, stronger developing economies, such as India or China or Brazil, might have enormous capacity in their national governments and infrastructure to manage their own (indigenous) programmes of human development, a very large number of countries might have no such capacities. Here, target setting is of little avail. Typically, these are the countries with the greatest deficits.

## **Concepts**

We wish to reduce poverty. How shall we define it? This definition has then to be converted into an indicator that can be specified numerically. The first step of conceptualization is worth comment, since it is often here that the biggest losses of meaning might occur. One important point of difference between the MDG exercise and the HD approach concerns the manner in which poverty is included in the former. The Human Development Index, for instance, does not take income poverty into account at all. It includes an adjusted per capita GNP indicator. On the other hand, the very first, and most prominent goal, target and indicator in the MDG exercise is the one popularized by the World Bank, viz., the incidence of poverty defined as those below the dollar-a-day income poverty line. This immediately imports into the MDG framework all

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6. Of course, those that felt assaulted by the family tree of indicators unleashed by the successive Human Development Reports might have cause for concern, in view of the eight goals, eighteen targets, and forty-eight indicators: indeed, the cocktail of possibilities could produce the mother of all hangovers. Hopefully, there won't be enough funding available to hire consultants to experiment with all permutations and combinations.

the methodological and conceptual problems associated with this particular measure. These difficulties undermine its use for international comparisons, but also question its intrinsic worth as a criterion for capturing the meaning of poverty defined in terms of an inability to meet basic needs. These difficulties apply very widely to nationally estimated poverty lines.<sup>7</sup> In the context of the single most highlighted goal, target and indicator, this is a fatal weakness.

Or, consider the case of knowledge and education. Focusing exclusively on indicators of educational enrolments has inherent distortions: it pays no attention to the very high drop-out rates in primary and secondary education in the developing economies; it ignores issues of quality of outcomes; and it is blind to the resources committed per child in the educational process. For instance, in the USA in 1994, only 30 per cent of the elementary and 49 per cent of the secondary schools had internet access for their students in classrooms; by 2000, there was near universal access in all public schools (Kosmidis, 2001: Table 4). Figures for the EU were a little lower, though Sweden and Denmark had better performances. Which developing economy could match this? The expenditure per student in PPP US dollars in 1998 was generally five to ten times higher in the US and OECD countries compared with a range of developing economies;<sup>8</sup> primary school class sizes were twice as large in India as in the USA;<sup>9</sup> and, of course, the drop-out rates for primary and secondary schooling in the rich countries are a small fraction of those in the developing economies. Thus, setting up targets which focus simply on primary level enrolments is so mindlessly myopic as to be near-blind to the needs of education over a medium-term time frame: it devalues the futures of the children of the developing economies.

In the same way, how should gender empowerment be conceptualized? The arguments over the gender-specific MDG 3 lay bare some of the deep fault lines of the MDG exercise. MDG 3 is remarkably broad in its scope, seeking to 'promote gender equality and empower women', but is simultaneously also remarkably narrow, in that it merely targets gender equality in terms of sex parity in primary education enrolments by 2005, and at all

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7. For a critical discussion of these dimensions, see Saith (2005); it is argued here that there are fundamental conceptual flaws in the manner in which the expenditure-based poverty line is specified that make it impossible for it both to provide a credible notion of deprivation in any socially acceptable sense, or to serve as a device for ranking households by the depth of their experienced deprivation. Reference also needs to be made to the comprehensive critique of the World Bank's US \$1/day poverty line as developed by Reddy and Pogge (2002).

8. In PPP (purchasing power parity) US dollars for 2002, the annual expenditure on educational institutions per student in the USA and in India reveals the dimensions of the yawning gap at each level. For the pre-primary level, the respective levels were 7881 and 79, or about 100:1; for the primary level, 8049 and 396, or about 20:1; for all secondary education, 9098 and 712, or about 13:1; and for all tertiary education, 20545 and 2486, or about 10:1; see OECD/UNESCO: *World Education Indicators*, Table 2.13.

9. OECD/UNESCO: *World Education Indicators*, Table 8, Table 2.9.

levels by (at the latest) 2015. The first goal has predictably seen widespread failure already, and the others are most likely to go the same way. This blinkered, politically regressive vision accounts for the 'outraged response of the global feminist community [since] the hard-won goal of women's sexual and reproductive rights was excluded from the list'; it roused Peggy Antrobus to declaring: 'I do not believe in the MDGs. I think of them as a Major Distracting Gimmick — a distraction from the much more important Beijing Platform for Action with its 12 Priority Areas of Concern' (Antrobus, 2003); these referred to structural, rights and power factors which lay at the root, and accounted for the perpetuation, of gender disadvantage and oppression. As such, feminist radicals struggling against the vice of neoliberal theory and policy have viewed the MDGs as representing a significant step, but in the wrong direction. Gender empowerment cannot be corralled into a single goal or target — it is a profoundly cross-cutting force. And universal primary education, and indeed even relative parity in enrolments at higher levels, could easily co-exist with fundamental denials of gender equality in many other personal and social domains — even though it is difficult to envisage such gains without prior upheavals in the sphere of gender empowerment. Why then engage in such an exercise?

### **Targets**

It is not clear how precisely the original targets came to be generated. Were these the results of country specific exercises which were then aggregated up with due weights in order to come to the global target set for each variable? If it was a direct, rough and ready global target, how is this to be 'allocated' to the different countries, given their very different starting points, possibilities and weights in the global figure? Countries are being allowed to set MDG+ targets which exceed the global average, but that does not really provide any additional rigour. If targets are to set the goal posts, and also provide the measure for monitoring achievements, their intrinsic value, degree of difficulty of achievement, should also be taken into account. It is questionable if an aggregate target setting exercise is really meaningful in the first place.

There are other more generic concerns induced by exercises of target-setting. Institutionalizing targets in bureaucracies and governmental regimes usually invites misuse and manipulation of statistics and the misrepresentation of outcomes. Even worse, when meeting targets in itself becomes a career goal for some of the implementing agents, perverse incentives and behaviour can result. False or motivated reporting is an acknowledged hazard from participatory village studies to state, national and international level exercises. Multiple data and methods provide the opportunity and means to add to the motive. Examples include countries or agencies manipulating GNP data to keep them under or over a line of convenience. It is argued that widespread



collective misreporting was a contributing factor to the high mortality of the Chinese famine in the target-driven Great Leap Forward exercise.

In terms of distorting behaviour, particularly pernicious examples are to be had from both China and India in the context of their drives to control population growth rates. In both cases, targets and incentives were set for local officials, and this led to widespread human rights abuses. At a programming level, officials might decide to allocate resources to those closest to the poverty line, rather than to the poorest, in order to maximize the impact of a given budget on poverty reduction in terms of a head count ratio (as indeed set in the MDG exercise). Further, expenditures could be switched from non-targeted items (such as the disabled) to other targeted items in order to be able to report the most favourable results for MDG outcomes. It is not being suggested that all this will happen across the board. What is being signalled through these examples are the pitfalls and potential distortionary effects of target setting.

Do we really need this detailed target fixation? In a lecture in Cambridge in the early 1970s, Amartya Sen argued that China, Kerala, Cuba and Sri Lanka provided the most prominent examples of countries or regions in which social and human development was well ahead of levels that would be predicted by their per capita incomes. One could have argued for the inclusion of a range of former Soviet bloc countries in this list. In all these cases, however, the positive deviance was a product of long-running path dependent socio-economic and political processes which had produced the outcomes without the benefit of repeated targeting and measurement by a maze of such indicators.

## **Data**

At every stage of the exercise of prioritization, design, implementation and monitoring of the various programmes that focus on the individual components of the MDGs, there are very considerable data needs. These needs far outstrip current availability of relevant, reliable and up-to-date statistics in most countries. That data are not internationally comparable is not in itself an intrinsic problem, since each exercise is to be implemented within a country-specific framework, but all too often data are simply not available. It would be salutary to recall the substantial gaps in required statistics that were encountered in the comparatively simple exercises involved in the HDI. Some of the most urgent goals are the ones with the greatest data problems, such as malaria, tuberculosis and maternal mortality. Amir Attaran (2005) provides a sobering analysis of the sorry state of affairs, and reveals the flimsy foundations on which the MDGs are untenably benchmarked.<sup>10</sup>

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10. For example, there are two severe problems with MDG 6, Target 8, on malaria. First, there are no baseline data, and without this, targets based on the notional, unknown incidence in

There are also dreadful difficulties with the use of such target concepts such as 'sustainable access to safe drinking water', and to 'slums'. For the former, there may be too many facile assumptions replacing data availability to test the claims of progress (or deterioration); but all experiential and anecdotal evidence points to atrophying and diminishing access in terms of timing, quality, volume, assurance, and cost. The real trends are in the negative direction, but the data base is woefully inadequate to capture these. This leaves out of the reckoning water as a productive resource, where there is widespread reporting of dropping water tables, drying surface water bodies and rivers, increasing contestation and water conflicts. Similarly, the question of what constitutes an urban slum, and what could be counted as tenure security for slum dwellers, is also riddled with definitional problems. The same applies to 'forest cover', where much depends on how generous one's choice of definition is to the timber contractors. For example, a World Bank report in 1994 listed estimates for deforestation in Indonesia that ranged from 263,000 to 1,315,000 hectares per year, depending on the definition used (Contereras-Hermosilla, 2000: 7).

It would be useful indeed if all this stimulated the accelerated development of national statistical systems that could be functionally oriented towards development needs. However, this is more easily wished for than realized, on account of the severe human capital and educational infrastructure constraints in most developing economies, in particular those with the largest needs and gaps. New international programmes for generating a range of comparable survey statistics on selected variables have been initiated for a significant number of countries. But vast gaps will persist. The purpose of these surveys is mostly determined by the needs of the project and does not really overcome the structural constraint at country level.

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a base year make no sense. Second, the country level household surveys and health records are so poor as to make malaria incidence and mortality immeasurable; consequently, the UN's malaria monitoring group advised against monitoring these indicators. But 'it was only two months after WHO scientists wrote that it will not, in general, be possible to measure the overall incidence rate of malaria that the UN chose the incidence rate as the mainstay of the malaria MDG' (Attaran, 2005). The case of MDG 5, Target 6, which pledges 'to reduce by three-quarters, between 1990 and 2015, the maternal mortality ratio', is equally immeasurable for most countries. 'Thus, 11 years after the Cairo Conference first set up an explicit target to reduce MMR by 75%, the UN neither has achieved measurement of MMR, nor has it heeded the warnings of its own scientists that MMR is basically immeasurable. The MDG carries that mistaken goal forward to 2015, and the impossibility of measuring and demonstrating success is certainly preordained' (ibid.). Similar strictures apply in the case of tuberculosis, where 'nobody can say with scientific confidence what the actual trends for TB are or whether the TB MDG is on track' (ibid.). For a side-stepping tactical response, see McArthur et al. (2005).

### Costing

Programming also calls for information on costing of initiatives. There are serious methodological problems in doing this. There have been several attempts at costing the various components, and some at generating aggregated figures for the programme as a whole. They throw up, as might be expected, a wide range of figures, even for the same item. Some of this variation is also evident even at the country level. For instance, Reddy and Heuty (2005) find that different studies give widely different estimates for the unit cost of universal primary education in Uganda, with the estimated annual cost per pupil varying by a factor of 4:1. Different studies use widely differing methodologies and assumptions and come up sometimes with very different, and sometimes with rather similar, figures. One is free to take one's pick depending on which sets of assumptions and methods one favours. The dangers and considerations to be dealt with here are well addressed by Devarajan et al. (2002), Reddy and Heuty (2005) and Vandemoortele and Roy (2004). At the aggregate level, the total costs for achieving the MDGs, excluding Goal 1, varies from US\$ 30 billion to US\$ 76 billion; for achieving Goal 1 the range is US\$ 20 billion to US\$ 62 billion (Reddy and Heuty, 2005: 29). My own rough-and-ready estimate would place it higher, in the range of about US\$ 75 billion to US\$ 110 billion using data based on the World Bank poverty-line methods;<sup>11</sup> it should immediately be added that the methodology used in that approach is questionable, as mentioned earlier.

A different approach by Kakwani and Son (2006) provides some orders of magnitude of the macro-economic requirements for the fulfilment of the MDGs. For a set of fifteen sub-Saharan African countries, the required distribution-neutral average per capita income growth rate over 2005–2015 was 2.40 per cent; the correspondingly required rate of investment was 24.1 per cent, yielding an investment–savings gap of 15.5 per cent of GDP each year. The overall indirect aggregate methodology is hardly free of problems; yet it points to the near impossibility of achieving the poverty reduction targets on the basis of income growth alone: GDP growth rates of about 5 per cent per annum would be required for the coming decade, which would constitute a dramatic and sustained reversal of the trends of the past decade and more.

It should be obvious, of course, that the fulfilment of one particular target could influence the achievement of others, though not in ways that lend themselves readily to precise identification and measurement. Thus, focusing on gender empowerment is known to be associated with a variety of positive health and education outcomes. Similarly the needs, as well as the costs

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11. Using a figure for the average poverty gap of 20 cents or 25 cents, and a poverty head count of 1 or 1.2 billion in terms of the dollar-a-day line. It should be noted that some of the estimates given earlier refer to the additional, not total resources, required.

of health programmes could be influenced by the availability of piped clean water, and of a road network. Such complementarities and externalities make costing and programming problematic, especially when it is target-oriented within budgetary constraints. Braving all problems of theory, method and data, such an exercise has indeed been attempted (Grown et al., 2006). This study finds that ‘the cost of interventions that aim directly to promote gender equality is \$7–\$13 per capita, on average, from 2006–2015’ for a group of five countries. But would spending these dollars buy gender equality and empowerment? Buried in the text is a brief acknowledgment that ‘simply knowing the costs of interventions to achieve gender equality and women’s empowerment is not sufficient to achieve gender equality. Leadership and political will are necessary to allocate the resources. To be successful, interventions may also require changes in legislation, political and administrative rules, social attitudes, and norms’ (ibid.: 10).

This immediately reveals the futility of such exercises. One might ask: what would it cost to overcome violence against women? What might it cost to address the issue of son preference and the appalling and falling sex ratio at birth? What would it cost to get the parents to agree to send the girl child to school? How much would have to be spent to change the laws on property rights? The costs of these are to be counted in women’s struggle and commitment, not in dollars to pre-finance project proposals and manuals for shifting male norms. The trouble with this MDG 3 costing exercise is that it assumes that effecting such changes always has a resource cost that has to be pre-financed; that changes are introduced through external ‘project’ interventions which act as the agents of change, implying the women are the recipients of the benefits of the agency of such agencies. This is apparent from the concluding remark: ‘transformation of social norms and patriarchal structures can begin through policies, interventions and projects that have adequate funding. Thus, the gender needs assessment, and associated financing gap analyses should be seen as critical tools for generating resources — and perhaps even leadership and political will — for gender equality and women’s empowerment’ (ibid.: 22–3). Thus, US\$ 7 per woman will induce, catalyse and create the conditions, personal, institutional and political, to stimulate empowerment. This demonstrates the epistemological and knowledge-reversing realities associated with buying into such mechanical methodologies. Money will buy you empowerment? One could be forgiven for preferring to walk the distance instead of jumping on this bandwagon that is money rather than movement driven.

### **Pathologies**

There is little point in setting targets if we do not know through what actions the outcomes can be influenced. Causal models are necessary; and the pathologies and chains of causation have to be identified and well

understood. This involves much more than projection models that simply provide mechanical extrapolations of ongoing trends. The difficulty here is that such processes are highly complex and require a great deal more than the injection of material resources and their conversion into the target output following an engineering production function. Moreover, there is enormous diversity. To make the story more interesting, very often a great deal can be had by doing things differently, even without additional resources; and, although such extra resources generally help, their effectiveness is governed by institutional structures and social behaviour.

This difficulty applies not just at the local level, but also at the macro-economic level, where there are wide differences over what constitutes good policy for pro-poor growth. Economists inexorably tend to disagreements. Even when they agree on the numbers and the numerical outcomes, say of change between point A and point B, they can come up with radically different explanations about the causes of that change. The same holds when looking ahead to identify policy options for achieving desired outcomes. Of course, economists are not unique in this regard. How can an economy grow faster? And what are the most effective ways of linking the poor to such rapid growth, when it does occur of course?

Focusing on the MDG target tabulations and worrying about costings, distracts attention from the central policy issues on which there is as much disagreement as there might be agreement about the desirability of the MDGs in principle. It is noteworthy that neither the MDG framework, nor the Human Development approach which is its parent, really tackles this question satisfactorily. Despite all the talk about pro-poor growth, there has been very little audible out-of-the-neoliberal-box thinking or argumentation on offer from the UN family of agencies. The alternatives have come more from the non-government sector and from development researchers and academics. It remains to be seen if the MDG exercise opens up the space for thinking differently, and the will to act accordingly. Without going into the significant policy choices attached to each set of issues, and then seeking ways of challenging the status quo, the MDG exercise will remain trapped in the inherited constraints of the past. Indeed, it is seriously arguable that the HD, and now the MDG, initiatives have limited their mapping of policy 'alternatives' to the set of interventions which are compatible with the key tenets of the neoliberal policy template. It would be refreshing and a relief to have this assertion seriously disputed with evidence.

#### **THE DEVELOPMENT RESEARCH AGENDA: INCORPORATION AND DISTORTION?**

It can be argued that MDG targets, like all others, invite manipulation, misuse and misinterpretation of statistics; and further, that, more than others, they can potentially lead to distortions in the development policy agenda.

There are also serious ramifications at a deeper level: there is a palpable danger — some would argue there is also credible evidence — of the monolithic MDG bandwagon already beginning to influence the priorities and direction of academic research and investigation.

Such an influence is obviously variable across categories of disciplines and institutions. Well-endowed private educational or think-tank establishments could not be pushed against their will, though their will itself could well be reshaped. However, most social science research has come to be heavily dependent on externally raised funds for which they have to compete. While even a decade ago the priorities of academic research were substantially endogenously defined, this situation has transformed dramatically. Particularly in the field of development and the related, supporting social sciences and disciplines, research funding now calls for large project submissions involving several partners making very substantial pre-investments of time and resources in order to compete for funds from some large government or regional or international donor or funding agency. Such applications have to conform closely to the set priorities — often laid down in great detail — of funders. Often, the institutions involved have to demonstrate prior expertise in the area, and a willingness to make the effort sustainable after the end of the project funding cycle. The research priorities are not supply driven, at least not from the side of the researchers — rather they are driven by the suppliers of funds, often masquerading as the spokespersons of the demand side. To all this, there is usually a multiplier effect. Often the field is so substantial that there is a first round of weeding out, followed by a more intensive competitive round before a few winners are identified. In the process, a great deal of resources are wasted, apart from effectively reorienting the priorities of a much larger group of applicants. The controlling hand in these funding processes is usually that of bureaucrats, often second-guessing what their political superiors would respond to. Regardless of whether one assigns a negative or a positive sign to this multiplier effect, its increasing power cannot be seriously doubted.

Recent MDG related consultative exercises in the Netherlands, which usually adopts a self-righteous stance on development issues, offer some insights. The Netherlands Development Assistance Research Council (RAWOO) organized a series of consultations on the MDG project. While the formal objectives of the meetings, which included academics and practitioners, was to engage in an open intellectual exchange, the conduct of business was clearly oriented towards cutting out critical debate in favour of a ‘get-on-with-it’ blinkered discussion. The underlying message, even made explicit, was: the MDGs are here to stay, so let us try and maximize our own possibilities and spaces within this exercise; let us show the Minister that we are in line with the MDG exercise, and can contribute to the various goals and targets. In a work(womanlike fashion, the consultative process converted itself into an inventorization of academic and professional capacities in the various departments of Dutch universities and related organizations to

contribute to the achievement of specific goals, targets and indicators.<sup>12</sup> The Dutch academic establishment was very consciously and proactively positioning itself to take advantage of the work and finance that might come their way through asserting their expertise with regard to lists of MDG targets and indicators. The report that emerged from the exercise titles itself 'Mobilizing Knowledge to Achieve the Millennium Development Goals' (RAWOO, 2005); in doing this, it declares its intentions quite accurately.

Dutch academic expertise has been further harnessed through the Development Policy Review Network, to develop a policy brief on MDGs for the Minister. That is all to the good. However, instead of opening up more space for critical debate, senior representatives of Dutch academe too quickly tend to foreclose such options:

We assume that the role of the academic community in this process is to be both critical and constructive. It is in the Dutch interest to have such impact at the conference that the Dutch academic community could be expected to be invited to further contribute to the effective implementation of the MDGs upon the conclusion of the conference. Furthermore, we assume that it serves no purpose to try to add new goals to the MDGs: it is unrealistic to expect the UN to adopt new or more MDGs. Hence we feel that our joint policy brief should be . . . to identify areas or topics within the scope of the MDGs which are in need of further scientific exploration and research and why. . . ; to forward innovative and well researched or to be researched ideas and suggestions which can be expected to enhance the successful implementation of the MDGs in the years to come.<sup>13</sup>

There are a lot of assumptions here, including some implicit ones about the role of the academic in society. The message is clear enough though: put on your consultancy hat and jump as fast as possible on to the bandwagon. Do not worry too much about your intellectual baggage or even precisely where you might get taken for a ride — just do not get left behind.<sup>14</sup>

This exercise is interfaced with close co-operation with research schools and research funding organizations in the Netherlands, viz., the Research School for Resource Studies for Development (CERES) and the organization for Scientific Research in the Tropics and Developing Countries (WOTRO).<sup>15</sup> There is a sense of urgency about inventorizing, marshalling

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12. For an exhaustive inventorization of the various capacities of a vast array of institutions and individuals within the Dutch scientific and development practitioners community to meet the challenges posed by the MDGs, listed separately for each of the eight Goals and each of the eighteen Targets, see Dietz (2005).

13. Development Policy Review Network (DPRN) Policy Brief communicated by e-mail by Chair, DPRN, 15 July 2005.

14. It should be pointed out that there are sections in the community that are critical of the newfound emphasis on the MDGs: these targets are about outputs and results, and exclude concerns over causal relationships underlying the outcomes; and they are too technocratic and instrumental and reduce space for critical science which addresses the hidden dimensions of power. However, this remains a minority strand.

15. The links in the research commodity chain are fairly visible in the following well-intentioned extract from a communication from the Research Director of CERES to CERES

and orienting the collective skills of the Dutch university research system towards responding to the challenge of implementing specific MDGs. One might be forgiven for recalling the case of British and American companies waiting and vying for contracts after (and even before) the Iraq War. Perhaps the imperatives of the consulting world are the same all over, regardless of the trade.<sup>16</sup> What is apparent are the corporatist tendencies in the organization of development research; the manifest dependence of those with ideas and skills on those with money and power; and the zealotry of the former to second-guess and fall proactively into line with the perceived objectives of the latter. I suppose this is one meaning one might give to the call for academics to be more demand-driven.

The Dutch illustration is by no means an exception. Its British counterpart, the Department for International Development (DfID), provides a very substantial budget of £100 million for development research. In its recent guidelines, DfID (2004) states unambiguously that: 'All DfID's efforts are directed towards achieving the targets set by the world community in the Millennium Development Goals by 2015. They are the basis for choosing research topics'; 'DfID's objective for research is therefore: "to promote the production and uptake of technologies and policies that will contribute to poverty reduction and the achievement of the Millennium Development Goals"' (ibid.: 9). Based on a consultation process, it identifies fourteen

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research staff (e-mail dated 12 April 2005 on 'Millennium Development Goals: A Challenge to the Scientific Community in the Netherlands and to WOTRO in Particular'): 'WOTRO has an important partnership with DGIS [the Department for Development Co-operation of the Dutch Ministry of Foreign Affairs]; in addition DGIS has become a major source of funds for scientific work in the Netherlands with a connection to international development. Like many other international development agencies, DGIS has adopted the Millennium Development Goals as its prime "driving force", and the current Minister for Development Co-operation has selected four specific parts of the MDGs for particular Dutch emphasis: (parts of) goals 2, 5, 6, and 7. DGIS is currently promoting an "IS (international development) academy", linking parts of DGIS with specific Dutch research centres, and again the MDGs get a prominent place. If WOTRO wants to further develop its partnership with DGIS it is important to stimulate a further contribution of the Dutch research community to the MDGs. But it is also important to ask ourselves the following strategic questions:

- Where in the Netherlands can one find high-quality knowledge centres for each of the specific MDGs?
- What are strengths and weaknesses?
- What are the existing funding arrangements, and in particular, what will be the focus of the IS academy?
- What are WOTRO's niches, where it can support high-quality work of major social relevance for MDGs, which does not overlap too much with other existing funding arrangements (or where WOTRO's contributions can work in a synergetic way)?

We will look at each of the MDGs, also specifying the way the goals, targets and indicators are specified by the UN (see [www.developmentgoals.org](http://www.developmentgoals.org)).

16. While WOTRO's new research priorities identify MDG-linked research as the first of three pillars, some room is left for innovative, broad research on open issues.



research areas with explicit references to the specific MDGs to which they each relate (ibid.: 11). It is arguable that this substantial, and in many respects worthy, research effort is to be instrumentalized with respect to the agenda of absolute poverty reduction in developing economies — the concern that arises is not over what is included, but what is thereby de-prioritized, if not excluded.

As a social scientist, I have in turn been puzzled, amazed and dismayed by the amount of intellectual energy and resources that have been diverted over the past fifteen years into the pursuit of various indicators related to the human development paradigm — while all the time fundamental structural constraints and policy-related weaknesses have gone underemphasized. Behind this has been a veritable industry headquartered in the UNDP. The ultimate justification for all this was that — good, bad or ugly — the HDI was a powerful tool of advocacy. That was needed, and who really would wish to argue against the cause of human development? The HD machine reinvented itself from year to year with the reproduction of the message in its updated forms in the annual *Human Development Report*. But it did lead to the spawning of a massive international, country-level development machine that monitored the evolution of the human development ‘strategy’. The MDG exercise promises to go further, in that it incorporates a temporal frame and specific targets and indicators in terms of which progress is to be measured.

MDGs Inc. has begun to exercise such an encapsulating effect. This influences not just the research agenda of development studies and practice, but also its day-to-day lexicon. Within research and teaching departments, as much as within NGOs, CSOs, MFOs and IDOs, hardly a meeting or a paper or a proposal can go past without paying some form of obeisance to the supernumerary symbolic power of MDGs. It tends to capture the bureaucratic and organizational imagination and culture like a latent, persistent linguistic virus. But quietly, it also reorders the discipline as well, as researchers, practitioners, teachers and trainers are instructed, usually through website manuals, on what is ‘good’, what constitutes ‘progress’; in other words, what concepts to use, and how to think about and do development.

## FROM VALUES TO MDGS: LOST IN TRANSLATION

When one moves from statements of human values, to dimensions of human development and then on to targets and to indicators, it is possible for almost every development researcher and practitioner to quibble with the list and to suggest alternatives. While the conceptual exercise travels in this direction, from values to indicators, the operational one then has to follow in the reverse direction: starting with numerically specified indicators that are successively combined and aggregated to eventually emerge with an overall quantitative reading on the extent to which the desired values were realized. At the end, it is the practicality and availability of data that sets the real binding constraint

on which indicators get used and which not, and often conceptually stronger specifications have to yield to inferior ones for lack of reliable data. All this is in the nature of the beast, and as such there is only limited operational advantage to be had from arguing the case for a range of indicators and variables deemed more meaningful if national data systems do not monitor these. Here, I want to limit myself to some disturbing aspects of the overall design of the MDG frame.

The first observation I wish to make is that even though it professes to be propelled by shared universal values, the entire MDG scaffolding and accompanying text is insufficiently global in its approach. It tends to ghettoize the problem of development and locates it firmly in the third world — as if development is fundamentally and exclusively an issue of absolute levels of living.<sup>17</sup> Whatever happened to poverty and deprivation in the advanced economies? Are they to be silenced? During the 1990s, there were serious problems of unemployment-related poverty and exclusion in Japan, enough to cause national angst over the high rates of suicides by unemployed middle-aged males. The US has income poverty rates of around 11 per cent, but child poverty afflicts about one-quarter of its children; and the rates have been rising for the past several years. Child poverty is accompanied very often by old-fashioned hunger and missed meals. The situation of children in Britain is roughly equivalent, though the poverty levels might well be higher.<sup>18</sup> The Netherlands, despite its social welfare system, throws up figures for poverty of over 10 per cent. In most of these countries, the position of the aged, and especially of resident ethnic minority populations, whether migrant or indigenous, is dramatically worse. The issue of social vulnerability and of rights has seldom been as acute in the first world as in recent times. It is also credibly arguable that this circumstance is driven by the same forces of globalization that underlie much of the same phenomena in the developing economies. This is a major lacuna in the MDG frame of reference: it does not provide a global template, merely ‘our’ agenda for ‘them’.

Second, the profoundly significant issue of the extremely high, and still generally rising levels of inequality and accompanying socio-economic exclusion find no reflection at all in the goals or targets or indicators. The closest the MDG frame comes to this is the third indicator of the first target of the first goal. This refers to the share of the poorest quintile in national consumption. This is a very narrow indicator, and is also not likely to show

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17. In doing this, it seems to be taking a step back from the earlier discourse of the human development paradigm, which made it a point to highlight the development deficits experienced by deprived groups in rich countries.

18. The 1999 Breadline Europe survey revealed that ‘9% of the population reported their income was a lot below that needed each week to keep their household out of absolute poverty and a further 8% said their income was a little below’; single parents with one child had an incidence of 40 per cent; those with two or more children, of over 50 per cent; and 25 per cent of single pensioners fell below the absolute poverty threshold (Gordon and Townsend, 2000).

very much variation over the kinds of growth rates and processes that are ongoing. But even this indicator is dropped in many of the listings of the MDG frame. For instance, both the 2005 and the recent 2006 report reviewing the progress on MDGs are silent on this indicator altogether (UN, 2005, 2006). In any event, this would be an extremely poor indicator of overall inequality, since there could be dramatic shifts at the other end of the distribution without shifting the relative position of the poorest too much. What the MDG project is essentially saying, implicitly, is that it is only absolute poverty that matters. So long as that is improved, there is no need to worry or even to think about and monitor overall inequality in societies, whether in the north or the south.<sup>19</sup> This position goes against some of the most dramatic and explosive dimensions of the era of market liberalization and neoliberal globalization — that of spectacularly rising inequalities that are as visible as the worsening forms of social and service exclusion in large parts of the third world. Given the wonderful sentiments on shared human values that preface the MDG statement, such an omission could not have been due to forgetfulness. This is a mindful silence that serves the mutual interests of the elites in north and south, east and west. For a project which purports to carry deep human values further, and which lays claim to the word ‘millennium’, this is inexcusable, and all the more so since the stance one adopts to extreme inequalities has very substantial implications for the nature and success of efforts against absolute poverty.

Relatedly, there is no mention at all in any form of redistributions whether of income or assets, such as land. Yet, it is clear that effective land reforms could be a crucial missing link in stimulating agricultural growth which links with the poor. The Brazilian case of high rural poverty amongst the landless and the high inequality in the ownership of land remains valid as an illustration. Within a policy framework that ignores the dimension of inequality, and which works fundamentally within market- and private-property friendly rules, redistributive land reform is replaced by the notion of market-friendly land reforms where the bottom line for the landless poor is: if you can find the money, you can pay the market price and buy some of the land the rich

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19. ‘It’s about poverty, not inequality’, asserts the Dutch Minister for Development Cooperation, chastising the UNDP’s *Human Development Report* for 2005 for being critical on this score. ‘We must focus on absolute, not relative, income levels; . . . to a poor widow living in the slums of Jakarta, it does not matter that some Indonesian millionaires become billionaires overnight on the stock exchange; what matters to her is whether she can find a job to feed her children and send them to school’ (van Ardenne-van der Hoeven, 2005). The speech can be admired for its breathtaking simplicity. It must be assumed that the Dutch minister can read the minds of Indonesian widows; and also that there is no deeper causal connection between the sudden billionaire and the impoverished slum-dweller. But what if the excluded do wish to have a more just society with more efficient and equitable generators and distributors of wealth than the overnight stock exchange? And what if the undeserved good fortune of the speculator is an outcome of the same neoliberal policy paradigm that accounts for the equally undeserved exclusion of the poor widow from a job, and her children from school?

landed classes want to sell off. Which is, of course, what the landless poor could not do in the first place.

Third, the discourse and the goals–targets–indicators have remarkably little that barks, let alone bites, in the direction of the relationship between the economies of the global north and south. There have been other global reports and conclaves in earlier decades, and almost all of them have placed international economic inequalities at the heart of the development agenda. All that really emerges in the MDG project, when the counting is complete, is an exhortation to the rich countries to meet the 0.7 per cent aid targets, and some clauses over debt relief. MDG 8, with its indicators on official development assistance (ODA), debt and market access singularly lacks vision, bark and bite. Essentially, what is called a global partnership for development has little more in it than some additional, but conditional, ODA. It is worth noting here that ‘aid’ usually refers to financial loans with a highly variable grant component, and that a large number of donors impose tied-aid conditions on where the money can be spent.<sup>20</sup> In addition, even the small amounts of such aid provided can yield heavy purchase in terms of conditionalities and interference in the conduct of national economic or diplomatic policy<sup>21</sup> in the recipient countries. Researchers have argued that the World Bank’s claims of prioritizing aid for countries with good policies are disingenuous and are

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20. Four countries have broken this selfish link, viz., the UK, the Netherlands, Denmark and Norway; these provide the overwhelming proportion of all untied aid. Contrasting cases are provided by Canada, the USA, Germany, Japan and France. Says Njoki Njoroge Njehu, director of *50 Years is Enough*, a coalition of over 200 grassroots non-governmental organizations (NGOs): “The United States makes sure that 80 cents in every aid dollar is returned to the home country”. Njehu cited the example of Eritrea, which discovered it would be cheaper to build its network of railways with local expertise and resources rather than be forced to spend aid money on foreign consultants, experts, architects and engineers imposed on the country as a condition of development assistance. Strings attached to US aid for similar projects, she added, include the obligation to buy products such as Caterpillar and John Deere tractors. “All this adds up to the cost of the project”. Njehu also pointed out that money being doled out to Africa to fight HIV/AIDS is also a form of tied aid. She said Washington is insisting that the continent’s governments purchase anti-AIDS drugs from the United States instead of buying cheaper generic products from South Africa, India or Brazil. As a result, she said, US brand name drugs are costing up to 15,000 dollars a year compared with 350 dollars annually for generics’ (see Deen, 2004, citing a UN report on African economies).
  21. Njehu claims that the African Growth and Opportunity Act (AGOA), which was signed into law by the USA in May 2000 and which offers aid to African economies, is more sinister than tied aid: ‘If a country is to be eligible for AGOA, it has to refrain from any actions that may conflict with the US’s “strategic interests”. The war against Iraq was of strategic interest to the United States’; as a result, according to Njehu, several African members of the UN Security Council, including Cameroon, Guinea and Angola, were virtually held to ransom when the United States was seeking council support for the war in 2003. ‘The message was clear: either you vote with us or you lose your trade privileges’. Njehu said her organization has already called on the US Congress to reject the renewal of AGOA. ‘Contrary to the intentions signalled by its name, we find that AGOA is a negative force on our continent’ (Deen, 2004).

based on statistical manipulation.<sup>22</sup> Aid allocations of the USA are known not to be allocated on the criterion of poverty, but on that of US strategic defence and global foreign policy interests.<sup>23</sup>

Fourth, issues pertaining to the lack of any serious forms of democracy in international arenas of political, economic, environmental, security related decision making are as absent as the voices of the poorer countries in these processes. Of course, there are explicit references to the agenda of good governance, both internationally and nationally. It is left to the reader to decide how such a bland single statement needs to be interpreted: is it a call for the radical democratization of international decision-making structures, or a reminder of the often capriciously interpreted and selectively applied 'good governance' conditionalities that accompany the aid to the poor countries?

Fifth, for an intervention carrying the millennium banner, the vision is insufficiently forward looking. Virtually all the indicators and goals reflect standard, mainstream indicators, most of which obviously carry important meaning. But the scope and coverage are also rather conservative. Sometimes, they reflect a lack of ambition, as for instance in the education targets. Why should the world be satisfied, after fifteen years of effort, with reaching universalization only of primary education? Why not a related target of universalization of secondary education? Again, there is no mention of the issue of child labour or of problems of social exclusion which stand squarely as hurdles in the way of such universalization. Why should the reduction in poverty be limited to only 50 per cent? Is it because of a lack of resources? Doesn't this imply an unwillingness to tackle the problem, not only domestically but also internationally? Why not aim for full universal cover for socio-economic security including financially viable access to health? What about the lives and rights of international migrants? People with disability, who are said to constitute up to 10 per cent of the global population,<sup>24</sup> find no mention at all, and neither do the aged who are beginning to represent increasing shares of the poor. Was there no room for employment or for access to and ownership of productive assets?

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22. The claims made by the World Bank at Monterrey 2002, that its aid disbursements had become much more effective during the 1990s on account of being targeted at countries with 'good' policies, has been challenged by Peter Nunnenkamp on the grounds that the overall aid disbursement was dominated by rescue packages for emerging market crises, and that the results were excessively dependent on the cases of two extreme outliers; when these are excluded the claim cannot be substantiated statistically (Nunnenkamp, 2002).

23. US foreign assistance has consistently and overwhelmingly gone to countries with which it has strong strategic interests; Israel and Egypt get vastly more aid than any other country, and in 2004, the top recipient countries were: Iraq, Israel, Egypt, Afghanistan, Colombia, Jordan and Pakistan (Tarnoff and Nowells, 2004: 13, Fig 4).

24. 'One person in ten — as many as 600 million people worldwide — live with a physical, sensory (deafness, blindness) intellectual, or mental health impairment significant enough to make a difference in their daily lives. Eighty percent of these live in the developing world. Disability also significantly impacts the lives of disabled people's family members and communities' (Yale University and World Bank, 2006).

At the same time, it is arguable that the exercise lacks imagination. It does not deign to touch the important, if difficult, issue of the anticipation of emerging and future needs. This applies to many groups in society, and especially to children and to youth as they engage with a kaleidoscope of myriad socio-economic and life changes, volatilities and choices (van Oudenhoven and Wazir, 2006). A pioneering, exploratory discussion of this new field interrogates the MDG exercise from this fresh, forward-looking perspective:

Our exploratory contention is that the notion underlying the MDGs, i.e., 'we know what is needed and we can do what is needed' is open for discussion. We also feel obliged to challenge the notion that resources and attention should be focussed on the MDGs at the cost of other initiatives for children. What are the challenges that children face at the start of the new millennium? Have their problems decreased, increased, diversified? Are they facing new problems? To put it crudely: to attain dramatic outcomes by the year 2015, we need to have the mindsets commensurate with the events leading up to this deadline and with the prevailing understanding and ethics of 2015. (ibid.: 12)

The aged also face new uncertainties, as do the diasporas of migrants. It seems that anything that cannot be zapped into a target or an indicator is societally insignificant. Thus, there is a serious danger that this rather 'static' nature of the monitoring indicators, all drawn from lengthy past experience, might be inadequate for identifying and tracking vulnerabilities, especially in their new guises and forms, that cannot be captured in these standard monitoring indicators. It is also possible that such indicators might post satisfactory progress while there might well be significant concurrent deteriorations on a wide number of more relevant but patchily reported and largely un-monitored dimensions.<sup>25</sup>

## **SILENCES: THE DOGS THAT DID NOT BARK**

There are over eighteen targets and forty-eight indicators specified in the MDG template. It would not be unreasonable, then, to query how so many pertinent dimensions are still missing. It is important to note that the exercise is ostensibly about development, not about poverty reduction per se. Had it been only the latter, there might have been an escape route, albeit a lame one, for these gaps. There is more to development than absolute poverty reduction alone, but this is primarily what the MDG exercise reduces development to.

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25. For some confirmation of such a possibility, see the discussion of the Beijing+10 gender goals (Molyneux and Razavi, 2005). There is also a clear need to focus on non-conventional indicators of well-being that go beyond the short list of widely used human and physical quality of life variables. Such efforts are especially valuable in the context of the emerging patterns of vulnerabilities experienced by the poor, but also by significant sections of the working population with nominal incomes above the poverty line. For a good and early treatment of this, see Sonpar and Kanbur (2003).

Even within the framework of poverty reduction, there are many serious questions. It is well known, for instance, that one of the primary factors underlying the slide into poverty is poor health, and/or the costs of accessing health services. Would it not have been appropriate to set higher ambitions here and call for a rights-based universal access to decent health services for all? There is no mention of the physically and mentally disabled or handicapped, yet these constitute a sizeable share of the poor. Even independently of whether they are above or below any income poverty line, these groups often suffer cruel and debilitating neglect, if not active discrimination and exclusion. Why stop short of asking for universal secondary school coverage, especially when the end point of the exercise is half a generation ahead? Why not set a zero-target for child labour and work that keeps children away from school? There is no serious mention of decent work and the right to gainful employment. It might be argued that this is an 'input' factor, which then generates the desired 'output' levels in terms of which the targets are defined. But this would overlook the importance and intrinsic worth of individually fulfilling, economically productive and socially valued work, as well as the fundamental significance of the dimensions of work and employment security. The issue of civil and human rights, of identity-based social exclusion and discrimination, including the rights of migrants, do not get much space either.

The other aspect which is remarkable, essentially on account of its absence, is the nature of the development process. Poverty reduction is somehow detached from the constraints imposed by structural inequalities and anti-poor and anti-labour policy biases. The answer is held to lie in the simple equation: external assistance + technological fixes + good local governance = poverty reduction. Of course there is marginal acknowledgement of the role of good trade regimes, and — oh yes — the north-west is working on this, just be patient. If one wishes to find what overall global and macro-economic policy framework is held to be apposite for the achievement of MDGs, the finger usually points to the Sachs's 'idiot's guide' to ending poverty. There appears to be a slide into convergence, as far as the international agencies are concerned, with the traditionally jousting and squabbling adversaries, UNDP and the World Bank, happily sharing the MDG bed. Perhaps the squeals of delight are staged, and it is just a marriage, or compact, of convenience in order to keep a good house for meeting the needs of MDGs, the new arrival. But on closer scrutiny it is not difficult to establish precisely who is doing what to whom: the UNDP and UN family takes its cue, if not its instructions, from the World Bank and the IMF, and in turn, these are guided by the development paradigm espoused by the other big player in Washington. Be this as it may, the end result seems to be an ongoing global bureaucratization and corporatization of 'development', now definitionally reduced to the achievement of the MDGs. The policy framework is set essentially by neoliberal market rules, with the cosmetics being provided by MDG 8, and frequent and generous lashings of talk of participation, national ownership, local

government — all so long as the iniquitous global and local economic orders and power structures are not seriously disturbed. A brave new world for the poor: perhaps it is just as well that they remain unaware, as in the previous cycles of anti-poverty euphoria, that salvation is now only nine years away. Political uni-polarity on the global stage now reflects itself in the development arena starkly, and the MDGs arguably provide the framework for stabilizing and sanitizing the contemporary path of capitalism on a global scale.

By strictly maintaining a focus on outcome-type goals and targets, readily justified by the need to think about poverty first, the MDG exercise effectively sweeps a spectrum of concerns over global systemic distortions and deficits under the conference carpet. The agenda for value-driven global development is detached from the 'more urgent' task of alleviating absolute poverty. What else might one find swept under the proverbial carpet? A few brief reminders might help.

### **Aiding Whom?**

Much attention has gone on the 0.7 per cent aid target for rich countries, but hardly a thought is given to the very uneven progress with regard to the political loss on account of an erosion of sovereignty, or the economic cost of such 'aid' in terms of conditionalities, both in terms of domestic policy and also in terms of the cost of tied aid, a practice still very common amongst donors, with some exceptions (see discussion above).

### **Subsidies: Do as I Say, Not as I Do**

Markets are to be efficient and subsidies to be withdrawn in third world agricultures, but there is no target date for the abolition of farm subsidies in the north-west. These amount to over US\$ 250 billion annually, which is twice the scale of the global absolute poverty gap with respect to the notional \$1/day line. Viewed on another scale, Education for All (EFA) could be funded twenty-five times over; drug producing farmers could be fully compensated for losses (rather along the principles of subsidizing OECD farmers for not producing unwanted crops) possibly a hundred times over. The collapse of the Doha talks in July 2006 confirms that there is no early possibility of a change of heart, mind, or direction.

### **The Business of War**

It is well recognized that a great deal of poverty arises from systemic breakdowns, wars, ethnic conflicts and so on. The peace premium for poverty is potentially enormous. The Stockholm International Peace Research Institute



(SIPRI) estimates that the world's military expenditure in 2004 was a staggering US\$ 1,035 billion, amounting to US\$ 162 per capita (SIPRI, 2005). To put it in perspective, this amount is about ten times the cost of achieving the MDG package. While regularly pointing and wagging a finger at military expenditures in the developing economies, the north-west magically excludes itself from any equivalent obligations. Arms exports from the rich countries fuel and sustain conflicts in the poor countries, and make money from them, while bleeding their human and financial resources.<sup>26</sup> Some of the countries with the loudest demands for peace and responsible government in the south are also some of the biggest arms exporters. This also applies to issues of good governance, since both supplier and procurer are locked inseparably in contracts cemented by commissions and kickbacks — euphemisms for flagrant corruption on both sides of the contractual equation.

### **Caring for the Environment: Not in Our Nature?**

Nature is high on the agenda, although other species of the planet have been losing ground by backward leaps and bounds in recent decades. But once again the exemptions kick in: the destruction of forests fuelled by export demand; widespread and routine waste dumping from rich to poor countries; chemicalization and resource intensification of agricultural production and the consequent loss of bio-diversity;<sup>27</sup> the use of GM seed varieties without adequate pre-testing. Again, even as the evidence on global warming knocks on, or knocks down, everybody's door almost daily, the leading power keeps out of any firm obligations to setting firm targets and timetables for reducing

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26. It seems moral indignation, peace posturing and good-governance strictures can happily co-exist alongside huge flows of arms exports from rich nations to developing economies; there are hardly any exceptions here. The US predictably leads the pack, followed by the UK, France and Russia.

27. The Millennium Project's technology and input-intensification approach to poverty reduction comes in for criticism from the Millennium Ecosystem Assessment, 2005. Anantha Duraipappa, co-chair of the MEA's report, argues that Sach's recommendation to boost infrastructure and road construction, if implemented in its current form, 'could have a devastating impact on biodiversity' (Duraipappa, 2005). Hamdallah Zedan, executive director of the UN Convention on Biological Diversity argues that further agricultural intensification will seriously damage biodiversity: 'what they are forgetting is that biological diversity is the source for our current and future food supplies; we will destroy this if we expand our current agricultural system' (see Masood, 2005). Masood reports further: 'Although many of the authors of the biodiversity report are also members of Sach's UN Millennium Project group, Duraipappa complains that their views were given little weight in the final document'. The Millennium Project's response to this criticism is revealing: 'The Millennium Project is a very outcome-oriented exercise. We need ideas for solutions . . . we want to know what works and what doesn't; . . . we did get a detailed assessment of the problems; but how do you integrate that into a report that is recommending solutions?' (ibid.). The overwhelming need for technical quick fixes clearly dominates the imagination and methodology of the Millennium Project.

its outrageously high levels of greenhouse gas emissions — another international covenant avoided, this time the Kyoto accords.<sup>28</sup> The Japanese and the Norwegians think of scientific breakthroughs when they chew on whale meat, claiming this delicacy to be their cultural right in a world where they call loudly for universalist values to be adopted and implemented elsewhere with regard to the protection of nature.<sup>29</sup>

There is a sorry tale and trail of leading north-west countries' sustained efforts at weakening or derailing global efforts to reach binding international treaties, agreements and protocols with regard to protecting the environment. The USA, Canada and Australia attempted to weaken the Precautionary Principle (PP) which calls for preventative measures in advance of achieving full scientific certainty with respect to the full extent of likely damage caused by a new technology on the premise that the Earth must not be treated as a testing laboratory. The PP was endorsed by UNEP in 1989 although its application has been frequently opposed by this group. A similar situation prevails with regard to the Convention on Biological Diversity, which in a strong form would have allowed any country to reject GM organisms in food and agriculture on the basis of the PP. This cartel-like group of grain exporting countries avoided ratifying the Bio-safety Protocol. Consider the Basel Convention, a global treaty, which has the objective of minimizing the generation and trans-boundary movement of hazardous wastes; basically regulating and then eliminating waste dumping by the rich countries in the poor nations. The Convention was negotiated in the 1980s when the USA bargained for its weakening on the threat that it would otherwise not join in; it was adopted in 1989 and came into force in 1992 with over 130 countries (including all OECD countries) signing on, with the exception of the largest global creator of hazardous waste, the USA. A similar strategy applies to the case of the 2001 Stockholm Convention on Persistent Organic Pollutants (POPs), where again the JUSCANZ group<sup>30</sup> stood against the adoption of effective commitments against POPs. The USA remains the only country,

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28. The USA alone accounts for 24.4 per cent of the world's carbon dioxide emissions — on a per capita basis, about twenty times higher than those of India (UNDP, 2005: 289–91, Table 22). The USA has not ratified the Kyoto treaty.

29. It is instructive to follow Japan's vulgar usage of aid as an implicit condition for influencing the votes of small Caribbean and Pacific countries who are equal members of the International Whaling Commission in the IWC meeting of June 2006, where Antigua, Dominica and Grenada all voted with Japan against the 1986 ban, as did Tuvalu, Nauru and Kiribati. All six tiny nations had received hefty packages of Japanese aid. The earlier moratorium was lifted by thirty-three votes to thirty-two, arguing that whales were responsible for depleting fish stocks; see McCurry (2006). For an earlier round by Japan in the Caribbean prior to the 2001 meeting, see Browne (2001): 'Dominica's Ministers have enjoyed a string of overseas trips with lavish VIP treatment normally reserved for royalty. Keen to get a ban on whaling lifted, Japan has flooded the country with cash and aid in the hope that Dominica will vote to allow slaughter to recommence'.

30. Japan, United States, Canada, Australia and New Zealand.

apart from Afghanistan and Haiti, not to have ratified the convention. The uphill path to attaining global environmental sustainability is littered with hurdles, cul-de-sacs and diversions courtesy the predictable culprits, the JUSCANZ group of nations.<sup>31</sup>

### **Human Rights and Sub-human States**

While human rights abuses are rightly highlighted by the north-west, and conditionalities are often linked to them, it seems fair game for parts of the north-west to bypass these obligations themselves. The International Court of Justice cannot hold some countries, including the USA, accountable for human rights abuses and war crimes. Exemptions have been sought for their serving nationals overseas; new styles of off-shore 'justice' and novel terms such as 'rendition' have emerged, as have creative definitions of what constitutes torture, and to whom and where the Geneva convention conveniently applies.

The freedom of capital to move without restriction is the touchstone of the global neoliberal agenda. After all, the growth strategy relies heavily on FDI inflows to generate growth. But the rights of labour to move have come to be constrained to an extent and in ways that are tantamount to wide-scale violations of human rights. Yet, international organizations are toothless in assuring the rights of migrant labour, of managing a humane and rights-based framework for asylum, for preventing trafficking. If anything, the north-west cynically cherry picks from the skilled segment of the third world labour markets, while raising fortress-like barricades against poorer, less skilled migrants. Thus, the sustainability of national health systems in Africa is seriously undermined by the absorption of nurses and doctors into the health services of the north-west, for whom these provide cheap and flexible recruits. The parallel drift towards the normalization of implicit racism and rights abuse in the north-west, aided by the post 9/11 mindset, is alarming.

Participation and democracy, good democratic government and power sharing are sought in the developing countries, while the international and global decision making structures are arbitrarily dominated by a tiny minority of powerful countries that cannot be seriously held accountable to any democratic global authority. This applies to the global economic and political decision-making architecture where the UN system is arguably being reduced and distressed to the role of an implementing agency of deals struck outside its purview by the dominant global power outside, but also increasingly to the third sector which essentially remains responsible and accountable only to itself and to its own donors.

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31. For a review of the period leading up to and since the Rio summit, see Greenpeace (2002).

## Reinventing Slums

Using the new shorthand of MDG-speak, consider G7T11.<sup>32</sup> The conceptualization of environmental issues is the proverbial dog's breakfast. Specific as it is, this target is obviously ambiguous, some might say patently disingenuous. What might constitute 'significant improvement': in which variables, to what extent, using what benchmarks and data, decided by whom, to what extent comparable? Will the relevant bureaucracies take the MDGs so seriously as to focus on slum communities that can be shown to have improved, while leaving the vast majority of slums to their own devices, struggling on, or deteriorating further? The target is to reach 100 million slum-dwellers. Does this make serious sense? For 2003:

the global slum population is estimated at 837 million persons, accounting for one-third of the urban population in Asia, over one-half in Africa and approximately one-quarter in Latin America. These figures are projected to double over the next 25 years, leading to one of the greatest challenges a country's development will face: a growing majority of the population, who are marginalized slum dwellers. (World Bank, 2002)

So, roughly speaking, while the MDGs set a target of 'significantly' improving the lives of 100 million slum-dwellers between 2000 and 2020, over the same time period, the total number of slum-dwellers will approximately be fifteen-fold this target, at about 1.5 billion!<sup>33</sup> What conceivable meaning can such targets or strategies have if they are not embedded within an overall framework which appropriately conceptualizes migration, urbanization and agricultural decline as the creators of the problem? Like many other Task Forces launched by the Millennium Project on each of the eight Goals, the Task Force on this goal clearly expresses its unease with Target 11, and goes further to propose its own formulation: 'by 2020, improving substantially the lives of at least 100 million slum dwellers, *while providing adequate alternatives to new slum formation*' (Garau et al., 2005; addition by Task Force in italics). The Task Force also displays commendable political correctness: 'in the process of extracting target 11 from the Millennium Declaration and the UN Secretary-General's (2000) report, *We the Peoples*, the explicit reference to the *Cities without Slums* target, which calls for preventing the formation of new slums after 2006, was dropped'; instead, the preferred language speaks of 'a home in the city', and more significantly, 'a right to the city' (ibid.). However, it is striking how few references there are to the issue of migration in this entire discourse and report, and the few that

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32. Goal 7 to 'Ensure Environmental Sustainability', Target 11: 'By 2020, to have achieved significant improvement in the lives of at least 100 million slum dwellers'.

33. The Task Force of the Millennium Project on this goal projects a figure of just 670 million slum dwellers for the year 2020. This exemplifies the influence of approach, concept, method and data in defining the scale, and setting the level of targets; simultaneously it tends inevitably to undermine confidence in such exercises (Garau et al., 2005: Table 1).

there are, are oriented towards emphasizing migration to the city as a right. The *hukou* registration system in the Chinese experience and model of development clearly sensitizes one to the need for reaffirming this fundamental right of all citizens everywhere. Yet, the argument cannot be closed with such a declaration: it is also necessary to ask if the migration decision is based on a positive move exercising such a right, or whether it constitutes a virtual self-expulsion from the villages on account of collapsing livelihoods. There is a great silence here about the fate and future of agriculture, of marginal farmers and the landless rural workers that dominate in rural populations from where swathes of slum dwellers originate.

The list of silences can be extended at will. An analogous list can also be built for the developing economies themselves, of course, where elites strive to carve out advantages for themselves to the relative exclusion of majorities that have been experiencing wider and intensifying vulnerabilities.

## EXIT

Ultimately, the MDG exercise reflects the sorry state of the analysis and practice of development at the international level. It hides more than it reveals, and its many areas of deafening silence are perhaps more significant than its litanous chanting of the familiar, well-meaning, feel-good mantras on human development. At a methodological level, there is an endless list of technical deficiencies and gaps, most of which are inherent and not easily surmountable. This seriously compromises any programming possibilities; the domain of policy design and intervention is then reduced to the usual array of ad hoc measures at country level — which is where the game was at the start anyway. Much is made of resource constraints. However, on the one hand, the methodologies for costing the MDG targets are unavoidably problematic and unreliable — they cannot really throw up an operationally usable estimate. On the other hand, too much is made of the resource constraint, and even the upper end of the highest estimates pales into insignificance when compared with the largesse and profligacy of the rich and powerful nations, multinationals, and individuals, of this world.

The MDG exercise reduces the development issue to a ghettoized state, with a focus primarily on the developing economies. It has become convenient and commonplace to legitimate this by reference to notions of Rawlsian justice. However, this excludes all the poor and the excluded in the rich countries from the frame of reference. The issue of inequality is thus entirely suppressed. In this, the politicians and bureaucrats of the rich and poor countries generally coalesce in turning a blind eye to the high, and generally rising, levels of inequality within their respective countries. Yet, third world leaders decry the high level of global inequality and the lack of democracy in international decision making; they bemoan the extent of income inequality between nations, and usually call for corrective interventions. But having

volubly voiced such real concerns in international conferences, they somehow forget to bring these messages back home. While it is right to emphasize the atrophy of the third world state in many regions as a serious constraint to development, it would be wrong to assume that these states would question internal structural inequalities in the social, economic and political domains.

It is an ill wind that blows no one any good, and neoliberalism is no different. It has assisted local and national elites, with a degree of internal elite mobility and churning, to detach further from local masses and attach themselves instead to global elites. Implicitly, meeting the MDGs — alleviating many of the obvious forms of absolute poverty — is to be a parallel process, comfortable and compatible with stabilizing the ongoing and unmoderated processes of neoliberal globalization. Indeed, the poor are increasingly viewed as the last unconquered market, and making poverty reduction profitable is an emerging dictum in the design and practice of public–private partnerships for sustainable pro-poor development.

It is hardly surprising then that the MDG strategic policy package ignores issues of structural inequality, and has no systematically developed and agreed macro-economic framework to suggest in place of the neoliberal straitjacket within which development is supposed to occur. However, if the last two decades have shown anything at all, it is that given these two constraints, very few countries will manage to achieve any kind of growth, let alone sustained egalitarian, pro-poor, or rights-driven development. No amount of mantra-chanting, good intentions and moral exhortations will substitute for addressing such structural constraints which are prominent by their absence in the MDG frame.

In defence of the MDG exercise, some of the usual suspects have been trotted out as justification. First, that it is good for advocacy, and indeed one could agree — up to a point. For instance, while sustained media exposure and campaigning might well have familiarized a section of the population of the developed economies with the existence of MDGs, this need not translate automatically into appropriate change in terms of political behaviour and action.<sup>34</sup> One wonders, though, what the degree of awareness of the MDGs would be with the elites and the targeted poor sections of the populations of the developing economies — certainly it is not a topic that makes headlines there. But how could it possibly be good for advocating changes which are not listed as targets at all; or for rights; or against rampant inequality?

Second, it has been argued in the MDGs' defence that they represent a political triumph over the extreme conservatism of Washington, a prized

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34. In the Netherlands, public awareness of MDGs was just 10 per cent in 2003, but rose to 21 per cent in 2004 and to 39 per cent in 2005. However, 75 per cent thought the target of halving poverty by 2015 was unrealistic; and while 80 per cent favoured more aid to developing economies, reducing trade barriers did not meet with favour, with 46 per cent wanting protection for the Dutch economy (NCDO, 2005).

trophy of a rare victory. Anecdotally, it appears that the initial stance of the US at the original conference was against the exercise, only to yield and change under pressure from the rest of the world. This was construed as a victory. But was it a Pyrrhic victory, when so much of the substance of development had to be jettisoned? Sachs has publicly said that the leaders of the developing world effectively withdrew from earlier radical stances on inequality of incomes and wealth, and simply sought the willingness of the west to the agenda of the reduction of forms of absolute poverty.<sup>35</sup> Was this perhaps a case of one step forward, or two steps back?

Third, it is sobering to hear from committed development practitioners, functioning at local interfaces within a rights-driven approach, that the public acceptance of the MDGs as benchmarks provides at least some strength to them in their negotiations with reluctant and stingy governments and international donors and agencies.

So is it right to make such a trenchant critique of the MDG bandwagon? There can be no doubt at all about the desirability of meeting the various poverty-reduction targets. The thrust of this contribution has not been to query this desirability, which clearly has the same status as mother's milk — who on earth could be against it, not even multinationals manufacturing and pushing canned powdered milk. The argument here has been about the larger global framework within which these MDGs are embedded, where the fundamental focus of development is reduced to the reduction of absolute poverty within the prevalent iniquitous global and national structures of economic and political power. There could be other strategic frameworks which would achieve poverty reduction, perhaps even more rapidly, but which would do so within a broader initiative that placed this objective within a rights-driven approach — where rights are recognized in their actual realization, rather than as a hypothetical possibility formally achievable in a liberal polity where individual opportunity is circumscribed by deep structural inequalities and exclusions — aspiring to more democratic and egalitarian forms of societal change. In contrast to this, the MDG exercise appears to be well embedded, even if by default, in the grand neoliberal strategic agenda. The world has seen many proposed alternative social forums, orders, compacts, contracts, partnerships between rich and poor countries since the post-war post-colonial era. All these scaffoldings have tended to be dismantled or just fall away. What is revealed at the present conjuncture is the increasingly monolithic edifice of capitalism — indeed the only game in town. The MDGs are its device for addressing the limited issue of absolute poverty within its own ideological, security, political and economic framework. Not much more, and probably rather less.

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35. Jeffrey Sachs in on-line lecture to the SID Conference in Amsterdam (October 2005).

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