

# The Power of Numbers: A Critical Review of Millennium Development Goal Targets for Human Development and Human Rights

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**ABSTRACT** *The Millennium Development Goals (MDGs) were heralded as opening a new chapter in international development, and have led to the use of global goals and target-setting as a central instrument defining the international development agenda. Despite this increased importance, little is understood about how they influence policy priorities of key stakeholders, and their broader consequences. While quantification is the key strength of global goals, it also involves simplification, reification and abstraction, which have far-reaching implications for redefining priorities. This paper highlights the key findings and conclusions of the Power of Numbers Project, which undertook 11 case studies of the effects of selected MDG goals/targets, including both the empirical effects on policy priorities and normative effects on development discourses, and drew specifically on human rights principles and human development priorities. While the Project found that the effects varied considerably from one goal/target to another, all led to unintended consequences in diverting attention from other important objectives and reshaping development thinking. Many of the indicators were poorly selected and contributed to distorting effects. The Project concludes that target-setting is a valuable but a limited and blunt tool, and that the methodology for target-setting should be refined to include policy responsiveness in addition to data availability criteria.*

**KEYWORDS:** Human development, Human rights, Measurements, Millennium Development Goals

## Introduction

The Millennium Development Goals (MDGs) were heralded as opening a new chapter in international development. They have been described as “the most broadly supported, comprehensive and specific poverty reduction targets the world has ever established” (UN Millennium Project 2005 2011) and are widely credited with having mobilized and maintained support for global poverty reduction (Waage et al. 2010). The enthusiasm over these successes of the MDGs appears to have entrenched goal-setting as a central policy instrument of global governance for development. Despite this newfound prominence, and the virtually universal acceptance of the value of global goal-setting, the ways in which global goals achieve their influence in shaping priorities and actions of the key stakeholders, and the ensuing consequences, are not well understood.

The critical debates and literature on the MDGs have focused on whether the 2015 targets are likely to be met, and on a critique of their composition, methodology for target-setting, and negotiating process.<sup>1</sup> However, the MDGs as a consensus development agenda have had wide-reaching influence on both

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policy priorities and on development thought. The intended policy objective of the MDGs was to draw attention to important but neglected social priorities. But they have taken on the broader role of defining a development strategy. Used in this way, target-setting can also unintentionally distort priorities by displacing attention from other objectives, disrupting ongoing initiatives and alliances, creating perverse incentives, and undermining alternative policy analyses.

This special issue includes 11 case studies of MDG goals/targets and their effects on development agendas, including both empirical effects on policy priorities and normative effects on development thinking. In particular, we evaluated whether these effects furthered the vision of the Millennium Declaration for development that is people centered,<sup>2</sup> drawing specifically on human rights principles and human development priorities.

Global goals exercise the “Power of Numbers” because of the potentially distorting effects of numerical indicators in redefining concepts that they are intended to measure (Poovey 1998; Porter 1994). The core strength of the MDGs is that they express important social objectives in the form of concrete outcomes that can be measured. However, translating social phenomena into measurable outcomes involves a transformation that reifies intangible phenomena, simplifies complex concepts, and abstracts social change from local contexts. The MDGs presented a short list of measurable outcomes communicating the urgent ethical norm of ending poverty, yet in the process they may have transformed the meaning of that objective, and in turn affected how particular solutions were identified. The MDGs also created incentives by numeric target-setting, which were used to set standards and facilitate monitoring. But what were the empirical consequences of these incentives on policy priorities reflected, for example, in resource allocations of governments and donors? The studies in this issue explore how the very strengths of the MDGs—simplicity, measurability and concreteness—also proved to be the sources of distortion.

A better understanding of the incentives that global goals create and their intended and unintended effects is essential in order to sharpen the methodology for setting targets and selecting indicators. While goals may be defined on normative grounds—reflecting consensus on important political objectives for the global society—setting quantitative targets and selecting indicators is necessarily guided by technocratic criteria. Without an understanding of the effects of goals, global goal-setting will proceed in the dark, and the possibilities for achieving transformative change through development will be drastically undermined.

This introduction highlights some key findings and conclusions from the Power of Numbers Project and draws lessons for criteria that should guide target-setting and indicator selection in the post-2015 agenda-setting and Sustainable Development Goal-setting processes that are now underway.

## **Conceptual Framework**

### *Analytical Framework: The Power of Numbers*

The concept paper in this collection by Fukuda-Parr explains how the core power of goals, such as the MDGs, is derived from the exercise of numerical target-setting and the selection of measurement indicators. The Project draws on the conceptual model developed in the recent Sociology of Knowledge literature, particularly on “indicators as a technology of governance” that models the effects of indicators.<sup>3</sup> According to this model, indicators exert influence in two ways: by setting performance standards against which progress can be monitored, rewarded or penalized; and by creating a “knowledge effect” where the indicators intended to reflect a concept effectively redefine it. Performance standards create incentives for behavior change on the part of policy-makers, opinion-makers, civil society groups, businesses and the public. Knowledge effects can redefine the purpose of development, the key constraints and the means to address them.

In an effort to explore how the MDGs created incentives for behavior (policy) change and knowledge (ideas) change, this Project undertook 11 case studies, each focused on a specific goal or target. Each study examined:

- the analytical and normative origins of each goal/target;
- the political economy of setting the specific goal and targets;
- the empirical effects on policy priorities;
- the normative effects on discourses and narratives;
- the choice of specific indicators used and the effects created; and
- alternative indicators that could have been used.<sup>4</sup>

### *Evaluative Framework: Human Development and Human Rights*

In evaluating these empirical (policy) and normative (knowledge) effects, the studies in this issue were concerned with whether they furthered the vision of the Millennium Declaration for people-centered and inclusive development. More specifically, the evaluative criteria are derived from the human rights and human capabilities approaches to development.<sup>5</sup>

The MDGs originated in the Declaration (United Nations 2000), adopted by the UN General Assembly in 2000. The Declaration is a normative document in which world leaders defined their key objectives for the twenty-first century. It is motivated by shared values, as set out in its first chapter, including: freedom, equality, solidarity, tolerance, respect for nature and shared responsibility (United Nations 2000, para. 1). It commits governments to a particular pattern of growth and development, which is equitable and supports human rights (Fukuda-Parr 2012; Langford, Sumner, and Yamin 2013). The Declaration's goals were first introduced as MDGs in the 2001 "Road Map" document (United Nations 2001). The Road Map was the Secretary General's implementation plan for the Declaration, created for the purposes of "harmonizing reporting" on progress.

The Declaration, and in turn the MDGs, appeared following a decade of efforts to redefine the development agenda throughout the 1990s, to focus on improving human well-being as the central objective of development rather than on the economic performance. Central to these attempts were the series of UN development conferences including the 1990 World Summit for Children in New York, the Jomtien Conference on Education in 1990, the 1992 Earth Summit at Rio, the 1994 International Conference on Population and Development in Cairo, the World Social Summit on Social Development in Copenhagen in 1994, the 1995 Fourth World Conference on Women in Beijing, the 1996 World Food Summit in Rome, and the 1996 Conference on Human Settlements in Istanbul. These conferences were highly participatory events, which included a broad range of stakeholders including civil society groups, development agencies, and government representatives of sectoral agencies as well as representatives of ministries of foreign affairs (UN Department of Economic and Social Affairs, 2007). Many of the Declarations and Agendas for Action adopted at these conferences emphasized the promotion of human rights as a central principle behind the development priorities in question. Another common theme of these Declarations, driven no doubt in reaction to the neoliberal reforms of the 1980s, was the emphasis on reducing exclusion and inequality and guiding the global economy to a path of *inclusive globalization* (United Nations Department of Economic and Social Development 2007).

Implicit in much of the language of these Conference Declarations was a conceptual approach to development rooted in the international human rights framework, as well as the human development framework. While human rights and human development are distinct conceptual frameworks, each with its own intellectual origins and histories, they are closely related<sup>6</sup> (UN OHCHR 2006; Sen 2005; Vizard, Fukuda-Parr, and Elson 2011).

Human rights have different meanings in different contexts; they are ethical principles as well as legal norms, and the way they have been used in development discourse and practice—and even among authors in this issue—is highly variable. Nonetheless, these diverse approaches all emphasize the application of international human rights norms and standards in evaluating development outcomes and the design of policies, and the obligations of States under these legal frameworks. The common set of principles identified in the UN's "Common Understanding on a rights-based approach" has become widely accepted by practitioners in this field and include universality and inalienability, indivisibility, interdependence of rights, equality and non-discrimination, participation and inclusion, and accountability of the State or other duty bearers (for a fuller explanation, see UN 2003b).

Thus, human rights is more explicitly concerned with enabling people to claim their entitlements through legal as well as other means than the human development framework. However, when applied to evaluate development policy and outcomes, both the human rights and human development frameworks emphasize the following: the well-being of the individual as the central objective of development; equality and non-discrimination in access to economic and social opportunities; meaningful participation of individuals in decisions that affect their lives and well-being; and adherence to international human rights standards.

## Findings

Although the selection and implementation of each target/goal had its own trajectory and consequences, some common themes emerge.

### *Intended Consequences—Mobilizing Attention and Effort*

Although the MDGs were interpreted and used in multiple ways, the policy purpose of global goals in global governance is to mobilize support and attention to important but neglected objectives (Jolly 2004). John Ruggie, the chief architect behind the Declaration, explains that the list of goals needed to be simple and memorable (Weiss 2001), while Michael Doyle, his successor who authored the Road Map and the MDGs, aimed for a package that would achieve ownership from the OECD donors who had previously accepted the International Development Goals (Weiss 2004).

Broad goals were not enough. The then UN Secretary General, Kofi Annan, and his chief advisers pressed for time-bound targets in the Declaration to communicate the urgency of poverty reduction as one of the top priorities for the twenty-first century (Vandemoortele 2011). They were inspired by the traction that the OECD's 1996 International Development Goals had created in mobilizing support for development aid in the donor countries.<sup>7</sup> According to the UN Task Team on Post 2015, an important success of the MDGs was to have garnered support for poverty reduction as a global priority (UN System Task Team on the Post 2015 UN Development Agenda 2012). However, an important finding of the Project is that the eight goals, 21 targets, and 60 associated indicators did not all have the same effect. Some of the goals and targets garnered significant attention in terms of funding as well as programs and research, while others were "poor cousins" and made little difference.

The goal for global diseases may have been very successful in terms of garnering support for HIV treatment, if not necessarily malaria or tuberculosis. Nattrass argues, however, that it was not the "MDG dog that wagged the HIV tail," but the other way round. The MDGs were part and parcel of the activism that engaged multiple actors at local, national and global levels in the HIV/AIDS movement, and which historically had included broader considerations of social determinants of HIV/AIDS that transcended the treatment paradigm. Although the global HIV/AIDS movement and increase in funding for treatment had already begun prior to the MDGs, Peter Piot, the Director of UNAIDS, ensured that HIV/AIDS would be included in the list and used the MDGs to mobilize support and funding. Moreover, the HIV community lobbied for inclusion of their agenda in the MDGs, and succeeded in securing the access to treatment target.

The targets for water, child survival, sanitation and maternal health also succeeded in drawing attention to and mobilizing funding for priorities that had long been neglected. Nevertheless, in these cases, the narrowly circumscribed focus of the targets and indicators produced more limited and ambiguous impacts on complex social issues. Outcome trends show important progress for these goals, and there was a dramatic increase in donor funding for the social sectors to meet basic needs as a whole, particularly in specific categories of health spending (see Table 1). However, Unterhalter argues, for example, that despite the great increases in primary school enrollment that have been achieved, critical dimensions such as quality, and both gender and class equity, were omitted from measurement—and therefore concern—undermining the desired impact of the education goal. Langford and Winkler point out that sanitation gained more visibility although progress in outcomes was better for clean water, while Yamin and Boulanger question what can be asserted with respect to the reported progress

**Table 1.** Percentage of Development Assistance Committee bilateral commitments by sector (% of sector allocable aid)

Major categories of sector allocable aid and selected subcategories	Average 1995–2000 (%)	Average 2001–2006 (%)	Average 2007–2011 (%)
1. Social infrastructure and services	43	57	55
Education	10	14	12
Health	6	8	6
STD and HIV control	1	4	7
Water supply and sanitation	10	7	7
2. Economic infrastructure and services	32	21	22
3. Production sectors	13	10	10
Agriculture	7	5	5
Food crop production	<1	<1	<1
4. Multisector/cross-cutting	12	12	13

Source: OECD Query Wizard for International Development Statistics, 2012. Accessed May 2013. <http://stats.oecd.org/qwids/>

Note: Authors' calculations.

in maternal mortality ratios (MMRs) in specific countries, due to statistical and practical issues relating to both the collection and interpretation of MMR data.

On the other hand, there were targets that made little difference to mobilizing political attention. Despite the hunger target, the food, agriculture and nutrition agenda continued to be marginalized from national and international agendas, reflected, for example in the stagnant proportion of aid to agriculture and to food production in particular (Fukuda-Parr and Orr). The issue has now emerged as a top global political priority, backed by several global initiatives and mentioned consistently in G-8 summits; but this was a response to the 2008 “food crisis” and not the launch of the MDGs in 2001. Similarly, as Van der Hoeven writes, employment has continued to be a neglected issue. Both were issues that were embedded as targets in the broader poverty goal that encompassed income poverty, employment and hunger, but the latter two were overshadowed by attention to the income poverty target. Progress towards the employment and hunger targets languished, and these lackluster results have received relatively little notice. Caliri reflects a widely shared view in concluding that the goal on a global partnership for development—aid, debt, trade, technology transfer—has also made little difference. There was progress in debt relief and total aid commitments, although only very slightly as a proportion of the Gross National Income (GNI) of donor countries. All three of these “poor cousin” goals and targets are related to supporting measures to increasing the productive capacity of national economies, which was neglected in the heavy emphasis on “basic needs” encoded in the MDGs’ priorities.

#### *Unintended Consequences: Policy and Knowledge Effects*

The studies collected in this issue reveal many unfortunate consequences of *simplification* that framed development as a process of delivering measurable outcomes. Several studies found a shift in development thinking during the decade of the 2000s that trended towards meeting basic needs. In turn, this thinking led to strengthened financial support for vertical and technocratic strategies, which represented a reversion to 1980s thinking. This was a shift from the emergence during the 1990s of human development and human rights-based approaches to development, which focused on people not as the beneficiaries of specific programs but as active agents in changing the social relations and structures that perpetuate rights deprivations (Alston and Robinson 2003; UN OHCHR 2006). For example, the 2000/2001 World Development Report (World Bank 2000) had concluded that the three strategic means to poverty reduction were empowerment of people, strengthening security against vulnerabilities, and expanding opportunities. Across multiple sectors, the international development conferences

of the 1990s adopted broad agendas that explicitly recognized an array of human rights and emphasized the concerns of equity/equality and the inter-relatedness of social and economic progress across sectors. For example, Unterhalter notes that education was an agenda in the Declarations on Women, Children, Health, and Food, among others, while Fukuda-Parr and Orr note that the World Food Summit Declaration incorporated objectives for gender equality, children, health and education.

*Empirical/policy effects. Diverting attention from important objectives and challenges.* The process that mobilized attention and support for several goals and targets was also associated with the marginalization of many important objectives of the internationally agreed agendas that were not included in the MDG framework. For example, Unterhalter's study on MDG2—to achieve Universal Primary Education—found that this target sidelined other important objectives that were being pursued under the “Education for All” agenda. That agenda, adopted at Jomtien by more than 160 countries, had included quality of education, early childhood education, adult literacy, secondary education, attention to marginalized and vulnerable populations and equity on multiple dimensions, including income, geography and gender. Sen and Mukherjee found MDG3—to promote gender equality and empower women—and its targets to be highly reductionist, sidelining all but one of the 13 points of the Beijing Platform for Action. The authors explain the incoherence of reducing a goal of gender equality to targets and indicators focusing only on gender parity in education, informal-sector labor-force participation, and political participation of women. These narrow targets were a dramatic change from the more transformative understanding of “gender equality” that had emerged from the 1995 Beijing Conference on Women and the civil society movements of the 1990s, and had been adopted by more than 190 countries. Similarly, Yamin and Boulanger found that the MDG5A target—to reduce MMRs by three-quarters<sup>8</sup>—sidelined the broader sexual and reproductive health and rights agenda articulated, with the support of the more than 180 country teams in attendance, in the International Conference on Population and Development at Cairo in 1994 (ICPD), and focused on narrow select interventions even within the health sector.

Gibbons and Diaz-Martinez conclude with respect to MDG4—to reduce child mortality—that the framing of this goal “not only shrunk the child health agenda, but took no account of incipient efforts to embed human rights principles in the pursuit of child survival. MDG4 was untethered from the Millennium Declaration and from the Convention on the Rights of the Child.” Cohen found that Target 7D—achieve a significant improvement in the lives of at least 100 million slum dwellers—diverted attention away from the broader economic, social, governance, and environmental goals set by Habitat II, the 1996 UN Conference on Human Settlements, and thus failed to address the critical challenges of urbanization including climate change, economic growth and employment creation.

Across the goals and targets studied, inequality and discrimination were almost entirely neglected. For example, primary school enrollment, child survival and water show important progress in aggregate national outcomes since 2000, but Unterhalter, Diaz-Martinez and Gibbons, and Langford and Winkler argue respectively in their papers that the progress was uneven across populations and continued to marginalize the poorest. Overall, the agendas driven by the goals and targets did not conceptualize the agenda as realization of rights: rights to education, food, health, water and sanitation, and education, sexual and reproductive rights, and rights to equality, including crucially gender equality.

*Silo effect in programming.* Several studies found that the goals/targets encouraged implementation approaches that were conceptually narrow, vertically structured and relied heavily on technological solutions, neglecting the need for social change and the strengthening of national institutions. For example, the hunger target encourages measures to achieve short-term improvements through feeding and nutritional supplements rather than by the broad approach of the 1996 World Food Summit, which identified a range of actions needed to expand access to food, including: support to small-scale farming, nutrition programs, social safety nets and the empowerment of women.

Gentilini and Sumner explain how the segmentation of interconnected domains of poverty, such as income poverty, hunger, water, and education, has helped lead to fragmented policy implementation. The authors suggest that a multi-sectoral approach would be more likely to deliver sustainable human development than this segmented approach. Yamin and Boulanger and Diaz-Martinez and

Gibbons suggest that, in areas of maternal and child health, funding over the last decade has overwhelmingly supported vertical approaches to such activities as vaccine programs and skilled birth attendance, at the expense of strengthening national systems.

*Normative/knowledge effects.* In addition to empirical effects on specific sectors, the studies confirm that the MDGs have had enormous communicative power. Once the goals were defined and the targets set, they began to shape the way that development was understood—but with dramatically reductionist consequences. For example, Sen and Mukherjee argue that gender equality in primary and secondary education began to epitomize the notion of gender equality and empowerment. Such a limited understanding characterized thinking of earlier decades before the advances in the 1990s, which highlighted dimensions of agency and human rights.

Yet the essence of the MDGs is that they frame the concept of development as a set of basic needs outcomes, rather than as a process of transformative change in economic, social and political structures. While gender equality is a valuable end in itself, it is also instrumentally important as a means to achieve other goals. The studies on maternal health, child survival, and household food security found that a broad understanding of gender equality—encompassing access to employment as well as social services, as well as freedoms from coercion and violence in both public and private spheres—was emphasized in many of the international agendas that were agreed in the 1990s conferences, and which were still being implemented at the time the MDGs were decided.

What happened with MDG5 on improving maternal health illustrates this well. Yamin and Boulanger argue that this goal reduced the comprehensive, and “necessarily politically contested,” sexual and reproductive health and rights agenda of the ICPD, which was reaffirmed in Beijing, to “the relatively depoliticized realm of maternal health.” MDG5A, which was the sole target until MDG5B was added in 2005 and additional indicators were selected in 2007, was defined in terms of reducing MMRs by 75% from 1990 levels. In so doing, MDG5 marginalized many of the other sexual and reproductive rights issues highlighted in ICPD, shifting attention from the social changes necessary to achieve the ICPD agenda to the idea of achieving a specific outcome measure.

Despite the idiosyncratic nature of the selection of targets and indicators, and the great variability in both ambition as well as data quality, an overarching conclusion of the Project is that once these numerical targets were set, they were perceived to be “value neutral.” As they were to be measured through outcomes, the MDGs displaced debates about policy alternatives both in global development broadly, as well as within specific fields. In fact, however, there were assumptions deeply embedded in the MDGs about the nature and purpose of development.

The effect of the MDG framing was to marginalize ongoing strategic processes for empowerment of people and transformation of economies, including such central issues to poverty reduction as productive employment and productivity gains of small-scale farmers, as well as issues mentioned earlier such as women’s political voice. These issues were partially added belatedly. However, they were buried as indicators or targets for goals that were already otherwise defined, such as women’s political participation as an indicator for the goal of achieving gender equality in education. It is impossible to say what would have happened if the processes set in motion by the UN Conferences of the 1990s had been allowed to mature and be further developed and implemented, given the extent of the confounding global and national political and economic factors. However, it is critical in and of itself to recognize the non-inevitability of the trajectory that the pursuit of the MDGs entailed.

*Political dynamics.* The MDGs did not arrive onto a blank stage in terms of international development. They built on—but selectively—two sets of ongoing processes that had developed international normative consensus and created alliances across civil society, UN agencies, bilateral donors, multilateral institutions, and national government departments. They built particularly on the Development Assistance Committee of the OECD’s alliance of bilateral donors and the International Development Goals created by that alliance, and on the 1990s development conferences led by coalitions of UN agencies, civil society, and sectoral-specific or theme-specific government departments.

A common finding across the studies was that in many cases the MDGs disrupted these ongoing processes for implementation of the 1990s conference agendas. This resulted not only from the selective cherry-picking of the issues, but also, in some instances, from the modification of previously agreed targets. For example, Fukuda-Parr and Orr write that the hunger goal was revised from halving the *number* of people suffering from hunger to halving the *proportion*, or, as Langford and Winkler explain, from “universal” access to “partial” access for water. In other cases, the MDGs disrupted nascent initiatives. Van der Hoeven points out that in the area of employment, the International Labour Organization had been mounting a broad initiative on decent work.

It is therefore not surprising to find the lukewarm reaction to these new goals on the part of some UN agencies which had to integrate them into their existing agendas, and did not see much value added. Only with respect to the HIV/AIDS goal do we see enthusiastic endorsement of the MDGs. Nattrass’s paper does not examine the World Health Organization’s reactions with respect to global diseases more broadly. However, there was no contradiction for the new UN organization—UNAIDS—to advocate for an HIV/AIDS target, and to use it in its mobilization campaign. In contrast, studies in this project note that the leadership of the FAO, ILO, UNESCO, UNICEF, UNIFEM, and UNFPA initially did not invest in the process of elaborating the MDGs, believing that their conference agendas were more relevant.

Moreover, Sen and Mukherjee note that the MDGs were distracting and even outright retrogressive for the global women’s movement, which had achieved remarkable successes at the conferences of the 1990s. Yamin and Boulanger confirm this with regard to the sexual and reproductive rights movement in particular.

## Target Setting and Indicator Selection

### *Methodological Criteria: Statistical Rigor and Policy Responsiveness*

The criteria behind the 2001 MDG framework (United Nations 2003a), those proposed by the Task Team on Lessons Learned from MDG Monitoring of the IAEG-MDG (UN 2013), as well as those proposed for the Sustainable Development Goals (UN 2012) all focus on: simplicity; measurability; and achievability in setting goals and targets, on statistical criteria for selecting indicators. Each of these criteria reflects important principles. However, as the papers in this issue show, these criteria are insufficient—and can be in direct conflict with—the policy priorities of fostering development that is equitable and sustainable. Further, they are applied unevenly in practice.

The original set of MDG targets and indicators were theoretically guided by statistical criteria with due consideration for the quality and coverage of data series available from recognized sources (UN 2003a). 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 (Vandemoortele 2011). Some of the Declaration’s goals—including promoting democracy, inclusive political processes, freedom of the media, and minority and migrant rights; combating violence against women; and consolidating “democracy in Africa” (UN 2000)—disappeared when the Declaration was “crystallized” (UN 2005) into the MDGs.

Nevertheless, despite emphases on methodological rigor and data reliability in arguments for the MDGs, the Project studies reveal that some of the indicators and targets chosen were weakly conceptualized and driven by political considerations as much as measurement ones. These factors varied across the sectors, ranging from “low-hanging fruit” considerations, as in the selection of proportion of children immunized against measles for MDG4, to the inertia behind “established indicators” such as MMRs and skilled birth attendance with respect to MDG5, to simply missing the point in MDG7’s target on slums.

Diaz-Martinez and Gibbons discuss the inappropriateness of indicator 4.3, the proportion of children immunized against measles, which according to recent estimates was the cause of only 4% of under-five



mortality. The decision to make measles immunization one of only three indicators for child mortality was probably motivated by the ease of vaccination, not the proportion of deaths that measles causes.

Yamin and Boulanger point out that MDG5A's MMRs may have been appropriate to mobilize attention globally, but were known to be notoriously difficult to measure for both statistical and practical reasons, and are ill-suited to being used as national planning devices—which is what happened in practice, especially in aid-dependent countries. This created incentives for investing in ever-more-sophisticated modeling and analysis based on poor data, while in many cases the health management information systems that are meant to collect information for planning purposes languished.

Cohen argues that MDG7, Target D—on slums—is “neither precise, nor evidence based, nor framed to confirm achievement or not.” He asserts that taken to its logical conclusion, the choice of the “100 million slum dwellers” target would lead to an implementation plan that depended solely on building more sanitation and housing facilities. It thus misses the point, not only in its minimal reach to some 5% of the concerned population, but by diverting attention from the key role of the city in issues such as economic growth and climate change.

In acknowledging some criticisms of the MDGs, and setting out new criteria for targets and indicators, the “Lessons Learned” report suggests that targets should, among other criteria, include both absolute and relative changes; be quantifiable and time-bound; be “ambitious but achievable;” and be set in consultation with country teams. Although these criteria address some of the more superficial criticisms (such as the choice between relative and absolute changes), there does not appear to be any more fundamental change in thinking about targets post 2015 (UN 2013). The list of criteria for the indicators reveals a similar pattern. The indicators should be measurable, possible to disaggregate, clear and easy to understand, and “sensitive to policy interventions.” The report also argues that “outcome indicators” are preferred to “process indicators,” and that “continuity with the current set of indicators is preferable” where possible (UN 2013). These criteria each pose serious dilemmas:

- *Concise and easy to communicate*—conciseness and simplicity were key strengths of the MDGs, for the purposes of communicating the urgency of priorities. Simplicity is a criterion used with respect to individual goals as well as the overall framework; simplicity therefore also implies selectivity in the “set of goals”—that is, there cannot be a “Christmas Tree” of goals. A key finding of these papers is that the goals were too reductionist in both senses. They diverted attention from important priorities that were not included at all or prominently enough among the goals, such as employment and income equality. Moreover, there are many development priorities that are too complex to reduce into a set of goals/targets.
- *Measurability*—while quantified targeting was another key strength of the MDGs, this again was for the purposes of communicating complex concepts. A key finding in these studies is that many non-measured—and non-measurable—priorities were sidelined. The human principles of participation, equality, democratic voice and accountability are difficult to measure quantifiably. Yet they are essential for development as a transformative agenda. Yamin and Boulanger point out that in a human rights framework, not all indicators will be quantitative. For example, there could be a time-bound indicator related to the implementation of specific legal protections. A focus on “measurable” targets distorts agendas, and can divert policy attention from pressing human rights and human development concerns, which require legal, political and institutional changes that are not well suited to quantifiable measurement.
- *Concreteness or outcome focus*—concrete outcome-focused targets and indicators were effective in achieving consensus on the MDGs as a development framework, and a widely held view argues that the goals should focus on ends, not means. Some argue that the international community should not dictate “means” to achieving key objectives (Vandemoortele 2011). But the MDGs were not consistent and did include “means” in a number of targets. Further, some important human development concerns may be discarded—such as “decent work”—if means are not included.

These arguments reveal lack of clarity about what is meant by “ends” and “means.” Many argue that development should ultimately be judged by people’s well-being, defined as capability expansion or the realization of human rights. By that definition, income poverty is not an end but is a means as well. Development requires not only meeting basic needs, but an enabling environment, including economic growth, for human flourishing. Agreement amongst states over global economic arrangements should surely be an important part of an international development agenda. As Caliri argues, concessionary flows, equitable trade rules, and arrangements for debt reduction are essential aspects of development progress.

In the case of maternal health, Yamin and Boulanger argue that certain “process” indicators would be far more appropriate than MMRs to reveal whether a government is adopting appropriate measures to realize fundamental women’s health rights on a non-discriminatory basis, as they can be disaggregated and illustrate policy responsiveness. Yamin and Boulanger further note that indicators which depend upon global estimation exercises are particularly poorly adapted to fostering national ownership and participation of the people who are most affected by development programming (see also Yamin and Falb 2012).

A number of papers underscore that the *process* of development should be participatory; people are not merely passive beneficiaries of progress, but are active agents who can voice their concerns and claim their entitlements. While global goals should not become another form of ill-advised prescriptions of one-size-fits all national policies, the notion of “outcomes” should be expanded to include an enabling economic environment, and processes such as peoples’ participation.

- *Statistical or policy criteria for indicator selection*—while the choice of indicators with poor data availability and definitional difficulties have been identified as a weakness of the MDGs, robust statistical criteria may favor indicators that are less responsive to policy priorities. 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 better suited to monitoring these dimensions of progress are needed. Indicators that would be more useful are those that are amenable to disaggregation to reveal inter-group disparities and the possible presence of discrimination, measurement of fluctuations that can capture vulnerability and insecurity, and the potential to advance data creation and collection.

This use of “indicator criteria,” such as data availability or measurability, as a “veto” over goal and target selection (Langford 2012), looks especially troublesome in light of the exclusion of many human rights and human development concerns in the original MDGs. When the goal/target-setting process is explicitly intended to influence the development agenda, immediately ruling out goals—no matter how important—strictly for data-related reasons is unacceptable. Further, Langford and Winkler point out that lack of data may not always be unintentional. It may be that issue areas which have been marginalized are 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, Langford and Winkler argue, the goal-setting process could be used to spur an improvement in data, perhaps most for under-emphasized issues. Looking forward, data availability should be balanced against the possibility of improving statistical systems to better measure concerns relevant to human rights and human development (see also Langford 2012).

Several of the studies in this Project suggest additional criteria specific to their subject. For example, Fukuda-Parr and Orr mention the importance of vulnerability in the context of hunger. They argue that the selection of the calorie consumption metric, which was reinforced by the second indicator of weight for age, neglected other dimensions of food insecurity such as under-nutrition. Alternative indicators, such as weight for height and price volatility in national price indices, would have monitored these longer-term and structural dimensions of food insecurity, tied to vulnerability. Vulnerability is equally relevant to many of the other goals, such as poverty. To take vulnerability into account, an indicator of measuring volatility (e.g. of prices of food, of employment, of income) may be useful.

However, the response need not be to adopt exactly these criteria, or even to do away with simplicity, measurability and concreteness. Indeed, Caliri asserts that the fact that MDG8, the only goal with specific obligations for developed countries, had targets and indicators which were significantly vaguer than for most of the other goals—lacking specific numbers, quantities, or time periods for completion—may have undermined its mobilizing effect.

Rather, these dilemmas can be addressed by explicitly acknowledging the limitations of global goals. The primary purpose of global goals is to communicate urgent social priorities, to strengthen consensus and to mobilize support. The numeric targets and indicators are tools that can monitor implementation by setting benchmarks. As such, they can prove very useful in mobilizing attention and signaling priorities. However, the lessons from the MDGs reveal that they should not be interpreted as a substitute for a consensus development agenda. Indeed, the MDGs were not developed for this purpose. They were introduced in the 2001 Road Map to “harmonize reporting.” Nevertheless, they came to be interpreted as hard priorities and as a comprehensive international agenda, and thereby created the concerns revealed in this issue.

## Conclusions

The findings of the Project do not contradict the consensus assessment of the positive effects of the MDGs in highlighting the importance of poverty reduction, and the focus on human well-being as urgent global priorities in the twenty-first century. Nonetheless, the power of numbers inherent in these goals produced multiple indirect and often unintended consequences, which also deserve attention in light of the construction of a post-MDG development agenda. The collected studies in this issue show that some of the policy effects undermined intended consequences while the knowledge effects created a narrative of development that was strangely alien to the vision of the Millennium Declaration for a people-centered development motivated by universal values of equality, respect for nature, solidarity and freedom.

As instruments of people-centered development—for the realization of human rights and human development—the methodology of setting targets and selecting indicators needs to consider more than statistical criteria. Targets and indicators need to be evaluated for their potential to give information on core human rights and human development priorities in dimensions of equity, participation, transparency and accountability. Reflexively privileging data availability may unwittingly neglect dimensions such as distributive consequences, and volatility of outcomes.

The unintended consequences revealed in the Project cannot merely be ascribed to the goals and targets having been selected or implemented badly, as is sometimes claimed. They are more fundamental structural issues arising from the nature of quantification and the nested structure of goals, targets and indicators that the MDGs created. Human rights approaches to development require targets and indicators that are both quantitative and qualitative, as many essential components of human rights cannot be reliably quantified. For example, the existence of legal and policy frameworks that proscribe discrimination along prohibited grounds is essential to ensuring development consistent with a human rights framework. However, some aspects of development consistent with human rights and human development can and should be measured. The experience of the MDGs highlights issues in the selection criteria for such quantitative targets and indicators, which extend beyond statistical considerations to focus on policy responsiveness.

Goal-setting is a poor methodology for elaborating an international agenda. A simple list of numerical targets cannot articulate an agenda for a complex process, such as sustainable, inclusive development. Nor is such a process neutral. By attempting to elaborate an entire international agenda through numerical targeting, the simplification, reification and abstraction of quantification created perverse effects in the MDGs. The post-2015 development agenda and the Sustainable Development Goals need to go beyond “finishing the agenda of the MDGs” and beyond setting goals and targets. A transformative future development agenda requires a qualitative statement of objectives, visionary norms and priority action needed to achieve the objectives, including legal, policy and global institutional considerations.

Quantitative targets are useful, but must serve the broader development objectives of advancing human dignity and capabilities, within a narrative that is tethered to the international human rights framework.

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## Notes

1. For a review of this literature, see Fukuda-Parr (2012), Nayyar (2013) and United Nations (UN 2012).
2. The Power of Numbers Project is an independent research initiative that arose out of a shared concern amongst the participating scholars with the need to more fully understand the consequences of the MDGs. We gratefully acknowledge the collaboration and support from the UN Office of the High Commissioner for Human Rights, UN Development Programme, Friedrich Ebert Stiftung, and the Dag Hammarskjold Foundation.
3. See particularly Davis et al. (2012). This is further elaborated in the Project concept paper by Fukuda-Parr (2014).
4. It is important to note that this is not a collection of case studies about what occurred under the MDGs in specific countries. Although many of the papers mention specific country contexts to illustrate trends or issues, the Project's focus was on the impacts at the global level.
5. For use of the capabilities approach as an evaluative framework, see (Robeyns 2005); and for the human rights approach, see UN Office of the High Commissioner for Human Rights (UN OHCHR 2006).
6. Vizard, Fukuda-Parr, and Elson (2011) provides a synthetic overview of the literature on the overlaps between capabilities and human rights as frameworks for development policy and evaluation.
7. In 1996, the OECD's Development Assistance Committee published a policy document, *Shaping the Twenty First Century: The Contribution of Development Co-operation*, and a set of six goals (OECD Development Assistance Committee 1996). The purpose of this document and the goals was to revitalize support for development amongst the "publics and parliaments" in the donor countries. This was important as political support had waned with the end of the Cold War and development assistance budgets declined over the 1990s. See Hulme (2009).
8. Initially the only target until the second target of universal access to reproductive health services was added in 2005, and the respective indicators were added in 2007.

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