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On the structure of global development goals

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(Invited Contribution received 23 March 2015)

The design of global development goals has been beset by deep flaws, inconsistencies, and manifest unfairness to some developing countries. Momentum has now peaked for the creation of Sustainable Development Goals to replace the Millennium Development Goals. This comment addresses three challenges that arise in setting development goals, and recommends feasible development goals that can meaningfully guide development cooperation, and focus the attention of policy makers on the worst-off.

Keywords: millennium development goals; sustainable development goals; feasibility; post-2015; progress

How and why should development goals be set?¹ The Millennium Development Goals (MDGs), and in particular its 8 goals, 18 targets, and 48 indicators that are used to measure progress at the national and international level, have been the central global development framework for at least the past decade. With the conclusion of the MDGs in 2015, a massive amount of international effort has gone into the process of establishing the post-2015 development framework. At the time of writing, the soon to be debuted Sustainable Development Goals had not yet been accepted, but the draft outcomes of two international processes developing the new development framework had been released.²

The original MDGs were beset by significant inconsistencies in the structure of the goals that made them unfair to some countries (Clemens, Kenny, and Moss 2007; Easterly 2009; Pogge 2010). This was arguably the result of the process by which the MDGs were developed: it lacked transparency, deliberation, and external input into how goals should be structured and rates of progress determined (Wisor 2012b). The draft SDGs are also badly structured, inheriting many of the flaws of the MDGs, and adding new mistakes as well.

This comment seeks to identify the challenges that arise in setting development goals, whether at the international or national level, and suggests how these challenges should be met, in contrast to the haphazard, inconsistent, and unfair goals that are found in both the MDGs and the draft SDGs. I argue that the purpose of global development goals is to guide international development cooperation, in which tradeoffs exist amongst competing priorities. Development goals should be ambitious but feasible, with feasibility assessments anchored in the historical rates of development progress. This would be far more meaningful as a guide for international development cooperation than highly ambitious or idealized goals. I further argue that development goals should be prioritarian or sufficientarian in nature, contra critics who suggest that development goals should represent the aspirations of all citizens.

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The history and impact of the MDGs

Before looking to the future of global development frameworks, it is worth briefly reflecting on the past. The MDGs are best seen as the culmination of a series of international conferences and declarations during the 1990s, which themselves built upon major international declarations of preceding decades. These efforts aimed to maintain focus on specific issues, such as hunger and child health, in the era of declining interest in and declining support for development policy following the end of the Cold War. The Secretary General of the United Nations, Kofi Annan, used the Millennium Declaration to refocus governments on the project of improving living standards in a range of areas. To keep interest in the Declaration alive, rather than allowing it to fade into obscurity like many international proclamations, Annan convened a small team of advisers to draft the goals, targets, and indicators of the MDGs.

After 'adoption' as an annex to a reaffirmation of the Millennium Declaration at the United Nations General Assembly, the MDGs rose from a rather inauspicious start (the United States did not even recognize the MDGs until 2005) to become the dominant method of declaring what development priorities should be, and assessing the degree to which governments were succeeding in achieving economic and social development.

The impact of the MDGs is contested. Clearly, the MDGs shaped the discourse of global development and the stated priorities for many development agencies and NGOs. Donor governments and international institutions explicitly tie their programming to the MDGs, and recipient governments are often evaluated in terms of their performance against the MDGs.

Arguably, the MDGs did increase support for foreign aid, directed it to poorer countries (Sumner and Kenny 2011) and focused the attention of development agencies on previously neglected topics such as maternal mortality.

But it is difficult to show whether any of this activity actually translated into further progress in the specified indicators of the MDGs (Friedman 2013; Sumner and Kenny 2011). Many of the gains against income poverty, primary education enrollment, and child mortality preceded the MDGs and did not show an increased rate of progress after the MDG declaration. As one example, almost all of the reduction in \$1.25 per day poverty occurred in China, during the 1990s rather than after the MDGs were approved. In any case, it is not possible to establish rigorous counterfactual evidence for any declines in deprivation that would not have occurred without the MDGs.

What are goals for?

In light of the mixed record of the MDGs, we should ask what are global development goals for?³ Once one establishes a purpose for development goals, at either the international or national level, one can then determine how such goals should be structured in the future, and whether they were successful in the past.

In the case of post-2015 development framework, this question, if asked at all, has been sidelined by the enormous amount of effort that advocacy organizations have expended on attempting to ensure that their preferred issue is on the international agenda.⁴ Although there have been credible efforts to make the procedure for setting the goals more inclusive than the last time around, such as through the MY WORLD 2015 survey⁵, the overall procedure has failed to focus on the question of why we should have development goals in the first place.

There are several candidate answers to this question. Development goals may be used to hold governments to account for achieving progress; to coordinate development policy among a range of actors who often work at cross purposes; to guide the allocation of scarce development resources; to praise or blame particular actors for their successes or failures in bringing about global development; to allocate duties to meet development targets; and to establish shared

norms which can then diffuse throughout the development system to subsequently shape development practice.

The optimal structure of development goals will therefore depend on which of these purposes one has in mind. If the goals are to serve as a real guide for allocating scarce resources and coordinating policy, then they must be structured in a way that can provide meaningful and feasible standards by which action can be judged. If they are simply an effort to establish what a just world would look like, then it is not clear why so much effort must go into establishing targets, indicators, rates of progress, and methods of measurement.

I prefer meaningful goals whose purpose is to actually guide development policy, rather than idealized norm setting goals. First, other international agreements already establish aspirational norms, including many of the international human rights treaties. Second, it matters for the purposes of development policy how things are measured. Getting measurement right will improve policy making, and thus outcomes, for affected populations (Stiglitz, Sen, and Fitoussi 2010).

Benchmarking rates of progress

In this section, I consider what rates of progress should be used to evaluate development progress. When should it be said that reductions in deprivation and achievements of social and economic progress are proceeding at a rate such that success may be declared?

In the Millennium Development Goals, different goals were assigned different rates of progress. Some goals were ‘zero goals’ – that is, deprivation in the particular target was to be fully eradicated by the time the MDGs were completed. This does not mean that no one would ever face deprivation, but that it would be avoidable for all people who desired it. People might, for example, choose to drop out of school, but not for a lack of educational opportunity. Among the ‘zero goals’ in the MDGs, full and productive employment was to be guaranteed for all, universal primary education (measured in terms of enrollment) was to be available to all, and universal access to treatment was to be secured for HIV/AIDS patients. In other cases, only partial reductions in avoidable deprivations were required for meeting the target. Maternal mortality was to be cut by three-fourths, while child mortality was to be cut by two-thirds. Extreme poverty and lack of access to sanitation and drinking water were to be cut in half. For many other targets, no clear rate of progress was specified. Biodiversity loss was simply to be ‘reduced’ and incidence of malaria was to be ‘halted and reversed’.

The differing rates of progress inherent in the MDG targets suggest the goals were internally inconsistent. Surely a country that had achieved full and productive employment for all its citizens would have also successfully eliminated many of the core deprivations tracked in most of the MDGs. Conversely, a country that had only achieved a 50% reduction in extreme poverty (as opposed to a full reduction) would be unlikely to secure full access to treatment for all victims of HIV/AIDS. A country that could not decrease the trend of malaria’s incidence would be unlikely to cut child mortality by two-thirds.

Given these inconsistencies, what might the architects of post-2015 development goals, or other goal setting exercises, do to make the rate of progress internally consistent and useful for guiding international development policy?

Full success

One option is to establish further ‘zero goals’. On this view, in 15 years time no avoidable deprivations that arise because of lack of adequate access to minimally acceptable goods and services should persist in the area of development under consideration. Zero goals have the advantage of making it clear that no one should be left behind, one of the pillars of the Sustainable

Development Goals framework. It is morally unacceptable if any children die from avoidable, preventable diseases, or any mothers die in childbirth who could easily have survived with access to medical facilities, or any innocent people are victims of war or interpersonal violence. These zero goals are interpreted in specific targets in the latest draft of the Sustainable Development Goals as baseline rates for deprivation characteristically found in middle to high income countries. For example, the target for neonatal mortality is 12 per 1000 live births, slightly higher than most European countries, and the same rate as in emerging economies like Mexico and Brazil.

But embracing this vision of a world largely free from avoidable deprivations unfortunately comes with significant costs. It requires detaching development goals from any serious assessment of where things currently stand or where they are going. One could of course assert that in 15 years time the world should be free from war and interpersonal violence in all its forms.⁶ That would be very welcome news. But there is no feasible scenario in which it will occur. No country on earth has reduced interpersonal violence to zero. And despite a reduction in the number of wars and number of casualties in war (Human Security Report 2013), there is no possibility that the world will be free of warfare in 2030. Given this, it is not clear how valuable goals or targets which aim for a world free from violence will be in tracking progress, evaluating commitments, allocating resources, and so on.

Zero goals might be defended on the grounds that global development goals are not meant to serve as feasible targets for actual reductions in deprivations and promotions of human development. They are merely ideals, attempting to establish an international norm for what human beings deserve and how the world ought to be (Miller Dawkins 2014). But if the SDGs are just a norm setting exercise of ideals that won't actually be met, then it is not clear why so much effort should go into measuring progress in reaching these unattainable ideals. Furthermore, it appears that development goals would simply be reasserting international norms that are embodied elsewhere in international law. The Universal Declaration of Human Rights and the International Covenant on Social, Economic, and Cultural Rights already establish that individuals are entitled to good health, productive employment, physical security, and so on. Reinforcing these norms may be a beneficial thing to do, but arguably not at the cost of failing to provide a meaningful guide for action in international development cooperation.

Extreme ambition

A second, closely related option is to aim for extremely ambitious goals. In the current efforts to establish new Sustainable Development Goals, some draft rates of progress are hugely ambitious. For example, goal 8, on growth, employment, and decent work, includes target 8.1 which calls for countries to 'sustain per capita economic growth in accordance with national circumstances, and in particular at least 7% per annum GDP growth in the least-developed countries'. What this means is that the countries which have had the hardest time growing, often because of civil war or autocratic governance, should suddenly grow at per capita rates which are among the historically fastest in the world, every year, for 15 years. In other words, the world's worst performing economies should suddenly become not only its best performing economies, but among the best performing economies the world has ever known. This goal becomes even more demanding when we consider goal 10, on inequality, which states that by 2030 the world should 'progressively achieve and sustain income growth of the bottom 40% of the population at a rate higher than the national average'. So, starting next year, Syria, South Sudan, Zimbabwe, and Burma should grow at historically unprecedented rates, with historically unprecedented share of that growth going to the poorest 40%. This is not serious thinking about what could be done in a limited time frame given huge feasibility constraints. This is a picture of the world we would like to

have but will not get. Hugely ambitious goals and their attendant highly ambitious targets fail to guide action, and fail to take seriously the trade-offs that exist in prioritizing one area of development over others.

Ambitious but feasible

This leaves a third possibility for pursuing international development goals. The ‘illustrative goals’ of the High Level Panel on the Post-2015 Development Framework are a mix of the ambitious and the feasible. In many cases, they argue for proportional reductions in deprivations below a given threshold. In other cases, they argue for a total elimination of the deprivation in question. For example, the High Level Panel calls for the eradication of extreme poverty (defined as \$1.25 USD (2005 PPP)) while it calls for a percentage reduction (the percentage is not specified) of the number of poor below the national poverty line.

A preferable alternative is to focus on feasible but ambitious reduction in a core set of deprivations. Feasibility must take account of specific national circumstances in pursuing deprivation reduction. Relevant factors in determining specific national rates of progress include the current quality of institutions, the availability of national resources that can be dedicated to economic and social development, the unique vulnerabilities and risks the country faces, the support the host country can anticipate from development partners, and the quality of political institutions that are currently in place.

On this view, ambitious but feasible goals can usefully track to what extent policy makers are actually upholding their obligations to pursue deprivation reductions, to determine whether responsibilities of international partners are being discharged, and to force policy makers to consider which goals they should prioritize in a world of limited resources and institutional capacity. This is the approach I favor. But as long as the architects of the post-2015 agenda are focused on pleasing the advocates, rather than thinking seriously about the future, it will not be the approach we get.

One promising method for establishing feasible but ambitious goals would look at the rates of progress that countries have been able to achieve to this point. Klasen and Lange (2012) show that development progress tends to follow a specific trajectory. In its initial stages, progress is slow. This may be a result of the early stages of institutional development being particularly difficult. However, once progress begins to be made, there is a period of rapid acceleration. This acceleration may occur as institutional development reaches a stable equilibrium, and investments in particular areas of development achievement begin to take off. Then again, progress slows, as the final stages of deprivation reduction may be more difficult, as policy must reach the most marginalized individuals, and the proverbial low-hanging fruit has already been picked.

When one contrasts the historical rates of progress with the projections for eradicating deprivation in given dimensions, it is clear that highly ambitious or zero goals can neither meaningfully guide development policy, as no development practitioner can structure programming to make such rapid progress, nor can they be used to evaluate the success or failure of countries, as all countries will appear to be failures with such rapid progress required.

Whose interests should count in global development goals?

In addition to setting a rate of progress, development goals must take a position on whose interests should be represented in the goals, targets, and indicators. That is, should development goals focus on achievements across the full distribution of residents, or should they focus more narrowly on specific subsets of the population?

Lant Pritchett and Charles Kenny have recently argued that development practice mistakenly aims to be ‘kinky’. That is, it aims to raise people at the bottom of distributional curves up below a minimum threshold. In the paradigmatic case, the International Poverty Line maintained by the World Bank (used as the metric for target 1.1 on poverty eradication in the MDGs) counts a person as poor if they live on less than \$1.25 per day 2005 PPP. (There are many problems inherent in the purchasing power conversions, but that is not our focus here).⁷ People living on incomes/consumption above this threshold are not relevant for determining whether target 1 of MDG 1 (the poverty eradication goal) has been achieved.

In other words, development goals with these thresholds aim to put a kink in the distributional curve, raising those below the poverty line to a living standard just above it, while making no effort to change the living standards of those above the poverty line.⁸

This is part of a more general phenomenon in which, Pritchett and Kenny argue, development has been narrowly defined in such a way so as to exclude the interests of most residents of low and middle income countries. They argue against this paradigm, and in favor of international development cooperation that reflects the interests of all citizens in countries who are the intended beneficiaries of development efforts.

Goals of this style are ‘sufficiency goals’.⁹ Sufficiency goals aim to get people above a minimal level of achievement. Above this level of sufficiency, welfare gains are treated with reduced (or non-existent) moral and political concern. Individuals living on \$1.80 or \$2.40 or \$3.60 per day are still poor by most standard conceptions, and their aspirations are still relevant for national development planning. It is therefore mistaken, in Pritchett and Kenny’s view, to focus development practice narrowly on an excessively low threshold for poverty eradication, excluding the interests and aspirations of the rest of society.

While I agree that the International Poverty Line is deeply flawed, sufficiency goals may be the best option in the post-2015 development framework. There are three reasons to defend sufficiency development goals.

The first is that the best way to achieve a sufficiency goal may not be to bend a kink in the distributional curve (that is, change the distribution of goods), but to shift the entire distribution to the right (that is, increase aggregate achievement in the dimension under consideration). Pro-poor policy need not exclusively focus on establishing social protection schemes that elevate the welfare of the worst off. Instead, pro-poor policy can focus on broader reforms that improve everyone’s well-being, and in so doing meet the target of raising everyone above sufficiency. In other words, you can redistribute your way to poverty reduction, or grow your way to poverty reduction. Both are consistent with sufficiency goals. So the interests of the middle and upper classes need not be fully excluded from development policy even when the target aimed at is benefitting those below the sufficiency threshold.

A second way to defend sufficiency goals is to note that shortfalls in meeting basic needs or securing basic rights are properly matters of international concern, while promoting the welfare of all citizens is not.¹⁰ Foreign aid programs are justified to the taxpayers and donors who provide them (at least partially) on the grounds that these dollars will combat severe deprivation. They are not justified on the grounds that they will merely support the general national interest of self-determining grounds.

A third way to defend sufficiency goals is to note that they function like prioritarian goals (see Parfit 1997). That is, they direct attention to the worst off members of society, and in so doing focus development policy and programming. (Of course, true priority goals might have a different structure. They could, for example, focus on raising incomes or life expectancy or caloric intake for the worst off 20%, or 40%, while according greater weight to the worst off below those cut-offs.). In this way, sufficiency goals guard against the tendency for development policy and resources to be directed towards (or captured by) better off groups who are able to benefit from gains afforded by international development cooperation.

Pritchett and Kenny (2013), global development goals that aim at a *morally plausible* sufficiency line might be defensible even if the current goals in both the MDGs and SDGs are not. While more aspirational development ideals may have some role to play in international norm setting, any attention or resources focused on these ideals might draw from the struggle to secure basic rights for the worst off.

In addition to choosing whether all individuals or just a subset of the distribution should be identified as relevant for evaluating development progress, there is the further question of how horizontal inequalities, or inequalities among groups, should be assessed.

From the perspective of justice, it matters not only how the overall distributional curve is shaped, but whether specific groups are disproportionately represented among the disadvantaged. These group-based or horizontal inequalities are intrinsically morally significant and instrumentally related to a host of other development outcomes (Stewart 2013).

The draft SDGs commendably attempt to highlight the importance of group disadvantage for global development policy. They note the importance of group-based deprivation and argue for goals targeting these disadvantages and statistics which are disaggregated to reveal horizontal inequalities. The High Level Panel on the post-2015 development framework similarly made their first commitment to ‘leave no one behind’, regardless of their gender, ethnicity, disability status, geographic location, or other feature. I agree that statistics on development progress should be disaggregated across all of these features. But, like other goals, a serious effort should be made to establish what the most ambitious but feasible progress is that can be made in reducing horizontal inequalities. There will unfortunately be group-based disadvantage in 2030. The relevant question is how fast countries can be expected to reduce group-based disadvantage, given the circumstances they find themselves in.

Conclusion

Given the massive investment of time and energy in the development of the post-2015 development framework, and the political incentives for advocates to see their issues well represented on the international agenda, it is unsurprising that no serious effort was undertaken to face the real trade-offs involved in international development, or to determine feasible rates of progress against which development actors can be judged. Nonetheless, it is a valuable exercise to examine each of the goals, targets, and indicators, to determine whether they provide meaningful standards for evaluating development progress, and if not, whether they can be reformed or replaced by alternatives.

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Notes

1. I am grateful to Eric Palmer for detailed comments on an earlier draft of this paper. This paper extends and develops arguments first written for the *Development Policy Blog*.
2. The two processes were the High Level Panel of Eminent Persons on the Post-2015 Development Framework, (at <http://www.un.org/sg/management/hlppost2015.shtml>) and the Open Working Group Proposal for Sustainable Development Goals (<https://sustainabledevelopment.un.org/sdgsproposal>).

3. Here I follow a more general approach to social evaluation and conceptual analysis, in which the purpose of the task at hand guides the conceptual and empirical research. See Wisor (2012a).
4. No organization wants to face the next 15 years seeking public support and financial backing without being able to reference that supporting their organizations will help to deliver on the Sustainable Development Goals.
5. <http://mdgs.un.org/unsd/mdg/Host.aspx?Content=Indicators/OfficialList.htm>
6. Target 16.2 of the draft Sustainable Development Goals: 'End abuse, exploitation, trafficking and all forms of violence against and torture of children'.
7. See (Pogge and Reddy 2006; Wisor 2012a; Woodward 2010).
8. I discuss this point further at <http://devpolicy.org/should-development-be-kinky-a-response-to-pritchett-and-kenny-20150107/>
9. See Huseby (2010) for a recent philosophical treatment, and Nussbaum (2000).
10. See Beitz (2009) for an account of the proper grounds of international development cooperation and human rights.

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