

The Millennium Development Goals after 2015: no goals yet, please



Claire Melamed

‘Finding new goals is not the point. The point is to find the global agreement that is most effective at promoting development’

It’s about 1,500 days until the end of 2015, when the Millennium Development Goals (MDGs) are supposed to have been met. Some will be, some won’t be.¹ But whatever happens, the MDGs have been a huge influence on the development debate since they were agreed in 2001.

They will leave a big gap on 1 January 2016. And not surprisingly, people are already trying to figure out *how to fill it*.² A ferment of activity is starting, as *UN agencies*,³ *donor governments*,⁴ *non-governmental organisations*⁵ and – though less so – some *developing country thinkers*⁶ and policy-makers – start to think about what might come next.

The default option seems to be to reach for another set of goals and targets. There’s a developing ‘scramble for goals’ as every lobby group that considers itself unfairly treated by the current MDGs starts to demand its own MDG after 2015 – creating a very real risk of a set of 50 goals that is so long that they are all ignored. More thoughtfully, efforts have already begun to *sketch out a short set of goals*⁷ that better reflect the nature of today’s poverty problem. A goal for internet connectivity, for example, or one for personal security and freedom from violence.

But finding new goals is not the point. The point is to find the global agreement that is most effective at promoting development. The main achievement of the goals approach has probably been to encourage *more aid*⁸ from donor countries. Is that still what is needed? Before we rush in to an argument about which goals for what, far better to step back and think bigger, for a moment. There are three difficult questions to answer.

What would a global agreement be for?

There’s a huge range of development problems that could be the focus of a new agreement, and a huge range of instruments with which to tackle them. A new agreement will act as a set of incentives to encourage action on certain issues using certain instruments. The MDGs, for example, focused on social development, and the main instrument that they incentivised was aid. But it shouldn’t be a given that that is the

most useful role a new agreement can play.

What, for example, could a new agreement do to tackle one of the most pressing global issues of all – *the lack of jobs*?⁹ Most of what needs to happen to create jobs is at the national level, and governments don’t, presumably, need to go through the pain of global negotiations to be persuaded that trying to get their citizens into jobs is a good idea.

What could a global agreement add here? What is the range of collective actions that would have an impact on jobs, and what type of agreement could most effectively incentivise those actions? There might be policies on, for example, *trade*,¹⁰ or technology transfer, or intellectual property, which could be usefully given a push through a global agreement – but it won’t necessarily be through a targets and goals approach. Limiting the scale of ambitions to developing a new set of targets might rule out effective action on some of the most urgent problems that confront the poorest people.

Who would a global agreement be for?

The MDGs can be seen as an agreement between donor and recipient countries about a set of priorities for collaboration and a monitoring framework. The goals and targets approach worked well for that. But the world is different now. *Most poor people*¹¹ live in countries that are both donor and recipient, or neither. Why should their governments be interested in a global agreement? What would be in it for them? Something that was all about aid would probably bypass the majority of the poorest people in the world. So what are the barriers to poverty reduction in middle-income countries that could be usefully addressed through a global agreement? What kind of agreement would be most effective at tackling those barriers?

How should a new global agreement link to the national level?

The MDGs were set at a global level, but were, perhaps inevitably, used for national level monitoring too. This *was unfair to many countries*,¹² whose starting point or trajectory was significantly different to the global average. One common response to this has been to

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argue that any new agreement should be built up from [national level goals](#).¹³

I'm not sure about this – it's not clear to me why you'd need an international agreement in that case. People in individual countries can and should monitor their own government's promises and delivery as part of national politics. Would an international agreement really make that more likely to happen? Also there's a danger of unfairness creeping in. What if governments set low targets? Is it fair for people in different countries to have different expectations from what is supposed to be a global agreement? A new agreement would have to square the circle of national level accountability and global equity.

The chance to think afresh about global cooperation on development, what it can achieve, and how, is a huge opportunity. The world is very different to the one that produced the MDGs in the 1990s, and it would be a waste of this moment to move straight to a process of target setting without thinking first if there's a better way to do this.

Of course, this is a political and not a purely academic process. The answers to these questions will have to be filtered through a political negotiating process – hopefully one that involves the governments and citizens of the countries that bear the brunt of global poverty. The result will inevitably be a compromise between evidence and expediency. There's a lot of work to do between now and 1 January 2016. But the role of research should be to open up options, not to close them down too early.

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Find out more about ODI's major research programme on the [post-2015 agenda here](#).¹⁴



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