



**The Power of Numbers: A Critical Review of MDG Targets for  
Human Development and Human Rights**

**LESSONS FOR SETTING TARGETS AND SELECTING INDICATORS**

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The analysis of 11 MDG goals/targets in the Power of Numbers project (the Project) demonstrates that global goals and targets can have important consequences in mobilizing support and resources for global priorities, but can also have unintended consequences in shaping policy priorities and conceptualizing development challenges. While the reductionism inherent in quantification creates these distorting effects, the specification of targets and indicators also matters. Poor choice of indicators and targets can have particularly distorting effects on both policies and conceptualization. The 11 studies each assessed the relevant targets and indicators selected and considered alternatives with particular attention to human rights and human development priorities. This note presents the key lessons of our analysis and is intended to contribute to the current debates about criteria that should guide the selection of targets and indicators for the post-2015 development agenda and the Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs).

The MDGs are constructed as a nested framework of goals, targets and indicators. In this paper, we distinguish between goals, targets and indicators where: goals are consensus global priorities; targets are numeric and time-bound outcomes; and indicators are metrics or data sets.

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## **Current Proposals for Post 2015 agenda and SDGs and Evolution from 2001**

Three recent documents contain proposals for criteria that should guide setting targets and selecting indicators: the 2012 Rio Outcome document (United Nations, 2012), the 2013 Report of the UN Inter-Agency Experts Group's (IAEG-MDG) Task Team on Lessons Learned from MDG Monitoring ('The Lessons Learned' report) (UN, 2013), and the 2013 report of the High Level Panel on the Post 2015 Development Agenda (United Nations High Level Panel of Eminent Persons on the Post 2015 Development Agenda, 2013). These criteria reflect an evolution in thinking amongst UN data experts involved since the original MDGs were elaborated in 2001, as documented in the 2003 UN publication "Indicators for Monitoring the Millennium Development Goals" (United Nations, 2003) and further explained by Ruggie (Weiss, 2001), Doyle (Weiss, 2004), and Vandemoortele (Vandemoortele, 2011), who were involved in drawing up the original MDGs. The current thinking responds to several long-standing criticisms about the MDG framework. With respect to quantitative *target setting*, this includes: (i) consistency with previously set targets and (when possible) international human rights standards; (ii) feasibility of achievement where the targets balance 'ambition with realism' and (iii) recognition of diverse national starting points. With respect to *indicator selection*, the current proposals include: (i) "possible to disaggregate" to the list of "measurable, clear and quantifiable" that reflects increased focus on inequalities across the goals, which has been a major critique of the MDGs.

However, the fundamental approach has not changed much since 2001, as described in where the key components can be identified as: *simplicity, measurability and outcome focus*, and where the indicator selection is guided by *data availability* and *robustness*. According to the Lessons Learned report, indicators should be "relevant and robust measures of progress" towards the targets, and constructed from well-established data sources.

### **Key issues**

These factors were strengths of the MDGs but as the analysis in this Project shows, the criteria are insufficient – and can in fact be in direct conflict with – the policy priorities of fostering human development and human rights. These contradictions and dilemmas arise because global

goals/targets and indicators are used not only for the purpose of communicating important objectives, but also as a framework defining a development agenda and applied for programming and accountability.

*Simplicity* has been the core strength of global goals. A short list of targets communicates development objectives in easy to understand and memorize, concrete outcomes. The simpler the list of goals and targets, the more powerful it communicates the urgency to tackle global development challenges. But a simple list is inherently reductionist when interpreted as a priority development agenda. Previous development goals were intended to promote a development objective one at a time, but the MDGs were the first comprehensive development goals. Interpreted as a comprehensive agenda, the short list of goals and targets meant excluding and marginalizing important objectives.

*Measurability*, combined with the indicator criterion of data availability and robustness not only privileges a particular category of development challenges but systematically excludes others. According to experts involved in the MDG creation process, the decision that only targets with agreed upon indicators and “robust” data would be included in the goals, with very few exceptions, directly resulted in the exclusion of civil and political rights indicators included in the Millennium Declaration. The Declaration’s targets such as promoting democracy, inclusive political processes, freedom of the media, minority and migrant rights, combating violence against women, and the “consolidation of democracy in Africa,” (UN, 2000) disappeared when the Declaration was “crystallized” (UN, 2005) into the MDGs.

By this criterion, the MDGs excluded ‘decent work’ because it was too vague (Vandemoortele, 2011), and ‘democratic governance’ because it could not be measured (Vandemoortele, 2011). Ruling out social priorities from an agenda – no matter how important – strictly for data-related reasons, is clearly distorting. Further, as Langford and Winkler point out, that lack of data may not always be unintentional; issues that have been marginalized may be precisely the ones for which data are lacking. To then use this lack of data to exclude these issues from the goal setting process is to compound the marginalization. Instead, the goal setting process could be used to spur an improvement and expansion of data sets.

To its credit, the HLP report acknowledges that data availability should be balanced against the ability to improve statistical systems, calling for a “data revolution”. Specifically, the HLP report calls for a target on “good jobs” (notably not “decent work” ) and includes a stand-alone governance (notably not “democratic governance”) goal, and proposes metrics which would presumably be based upon a combination of existing legislation/regulation and perception indexes, e.g., guaranteeing access to information and holding officials to account for bribery and corruption.

*Outcome focus* facilitates consensus amongst stakeholders and global agreements but should not prescribe policy choices, which should be left to national governments. Focus on outcomes, especially concrete and achievable outcomes, could be over-restrictive, and exclude process dimensions of development such as governance institutions and participatory processes. Moreover, human rights obligations of states refer not only to outcomes but also to effort. Although there is language in the HLP report that begins to acknowledge this issue, the language is weak. For example, with respect to meaningful participation, the HLP report proposes that governments “could receive input from” people in shaping national development plans (United Nations High Level Panel of Eminent Persons on the Post 2015 Development Agenda, 2013).

#### *Conflation of policy purposes of goals, targets and indicators*

In the MDGs, the different objectives of goals, targets and indicators became confused. The goals/targets/indicators framework, meant as a messaging device, was inappropriately converted into comprehensive development agendas and programming tools, which it was not designed to be. Simplicity, measurability and outcome focus were important strengths of the MDGs in communicating the reduction of global poverty as an urgent global priority. However, these are inappropriate criteria for setting agendas, balancing competing priorities in national planning, and allocating resources. Table 1 outlines different criteria for setting goals and targets, and for selecting indicators based on different objectives:

**Table 1: Desirable characteristics of goals and targets**

	<b>Communications for political mobilisation</b>	<b>Monitoring progress</b>	<b>Monitoring for Human Rights accountability</b>	<b>Programming</b>
<b>Goals and Targets</b>				
<b>Scope</b>	Simplicity (memorable but narrow)	Selective proxies for broader objectives	Selective proxies for broader objectives	Broad objectives and comprehensive dimensions
<b>Level</b>	Ambitious and aspirational	Realistic and benchmark (evidence based)	Ambitious but realistic and benchmark (evidence based)	Realistic (evidence based)
<b>Quantification</b>	Concrete, measurable	Concrete, measurable	Concrete, measurable/quantifiable and non-quantifiable/qualitative	Qualitative and quantitative objectives
<b>Focus</b>	Outcome focus (easy to understand)	Outcome focus	Human outcomes, social /legal arrangements and effort (e.g., budget, policy)  Linked to international standards/norms	Outcomes, institutional arrangements, policy reforms

**Table 1 (Continued): Desirable characteristics of indicators**

	<b>Communications for political mobilisation</b>	<b>Monitoring progress</b>	<b>Monitoring for Human Rights accountability</b>	<b>Programming</b>
<b>Indicators</b>				
<b>Policy relevance</b>	Policy relevant  Not subject to perverse interpretation and perverse secondary effects	Policy relevant; frequently measurable  Not subject to perverse interpretation and perverse secondary effects	Policy relevant;	Policy sensitive (disaggregation/distribution)
<b>Data availability and reliability</b>	Data availability and reliability	Data availability or promote data creation	Frequently measurable to hold specific administrations accountable; Data availability	Data availability and promote data creation
<b>Level of aggregation</b>	Global aggregate, Inter-country comparability	Global aggregate, Inter-country comparability  Subject to disaggregation/distribution qualitative as well as quantitative	Country and Location specific  Linked to international standards; Subject to disaggregation/distribution along gender, ethnicity race, etc (“prohibited grounds”) as well as income quintiles; comparable across time/countries;  Subject to local assessment/evaluation through transparent and replicable methodology	Country and Location-specific  Subject to disaggregation/distribution; comparable;
<b>Measurable, quantitative or qualitative</b>	Quantitative	Qualitative and quantitative information	Qualitative and quantitative information	Qualitative and quantitative information

**Proposed Criteria for Post 2015 and SDGs**

The Rio Outcome document recommends that the goals should be: ‘action oriented, concise and easy to communicate, limited in number, aspirational, global in nature and universally applicable to all countries, while taking into account different national realities, capacities and levels of

development and respecting national policies and priorities’ (United Nations, 2012). The High-Level Panel recommended that a limited number of goals and targets be adopted in the post-2015 development agenda, and that each should be “SMART: specific, measurable, attainable, relevant and time-bound.”<sup>3</sup>

The High-Level Panel report goes on to state that “A set of clear and easily applicable criteria, to guide the shape of the post-2015 agenda in line with the Rio+20 Outcome, is that each goal should:

- Solve a critical issue, and have a **strong impact** on sustainable development, based on existing research;
- Encapsulate a **compelling message** on issues that energise people, companies and governments;
- Be **easy to understand** and communicate without jargon;
- Be **measurable**, using credible and internationally comparable indicators, metrics and data, and subject to monitoring;
- Be **widely applicable** in countries with different levels of income, and in those emerging from conflict or recovering from natural disaster;
- Be grounded in the **voice of people**, and the priorities identified during consultations, especially children, youth, women and marginalized and excluded groups;
- Be the **voice of people**, whenever possible built on UN member states’ existing agreements, while also striving to go beyond previous agreements to make people’s lives

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<sup>3</sup> The HLP’s criteria are not dissimilar from those suggested by Langford (2012), which are also generally suitable for mobilizing or monitoring, but not for programming: the target provides a “boosting effect” that helps bring attention to an issue that is urgent or under-prioritized, it has democratic legitimacy as measured by strong global or national demand for a target, and it is universally (rather than widely) applicable, in that all states must contribute some effort to achieve the target. Consistency with international law, and a potential for a focus on equity and equality are other possible criteria mentioned. Langford also provides a different set of guidelines for indicators. These criteria include: relevance; the indicator is a good proxy for the target, saliency and communicability; the indicator is useful for mobilization, data availability (though if data is not available, it should not be an automatic veto—as the High Level Panel report recognizes). Langford also argues that they should be action-oriented, be useful for monitoring, and be universally applicable to all countries (perhaps with some adjustment for capacity or resources, or starting point). Langford, M. (2012) ‘The Art of the Impossible: Measurement Choices and the Post-2015 Development Agenda’, *Background Paper for Governance and human rights: Criteria and measurement proposals for a post-2015 development agenda*, OHCHR/UNDP Expert Consultation, New York, 13-14 November 2012.

better.’ (United Nations High Level Panel of Eminent Persons on the Post 2015 Development Agenda, 2013)

Both these frameworks propose criteria that are broadly adequate for setting goals and targets as a communications tool, with the purpose of mobilizing political support. The criteria are inadequate or inappropriate when the targets and indicators are used for programming. This is illustrated in the following review of illustrative Goal 4 and its proposed targets.

*Example: Goal 4: Ensure Healthy Lives*

- a) End preventable infant and under-5 deaths
- b) Increase by x% the proportion of children, adolescents, at-risk adults and older people that are fully vaccinated
- c) Decrease the maternal mortality ratio to no more than x per 100,000
- d) Ensure universal sexual and reproductive health and rights
- e) Reduce the burden of disease from HIV/AIDS, tuberculosis, malaria, neglected tropical diseases and priority non-communicable diseases

The broad goal of ensuring healthy lives is simple and memorable. It is ambitious and aspirational, as well as outcome focused. Compared with alternatives that have been proposed, such as “Achieve universal health coverage,” ensuring healthy lives is also immediately understandable. While achieving UHC could require explanation of what “universal,” health,” and “coverage” mean—and how they are related to the ultimate health outcomes, ‘ensuring healthy lives’ is arguably immediately and intuitively understandable, providing a “compelling message.”

The targets for Illustrative Goal 4 are outcome measures that are far more applicable in low-income and some middle-income countries than in upper-income countries (i.e., not universally or even in some cases widely applicable), with the exception of ensuring universal access to sexual and reproductive health and rights (SRHR). The other targets adopt the same kind of disease-specific (as opposed to systems-strengthening) approaches for which the MDGs have been criticized—extending some of the targets to groups that had been neglected, such as adolescents and “at-risk adults”-- and seem much more driven by realism/feasibility than



ambition. Some of the indicators carried over from the MDGs, such as maternal mortality ratios, are wholly inappropriate for monitoring or national planning. Indeed, more generally, the narrow focus of the targets makes them unsuitable for national planning purposes, which require a more comprehensive and contextualized approach. Thus these targets and indicators would generally not be suitable either for planning or for full human-rights based accountability related to health.

The SRHR target, which is an important acknowledgement of the absence of SRHR in the MDGs, is discussed by alluding principally to indicators that already exist under the belatedly added MDG 5B: family planning and adolescent birth rate. These are critical aspects of reproductive health. Moreover, the attention to gender-based violence elsewhere in the High-Level Panel's Illustrative Goals is welcome and underscores the need to link actions across the Goals to meet targets. However, the targets and indicators set out do not include the kinds of legal or institutional measures necessary to ensure SRHR in countries of varying development levels, including the sexual rights of marginalized groups, which are likely not to be a subject of consensus or the so-called "voice of the people."

### **Setting targets and indicators for human development and human rights**

Thus, the criteria guiding target setting leads to a framework where there is still a virtually exclusive focus on outcome measures of basic needs, which are concrete and measurable. The lack of attention to the enabling conditions necessary to allow all people to enjoy their SRHR—or other human rights—continues to establish targets and indicators that cannot appropriately measure critical aspects of development from a human development or human rights perspective.

Further, policy priorities for human development and human rights include equality in both outcomes and opportunities, addressing vulnerability, insecurity, and exclusion, and ensuring meaningful participation, voice and accountability. Metrics more capable of monitoring these dimensions of progress are also needed, beyond what has been considered in the High Level Panel report.

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