GLOBAL DEVELOPMENT GOAL SETTING AS A POLICY TOOL FOR GLOBAL GOVERNANCE:

INTENDED AND UNINTENDED CONSEQUENCES

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ABSTRACT

Global development goals have become increasingly used by the United Nations and the international community to promote priority global objectives. The Millennium Development Goals (MDGs) are the most prominent example of such goals, but many others have been set since the 1960s. Despite their prominence and proliferation, little has been written about the concept of global goals as a policy tool, their effectiveness, limitations and broader consequences. This paper explores global development goals as a policy tool, and the mechanisms by which they lead to both intended and unintended consequences in influencing international development strategies and action. It analyses the MDGs as an example to argue that global goals activate the power of numbers to create incentives for national governments and others to mobilise action and galvanise support for important objectives. But the powers of simplification, reification and abstraction lead to broader unintended consequences when the goals are misinterpreted as national planning targets and strategic agendas, and when they enter the language of development to redefine concepts such as development and poverty.

Keywords: global goals; MDGs; development indicators; UN; poverty

1 INTRODUCTION: THE NEED FOR A THEORY OF GLOBAL GOAL SETTING AS A POLICY TOOL

In *UN Ideas that Changed the World*, authors Emmerij, Jolly and Weiss (2009) identify global goals as some of the UN's most important intellectual contributions. The Millennium Development Goals (MDGs) are not the only goals to have been set. They have long been a regular feature of UN declarations, and have been an important tool used by the UN to guide international cooperation for development for decades. The First UN Development Decade

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launched in 1961 set goals for growth and development aid. Dozens of goals have been set since, many of which have had important influence in mobilising attention and driving campaigns to mobilise action for important global development challenges. Examples include the Education for All goals set at the 1990 Jomtien conference and the child survival goals set at the 1990 World Children's Summit. Emmerij and his coauthors conclude that these goals "have served as guidelines for economic and social development both nationally and internationally…. A review of performance shows that the goals have had considerable impact, probably more than most people realize" (Emmerij et al., 2009: 43).

Despite their proliferation and importance, little is known about global goals as a policy tool—their potential, limitations and implications for how best to deploy them. Questions about their effectiveness start and end with asking whether progress was made to meet the targets. Empirical questions about other consequences, especially unintended consequences, are rarely pursued. Conceptual questions are rarely asked about how they work; what kinds of incentives do they create and why, when are they most effective in achieving their policy goals, what unintended consequences do they lead to, and what are their strengths and weaknesses?

Without a fuller understanding of both the concept and empirical effects, goals can be poorly designed and applied. The recent experience of the MDGs highlights this problem. While they have been highly successful in raising awareness, developing a consensus framework, strengthening monitoring and guiding resource allocation towards poverty and human development, they have also generated considerable controversy about their formulation (inclusion and omission, methodology for setting goals, process of goal setting) and implementation (unit of application, methodology for monitoring, process for accountability).[1] These controversies reveal multiple interpretations of the purposes and uses of the MDGs, with no consensus on what their purpose should be. They are used, especially as a *communications or a messaging device* to express in concrete terms the complex challenge of development and poverty and raise awareness and mobilise attention and action to a neglected priority. Others use them as an *evaluative framework* for monitoring progress towards the broader objectives of ending poverty, and in the search of an accountability framework. Yet others use them (inappropriately) as *planning targets*, set to be achieved, that must drive priority setting for policy formulation, programming and resource allocation. Such ambiguities or disagreements are counterproductive. Goals set for one purpose may be quite inappropriate when used for another.

These controversies and disagreements show that global goal setting is not as simple as coming to a political agreement over important objectives, statisticians finding appropriate indicators by which the objectives can be measured, and economists setting an appropriate target level of achievement.

Goal setting is a complex policy tool. Research on the sociology of numbers studies indicators as a social phenomenon and has theorised how they are used to govern and exercise power. Emerging work on indicators in global governance is exploring their unique characteristics, consequences and implications (Davis et al., 2012). It also highlights the unintended consequences they can have and the two types of effects that indicators have: a governance effect when used to evaluate, and a knowledge effect when they redefine the meaning of the concepts that they are intended to measure (Merry, 2009; Porter, 1994; Poovey, 1998).

This paper draws on this social science literature to conceptualise global goals as incentives that elicit diverse responses from multiple stakeholders and to analyse the recent experience of the MDGs. It argues that global goals activate the power of numbers to create incentives for national governments and others to mobilise action and galvanise support for important objectives. But the powers of simplification, reification and abstraction lead to broader unintended consequences when the goals are misinterpreted as national planning targets and strategic agendas, and when they enter the language of development to redefine concepts such as development and poverty. These effects are not neutral with respect to the power relationships among actors in global governance.

The broader policy purpose of this paper is to contribute to an understanding of global goals as policy instruments so that they can be deployed to achieve their policy objectives, and to avoid unintended consequences that undermine those objectives.

2 GOAL SETTING AS A TOOL OF GLOBAL GOVERNANCE

2.1 INDICATORS IN MANAGEMENT AND GOVERNANCE

Quantitative targets are increasingly used by a wide variety of organisations, including private businesses, public services, national governments, international organisations and many others. They are used to monitor performance, evaluate progress and set priorities for programming resources and activities. They are used to establish action plans and programme projects and hold service providers and other responsible agents accountable. But global development goals set by the UN and other international organisations differ in important ways from these other uses of indicators and targets. They are disjointed from implementation processes such as resource allocation, investment programming investments and policymaking. They are agreed as an international treaty among states, not as a business plan developed by chief executives. They are derived from norm-setting processes that define social objectives on the basis of values and not from technocratic planning exercises.

Global goals are one of a battery of tools that can be deployed in global governance. In the absence of hard, enforceable instruments such as national laws that can be enforced, the UN and other institutions use a range of tools and mechanisms to influence decision-making and the behaviour of states, businesses, non-governmental organisations (NGOs) and other actors that shape development and other global priorities. Treaties among states are an important tool, but as even these are not subject to hard enforcement mechanisms, global governance functions in reality by deploying a range of informal tools and mechanisms, such as global summits, global commissions, political declarations, reporting requirements and peer pressure, among others, including global goal setting.

How are global goals supposed to change behaviour to meet the targets? Global goals create *incentives* for national governments and other stakeholders to take action. The incentives they create are arguably weak; they are an international agreement on an idea, and compliance does not bring many direct rewards. They rely on the power of numbers to gain traction in promoting behaviour change and in reshaping thinking. Global goals set priorities, frame debates, create a language for mobilising financial and human resources, strengthen accountability, and create peer pressures for aligning national policy with the global goals.

2.2 THE POWER OF NUMBERS

Quantification is the essence of global goals. Numbers are useful for creating incentives and describing social objectives. They can be manipulated in calculations and provide means to evaluate trends and analyse their causes. They reify complex qualitative norms into concrete outcomes. In this way, they engender trust in what is being reported because people tend to have faith in numbers as something scientifically derived. Similarly, they simplify a complex and multidimensional reality into a unidimensional single number. They abstract from local context and specificity and, therefore, can be universally relevant. They set up a single standard for measuring trend and performance, permitting comparisons among countries.

Global goals are being used in two ways as an instrument of global governance. The first is as a norm, to create incentives that lead to behaviour change. The second is to describe social objectives in concrete terms and communicate them. This process of quantification is a form of knowledge that Mary Poovey calls "a modern fact" (Poovey, 1998). In both these contexts, the powers of calculation, reification, simplification and abstraction make global goals particularly effective, yet these very features can also be a source of contradictions.

2.3 NORMS TO CHANGE BEHAVIOUR

As norms, global goals are prescriptive rather than regulatory in that they define what 'ought to be done' rather than prohibit what 'should not be done'. As norms, global goals are, therefore, intended to lead to behaviour change, notably policy change on the part of governments. They are prescriptive norms without means of enforcement, so their implementation depends on being deployed indirectly, through processes of self-regulation or regulatory decision-making. As already mentioned, global goals are used as a communications device, monitoring benchmarks and planning targets. Their use to communicate important normative objectives is often the intention when goals are set. This can lead to unintended consequences, as explained in the next section.

Because of their powers of calculation and abstraction, goals are single standards that can be used to evaluate performance across a wide range of countries. Evaluation is then used to demand corrective action. Demands for accountability often justify goals; goals must be set so that responsible agencies or persons can be held to account for achieving them. Targets are used by social activists who use them to pressure the authorities to do more. They often demand 'accountability'. Such performance standards make sense and work where the agents who are responsible are clearly identified, have control over the means to manage implementation and are able to take corrective action through enforcement mechanisms. For example, performance contracts within national governance systems between a public service and citizens—such as hospitals or schools—make sense as a way to improve outcomes. However, global goals are vague with respect to the responsible agents. The agents are arguably governments, but these governments often do not have the means to achieve the goals set at the global level. Moreover, there are no enforcement measures in global governance.

Indicators not only provide an objective basis for judging performance but incentives for self-regulation (Merry, 2009; Porter, 1994). Many of today's global indexes and country rankings are used to control behaviour in a subtle way, by assigning a 'score card' that creates incentives to improve performance, and countries adopt policies to improve their ranking without being pressured to do so by some global oversight body or peer group countries.

Country rankings that are made public to the international community work on national pride and create 'healthy competition' among countries, just like the Olympic games—a concept deliberately used by Mahbub ul Haq in developing the Human Development Index (HDI) (ul Haq, 1995). Indeed, the annual HDI rankings have come to be eagerly watched by prime ministers and finance, health and education ministers around the world. They have often led to policy response to do better in one area or another—for example, the HDI rankings in Egypt revealed poor performance in girls' school enrolment, which motivated the government to take action to improve the situation. They have sometimes become points made in election campaigns, such as in Guinea in the first democratic elections held in the country in 1992.[2]

2.4 'A MODERN FACT' TO DESCRIBE A SOCIAL OBJECTIVE

Global goals are a form of knowledge. Through the powers of abstraction, reification and simplification, they transform complex global challenges in declarations into a message that can be more easily understood and memorised and are more compelling than wordy and lofty statements.[3] They are more powerful descriptions that are more effective in communicating the idea to politicians and the public at large, and mobilising them to take action.

By simplification, goals overcome a problem of global declarations: how to communicate a complex global challenge and a broad action agenda with hundreds of detailed action points in terms that can be understood by policymakers and the general public. For example, the 1990 Children's Summit's Declaration and Plan of Action is about "Survival, Protection and Development of Children" and a commitment to the rights of children. It is hard to communicate what this means and what it is calling on political leaders and the general public to support. Embedded in this document are ethical principles of rights of the child to a free and dignified future, and the equality of all children to such a future. But this conference set global goals related to concrete improvements in children's health, nutrition, education and access to safe water and sanitation. An example is the goal to achieve "universal access to basic education, including completion of primary education or equivalent learning achievement by at least 80 per cent of the relevant school age children with emphasis on reducing the current disparities between boys and girls, [and] the reduction of adult illiteracy by half, with emphasis on female literacy" (UNICEF, 1991, para 20).

These numeric goals are more convincing; they imply that the goals are not just utopian ideals but achievable objectives that economists and planners had applied scientific logic to define. Commitments such as "We will work for programmes that reduce illiteracy and provide educational opportunities for all children, irrespective of their background and gender" from the 1990 Children's Summit emphasise intangible values and human experiences. The quantitative goals transform them into tangible, concrete changes in the world. In this way, they reify and give concrete content to resolutions adopted by the UN or other assemblies that state general intentions.

Quantification is also a process of abstraction out of contextual specificities. This overcomes a problem achieving global consensus in addressing major global challenges that are also embedded in very diverse local realities, challenges and priorities. As such, these numeric goals can command consensus of all countries of the world in ways that would not be possible for more qualitative descriptions.

Simplification, reification and abstraction are a recipe for a message that is easy to communicate and memorise. But in the process, much is lost in terms of the intangible,

the multiple dimensions of a complex concept and the need for local specificities. For these reasons, most conference declarations that produce goals are careful to provide qualitative presentations that put the goals in context. The seven goals from the Children's Summit were presented in a context of a short declaration framed around the Rights of Children and accompanied by a Plan of Action. The Plan of Action elaborated the list of seven goals, with explanations of key challenges and solutions. It included an appendix with more detailed goals and actions including additional indicators for each goal. Most importantly, the Declaration and Plan were keenly aware of the limits of abstraction; they explained that "The needs and problems of children vary from country to country, and indeed from community to community. Individual countries and groups of countries, as well as international, regional, national and local organizations, may use this Plan of Action to develop their own specific programmes in line with their needs, capacity and mandates" (ibid., para 6). Moreover, the goals should be adapted to the specific conditions of each country: "These goals will first need to be adapted to the specific realities of each country in terms of phasing, priorities, standards and availability of resources. The strategies for the achievement of the goals may also vary from country to country. Some countries may wish to add other development goals that are uniquely important and relevant for their specific country situation. Such adaptation of the goals is of crucial importance to ensure their technical validity, logistical feasibility, financial affordability and to secure political commitment and broad public support for their achievement" (ibid.).

The transformation from a qualitative description of a norm to a numeric transformation is fraught with problems. A great deal of meaning is lost in the simplification and reduction. As Theodore Porter (1994: 338) argues, quantification is "not merely a strategy for describing the social and natural worlds, but a means of reconfiguring them. It entails the imposition of new meanings and the disappearance of old ones". Table 1 summarises schematically the two ways that global goals are used.

TABLE 1
Two Uses of Global Goals.

	Governance effect: Norm in global governance	Knowledge effect: 'Modern Fact', a form of knowledge
Function and purpose	Prescribes to change behaviour	Describes to communicate, to achieve consensus
Key features of quantification	Facilitates manipulation for calculation and analysis Acquires aura of scientific precision Abstracts from local context and specificity Sets single standard for measuring trends and performance	Simplifies complex concepts Reifies intangible concepts (Concrete) Abstracts contextually specific concepts Reduces multidimensional reality into a single number

Deployment	Indirect control: Self-regulation
	
	Direct control:
	
	   - Normative objective
	
	   - Evaluative and monitoring benchmarks
	
	   - Planning target
		Narrative

3 THE MDG EXPERIENCE
INTENDED AND UNINTENDED CONSEQUENCES

This section considers the case of the MDGs as global goals and illustrates the process outlined above whereby quantitative targets are deployed as norms and descriptions that result in both positive responses but also unintended consequences.

3.1 MDGS AS A NORM IN GLOBAL GOVERNANCE

The MDGs derive from the Millennium Declaration (United Nations, 2000), which was an international norm-setting process. At the turn of the millennium, world leaders laid out a vision of priorities that were central to the future of all the world's people: development and poverty; peace and security; environment and democracy and human rights. It was a powerful document that set out their determination to work towards common objectives, based on shared values. The Declaration reiterated commitment to the "fundamental values to be essential to international relations in the twenty-first century" (ibid., para 1): freedom, equality, solidarity, tolerance, respect for nature, and shared responsibility.

The Declaration envisions development that is equitable and based on human rights. The theme of equality both within and between countries is articulated throughout the document, including gender equality (paragraph 6), equitable and non-discriminatory trading and financial systems (paragraph 13), with special attention to the poorest and vulnerable people. It draws on the ethical framework set out in the Charter of the United Nations and that has been codified in international law. The framework goes beyond the economic concept of 'development with equity' and seeks a world that is "just" (paragraph 1). It draws explicitly on human rights principles which are reflected throughout the document, notably the principles of "human dignity and freedom, equality and equity" (paragraph 1), the respect for economic, social, cultural, civil and political rights (paragraph 25), and reaffirms commitments to the Universal Declaration of Human Rights (paragraph 25), the Convention on the Elimination of All Forms of Discrimination against Women (paragraph 25), the Convention on the Rights of the Child (paragraph 26) and the Right to Development (paragraph 24).

The development priorities in the Declaration were not created anew for the 2000 Summit. The Millennium Summit built on the UN Conferences held over the 1990s on diverse topics from environment to children to habitat. These conferences set goals that, combined, comprise the Internationally Agreed Development Goals (IADGs), and the plans of action, the UN Development Agenda. The conference declarations had a common theme—inclusive globalisation that emphasised human-centred, equitable and sustainable development (United Nations, 2007). They also emphasised the participatory nature of international development, which would be driven not only by governments and donors but by civil society. According to Joseé Antonio Ocampo, "Two elements have permeated the content and character of the Agenda since its inception. First is a fundamental concern for equity and for equality of all persons, as human beings and as citizens… The second essential element [is] partnership. The conference process has engaged all the key stakeholders: governments, UN system organizations, other international and non-governmental organisations, civil society, and the private sector" (ibid., Preface: ii).

Coming in the context of the rapid spread of globalisation following the policies driven by Thatcher and Reagan and two decades of contentious debates about structural adjustment, the UN Development Agenda was an alternative to the Washington Consensus policies of the World Bank and International Monetary Fund (IMF). It emphasised the essential human ends of development and promoted social and economic policy alternatives that would attend to the distributional consequences of liberalisation reforms. The Millennium Declaration was also an important advance in UN agendas. The UN had set successive agendas for UN Development Decades starting in 1961. The four decadal agendas up to the 1990s included social objectives but were dominated by economic growth priorities and focused particularly on issues of the international economic environment. The Millennium Declaration brought poverty and human-centred perspectives on development to the fore.

The Declaration contained concrete goals. For all the reasons identified in the previous section, these goals strengthened the 'message' of the normative commitment. One year later, the Secretary General presented his implementation plan for the Declaration, in a document commonly known as the 'Road Map' (United Nations, 2001). This introduced the MDGs, comprised of eight goals drawn from the Declaration, each with concrete targets (18 in all), which in turn carried corresponding indicators (48 in all). Note that this was the first time the term MDGs was introduced, and their purpose was not to define important priorities nor to propose national planning targets but merely to harmonise reporting (ibid.). In other words, they were intended to be benchmarks of progress. The structure of goals, targets and indicators makes it possible to evaluate progress being made to achieve the broad goals, as targets and indicators can be calculated and compared.

But beyond that, the concrete goals in the declaration and the MDGs carried an aura of scientific precision, even though poverty reduction is an enterprise that is not amenable to such precise planning and commitment. The pace of development depends on a multitude of factors including many exogenous factors such as epidemics and natural disasters. Moreover, the world leaders who made the commitment do not control the means to implement them. Yet the aura of scientific certainty and precision in the goals convey the seriousness of intent. Top leadership in the UN and the development community responded to the promise of this apparently scientific plan. They took the Declaration and its goals as the centrepiece of its own work. The MDGs also strengthened a sense of global solidarity. They abstract from local context and specificity, setting a single—universal—standard of measurement and ambition.

Self-regulation

MDGs can also be instruments of self-regulation by creating incentives to do better. Countries are keen to present their MDG records in international fora to bolster their standing. Countries prepare MDG progress reports for international consumption; some for this purpose only rather than for national development planning and monitoring. The Prime Ministers of India and China have come to present and showcase their MDG reports in high-profile UN events.[4]

Political leaders also use the MDGs to show global leadership and draw attention to priority social objectives. UK Prime Minister Blair used the MDGs as a major rallying cry to aid Africa at the 2005 G8 summit. At the 2009 G8 meeting Gordon Brown, Barrack Obama and others argued that the response to the global financial crisis should include measures to ensure that MDGs could be met. The MDGs were raised to argue for the 'Development Agenda' at the World Intellectual Property Organization, an important shift in the principles governing

intellectual property rights to take account of their impact on health, education and other development and poverty concerns. IMF reviews of Poverty Reduction Strategy Papers (PRSPs) include an analysis of how well the country is doing against MDG benchmarks.

MDGs can raise awareness among actors outside the 'international development community'. Businesses have adopted MDGs and taken initiative to offer awards. NGOs, churches and other civil society groups have been inspired by the MDGs and have taken up global poverty as a cause (Manning, 2009).

Direct Control: Evaluative Framework for Assessing Progress

The MDGs have been regularly reported by the UN, which set up a mechanism bringing together the entire set of relevant UN agencies. Numerous global and regional organisations report on progress, each with a specific focus and target audience. These monitoring reports are put to wide use, mostly to encourage more effort towards reducing poverty and achieving the MDGs.

Civil society groups use the MDGs as frameworks for accountability and put pressure on governments to live up to their commitments and hold up outcomes against the benchmark goals. International NGOs and campaigners are using MDGs and associated aid commitments to deplore failure of donors to live up to their promises. National civil society groups, such as the Philippine budget network, argue that domestic taxation should be raised and expenditure priorities should be revisited 'to achieve the MDGs'. Opposition politicians can use them in election campaigns to criticise incumbent performance. Surprisingly, the use of MDGs to hold authorities accountable appears to have been relatively limited.

Direct Control: Planning Targets

Most economists have unquestioningly assumed that MDGs are intended to serve as planning targets. If MDGs cannot be 'operationalised' as a framework for resource allocation and informing other policy choices, how else can they be implemented? Country-level costing for priority setting and resource mobilisation—MDG-based PRSPs—has been the main strategy of the Millennium Project. Set up as an independent technical arm of the UN MDG implementation effort and directed by Professor Jeffrey Sachs, the project undertook a major initiative to estimate the 'cost' of achieving the global MDG targets at the country level, and advocates including these costs and targets in national PRSPs. This became the main focus of its work over 2004–2009 and has implemented it in almost every country in sub-Saharan Africa as well as a number of countries in Asia. In this way, MDGs came to serve as a framework for modelling and estimations of resource allocation and development. They have become "centres of calculation", as Latour (1987) predicted.

Contradictions – MDGs as Planning Targets: Methodological Incoherence

The use of MDGs as planning targets and to measure performance has given rise to sharp criticisms. These include: the arbitrary nature of how the individual goals are defined; the bias to Africa and other countries with low starting points; the unfeasibility of reaching the goals for many countries; the criteria for judging success and failure; and the applicability of the targets to countries rather than the world as a whole.

Saith (2006) has pointed out numerous flaws in the list of goals, targets and indicators for their concepts and data availability that undermine their potential use as programming tools. Easterly (2009) explains that there are several different ways that these targets could have been defined, by absolute or percentage changes, change targets versus level targets, and by positive or negative indicators. All of these choices have ramifications on the likelihood of the goals being met. The choices were not consistent, and the logic behind how each goal was defined is not always clear. But, more importantly, these arbitrary choices have resulted in bias against Africa in that African nations are less likely to meet the goals and so will be dubbed failures. Vandemoortele (2009: 362) points out that previous UN targets were expressed in absolute values, not proportional terms, and differentiated among groups of countries. For example, in 1980 a 2000 target was set to reduce infant mortality to 120 per 1000 live births in the poorest countries and to 50 in all others. Earlier publications had made similar points that relate to the inverse relationship between the likelihood of achieving MDGs and level of starting point (UNDP, 2003; Jolly, 2003).

Another criticism has been raised around different types of constraints that make it difficult to achieve MDGs, including macroeconomic, technical and managerial, and institutional and policy constraints. Gupta, Powell and Yan (2005) at the IMF have warned that 'scaling up' aid flows necessary to finance interventions to achieve the MDGs would lead to macroeconomic imbalances, notably an upward pressure on the currency exchange or 'Dutch disease'. For Clemens and Kenny (2007: 736), the goals are inherently implausible due to their poor design. For example, to halve poverty, the average African country would require per capita gross domestic product (GDP) growth of 7 per cent for 15 years. In the 15 years before MDG implementation, 1985–2000, only five countries in the entire world averaged GDP growth that high (ibid.: 739).

A major controversy concerns whether the goals were intended to apply to the world as a whole or to each country. Earlier global goals were explicit in stating that the goals were intended for the world and encouraging national governments to adapt them to their own contexts,[5] but the Millennium Declaration is silent and the 2001 Road Map document ambiguous on this question, leaving it open to conflicting interpretations.[6] The UN itself is not always consistent, at once encouraging country adaptation[7] but monitoring and reporting on their progress to achieve targets, and assisting countries to cost resource requirements to achieve them.

A global target applied universally to each and every country and taking no account of the hugely diverse conditions would lead to distortions in national priorities. Some goals made no sense in countries where they had already been achieved. For example, most countries of Latin America and Southeast Asia had already achieved universal primary school enrolment. Their education challenge was to improve quality, reduce unequal quality and achieve higher levels of secondary education. MDGs were labelled 'Minimum Development Goals' in these countries and were ridiculed for being a regressive agenda.

Applied at the country level as performance measures, these global targets are biased against the poorest countries because they have a reverse relationship to the starting point. For example, the target to 'halve' the income poverty rate means cutting 60 per cent to 30 per cent or 10 per cent to 5 per cent. The fewer resources and capacities countries have, the steeper the mountain they must climb to achieve the goals. This only makes sense if we use the MDGs as a broad and general framework for evaluating needs rather than for judging the performance of countries. If used for judgemental purposes, they would certainly be

'unfair' to poorer countries, as many of the 2015 targets imply progress at a pace that far exceeds historical experience (Clemens and Kenny, 2007) and because of the methodological choices made in setting the quantitative goals and targets (Easterly, 2009).

Adopting global goals as national goals without adaptation contradicts the principle of 'national ownership'. National planning and programming processes are deeply entrenched institutional mechanisms with established procedures and a history of commitments and achievements. MDGs are nothing new to national and local development plans. How can national and local authorities take ownership of a 'one-size-fits-all' agenda without relating it to this context?

The criteria and the metric used for judging success and failure is another issue that has generated critical comment. All UN and other monitoring reports evaluate whether global, regional and country progress is 'on track' to achieving the 2015 goals. When interpreted as performance measures, this way of evaluating progress is particularly troubling, since this one-size-fits-all target takes no account of starting points. Several authors (Degol and Tsukuda, 2011; Fukuda-Parr, Greenstein and Stewart, 2012) argue that the criterion for success should be whether countries are improving progress, and the metric should focus on the rate of progress rather than the level of achievement. If this metric were used, countries considered to be 'off track', mostly in sub-Saharan Africa, emerge as the top performers.

There are clearly serious problems with treating the MDGs as planning targets applied to countries and regions. This is not surprising, since the goals were not set through national planning processes that consider priorities, feasibility, resources and necessary trade-offs. They grew out of a normative process of political negotiations and consensus building among world leaders. They were clearly not intended by their creators to be national planning targets. They were not defined as targets for countries and regions but for the world. Yet confusion set in, and monitoring tools came to be used as priority objectives. But these 'goals', with their aura of scientific certainty, in fact cannot be defended as an effective development strategy.

Contradictions – MDGs as Agendas: Narrow Scope and Distorting Priorities

Interpreted as planning targets through self-regulation or direct control, global goals effectively define strategic priorities that would logically drive resource allocation and programmatic priorities of national governments, development agencies and other actors. Yet this was never their original intention. In national contexts, they make no sense as an agenda; as explained in the previous section, how can primary school enrolment be a priority goal in a country that has already achieved it?

Not only do these globally set targets that take no account of diverse national contexts and challenges, they are also a gross over-simplification of development objectives at both national and global levels. The list of goals in the Declaration and subsequently in the MDGs was kept deliberately short and simple to ensure that they would be memorable and easy to communicate.[8] The objective of gender equality and empowerment is reduced to a single goal of eliminating gender disparity in schooling. In contrast, the Platform of Action agreed at the 1995 Beijing Conference on Women and Development lists 12 strategic objectives, of which one is education and training of women. Similarly, the entire agenda of the 1990 Cairo International Conference on Population and Development was reduced to maternal mortality. This selectivity applied to all goals, and many important priorities are not even

included. Appendix 1 compares the MDGs with UN development agendas and goals adopted in the 1990s. It was never the intention of the framers of the MDGs to set an agenda for development. Yet the MDGs came to be interpreted as a set of priorities.

Development challenges require multifaceted and contextualised agendas; quantification was one of reductionism to grossly simplified and narrow agendas that could distort national and global priorities.

3.2 MDGS AS A 'MODERN FACT', RE-DEFINING DEVELOPMENT AND POVERTY

Both development and poverty are complex and contested concepts that have generated considerable literature about their definition and measurement and the most effective strategies to make progress. As a 'modern fact' the MDGs have come to substitute for the term 'development' and thus define its meaning. This brought a fundamental change in the definition of a concept, which had long been understood as a process of economic transformation of countries, and replaced it with a process of reducing absolute poverty of individuals. Although there have been many debates about how development should be defined, the mainstream concept of 'development' focused on economic transformation and the process of national economic development. And while the neglect of the human factor was a major critique of this mainstream definition, even the critical perspectives such as the capability approach recognised the essential role of economic growth. The understanding of the development challenge then was to bring about structural change that enhanced the productive capacity of a country and improved the lives of its people. MDGs redefined this concept as ending poverty, and poverty defined in multidimensional aspects of human life and, more specifically, as those particular elements that were included in the list of eight goals, 18 targets and 48 indicators.

This has significant implications for policy and the political economy of international relations. The MDGs have now become the consensus framework for international development. Frameworks drive the ways that policy priorities are perceived, defined and analysed. For example, the focus on poverty as the development goal also means neglecting development agendas that focused on economic growth and transformation. It would side-line the core elements of the policy agenda of developing countries in international negotiations, such as special and differentiated treatment in trade, finance, debt, technology and their lack of voice in international institutions such as the World Trade Organization (WTO) and the World Bank. For these reasons, Gore (2010) refers to the consensus on ending poverty as a global priority to be a major achievement. Yet for the developing countries it was a 'Faustian bargain' in which they gave up the idea of national development for enhancing productive capacities.

The concept of poverty, too, is redefined by the MDGs. For a long time the mainstream concept of poverty was focused on income and consumption deficits and measured by the number of households falling below a defined threshold. During the 1980s and 1990s this conventional definition was widely challenged because it was too narrow to capture the breadth of poverty as a lived experience of human beings. Several alternative definitions and measurement approaches emerged, most of which were multidimensional and people-centric. Amartya Sen and the UNDP *Human Development Report* advanced the concept of 'human poverty' as deprivations in human capabilities and human development below a tolerable minimum (UNDP, 1997). The International Labour Organization (ILO) elaborated the

concept of 'social exclusion' (ILO, 1998)—individuals who met their material needs but remained excluded from participating fully in society. Robert Chambers (1997) argued that the definition of poverty is location-specific and developed the concept of a 'participatory approach' to defining and measuring poverty by asking communities to identity who among them were 'poor'. Finally, diverse authors concerned with human rights argued that poverty entailed failures in the realisation of human rights.[9]

In a departure from the income/consumption definition of poverty, the MDGs emphasised the multidimensionality of poverty and focused directly on the conditions of people's lives. Although the MDGs has that in common with the alternative definitions, the selected goals/targets and indicators do not reflect nor were designed to reflect any of these broader concepts. The MDGs were not selected as key indicators of a particular theoretical approach to measuring poverty.

Simplification and Reification

The UN Secretary General and his advisers believed that numeric goals would be a way to strengthen the Declaration as a memorable historic document that would have significant public impact. For this purpose, simplification was an imperative, since 'less is more'; limit the number of goals to just a few that could be easily memorised and recited.[10] They fought the pressure and temptation to be comprehensive and include all the important dimensions of development and poverty in its outcomes, process and causes. The goals needed to be 'memorable' and powerful in communicating the message to the general public and in broad aggregate policy debates. The quantitative goals of the Declaration made concrete the vague and intangible commitments: "We will spare no effort to free our fellow men, women and children from the abject and dehumanizing conditions of extreme poverty, to which more than a billion of them are currently subjected."

Quantification increased the credibility of the commitments made. Without specific and measurable indicators, commitments made by governments to 'pursue' such objectives as ending extreme poverty and reducing illiteracy would be wide open to different interpretation and thus have little real meaning and be impossible to monitor. Governments could not be held accountable. The numerical content gives an aura of scientific precision in what is intended, implying that there is a clear technocratic strategy behind achieving these goals. Such specific and quantitative targets communicate the aspirations of human progress more effectively than general terms such as 'poverty' or even 'education and literacy'. These numbers remove much of the ambiguity that is embedded in the concept of poverty as a dehumanising condition, but they also remove the very concept of poverty as an affront to human dignity and a denial of human rights. They simplify the complex human condition, abstract it out of local realities and theories and reify an intangible concept into a tangible, measurable condition.

Yet this simplification and reification also shed essential concepts of equity and participation that were core themes of the Millennium Declaration and the agendas of the UN development conferences. The ethical values that the Declaration was careful to reaffirm were principles that should guide the international agenda and could not be reified and counted.

The MDGs are an important advance on the purely money-centric definition of poverty and accommodate some of its multidimensional human perspectives. Its widespread adoption as a norm signifies a consensus on poverty as broader than income poverty, as a human

condition and as multidimensional. Nonetheless, the MDGs transform the meaning of poverty as an affront to human dignity from the human rights and capabilities perspective, rob it of the essential concerns with human agency and ethical demands on social institutions and reconfigures the concept to a set of numerical and essentially *material* wants from the utilitarian perspective. It represents poverty as multidimensional *material* deprivation—lack of income, water, education and health services—stripped of the ethical principles and human agency that are essential to the human rights and capabilities perspectives. This is an inevitable result of the power that numbers have in simplifying complex concepts. It is also in part a reflection of the particular design of the MDGs in which numbers about lack of basic services and incomes are prominent, and where indicators of equity and participation are lacking.

Quantification Disembodies Definitions from Theory

Issues of measurement and definitions derive from theories about poverty and development, yet quantification disengages concepts from their theoretical frameworks. In presenting the concept of 'modern fact', Mary Poovey (1998: xii) explains that the use of numbers arose in the early 19th century in a process where description became separated from interpretation and theory. Even though numbers "embody theoretical assumptions about what should be counted, how one should understand material reality, and how quantification contributes to systematic knowledge about the world", they are somehow 'immune from theory and interpretation'. Numbers are the 'bedrock of knowledge' used to 'describe' a social condition without 'interpretation'.

The conventional definition is lack of income (or income poverty), rooted in the utilitarian materialist perspective of human well-being, and measured by a headcount of individuals living with incomes below a specified standard or food consumption below a specified daily intake. But several new approaches emerged in the 1990s that broke new ground in conceptualising poverty and challenged the income- and consumption-based definition of poverty with such concepts as social exclusion, a participatory approach, a rights-based approach and human poverty (Stewart, Saith and Harris-White, 2007). These alternative approaches were part of broader theoretical debates in development economics about the meaning of development. As mentioned above, the 1980s and 1990s were decades of intense debates about development policy strategies and advocacy for approaches that addressed the consequences of neoliberal reforms on people, distribution and power structures. A major theoretical advance came from Amartya Sen, his work on capabilities and the idea of 'development as freedom'.

While the concept of 'human poverty' and the 'human poverty index' measures poverty from the capability perspective, other proposed concepts are compatible and are also human-centred, emphasise multidimensionality and see the role of income and consumption as means rather than ends of ending poverty. These alternative approaches are also concerned with human agency and with the central role of empowerment in a strategy for eradicating poverty. Poor people are not considered simple beneficiaries of a development process but active agents of change.[11] Development outcomes are then driven not only by economic dynamics but political processes. From the human rights perspective, along with denial of core human rights—economic, social, cultural, political and civil—poverty is also a denial of equality, participation and empowerment. Analysis of the causes of poverty, therefore, requires an understanding of power structures.[12]

The Design of MDGs from the Utilitarian Perspective – Commission and Omission

The Millennium Declaration conceptualises poverty as a dehumanising human condition, from the human rights and capabilities perspectives rather than from the utilitarian perspective of material deprivation. The central concerns are with poverty as an affront to human freedom and dignity. It conceptualises poverty and development from the perspective of human rights and capabilities—or human development.

However, this conceptualisation is not reflected in the MDGs. The numerical indicators selected, and for which data are most commonly available, are overwhelmingly about material means rather than human ends, and there are no indicators that reflect the central principles of social exclusion, capabilities and human rights perspectives, such as equality, universal attainment and ending discrimination, injustice and violence.

For example, Goal 1 aims to eradicate extreme poverty and hunger, defined by three targets: to halve the proportion of people living on less than US$1 a day; to achieve full and productive employment and decent work for all, including women and young people; and to halve, between 1990 and 2015, the proportion of people who suffer from hunger. These three targets are measured by 12 indicators including measures of income and consumption, employment levels, own account and family work, dietary consumption and body weight. From the human rights perspective, extreme poverty and hunger are dehumanising in particular social contexts—for example, when a person has to resort to begging to overcome hunger, or sex work to overcome a lack of income. Such issues are admittedly difficult to measure, but the reduction of 'dehumanising poverty and hunger' to income and consumption measures not only over-simplifies the concept but redefines it to a utilitarian perspective of material deprivation. Measuring full and productive employment for all by average data on employment does not capture the discrimination against women and young people, while the proportion of own account and family workers is not a satisfactory measure of lack of guaranteed labour rights. Many self-employed workers enjoy labour rights if the country has universal social security benefits. Many family workers enjoy conditions of work where their dignity and freedom are respected. On the other hand, the proportion of employed people living on less than $1 a day reflects work that is not adequately productive.

The issue that was most contested in the design of the Declaration and the MDGs was reproductive health. While the goals in the Declaration are virtually identical to the International Development Goals set by the Organisation for Economic Co-operation and Development (OECD) in 1996, the reproductive health goal was deliberately left out. For women's movements, this was a critical issue because recognition of reproductive rights was a hard-won battle of the 1990s. Women's access to reproductive health is a central question of women's rights and agency, fundamental to a woman's ability to have a say in decisions about her own reproductive life and surely reflecting her ability to make many other life choices. It is quintessentially a basic capability on which many other capabilities and functioning depend. For women's movements, the 1990 International Conference on Population and Development was a landmark victory that achieved recognition of this right. However, in defending the decision to omit this goal, those leading the negotiations over the Declaration and MDGs argued that it did not matter because the related goals were there; it was a means to reducing maternal mortality, increasing life expectancy, reducing income poverty and many other goals.[13] This utilitarian perspective failed to understand the rights-based significance of access to reproductive health as a central issue for expanding capabilities and freedoms, and the obligations of the state to put in place the necessary institutions to realise women's human rights.

The MDGs do not distinguish between ends and means and treat some material means as ends. Capabilities are a freedom to be and do what an individual would value (Sen, 2001). They are ends with intrinsic value and are important objectives of development for that reason. They are not to be confused with means, particularly material means such as income or schools, which have no intrinsic value but only instrumental value. Lack of income and lack of access to food are material constraints to capabilities to enjoy a decent standard of living and to many other capabilities. But they have no value in themselves. Enrolment as an indicator of universal primary education is about material access to school but says little about the right to education or the capability of being educated. Immunisation is an indicator of child survival, not a valuable end in itself.

Omitted from the goals, targets and indicators are those that present and describe poverty as a dehumanising condition that restricts human freedoms and address relational issues such as inequality and discrimination, lack of empowerment and lack of security. Out of a total of 21 targets and 60 indicators, only one target and three indicators relate to inequality and exclusion. For Goal 3 to promote gender equality, the target is to eliminate gender disparity in primary and secondary education, preferably by 2005, and in all levels of education by 2015. Three indicators include measures of male–female ratios in school enrolment and female participation in non-agricultural wage employment and in national parliaments.[14]

Designing the MDGs – the Process and Criteria

The translation from the Millennium Declaration into the MDGs involved a shift in the process. The Declaration was driven by the UN Secretary General and his staff and negotiated by diplomats. It was built on the agendas adopted at the UN development conferences driven by interest groups including sectoral ministries and social activists. The MDGs, on the other hand, were defined by technocrats from UN agencies with expertise in development data representing several multinational agencies.

The Chair of this group was Michael Doyle, another well-known international relations scholar who succeeded Ruggie as the chief strategy adviser to the Secretary General, who focused on the big-picture issues of political negotiations and basic principles.[15] But the dominant members were the representatives of the UNDP, the World Bank and the OECD who had worked together on reporting on the Development Assistance Committee's International Development Goals. It is worth noting that this was an unusual group for a UN initiative on data, since the three individuals were not from the statistical units of a UN secretariat such as the Department of Social and Economic Affairs or specialised agencies with thematic/sectoral mandates such as the World Health Organization (WHO) or the UN Educational, Scientific and Cultural Organization (UNESCO). They were development economists rather than statisticians. And it was highly unusual for the World Bank and OECD to be participating in a UN exercise, but here the two organisations were playing a leading role. Statisticians from the UN agencies were also included in this group but did not dominate the process. Many voiced dissatisfaction that it did not reflect adequate consultation with the UN statistical networks and the knowledge and experience of specialised agencies in areas such as education and health.[16]

The process of designing the MDGs was guided by three fundamental principles: faithful reflection of the Millennium Declaration, data availability and simplicity.[17] While the first principle follows a political imperative, the second and third follow professional imperatives.

It makes no sense in the practice of development economics to include objectives and indicators that are not measurable and for which data are not available. While statisticians may have preferred to use as many data points as possible to assess trends, development economists had learned that too many indicators led to confusion in policy debates. The international development community had learned the lessons of the HDI; one number communicated more powerfully to 'busy policymakers' was more effective than a battery of tables.

4 CONCLUSIONS

The experience of the MDGs demonstrates the importance of global development goals as policy tools in mobilising awareness, support and action for priority social objectives. However, the power of numbers has led global goals to many unintended consequences as they become used for purposes for which they were not designed. The MDGs were introduced as monitoring tools, to harmonise reporting on the Millennium Declaration. They then took on a life of their own and became transformed into normative priorities and planning targets that define a development agenda. They were intended to be global priorities requiring joint action but came to be interpreted as hard national planning targets, introducing distortions in policy priorities and creating biased performance evaluations.

Global goals are a powerful policy instrument in global governance because they impose a single standard to all countries and ignore the diversity of local contexts. Moreover, they can be manipulated to analyse performance, simplify complex social descriptions and engender trust in what is being reported, because people have faith in numbers as something scientifically derived. For these reasons, global goals facilitate global consensus over common goals in a world of diversity and communicate complex challenges like poverty. With numerical goals, commitments to social objectives can be monitored with progress measures and governments held accountable. Yet these very features of global goals are a source of contradictions and unintended consequences.

The process of simplification, abstraction and reification in transforming the Declaration to a set of numerical goals was a deliberate attempt to develop a global norm that would have the power and influence to be implemented. In doing so, it has recreated a new meaning of development as poverty reduction and has redefined poverty reduction from the utilitarian perspective, shedding the Declaration's human rights and capabilities perspective. It has taken on some human dimensions in the conceptualisation of poverty and development, but not the full concept of development as capability expansion or the realisation of human rights.

The abstraction disembodied the concept of poverty, as lack of freedom and dignity, from theory, and recreated it in the utilitarian perspective of material deprivation. As Merry (2009: 9–10) points out, "The essence of an indicator is that it is simple and easy to understand. Embedded theories, decisions about measures, and interpretations of the data are replaced by the certainty and lack of ambiguity of a number. Like money, it appears to allow abstraction and easy comparison among groups and countries by converting values into numbers."

This transformation of MDGs from evaluative benchmarks to global priorities to strategic priorities effectively distorts priorities and has major implications for the effectiveness of

development efforts. MDGs did not generate new thinking about development nor new political dynamics. They came to be used as a more powerful narrative of development aid to justify existing policy strategies and relationships between the donor and recipient.

The UN is careful to present the MDGs as extracted from the Declaration, and to explain that "the goals and targets are inter-related and should be seen as a whole. They represent a partnership between the developed and developing countries to create an environment—at the national and global levels alike—that is conducive to development and the elimination of poverty." But numbers powerfully communicate the oversimplified description of complex concepts. The fine wording of the Declaration and its statement of ethical principles, commitment to the right to development and to goals of empowerment are overshadowed by the MDGs of halving the poverty rate and putting every child in school.

As the 2015 deadline for the MDGs approaches, the international community is beginning to debate a new international development agenda, including a new set of goals. The criteria for selecting the new indicators should take heed of the unintended consequences of the MDGs. The criteria that drove the design of the MDGs were simplicity for the goals and targets, while statistical measurability and data availability drove the selection of indicators. What they did not consider was that the global goals end up being taken more seriously and set agendas and priorities.

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NOTES

1. See UN Task Team (2012b) for a summary of these controversies, listed as 'strengths and weaknesses'.

2. These observations are based on the author's personal experience as director of the UNDP Human Development Report Office during 1995–2004.

3. UN documents have frequently been criticised as being poorly drafted from a communications point of view. They are usually drafted in conventional bureaucratic language, by UN staff who view these documents as inter-governmental consensus documents among technocrats. The typical UN document is not intended to communicate with the public and politicians.

4. In India, for example, the national plan and budget are the main tools of planning, evaluation, priority setting, programming and resource allocation. The Planning Commission official explained that the government places high importance on the MDG report because of its impact on India's international standing (author interview with Prenab Sen, December 2008).

5. For example, the 1990 Children's Summit stated that the goals were global and encouraged national governments to define their own strategies and adapt the goals to take account of their specific national contexts. Manning (2009: 70) notes: "The Jomtien Conference introduced its quantitative targets with a comment on the value of targets: 'Time-bound targets convey a sense of urgency and serve as a reference against which indices of implementation and accomplishment can be compared... Observable and measurable targets assist in the objective evaluation of progress.' It pointed out that 'As societal conditions change, plans and targets can be reviewed and updated.' It argued that 'Targets need not be based solely on current trends and resources. Initial targets can reflect a realistic appraisal of the possibilities presented by the Declaration to mobilize additional human, organizational, and financial capacities within a cooperative commitment to human development.' This might be thought to bias its targets in something of an optimistic direction, but the Declaration also noted that 'Countries with low literacy and school enrolment rates, and very limited national resources, will need to make hard choices in establishing national targets within a realistic timeframe."

6. The 'Road Map' implies that the MDGs should be country goals, stating: "It is crucial that the millennium development goals become national goals and serve to increase the coherence and consistency of national policies and programmes" (United Nations, 2001, para 81). It is particularly concerned with implementation, going on to state: "They must reduce the gap between what needs to be done and what is being done. The widening gap between the goals and achievements implies that the international community has failed to deliver on crucial commitments made during the 1990s" (ibid.).

7. See, for example, the UNDP Evaluation Office's report, and guidelines of the UN Development Group.

8. Author interviews with MDG architects: Doyle, 11 September 2008; Swanson, 10 September 2008; Vandemoortele, 6 September 2008.

9. See, for example, UNDP (2000) and Office of the High Commissioner for Human Rights (2004).

10. Author interviews with Malloch Brown, 27 June 2008; Mortimer, 14 September 2008; Ruggie, 6 September 2008.

11. From the human development and capabilities perspective the capability to have a say in decisions that affect one's life and enjoying the respect of others in a community are valuable aspects of life, while human agency is an important means to social progress which results not only from government action but from people demanding change.

12. The 1996 UNDP *Human Development Report* argued that to eliminate poverty required pro-poor growth, investment in human capital, elimination of discrimination, an enabling environment for poor people to have access to economic, social and political assets, and political support for pro-poor policies. The 2000/2001 edition of the World Bank's flagship publication, *World Development Report*, argues that to eliminate poverty, poor people need opportunity, empowerment and security (World Bank, 2000).

13. Author interview with Ruggie, 6 August 2009.

14. Some of these omissions have been vigorously contested since the first publication of the MDG lists in 2001. As a result of lobbying, three new targets were added in 2005 relating to employment and decent work (target 1B), universal access to reproductive health (target 5B), and access to treatment for HIV and AIDS (target 6B). The number of indicators increased from 48 to 60.

15. Author interview with Doyle, 11 September 2008.

16. Author interview with Robert Johnson from the UN Statistical Division, September 2008.

17. Author interviews with MDG architects: Doyle, 11 September 2008; Swanson, 10 September 2008; Vandemoortele, 6 September 2008.