

HOW CAN A POST-2015 AGREEMENT DRIVE REAL CHANGE? REVISED EDITION

The political economy of global commitments

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What are the lessons of the Millennium Development Goals process to date? What has been their impact on aid and national government decision making? This paper seeks to inform the post-2015 debate by examining these questions. It argues that leverage over national governments and civil society involvement will increasingly eclipse leverage on aid as the determining factor of post-2015 success and discusses how alternative international instruments can achieve such traction. The paper has been revised after online discussion of a draft version. This is a discussion paper, intended to provoke reflection and debate, and does not represent Oxfam policy positions. The authors welcome further comments – email research@oxfam.org.uk



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SUMMARY

The post-2015 discussion on what should succeed the Millennium Development Goals (MDGs) is picking up steam, with barely a day going by without some new paper, consultation or high level meeting. So I, along with Stephen Hale and Matthew Lockwood, have decided to add to the growing slush-pile with a new discussion paper. This final version benefits from comments we received after posting a draft on <http://www.oxfamblogs.org/fp2p/>. After more than 500 downloads, we would like to thank all who commented and sent in research that we had missed.

Why join the circus? Because we think that too much of the debate is being conducted in a political vacuum, dominated by overly theoretical policy analyses of what could ideally be developed. It's the messy business of power and politics that will really determine what happens to poverty, equality, essential services and sustainability over the next few decades, and we think there's an urgent need to bring power and politics into the centre of the post-2015 discussion.

The international system is awash with fine-sounding global undertakings and commitments (at the last count, the ILO alone had 189 international conventions on its books). Some of these have much more impact than others.

This paper argues that to have impact, any post-2015 arrangement has to take into account the lessons of over a decade of implementing the existing MDGs, and be shaped by the profound global change since the MDGs were debated over the course of the 1990s and early noughties.

The most significant shift is that the new arrangements have to be designed to influence governments, whereas the main impact of the MDGs was on the aid system. Why the shift? Because aid is becoming less important, both because it is likely to decline in volume over the next few years, and because many governments' dependence on aid as a percentage of revenues is falling even faster than aid itself.

So if influencing governments is the goal, what can we learn from the experience of the MDGs? The first thing to note is a startling lack of research. Many reviews blur the distinction between 'MDGs' and 'MDG policies'/'MDG planning' (in effect, social welfare). Analysis of the data on improvements in health, education, and other key sectors largely ignores the vital question of how much of that improvement can be plausibly attributed to the MDGs, rather than to other factors such as national politics, economic growth, or technological innovation. Given the substantial political and financial investment in the MDGs, and the need to design an effective post-2015 framework, being unable to attribute – with any certainty – progress due to the MDGs is a truly lamentable gap in our knowledge.

There is even less research on (and less anecdotal or circumstantial evidence for) the impact of the MDGs on the policies and behaviours of rich countries, beyond changes in their aid budgets. MDG 8 set out an ambitious agenda for a 'global partnership for development', on areas including trade, finance, debt relief, access to medicines, and technology transfer. There is scant evidence that this has had any impact on rich country behaviour in those areas. Understanding this failure is vital, given that many proposals for the post-2015 regime seek to place more obligations on rich countries in areas such as climate change and resource consumption.

What we know is that some governments have adopted the language of the MDGs and have customized them to fit national priorities, while civil society groups have increasingly used them as advocacy tools. Beyond that, many post-2015 participants seem to think it is not possible to give a more complete answer to the traction question because of the missing counterfactual (that is, how can we know what would have happened without the MDGs?). That is not the

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case. It is certainly possible to know much more than we do about attribution through more rigorous qualitative research. For example, in-depth interviews with policy makers could investigate the traction exerted by a range of external and domestic forces on their decisions (avoiding any leading questions on the MDGs). We have yet to locate such research.

So much for the MDGs, what about whatever comes next? International instruments can exert influence in three key ways:

1. **By changing national norms** in areas such as women's rights. However intangible, norms matter, leading to long-term changes in what society considers acceptable or deplorable, which then leads to changes to laws, policies and behaviours.
2. **By directly influencing government decision making**, through any of a number of possible carrots (aid, contracts, acceptance, approval) or sticks (sanctions, disapproval).
3. **By giving civil society organisations and other domestic actors more tools** with which to lobby, campaign, and secure action by their governments.

In most cases, the main drivers of change will be domestic – the result of national politics and culture. But international initiatives are second-order factors that can nudge things along. We suggest six kinds of instrument at global and regional levels.

Big global norms: rallying cries intended to influence the underlying attitudes of decision makers and citizens, such as 'zero poverty' or 'zero hunger'. At best, these change the way people and leaders think about the world, and the role of government. But talk is cheap, and ringing declarations are swiftly forgotten; the Millennium Declaration is generally thought to have been headed for the dustbin of history before being saved by its subsequent codification into the MDGs.

Global goals and targets: as encapsulated by the MDGs.

Regional goals and targets: the African Union has been particularly energetic in agreeing regional targets, setting out what its member governments should be aiming for on the Rights of Women (AU Protocol, 2003), or their allocation of spending to agriculture (Maputo Agreement 2003), health (Abuja Declaration 2001) and similar commitments on social protection, and water and sanitation. Civil society, including Oxfam's Pan Africa Programme, has made effective use of these targets to press governments across Africa to improve their performance.

Global league tables: the international community and/or civil society can simply collect and publish data allowing a comparison between different countries' absolute situation and rate of progress, as in the UNDP's Human Development Index. Anecdotal evidence (and long NGO experience) suggests that league tables can be effective both in attracting public and media interest, and in goading politicians into action – there is nothing a leader likes less than to be seen to lose out to a rival nation.

Data transparency: according to Jan Vandemoortele, one of the architects of the MDGs, perhaps their greatest legacy will be the improved quality, collection and dissemination of social data. Something resembling a global movement for data transparency can be discerned in the plethora of initiatives such as the Extractive Industries Transparency Initiative (EITI), and the International Aid Transparency Initiative (IATI). One option would be to make this the centrepiece of a post-2015 arrangement, and leave it to others (national or regional bodies, international institutions) to 'mash up' the data into different indices and use it to advocate for progressive policies.

International law: Most governments are already signatories to dozens, if not hundreds, of international conventions and the role and influence of international law appears to be on an inexorable upward curve, steadily encroaching on previously untouchable areas of state sovereignty.

What are the strengths and weaknesses of these options in influencing norms, decision making or civil society activism? Here we are basically into guesswork/gut feeling, captured in the table below.

Possible options for international instruments to drive change post-2015

Instrument	Influence on national norms	On decision making	Civil society take-up
Big global norms	Sometimes strong, but often disappear without trace	Long-term influence (e.g. shaping future leaders' world views)	Strong, if resonate with national reality
Global goals and targets	Partial	Transmission via aid system, otherwise likely to be partial	Yes, when resonate with national reality Far stronger if accompanied by national goals, civil society commitment to these, and clear national accountability mechanisms
Regional goals and targets	More influence where regional identity is stronger (e.g. African Union)	Especially if governments have to ratify and legislate. Rivalry can also be effective	Can provide a valuable advocacy tool, especially where regional identity is strong
Global league tables	Weak	Effective if builds on regional rivalries	Can provide a valuable advocacy tool
Data transparency	Weak	Depends how data are picked up by national actors	Depends on civil society capacity to use data for advocacy purposes, alliances with academics, etc.
International law	Strong, but slow osmosis into national common sense (e.g. children have rights)	Especially if governments have to ratify and legislate, or report publicly on their performance (as with the UNCRC or CEDAW)	Depends on civil society capacity to use legal system (and responsiveness of legal system)

1 INTRODUCTION: WHY LOOK BACK?

The next two to three years will see a flurry of international activity to decide what (if anything) replaces the Millennium Development Goals (MDGs). The UN is establishing a sometimes bewildering set of processes to discuss this, involving civil society, governments and the private sector. The end result *could* be a new global commitment to overcome the enduring scandal of widespread poverty and to build a global economy within environmental limits, which drives more sustained and coherent action by governments of the North and South. But to make that a reality, we need to learn the lessons of the past decade.

This paper offers some reflections on the lessons of the MDGs process by analysing the evidence for their actual impact to date. We argue that this has important implications – for the nature of the post-2015 process, the design of the post-2015 framework, and the approach to involving civil society in the emerging process.

We must start by emphasising that the MDGs have not yet run their full course. However, the most recent evidence suggests that, in many countries, the MDGs are unlikely to be achieved. There are more than three years to go until the 2015 deadline, and a huge amount is still at stake. For instance, while maternal mortality rates (MDG 5) have nearly halved, there is still a long way to go to reach the target of reducing the maternal mortality ratio by three-quarters.¹

Nevertheless, the debate on the post-2015 framework is about to begin in earnest. The UN will run consultation processes on the lessons learned from the MDGs and options for the post-2015 framework in more than 70 countries.² The UN Secretary-General has established a ‘High Level Panel on the Post-2015 Development Agenda’ with 26 members.³ The first discussion at the UN General Assembly will take place in September 2013.

The vision that is emerging, which is described in the UN Task Team’s report (UN 2012), includes:

- a new set of global development goals, along the lines of the MDGs; but also
- global goals that better reflect the importance of the environment and/or specific goals covering the most pressing global environmental issues; and perhaps also
- a universal set of goals – covering all countries, not just those that were the focus of the MDGs; and
- a framework that would enable or encourage countries to set national targets.

This is a far more ambitious vision than the MDG framework. It would require very high levels of commitment and leadership to develop, agree, and deliver this vision, particularly given the current context of global economic and political turmoil.

Nevertheless, many groups and coalitions are now developing proposals, both for the post-2015 framework as a whole and in individual areas. Champions of what were considered ‘Cinderella’ issues in the MDGs (such as jobs, inequality, disability, growth, and infrastructure) are arguing for their inclusion in whatever replaces the MDGs, while others are pushing for a new approach (for example, a more explicit rights framework or a shift to sustainable development goals). Claire Melamed of the Overseas Development Institute (ODI) cautions against this ‘Christmas Tree’ approach (Melamed 2012), but is losing the battle, judging by the research summary on the Beyond2015 website.⁴

Some civil society groups see the post-2015 process differently – as an opportunity to channel people's anger at the failures of our current model, and to build a movement that demands action on the inter-related crises of economy, equity and environment. This perspective is outlined in the Montreal Declaration produced by the civil society meeting convened by the World Alliance for Citizen Participation (CIVICUS), the Global Call to Action Against Poverty (GCAP) and Beyond 2015 in September 2012.⁵ But this movement would clearly have to be very powerful in both the North and South to secure an outcome of the visionary kind outlined above, and there are many more direct opportunities for civil society to mobilise public demand for change.

In our view, the key gap that needs to be addressed in both these approaches is a deeper exploration of the political and economic context for the post-2015 framework. That context is profoundly different from that of the late 1990s, from which the MDGs emerged. Arguably, national context matters even more than before, as countries reduce their aid dependence, diversify their international links, and increase their ability to raise domestic revenues from natural resources or taxation. Both the decisions that are made on post-2015, and the extent of their subsequent implementation and impact, will be shaped above all by these shifting political and economic tides. 'If I ruled the world' proposals for perfect global systems, whether dreamt up by multilateral technocrats, NGOs or think-tanks, are bound to fail if they do not root themselves in the politics and economics of the times.

This paper attempts to help bridge the political and policy debates. We assess the evidence of the impact of the MDGs to date and consider the implications of that evidence, alongside what we know about the extent to which the range of possible post-2015 instruments are likely to 'go with the grain' of the political and economic moment.

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2 TRACTION ON AID: THE MDGS' STRONGEST SUIT?

After a period of stagnation in the 1990s, Official Development Assistance (ODA) rose sharply in real terms from 2000 onwards (although this was not a significant rise when viewed as a proportion of gross domestic product (GDP) among OECD countries). The proportion of aid going to countries facing the greatest challenges in meeting the MDGs – those in sub-Saharan Africa – almost doubled over the decade, as did per capita aid to low-income countries (Kenny and Sumner 2011: 27).

Donor spending increased disproportionately in ‘MDG-related sectors’: ‘The proportion of aid allocated by member countries of the Development Assistance Committee (DAC) to basic social services increased from 10.1 per cent in 1999 to 21.0 per cent in 2009 while the proportion of ODA for building trade capacity declined from 38.5 per cent in 2001 to 28.9 per cent in 2009’ (Fukuda-Parr 2012). Sumner and Tiwari (2011) report similar findings, with bilateral ODA to social sectors doubling between 2000 and 2008, while the amount going to productive sectors stagnated. The Gender and Development Network argues that MDG 3 has galvanised resources to tackle gender equality, including specific funds such as the Dutch government’s MDG3 Fund: Investing in Equality (Woodroffe and Esplen 2012).

Was this reallocation of aid attributable to the MDGs? Fukuda-Parr (2012) points out that these trends pre-dated the introduction of the MDGs, and speculates: ‘If there is causation, we might ask if donor policies drove the MDGs rather than the other way round.’ In reality, it is likely that both the MDGs and the reallocation of aid resulted from the shifting consensus in the aid sector – which makes it difficult to prove cause and effect in either direction.

Similarly, Kenny and Sumner (2011: 4) note that ‘aid is controlled by the same agencies that agreed the DAC targets, suggesting that it is possible the aid shift to social sectors might have occurred even absent the MDGs’. A 2008 review of 21 bilateral donors’ policies found that they consistently mentioned the MDGs as overall objectives, but ‘none of the donors have adopted MDGs as a framework for allocation of resources and for programming purposes’ (Fukuda-Parr 2008).

It is at least plausible that the focus on social spending and measurable targets encouraged the emergence of significant new aid donors such as the vertical health funds (the Global Alliance for Vaccines and Immunization (GAVI), The Global Fund to Fight AIDS, Tuberculosis and Malaria, and the Bill & Melinda Gates Foundation).

Lingering doubts on the reasons for the increase in aid notwithstanding, it seems reasonable to conclude that the MDGs probably helped to redirect aid towards social spending, and thus contributed to the concomitant increase in spending at national level. What is not clear is whether the MDGs process exerted a significant amount of *additional* traction on national governments, beyond the allocation of aid moneys. This matters, because the prospects for further aid increases in the medium term are so poor. Indeed, overall aid budgets are now falling, as we explore in Section 4.

3 TRACTION ON NATIONAL GOVERNMENTS: WHAT IMPACT HAVE THE MDGS HAD SO FAR?

A recent UN review acknowledges that 'The precise added value of the MDG framework is difficult to determine'. It continues: 'Yet, a review of its implementation clearly shows the historic contribution of the MDG framework in providing a common worldwide cause to address poverty and putting human progress at the forefront of the global development agenda' (UN 2012: 6). The report speaks in terms of concepts and indicators, but at no point examines precisely which institution did what as a result of the MDGs. There is a risk that sidestepping this evidential question will lead to bad decisions in the post-2015 process, producing instruments that exert little influence on national decision making.

Development is a dauntingly complex and constantly changing process, and one that requires us to learn continually. But all our experience and knowledge points to one critical fact: it is the set of interactions, contracts, rights and responsibilities at national level between states, citizens and the private sector that is the main driver of development.

So when it comes to assessing the concrete impact of the MDGs, the key issue is evidence of their impact at national level. What influence did they have on decisions made by national governments? Have they strengthened or weakened the social contract between citizens and the state? There is a startling lack of research into these questions. Many reviews blur the distinction between 'MDGs' and 'MDG policies'/'MDG planning' (in effect, social welfare) (Lay 2012). Analysis of the data on improvements in health, education, and other key sectors largely ignores the vital question of how much of that improvement can be plausibly attributed to the MDGs, rather than to other factors such as national politics, economic growth, or technological innovation. Given the substantial political and financial investment in the MDGs, and the need to design an effective post-2015 framework, being unable to attribute – with any certainty – progress due to the MDGs is a truly lamentable gap in our knowledge.

Perhaps less surprising (as the causal connection is that much more complex) is that we know even less about the extent to which the MDGs have affected the norms and attitudes of 'real people', whether poor or not, and whether they have been more or less efficacious in this than other kinds of international instrument.

There is even less research on (and less anecdotal or circumstantial evidence for) the impact of the MDGs on the policies and behaviours of rich countries, beyond changes in their aid budgets. MDG8 set out an ambitious agenda for a 'global partnership for development',⁶ on areas including trade, finance, debt relief, access to medicines, and technology transfer. There is scant evidence that this has had any impact on rich country behaviour in those areas.

It is important that we discuss and understand this failure of the MDGs, given that many proposals for the post-2015 regime seek to place more obligations on rich countries in areas such as climate change and resource consumption. While entirely justifiable in terms of responsibility and the rapidly blurring distinctions between 'North' and 'South', the post-2015 process will need to deliver conclusions and commitments that are far more effective than their predecessors in influencing the actions of powerful governments.

There is, of course, a political question about the MDGs themselves. Do they represent a constraint on national sovereignty, through which the international community seeks to influence decisions and resource allocations at national level? In some senses, the answer is yes, but the nature and purpose of such interference is closely circumscribed. Instruments must be agreed by genuinely multilateral forums such as the UN. If developed through a truly multilateral

⁶How can a post-2015 agreement drive real change? The political economy of global commitments

process, these global development goals represent the collective will of the international community, and can encourage the spread of global norms based on human rights.

There is a sharp and striking contrast between the doubt cast by the lack of rigorous comparative research on attribution, and the certainty and passion of aid and government officials, many of whom are convinced by their own experience of the efficacy of the MDGs in changing government behaviour. These views can certainly not be dismissed as merely anecdotal, but they do raise two important questions:

- What was it about the MDGs, compared with other international instruments (such as international law), that influenced government behaviour?
- Is it true, as David Booth⁷ and Peter Newell (2008)⁸ argue, that the efficacy of international instruments relies on their being picked up by local political and economic actors to pursue their own domestic agendas? If so, what were those agendas, and are they likely to play a similar or different role in whatever emerges from the post-2015 process?

What we do know is that, while it is difficult to directly attribute improvements in health and education to the MDGs, many governments have adopted the language of the MDGs in setting priorities and targets in health, education and other areas. According to a study by the UN Office of the High Commissioner for Human Rights (OHCHR):

‘The *MDGs Status Report for Kenya* (2005) states that the Government’s decision to increase funding for MDG-related programmes has seen funding for health, education, agriculture and infrastructure increase. The *Report on the Achievement of Millennium Development Goals: Indonesia* (2007) claims that, in the allocation of provincial budgets for 2003-2006, many districts and cities based their spending priorities on the MDG framework. Many donor countries, United Nations funds, programmes and agencies and the World Bank similarly claim that development priorities are now more closely aligned with poverty reduction as a result of the Goals’, (UN OHCHR 2010: 3).

Reviewing a wider set of data for low- and middle-income countries, Kenny and Sumner (2011: 5) found that there had been an increase in per capita spending on health and education between 2000 and 2007, but they note that GDP per capita also rose during that period. As a result, it is difficult to see a clear trend in health and education expenditure as a proportion of GDP.

Similarly, a 2008 study of 22 Poverty Reduction Strategy Papers (PRSPs) showed that low-income country governments consistently referenced the MDGs, but were selective and did not always include timelines or action plans for meeting the MDG targets (Fukuda-Parr 2008). This suggests that some governments are using the MDGs as planning and communications tools or as a common language with which to talk to donors – not necessarily that they are changing their behaviour as a result. In any case, as Richard Manning has pointed out, it is wise to assume a degree of ‘contamination’ of documents such as PRSPs by governments adopting the language of donors so that ‘references in local documents may amount to little more than political correctness’ (Manning 2009).

Perhaps a more interesting finding is that some of the more dynamic developing country governments have consistently ‘customised’ the MDGs, adapting them to national realities and priorities and including them in national planning documents. A United Nations Development Programme (UNDP) study of 30 countries found that 10 had added or modified goals. Thus, for example, Albania, Iraq and Mongolia had added a goal on good governance and/or fighting corruption. Armenia, Cambodia, Kyrgyzstan and Tajikistan had modified MDG 2 (education) to include eight or nine years’ schooling for all children. And Colombia and Mongolia had added specific infectious diseases to MDG 6 (tackling HIV and AIDS, malaria, and other diseases). Fifteen countries had added, expanded or modified targets, and no fewer than 25 had added, expanded or modified indicators – for example, to reflect national poverty lines. Such steps

imply at least a measure of local ownership of the MDGs among a wide variety of countries (UNDP 2010).

A gender review by UNDP (2005) showed that Ethiopia had added an indicator on women's ownership of land and livestock under MDG 1 (ending poverty and hunger), and an indicator on the proportion of women in the police force, law-making and policy-making bodies under MDG 3 (gender equality). Of the 78 national reports reviewed, 22 addressed violence against women; Viet Nam, for instance, added 'Reduce vulnerability of women to domestic violence' under MDG 3.

According to the UN OHCHR (2012) study: 'The most well-known example of adjusting MDG targets to a country's situation, and possibly human rights obligations, is Thailand's MDG-plus model, which adapted 9 of the 11 domestic targets. For example, income poverty was to be reduced to 4 per cent of the population and the goal of universal education extended from primary to secondary education. More specific targets were set for women (such as doubling the proportion of women in the national parliament, administrative organizations and civil service executive positions by 2006) and marginalized regions (reducing by half the under-five mortality rate in highland areas, selected northern provinces and three southernmost provinces by 2015)' (UN OHCHR 2012: 8).

But customisation raises questions of cross-country comparability: at what point do international goals become so transformed that they cease to be an international instrument at all (and does it matter)?

Research at national level highlights both the complexity of the interaction between the MDGs and national institutions, and the importance of regional rivalry. In Zambia global targets and league tables fostered the effective promotion of maternal healthcare (MDG5) in several ways. Firstly, glaring regional differences in maternal mortality rates demonstrated that such deaths were avoidable, strengthening the arguments of advocates within Zambia. Secondly, exposure to neighbouring country data invoked a sense of competition: 'No, Zimbabwe can't do better than us!' (exclaimed one maternal and child health coordinator) (Evans, 2012).

Researchers in Kenya and South Africa, on the other hand, found 'only a partial connection between the formulations articulated in global policy aspirations for gender equity, poverty reduction and education expansion and various sites of enactment. The clearest expression of a connection is in global organisations and their work with local partners and in a national government like South Africa, even though some officials find it difficult to get full buy-in from colleagues for this work, and rolling it out to districts and schools is challenging.' (IoE, 2012)

In some countries, the MDGs have also provided an advocacy tool for civil society organisations and other development actors. A survey by CAFOD of 104 representatives from civil society organisations in 27 developing countries found that 75 per cent of respondents thought the MDGs were 'a good thing'; 72 per cent agreed that development had become a higher priority because of the MDGs, and 60 per cent said the MDGs were a useful set of tools for non-government organisations (NGOs) in terms of lobbying, monitoring, fundraising and project design (Pollard *et al.* 2011).

In Oxfam's experience, the MDGs have provided a valuable tool for regional advocacy in Africa. At the African Union (AU) Finance Ministers Meeting in 2010, Oxfam and Fair Play (a health campaign comprised of more than 200 organisations in 10 African countries, linked to the 2010 soccer world cup in South Africa), lobbied for an acceleration plan for countries to meet the MDGs. The concept of acceleration plans was passed as a resolution by the 2011 and 2012 AU meetings, which passed resolutions that African governments should

- have clear action plans and timelines to ensure that they meet most of the MDG targets by 2015,
- commit adequate resources towards maternal health, and

- maintain the momentum of political and economic reform, deepen regional integration, mobilise domestic resources and foreign direct investment, and use available resources to accelerate the progress towards meeting the MDGs.

It is important that the post-2015 process – both in its design and its implementation – builds on this momentum to further strengthen the voice of civil society organisations at national and regional levels.

Many stakeholders involved in the post-2015 discussions seem to think it is not possible to give a more complete answer to the traction question because of the missing counterfactual (that is, how can we know what would have happened without the MDGs?). That is not the case – it is certainly possible to know much more than we do about attribution through more rigorous qualitative research. For example, in-depth interviews with policy makers could investigate the traction exerted by a range of external and domestic forces on their decisions (avoiding any leading questions on the MDGs); real-time monitoring of political processes would also help. We have yet to locate such research, but in its absence, the traction question remains largely unanswered (though not, we repeat, unanswerable).

4 TODAY'S WORLD: COMPARING THE LATE 1990S AND THE EARLY TEENS

The MDGs were a child of very different times. Politically, the late 1990s was a time of post-Cold War optimism, with clear global leadership from both the Utstein group⁹ and, later, the governments of the UK (under Clare Short as Secretary of State for International Development) and the USA (during Colin Bradford's time as Chief Economist at USAID). The UN system had delivered a series of important global conferences on human rights and social justice issues from housing to women's rights, creating a sense of momentum in building a series of progressive global norms around rights and development.

Today, austerity and recession in Europe and the USA are coupled with growing disillusionment with a multilateral system that has produced a series of paralysed negotiations on trade, climate change, sustainability, and the arms trade (Savedoff 2012). The ongoing global financial crisis that started in 2008 has proved a geopolitical tipping point; the global centre of gravity is moving rapidly from the old G8 powers to the emerging powers of the BRICS (Brazil, Russia, India, China and South Africa), reflected in the rise of the G20.

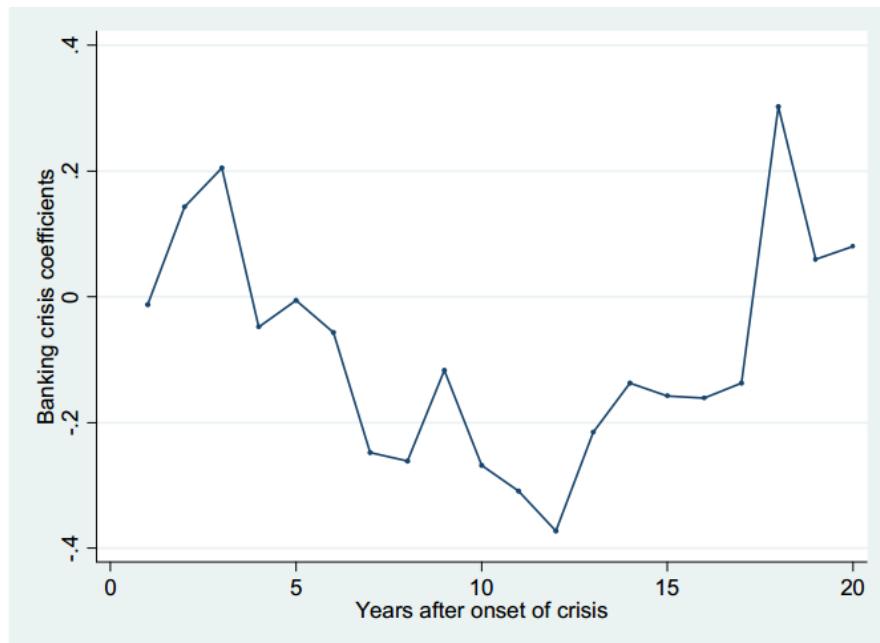
However, these emerging powers seem to be prioritising growth and physical infrastructure over the kinds of issues captured in the MDGs. This suggests some difficult discussions ahead in the post-2015 debate, 'which will have to involve these emerging powers as major players if it is to enjoy any international legitimacy. Moreover, whatever the issue, the political appetite for big new global undertakings is not what it was. This has led some commentators to lament that the new regime is, in practice, fast coming to resemble a 'G zero', a multilateral system adrift, with no one at the helm.

Equally, the African context is profoundly different from that of the 1990s, as rapid continent-wide growth has masked substantial disparities within and between countries, as Irungu Houghton has outlined.¹⁰

Economically, the late 1990s were good times – the G8 economies were growing, generating more fiscal cake to spread around as aid (indeed, Sakiko Fukuda-Parr (2012) argues that reversing the previous decline in aid was the driving motivation for many involved in establishing the MDGs). This time around, while some governments are sticking to their promises (and all of them could do better), the impact of previous financial crises on aid flows suggests that overall aid is likely to fall in the coming years. World Bank research on the impact of previous banking crises on donor aid flows (see *Figure 1*) suggests that aid typically rises for a couple of years and then falls off a cliff, not returning to its former levels for at least 15 years (Dang *et al.* 2009). The latest global aid figures suggest that a repeat of this pattern could be under way (OECD 2012).

¹²How can a post-2015 agreement drive real change? The political economy of global commitments

Figure 1: Impact of banking crises on net disbursed aid provided by crisis-affected donors, 1977–2007



Source: Dang et al. 2009, p 33

It is also the case that aid has declined in importance in most developing countries. According to a 2011 study by ActionAid, 'Over the last decade [aid dependency] has fallen on average by a third in the poorest countries. In Ghana aid dependency fell from 47% to 27%, in Mozambique from 74% to 58% and in Vietnam from 22% to 13%. Although aid levels increased, economic growth and the countries' ability to mobilise their own resources increased faster' (ActionAid 2011: 8). Across low-income countries, leaders irked by the sometimes-humiliating experience of structural adjustment and aid dependency are keen to reduce their reliance on aid and regain control over their national development agendas.

The intellectual landscape was also very different in the late 1990s. In the West, this time marked a high point in the kind of 'planner' mentality in the public sector, whose aid industry incarnation has been ably critiqued by William Easterly (Easterly 2006). Perhaps as a result, the moral and rights-based tone of the Millennium Declaration had to be transformed into the planners' playground of the MDGs before it could be taken seriously by the aid industry. According to Andrew Rogerson,¹¹ the MDGs were born of a world view (quintessentially identified with Jeffrey Sachs) that they were both desirable and technically feasible, and the compact between rich and poor countries was simple: the latter would do their utmost within their resource capability, and the difference between that and the objective costs of the MDGs was a financing gap which axiomatically had to be met by donor countries.

Since then, such 'big push' certainties have become increasingly questioned, new donors with differing agendas have entered the development scene, and traditional donors have slid into economic crisis. We have moved a long way from the world of 'global planners' in our understanding of what development is. In terms of the 'what', work by Dani Rodrik¹² in identifying a small number of 'binding constraints' to growth and attacking those one at a time has been part of an increasing recognition of the role of national specificities. This has produced path-dependent change according to national realities and history (Acemoglu and Robinson 2012) – 'crossing the river by feeling the stones', in a much-cited Chinese proverb. This shift has cast increasing doubt over the relevance of ever-lengthening shopping lists of generic reforms and 'best practice'.

Technology has also moved on enormously since the 1990s, not least in the area of communications. While the political impact of social media and other ICT developments may often be exaggerated (Gladwell, 2010), social media provide new tools for transparency and accountability, enabling civil society better to monitor government performance and hold it to account. Social media also constitute a tool for shaping the post-2015 process itself.

In terms of the ‘how’ of development, there has been increased attention to systems thinking, complexity and change, with development portrayed as an emergent, inherently unpredictable and discontinuous process.¹³

It is not currently clear whether and how this new thinking is compatible with a linear ‘goals, targets, indicators’ approach. We welcome processes through which governments make promises to which they can be held accountable. But there are many other factors involved in determining whether governments do, indeed, execute those promises, and proving attribution is a difficult exercise. There is a strong argument that supporting development has to be more nimble and opportunistic; actors need to get better at thinking on their feet and making it up as they go along, rather than simply implementing grand plans.

Taken together, the shifts in the geopolitical, economic and intellectual landscapes since the MDGs were first conceived suggest that agreement on any post-2015 arrangement, as well as its sources of finance, and implementation, will be much harder to achieve this time around. On the plus side, though, is the power of precedent: it is much easier to build on an existing agreement than to start a new one from scratch.

5 LOOKING FORWARD: WHAT GLOBAL APPROACHES WOULD INFLUENCE FUTURE NATIONAL ACTION?

The purpose of this paper was to reflect on the MDG experience, and ask which international instruments are best suited to influencing national governments to give greater priority to human development. We have argued that it would be a mistake to limit the post-2015 discussion to a debate on a new set of goals. Rather, a combination of levers may be the best way for the international community to encourage pro-poor change at national level. International instruments can exert influence in three key ways:

1. **By changing national norms** in areas such as women's rights. However intangible, norms matter, leading to long-term changes in what society considers acceptable or deplorable, which then leads to changes to laws, policies and behaviours, both at individual level, and among non-state actors such as religious organizations and private sector companies. Shifting norms on ethnicity (the fall of apartheid, treatment of minorities), women's role and position (political representation, domestic violence) and children (acknowledged as rights-holders) have led to profound changes in developing countries. However, the link between global agreements and national norms is complex and varied.
2. **By directly influencing government decision making**, through any of a number of possible carrots (aid, contracts, acceptance, approval) or sticks (sanctions, disapproval).
3. **By giving civil society organisations and other domestic actors more tools** with which to lobby, campaign, and secure action by their governments. Often, the most promising areas for advocacy are the implementation gaps between governments' promises and policies, and what they actually do. The post-2015 agreement could add to those levers, but what kinds of gaps provide the most fruitful areas for public pressure?

In most cases, the main drivers of change will be domestic – the result of national politics and culture. But international initiatives are second-order factors that can nudge things along to varying degrees in different global and national circumstances. Here, we present some of the available options for action at the global and regional levels.

Big global norms: rallying cries intended to influence the underlying attitudes of decision makers and citizens, such as 'zero poverty' or 'zero hunger'. At best, these change the way people and leaders think about the world, and the role of government. But talk is cheap, and ringing declarations are swiftly forgotten; the Millennium Declaration is generally thought to have been headed for the dustbin of history before being saved by its subsequent codification into the MDGs (Vandemoortele 2008).

Global goals and targets: as encapsulated by the MDGs, but subject to the strengths and weaknesses outlined earlier. The design of these goals – and the extent to which the process used to develop them enables civil society to hold governments to account – is a vital factor in determining their long-term impact at national level.

Regional goals and targets: the African Union has been particularly energetic in agreeing regional targets, setting out what its member governments should be aiming for in terms of the AU Protocol on the Rights of Women (2003),¹⁴ or their allocation of spending to agriculture (Maputo Agreement 2003),¹⁵ health (Abuja Declaration 2001)¹⁶ and similar commitments on social protection, and water and sanitation. Civil society, including Oxfam's Pan Africa

Programme, has made effective use of these targets to press governments across Africa to improve their performance.

Global league tables: the international community and/or civil society can simply collect and publish data allowing a comparison between different countries' absolute situation and rate of progress, as in the UNDP's Human Development Index. Anecdotal evidence (and long NGO experience) suggests that league tables can be effective both in attracting public and media interest, and in goading politicians into action – there is nothing a leader likes less than to be seen to lose out to a rival nation. Again, however, there is a lack of systematic evidence of how and when such instruments affect government policy.

Data transparency: according to Jan Vandemoortele, one of the architects of the MDGs, perhaps their greatest legacy will be the improved quality, collection and dissemination of social data. Something resembling a global movement for data transparency can be discerned in the plethora of initiatives such as the Extractive Industries Transparency Initiative (EITI), Open-Contracting.org, and the International Aid Transparency Initiative (IATI). One option would be to make this the centrepiece of a post-2015 arrangement, and leave it to others (national or regional bodies, international institutions) to 'mash up' the data into different indices and use it to advocate for progressive policies. This has the advantage of being more adaptable to local realities and the moving target of well-being; however, it is also the case that a plethora of competing indices would lack the authority of a globally agreed goal.

International law: most governments are already signatories to dozens, if not hundreds, of international conventions such as the UN Charter (indeed, Sakiko Fukuda-Parr sees the MDGs as simply 'a concrete means to implement the UN Charter' (Fukuda-Parr 2012). According to Shimko (2010):

'International Law embodies norms widely shared in international society. The existence of these laws influences the behaviour of states in the same ways that domestic laws influence the behaviour of individuals. It may not prevent states from pursuing their national interests, but it does influence how states define their national interests and what behaviours are considered acceptable in pursuit of national interests.'

Moreover, the role and influence of international law appears to be on an inexorable upward curve, having undergone 'explosive growth' over the past 50 years, steadily encroaching on previously untouchable areas of state sovereignty (Ku and Diehl 2009).

Legislation is usually the means through which international law influences domestic reality. Provided that incentives for implementation exist, governments that ratify international conventions then enshrine them in domestic legislation, opening the way to changes in domestic policy and (eventually) in public attitudes and beliefs. UN agreements such as the Convention on the Elimination of All Forms of Discrimination Against Women (CEDAW) (on women's rights, passed in 1979) and the Convention on the Rights of the Child (UNCRC) (1989) have had a profound impact in this regard (Green 1998; Byrnes and Freeman 2012). But their impact is often much less well-publicised than the debate on the impact of the MDGs.

This typology is not comprehensive, and it is vital to highlight that these are not mutually exclusive choices; goals create norms, and new international laws can create demand for data and transparency to monitor compliance.

But what combination and relative weight of these instruments is likely to be most effective? One way to answer the question is to ask: what international instrument would influence the government of India (or Botswana or Paraguay – any country that receives insignificant levels of aid) to improve its social (and other) policies? In the table below, we offer some initial reflections on the relative strengths and weaknesses of these instruments in relation to norms, policies, and their likely take-up by civil society. These reflections are speculative and largely evidence-free; in our defence, that is because we have been unable to identify relevant research and, in

any case, the purpose of this paper is to prompt questions to which we all need to find compelling answers.

In time, this discussion would need to be followed by more tactical discussions on the prospects of reaching agreement on some or all of these instruments in the current international context. But some prior consideration of the desirability of different options is critical *before* getting into the nitty-gritty of negotiations and their 'art of the possible'.

Possible options for international instruments to drive change post-2015

Instrument	Influence on national norms	On decision making	Civil society take-up
Big global norms	Sometimes strong, but often disappear without trace	Long-term influence (e.g. shaping future leaders' world views)	Strong, if resonate with national reality
Global goals and targets	Partial	Transmission via aid system, otherwise likely to be partial	Yes, when resonate with national reality Far stronger if accompanied by national goals, civil society commitment to these, and clear national accountability mechanisms
Regional goals and targets	More influence where regional identity is stronger (e.g. African Union)	Especially if governments have to ratify and legislate. Rivalry can also be effective	Can provide a valuable advocacy tool, especially where regional identity is strong
Global league tables	Weak	Effective if builds on regional rivalries	Can provide a valuable advocacy tool
Data transparency	Weak	Depends how data are picked up by national actors	Depends on civil society capacity to use data for advocacy purposes, alliances with academics, etc.
International law	Strong, but slow osmosis into national common sense (e.g. children have rights)	Especially if governments have to ratify and legislate, or report publicly on their performance (as with the UNCRC or CEDAW)	Depends on civil society capacity to use legal system (and responsiveness of legal system)

6. CONCLUSION

This paper is a contribution to the debate on the post-2015 framework. It will be some time before that framework begins to take shape, as negotiations will not begin in earnest until 2014. But there is already an extensive international debate on the framework, and the vision and nature of the post-2015 framework will be largely shaped during 2013. The High Level Panel and the UN Secretary-General's report to the General Assembly will be key moments for this. So there is an urgent need for all interested parties to reflect, at this formative stage, on the impact of the MDGs to date, and the implications of that experience, given the profoundly different political and economic context for the post-2015 framework.

We are aware that it is far from original to end a discussion paper with a cry for 'needs more research', but on this occasion, it is fully warranted. Given the substantial investment of money and brainpower in both the MDGs and the global debate over what should replace them, it is scandalous and astonishing that research seems to tell us so little about the impact of such global instruments on the things that matter – the performance of governments and the development of communities in poor countries. Are we missing something? At the very least, research should help substantiate or question the currently received wisdom in the aid industry – that the MDGs have been a major factor in driving global progress in poor people's access to health, education, and other key services and rights.

We need to move beyond subjective debates about what governments, civil society groups and others 'would like' to succeed the MDGs, and engage in a deeper conversation between the UN, governments and civil society over what kinds of instruments are most likely to influence decisions and deliver lasting impact.

The alternative to asking (and answering) these questions is to develop the post-2015 arrangement through the kind of protracted negotiations that have too often served us poorly in other areas. We look forward to the contributions of others on the evidence for the impact of the MDGs, and to developing together a deeper understanding of how the next global framework can secure lasting change and the kind of ongoing pressure from civil society that is so critical to bringing it about.

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