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***Brave new world: global development  
goals after 2015***

**David Hulme<sup>1</sup>**

**Rorden Wilkinson<sup>2\*</sup>**

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<sup>1</sup> University of Manchester, UK

david.hulme@manchester.ac.uk

<sup>2</sup> University of Manchester, UK

rorden.wilkinson@manchester.ac.uk

\* Corresponding author

Brooks World Poverty Institute  
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[www.manchester.ac.uk/bwpi](http://www.manchester.ac.uk/bwpi)

## **Abstract**

This paper evaluates the major options for reformulating the Millennium Development Goals (MDGs). Our purpose is to add weight and direction to emerging thinking on MDG-reformulation in a way that: (i) reaffirms the importance of global efforts to reduce extreme poverty; (ii) overcomes the problems endemic in the existing MDGs; (iii) accelerates the reduction of extreme poverty globally; (iv) builds the foundations of a more comprehensive global development programme; (v) tailors poverty reduction efforts to local conditions and strengthens national-level poverty eradication policies; and (iv) offers a realizable prospect for maintaining momentum in UN development efforts.

**Keywords:** Millennium Development Goals, poverty reduction, global governance, foreign aid, inequality

**David Hulme** is Executive Director of the Brooks World Poverty Institute (BWPI), and Head of the Institute of Development Policy and Management (IDPM), the University of Manchester, UK.

**Rorden Wilkinson** is Research Director, Brooks World Poverty Institute (BWPI) and Professor of International Political Economy, School of Social Sciences, the University of Manchester, UK.

## 1, Introduction

In 2015 the United Nations (UN) Millennium Development Goals (MDGs) will reach the end of their declared life cycle (see Table 1).<sup>1</sup> In the run-up to this expiry, the UN's 193 member states will come under increasing pressure to decide what comes after the MDGs. The main focus will be on the negotiations in the immediate lead up to, as well as during, the General Assembly meeting in September 2015. But, working out what comes after the MDGs, as with their original formulation, has already been and will increasingly become a significant activity for a wide range of actors—aid agencies, multilateral development agencies, civil society groups, NGOs, faith-based organizations, social movements and celebrities (see, for instance, Feeny and Clarke 2009; Sumner and Melamed 2010; Sumner and Tiwari 2009; 2011; Vandemoortele 2011). Recasting the world's biggest promise—"freeing the entire human race from want"<sup>2</sup>—in a new and improved form, particularly as considerable pressure will be exerted on the General Assembly to present something that is seen as an "advance," will not be an easy task.

In this paper we explore the major options that are available for formulating a post-2015 set of global development goals (GDGs). Our purpose is to add weight—as well as offer direction—to emerging thinking on MDG-reformulation in a way that: (i) reaffirms the importance of global efforts to reduce extreme poverty and further embeds poverty reduction as a global public policy imperative (Kokaz 2007); (ii) overcomes the problems endemic in the MDGs, not only resulting from the inflexibilities entrenched in ways of assessing MDG achievement, but also bringing issues of gender equality and maternal health—the two least successfully addressed MDGs (Harman 2012)—centre-stage; (iii) accelerates the reduction of extreme poverty across the world; (iv) builds the foundations of a more comprehensive global development programme; (v) tailors poverty reduction efforts to local conditions and strengthens national-level poverty eradication policies; and (iv) offers a realizable prospect for maintaining momentum in the grand framing programmes that have been indicative of UN development efforts since the first development decade was launched in December 1961 (Anstee 2012). In the conclusion we address the question of "which of these options is most likely to promote the interests and improve the conditions and prospects of the world's poor people?" We tie together changes in substance with alterations in process in a viable and preferable whole. In particular, we highlight the importance of addressing inequality and promoting national ownership in a reformulated set of GDGs.

A logical starting point would be to identify precisely what the MDGs have contributed to human development across the world.<sup>3</sup> As David Hulme has argued (Hulme 2010a; 2010b), this is an exceptionally difficult evaluation exercise as the promotion of the MDGs has had many different

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<sup>1</sup> For a full listing of the eight MDGs and the accompanying 21 targets and 60 indicators, see: <http://www.un.org/millenniumgoals/>

<sup>2</sup> UN General Assembly, Millennium Declaration, 55/2, 8<sup>th</sup> Plenary Session, 8 September 2001.

<sup>3</sup> Do note that what the MDGs have contributed to poverty reduction is quite different from the degree to which the MDGs have been achieved. Many MDG goals and targets were improving, and sometimes rapidly improving, before 2000 (see Kenny 2011 for a historical account). The key question is "what positive and/or negative difference have the MDGs made to poverty reduction?"

**Table 1: The Millennium Development Goals**

Goal 1: Eradicate extreme hunger and poverty
Goal 2: Achieve universal primary education
Goal 3: Promote gender equality and empower women
Goal 4: Reduce child mortality
Goal 5: Improve maternal health
Goal 6: Combat HIV/AIDS, malaria and other diseases
Goal 7: Ensure environmental sustainability
Goal 8: Develop a global partnership for development

effects on an almost innumerable number of impact pathways at the global, regional, national, sub-national, organizational and personal level. Needless to say, measuring their impact and “success” is the subject of considerable debate (see, for instance, Klasen and Lange 2011; Curtis and Poon 2009; Guereña 2010; Fukuda-Parr and Greenstein 2011); and many contrasting understandings of the ways in which the MDGs should improve the lives of poor people exist (and co-exist). Within the same building at UN headquarters, for instance, Jeffrey Sach’s UN Millennium Project team saw the MDGs as a technical device that would increase funding, improve resource allocation and make development policies more effective. A few yards away, staff at the UN Millennium Campaign saw the MDGs as a political device to raise awareness about poverty and reshape public attitudes and behaviours (Hulme 2010a: 126-131). Indeed, the Head of the Millennium Campaign, Eveline Herfkens, believed that Sach’s Millennium Project could impact negatively on efforts to reduce global poverty.<sup>4</sup>

On the positive side, there is evidence (Hulme 2010a; 2010b) that the MDGs have improved the data available on multi-dimensional poverty at national and international levels; helped to reverse the global downturn in levels of foreign aid for a few years;<sup>5</sup> assisted in improving the coordination of aid between donor agencies; raised public awareness of poverty in parts of the rich world; and contributed to progressive shifts in international social norms in some parts of the world.<sup>6</sup> More negatively, it can be argued that the MDGs have led to a profound misunderstanding of the role of foreign aid in poverty reduction (Peet 2009: 169); contributed to public Afro-pessimism (Clemens and Todd 2005; see Hulme and Chimhowu 2012; Botman 2012 for contrasting views), and thus negatively impacted on investment in Africa (Easterly 2006); facilitated World Bank and IMF influence over public finance and plans in aid-dependent countries; and demonstrated to national leaders, from Mugabe to Berlusconi, that they can repeatedly mislead international meetings about their development efforts and not be held accountable. Our judgement is that, on balance, the MDGs have contributed to improvements in human welfare through direct (increased and somewhat more effective foreign aid) and indirect means (contributing to the evolution of an international social norm that finds extreme poverty in an affluent world morally unacceptable) (see Fukuda-Parr and Hulme 2011; Murphy 2012 for analyses along these lines).

<sup>4</sup> Interview with Eveline Herfkens, 19 September 2007.

<sup>5</sup> Do note that an influential minority of analysts (e.g. Bauer 1957; Easterly 2006) would argue that reduced foreign aid would promote more effective poverty reduction.

<sup>6</sup> It can be argued that the MDGs helped to make promoting international development a social norm within the European Union. In 2004 the EU decided that states seeking to join the EU must make a commitment to having an aid budget and increasing it over time (Fukuda-Parr and Hulme 2011; Hulme 2010a:187).

In the next section, we set out a series of analytical and methodological markers that inform our analysis. In Section 3, we explore content-based approaches to GDG formulation post-2015, before moving on, in Section 4, to examine process-based approaches to working out what should follow on from the MDGs. In both of these sections, our aim is to evaluate the desirability and likelihood of the most commonly presented proposals for a post-MDG era. In Section 5, we build upon our analysis of content and process-based proposals and triangulate this with work currently being undertaken on the political economy of global institutions—to advance our argument that national ownership should be a key element of a post-2015 regime. In Section 6, we draw our argument together and set out what for us would be the most effective—in terms of promoting real welfare gains for the global population—and feasible—in terms of what is politically possible—GDG machinery to replace the MDGs. In the final section, we offer our concluding comments.

## **2. Analytical framework and methodology**

Our analytical approach has three four main elements. First, it divides different methods of developing a post-2015 agenda into content and process-based approaches (Table 2). Content approaches seek to formulate a new or a renewed set of GDGs by improving the goals and targets set in the MDGs.<sup>7</sup> These range from a minimalist “stick with the MDG goals, targets and indicators” position but change the target dates from 2015 to 2020 or 2025 to 2030, to more radical options that include a complete abandonment of the MDGs, or indeed any global development, goals post-2015. Process-based approaches are founded on the premise that the best way to build on the MDGs is to focus on a better means of formulating future GDGs than that which took place during the MDG formulation period (1990 to 2001). From this perspective, the eventual content of the goals is secondary to ensuring that the process by which the goals are selected is seen as legitimate and promotes accountability. Such alternatives have only rarely been developed in concrete terms. When they have been developed, they most commonly take the form of criticisms of the process that created the MDGs—that it was catalysed by aid agencies (such as the Organization for Economic Cooperation and Development [OECD], Development Assistance Committee [DAC]); that high-income countries dominated the debates and insisted on a ‘results’ framing of the goals; and, that the final (that is, 2001) goals, targets and indicators were selected by a non-accountable and ad hoc committee of DAC, IMF, World Bank and IMF staff. At a modest level, alternative process-based approaches would call for greater transparency in debates and negotiations and seek the elimination of the kind of political skullduggery that was able to unfairly block aspects of the original MDGs formulation.<sup>8</sup> At a more radical level, process approaches would call for direct citizen participation on a global scale in the setting of global development goals (see Table 2).

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<sup>7</sup> By the MDGs we refer to the 2008 improved version, which added “decent work” and “reproductive health” to the original 2001 specification and increased the number of targets and indicators from 18 and 48 to 21 and 60.

<sup>8</sup> The most obvious example of this would be limiting the role of the Holy See, a non-member state, so that it cannot block agreements on reproductive health and sexuality that have the approval of the international community (see Hulme 2010a; Harman 2012).

**Table 2: Content and process-based approaches to post-2015 global development goals**

<b>Content-based approaches</b>
1. Retain the current goals, target and indicators but change the target dates to 2020/2025/2030.
2. Retain the underlying specification of the MDGs, but update the targets to cover the period 2010-2025 or 2010-2030.
3. Abandon global goal setting for poverty reduction and international development.
4. Reframe the MDGs as goals reducing poverty by reducing inequality.
5. Reframe the post-2015 development agenda as a human rights agenda.
<b>Process-based approaches</b>
1. Operationalise existing MDG 8 as the basis for developing a meaningful global partnership for development.
2. Conduct a mass global grassroots consultation exercise on the desirability and content of a post-2015 set of GDGs.
3. 'Nationalise' GDGs within a global framework.

The second element of our analytical framework relates to making brief assessments of the positive and negative contributions that different options might make to improved human wellbeing and especially the conditions and prospects of the world's poor and poorest people. This is examined in terms of desirability (i.e. is there a logical argument that enacting this option and/or publically promoting this option would reduce poverty) and feasibility (what is the likelihood of this option being included in the post-2015 global development goals?). The former is based on theoretical and empirical assessments. The latter is based on our understanding of the history of General Assembly actions and decisions in the field of international development, prevailing realities of power, and the shifts that have occurred in international agendas (ideational as well as substance-wise) since the MDGs were formulated and which are currently prevalent.

The third element of our analytical framework derives from recent advances in the study of international political economy and global governance that: (i) examine the feedback loops between recipients of global policy and sites of planetary policy formulation and implementation; (ii) explore the way policy subjects are constructed by international organizations and the consequences these constructions can have; and (iii) investigate the dynamism, or lack thereof, in the institutional cultures and development trajectories of international organizations and global agenda setting bodies. We use these advances to illustrate the disjuncture that exists between the formulation of policy at the global level and local conditions that mediate the effectiveness of policy on the ground, and to highlight the way this disjuncture has become an embedded feature of much global policymaking. Here, we are concerned with the problems with feedback loops that exist between global policymaking and local communities, how the problems of poverty and development are constructed and solutions derived, and the dynamism—or lack thereof—exuded by international institutions in addressing these shortcomings.

The empirical materials from which we build our analysis are derived from three principal sources. The first is a comprehensive review of the literature on global goal-setting, global poverty reduction

and the MDGs. It should be noted here that while we have not been able to consult all of the available sources on the MDGs,<sup>9</sup> our analysis is grounded in a deep understanding of how the MDGs evolved, how they have and have not influenced policies and practices internationally and nationally and of the processes that are shaping and will shape future global development goals. The second component is data drawn from long-running research programmes at grassroots and policy elite levels that draw from more than 150 interviews we have conducted. These interviews establish both the processes—ideational, technocratic, political, and otherwise—underpinning the formulation of global policymaking, the impact of that policymaking at national and local level, and the extent to which feedback loops exist between the two. The third source is a sequence of workshops put together specifically to think through the global and local aspects of planetary policymaking that began thinking about ways to engage global institutions with a view to agitating for poverty and inequality-sensitive policy change (see Wilkinson and Hughes 2002; Clapp and Wilkinson 2010; Wilkinson and Hulme 2012; Wilkinson and Scott 2012). That said, while we draw from a long-standing engagement with the impoverished, as well as with scholars, practitioners and civil society representatives, responsibility for the argument developed herein lies with us.

### **3. After the MDGs: improving the content of global development goals**

One logical way of approaching the specification of post-2015 global development goals is to pose the question: “how might the MDGs be amended, expanded or reduced so that they would contribute more to global poverty reduction?” Posing this question leads us to identify five major options (Table 2). The first three of these are relatively straightforward to describe and assess. The last two are more complex and more difficult to evaluate.

The first and simplest option would be to retain the MDG goals and targets (and indicators) but to change the target date for their achievement. Such an approach recognises that despite substantial progress in most countries, some goals and targets will not be reached by 2015 and that in some countries the majority of goals and targets will have shortfalls (United Nations 2011). While this would be a simple and a transaction cost ‘lite’ mechanism, we believe it would be disastrous for global poverty reduction efforts, as:

- (i) Sticking with the “old” goals and targets would indicate the international community’s lack of commitment to poverty reduction and would suggest either ambivalence, or else a reversion to that well noted UN institutional tendency towards status quo behaviour (Weiss 2008);
- (ii) Simply extending the date would suggest complacency and that any future shortfalls in achievement could be dealt with by further arbitrary “extensions”;
- (iii) It would add further fuel to attacks from MDG critics (see, for example, Amin, 2006).

As a result, we argue that extending the target date should be ruled out from the outset, as it would undermine efforts at global poverty reduction.

A second option would be to retain the underlying specification of the MDGs but update the targets to cover the 2010-2025 (or 2010-2030) period. This would mean, for example, re-setting Goal

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<sup>9</sup> A Google search identified 11,500,000 items and Google Scholar 277,000 articles on 12 January 2012.

1/Target 1 as halving the proportion of the population experiencing \$1.25-a-day poverty in 2010 by half by 2025. Such an approach would have the advantage of being simple to undertake. It would also allow it to be argued that the new goals are progressive as, given that the percentage of population in extreme income poverty in most countries has reduced over 1990 to 2010, then the target for 2025 would be more ambitious than the target set for 2015. However, as with option one, albeit to a lesser degree, such an approach would indicate that international commitment to poverty reduction is stagnant or stalled (especially as gross global income per capita has more than doubled since 1990 and would inevitably result in a bout of MDG fatigue setting in down the line).

The third option is relatively straightforward, but is more radical. This would be to use the 2015 UN General Assembly to announce and discuss the degree to which the MDGs have been achieved but *not* to proceed with any follow-on programme—in effect to abandon the practice of global goal-setting for poverty reduction and international development. This seems highly unlikely, unless the UN were to move into some unexpected meltdown. Such an approach would seriously undermine the credibility of the UN as, by inference, it would be an admission that either its flagship Millennium programme—and more than half a century's development work—has failed, or else that the UN no longer cares about global poverty. While critics of the collective responsibility assumed in the MDGs would argue that abandoning the MDGs would enhance the performance of development programmes (Easterly 2006), this ignores the considerable evidence that earlier UN goal-setting initiatives, such as decolonization, child immunization, the eradication of smallpox, guinea worm and polio, have greatly improved human welfare (Jolly 2005).

In contrast to the first three, options four and five would indicate raised ambitions and, perhaps, an increased commitment by the UN membership to global poverty reduction. If the post-2015 goals were re-framed as reducing poverty by *reducing inequality*, this would raise the targets from reducing absolute poverty to reducing both absolute and relative poverty. To be effective, this fourth option would need to address inequality as a multi-dimensional problem, what Kabeer 2010 calls “intersecting inequalities” and not simply as “income inequality”. Kabeer argues that the MDGs lost sight of the fundamental values that underpinned the Millennium Declaration and this means that they have failed to tackle social exclusion and discrimination. Intersecting inequalities—cultural, spatial, economic and political—are reinforcing, so that those left behind in relation to one MDG goal are often left behind in others. A post-2015 GDG focus on reducing inequalities would permit the underlying causes of poverty to be tackled, rather than the symptoms. John Githango (2011) takes this argument further:

If the Arab revolutions have taught us anything it is that inequality and perceptions of inequality within poor countries have now replaced poverty as the No! development challenge facing the world.

Analytically, such an option has a lot to recommend it (see, for instance, Wilkinson and Pickett 2009) and it would go some way to moving a post-2015 set of GDGs away from a distilled notion of development encapsulated in eight prerogatives achievable only by meeting certain largely quantifiable targets (Fukuda-Parr, 2012):



- (i) There is strong empirical evidence that economic growth in countries with higher rates of inequality produces lower rates of income poverty reduction (see, for instance, Bourignon 2004; Ravallion 2001).
- (ii) There is a strong theoretical and empirical case study material that the processes that fuel inequality (economic exploitation, social discrimination and political marginalization) are central to the creation and persistence of absolute poverty.<sup>10</sup> Consequently, if extreme poverty is to be tackled, then multi-dimensionally inequality must also be tackled (Greig et al 2006; OECD 2012).
- (iii) Many believe that reducing social and economic inequality at the domestic, local, national and global levels should be a social goal in its own right.<sup>11</sup>

That said, the extent to which inequality is a “problem”, and whether the problem is equality of opportunity or of outcome, is the subject of considerable, and often highly charged, debate (see, for instance, Barrientos 2010; Bangura 2011; Berry 2010). At times, such debates can break down into ideological rants that eschew empirical evidence. Our analysis is that enterprise and innovation are crucial for economic growth and improved human welfare, but that these are underpinned by many factors other than competition generated by inequality. The high levels of inequality, now typical in most countries, undermine social cohesion and democracy (Stewart 2008; 2011). High levels of inequality create national politics in which the voices (and interests) of wealthy minorities have undue influence over political processes, such as elections and policy choices. Internationally, it means that wealthy individuals with barely any public accountability have more influence over policy agendas than the democratically elected heads of low-income countries.<sup>12</sup> And, we know that horizontal inequalities—that is, differences between groups both within and between countries—can act to ignite and fuel tensions, hostilities and violence (Stewart 2010). Our judgement is that re-framing the post-2015 global development goals either wholly or partly as inequality reduction is highly desirable and, although it will be challenged, it is not unfeasible.

With regard to a fifth option, if the idea of tackling inequality will be contested then one must expect that the idea of re-framing the post-2015 development agenda from a human rights perspective is even more likely to be obstructed and perhaps blocked by powerful countries and elites. The 2000/2001 MDGs were the product of the historical structures of the late 20<sup>th</sup> century and they were the “best deal” that could be achieved by proponents of international development and poverty reduction at that juncture. They were the offspring of many different ideas and forces and, in particular, the unlikely marriage of human development with results-based management (Hulme 2010b). In earlier times, the UN General Assembly has been more ambitious, as with the UN Declaration on Human Rights in 1947 and subsequent human rights conventions that seek to be binding. It is equally the case that the UN can be prone to an institutional stasis and a paralysing politics that ensures little gets done (Weiss 2009; 2012). The MDGs managed to navigate an in-between. In 2000/2001 there was no way that Kofi Annan’s “Road Map” for international development could be framed as human rights. The US public and US political leaders, especially

<sup>10</sup> By definition, increases in income inequality lead to higher levels of relative income poverty.

<sup>11</sup> See Miller (2006) for a commentary on inequality in the work of Isaiah Berlin, Julian Le Grand, Stephen Lukes, Michael Walzer, Tony Atkinson, Amartya Sen, R. H. Tawney and others.

<sup>12</sup> The most obvious example is Bill and Melinda Gates, who arguably have much more influence over health policies in Africa than do national leaders in Africa.

George Bush, were never going to agree to a rights-based approach to development that might identify high-income countries, such as the USA, as duty-bearers for financing international development. For quite different reasons, China, and a number of other countries, would not agree to a strengthening of human rights within the UN system, as these were seen as Eurocentric, rather than universal, and as interfering in sovereign issues (see Lawson 2003). While the contribution that a human rights framing of post-2015 GDGs could make to poverty reduction would be powerful, because of its binding nature, we believe that the international politics of the twenty-teens make it clear that such an option will not be allowed to advance.

#### **4. After the MDGs: improving the process for global goal-setting**

A quite different way of thinking about how to shape what comes after the MDGs is to focus on changing the social and political processes that will determine an agreement on the post-2015 global development goals. This is based on two main premises:

- (i) A tactical, political analysis that it is the processes (the forms of meeting and negotiation; who attends and who leads meetings; the locations; the formats and preparation activities; the production of key documents) that will most strongly influence the eventual agreement on any set of global development goals.<sup>13</sup>
- (ii) A normative argument that the best way of advancing the interests of the poor and disadvantaged is to maximize the opportunities for poor people and their representatives to participate in the processes leading up to goal formulation and agreement (that is, through robust feedback mechanisms that connect the local and the global).<sup>14</sup>

As we argue in the conclusion, the choice about content approaches and process approaches is not either/or but rather both/and. However, given that the resources of any individual, group or organization are finite, the key issue becomes: “which mix of content and process would contribute most to improving the conditions and prospects of poor people?”

The logical starting point is to examine the formal processes that—at least officially—will create the post-2015 agenda. Up until 2010 the UN Secretariat discouraged discussions about what would happen after 2015. There was a clear ruling that the run-up to the “MDGs + 10” General Assembly in September 2010 was to focus on how to maximize MDG achievement up to 2015. Discussions about “what comes next” were not to occur, as that would confuse debates and reduce the focus on MDG performance. This focus is understandable, but it has meant that to date discussions have all-too-often focused on the detailed and technical aspects of the MDGs—measuring “results”, identifying optimal programmes through evaluations and randomised control trials. The age of voice that led up to the Millennium Summit and MDGs—noisy, inclusive, diverse and sometimes chaotic

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<sup>13</sup> For example, the decision to hold the March 2001 “showdown” meeting that led to the MDGs at the World Bank in Washington DC and between international development agencies (DAC, IMF, UNDP and World Bank) ensured that the US had a very powerful voice and that the MDGs highlighted the role of foreign aid and “results” (Hulme 2010a). In contrast, the UN Summits and Conferences of the 1990s and especially the parallel civil society summits/conferences, permitted a very powerful civil society/social movement input to Summit Declarations focused much more on human rights.

<sup>14</sup> This also has the additional normative benefit of deepening global, regional, national and local democracy more broadly.

talking shops in New York, Rio, Vienna, Cairo, Copenhagen, Beijing, Istanbul and other cities—has been replaced by an age of measurement dominated by technical elites, officials and professional staff from international NGOs. When the “voices of the poor” enter the contemporary for a, it is in terms of participatory poverty assessments managed by professional researchers or as quantitative analysis of subjective well-being rather than as actual participants in policy debates (a point to which we return below).

Since 2011 the UN Secretariat has lifted its moratorium on the post-2015 agenda and a series of official meetings and consultations are under way. We are nonetheless concerned that the framing of the processes is professionalized, technical and focused on a narrow elite. Without the unique pressure of the “millennium moment” pushing for a progressive outcome and without the passion of Kofi Annan to see life made better for poor people, there is a danger that any post-2015 global development goals will be about “turning the handle” or “keeping face” and not catalysing action or mobilizing political constituencies. So, what other options are there?

**Table 3 – MDG 8: Develop a global partnership for development**

Target 8.A: Develop further an open, rule-based, predictable, non-discriminatory trading and financial system.
Target 8.B: Address the special needs of the least developed countries.
Target 8.C: Address the special needs of landlocked developing countries and small island developing states (through the Programme of Action for the Sustainable Development of Small Island Developing States and the outcome of the 22nd special session of the General Assembly).
Target 8.D: Deal comprehensively with the debt problems of developing countries through national and international measures in order to make debt sustainable in the long term.
Target 8.E: In cooperation with pharmaceutical companies, provide access to affordable essential drugs in developing countries.
Target 8.F: In cooperation with the private sector, make available the benefits of new technologies, especially information and communications.

One possibility would be to focus on MDG 8, “develop a global partnership for development”, the only process goal of the original MDGs (Table 3). This goal differs from goals 1 to 7 in that it is not about specific outcomes, but instead it identifies improvements in what are regarded as important processes (such as increasing foreign aid; reducing tariffs and quotas on LDC exports; reducing agricultural subsidies in the OECD; improved access for the poor to essential drugs) and it applies to high-income countries. Significantly, it does not identify specific targets (except for aid to reach 0.7 percent of rich country GDP) and no dates were set for target achievement. None of the other MDGs were so weakly specified, reflecting the power of high-income countries. These countries insisted, instead, on detailed targets and dates for everything except the changes for which they were responsible (Fukuda-Parr 2004). A post-2015 agenda could focus on negotiating concrete targets and dates for MDG 8 and might make this palatable for OECD countries by including targets and dates for low- and middle-income countries to achieve “good enough governance.” One could

be more ambitious and broaden Goal 8 to include progress on climate change and trade negotiations and try to make the agreement binding rather than voluntary. But, even if this were desirable in the present context, it looks unfeasible. The Kyoto Protocol has not proven to be binding and recent climate talks in Copenhagen and Durban suggest that countries are less willing to make binding commitments than they were 20 years ago; and the World Trade Organization's (WTO) Doha Development Agenda—a negotiating round intended to focus on gains for developing countries, but which has slipped back into standard market access mode—has been in deadlock since July 2008, with little prospect of substantive development gains appearing any time soon (Wilkinson and Scott 2012).

The final two process options are even more radical. One argues that a process of global citizen participation should be initiated, so that citizens from across the world can voice and debate their preferences for any post-2015 global development goals. A vast series of local and national consultations would feed into global deliberations in the belief that an inclusive and democratic process would eventually agree on what comes next. However, the desirability of this option (from democratic perspective) is more than matched by its unfeasibility (from both a logistical perspective and in terms of the political economy of consultative processes in many countries where citizens believe that speaking your mind is dangerous). A more focused, nationally-based, process of consultation is required (to which we now turn).

The final approach builds on the basis that the original MDG process focused on the wrong level. The level at which agreement and commitment is most needed to help poor people is the national level (Thakur 2012). While the policies and behaviours of external actors (aid agencies, international development agencies, NGOs, businesses) can help (or hinder) poverty reduction, the historical record shows that sustained poverty, and sustained economic growth, originates in policies and actions (and political processes) at the national level. Given this circumstance, the way for post-2015 global development goals to contribute to poverty reduction is by their supporting the selection of “better” national development goals and raising the levels of elite commitment to inclusive national development.<sup>15</sup> The MDGs can be seen as having made only a limited contribution to goal-setting and commitment to poverty reduction at the national level. Jeffrey Sachs' Millennium Project sought to impose the MDGs on the plans of developing countries, while leaving oversight of national Poverty Reduction Strategy Papers (PRSPs) to the World Bank and IMF meant that aid-dependent countries had to follow the dictates of the international financial institutions (IFIs) (Tan 2011). The recent shift by a number of countries from three-year PRSPs to five-year National Development Strategies has done more to create domestic commitment to development plans than World Bank and IMF efforts to promote “national ownership”. Perhaps the post-2015 global development goals approach should seek to catalyse enhanced national debates and discussions and examination of evidence that strengthens national plans, policies, budget-making and implementation. Rather than global goals being a neat set of goals in a UN document, global goals would be the totality of national development goals knitted together through their commitment to multiple ways of tackling destitution.

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<sup>15</sup> For discussions of this issue, see [www.effective-states.org](http://www.effective-states.org)

## 5. Policy subjects, feedback loops and institutional dynamism

The call for a post-2015 set of GDGs that draws the national and the global together in a broad co-ordination strategy finds support in the literature on the political economy of global institutions. In response to gaps in global policymaking left open by national level implementation, a body of work has emerged that deals with the relationships that have been forged in the past 20 years between global institutions and those that purport a degree of grassroots representation (see, for instance, O'Brien et al. 2000; Clark, Friedman and Hochstetler 2005; Scholte 2011). Grassroots representation in global policy fora is effective only to the extent that it is drawn from groups that have managed to gain a foothold in key institutional structures and processes. As Jan Aart Scholte (2012) shows, a notable feature of civil society engagement with IFIs is the dominance of Northern Hemisphere, professionalized NGOs (see, also, O'Brien et al. 2000). Very few Southern, grassroots, local bodies have been able to establish a meaningful dialogue and, crucially, translate that dialogue into policy impact. Part of the problem here results from the greater capacity that Northern NGOs have over their Southern counterparts. Part of the problem is also one of familiarity: that many Northern NGOs are more familiar to IFI and/or UN staffers and are thus easier to engage with than little or unknown local groups. A further cause is that large-scale Northern NGOs are often seen as being able to represent adequately the plight of the poorest. Inevitably, here, any policy feedback or co-constitution that develops from IFI/NGO interaction relies on the construction of policy recipients—i.e. the poor—as NGOs perceive them (and their problems) and not necessarily as they are seen on the ground and represented by local, grassroots bodies. This dynamic leads to a relative lack of sensitivity to the needs of the poorest in given localities in global policymaking and underscores the necessity of promoting national involvement in, and ownership of, a GDG formulation process.

A second body of literature has recently begun to ask probing questions about the relationship between the formulation of policy and the way policy recipients are constructed or imagined (see Broome and Seabrooke, 2011; also Broome and Seabrooke 2007). There is a simple, obvious, but seldom posited logic here. Any process of policy formulation draws on ideas of what the problem is, as well as notions of what the character and predicaments of those that would be on the receiving end of policy are, before working up a programme of action. In this way, the analytical aspects of an international organization make “legible” the subjects of policy and the problems they face, which, in turn, feeds into policy formulation (Broome and Seabrooke 2011: 3). What takes place, then, is a process of policy formulation that is determined by the way subject and problem are “seen”. This necessarily involves a process of making sense of subjects and problems through the lenses of an international organization’s (or more properly the units responsible for feeding into policy formulation) preconceptions about how the world works.

There is, of course, as André Broome and Leonard Seabrooke point out, an efficiency gain here for international organizations that wheel out one-size-fits-all policy solutions, based on what is understood to be “world’s best practice” (2011: 7). Problems and recipients become understood in similar ways, enabling best practice to be rolled out. Equally, however, this policy-leads-problem best practice impulse tends to crowd out local knowledge and input and thus not result in policy tailored to local and national circumstances. This highlights one of the principal tensions in the MDGs: as generalized goals they enable some states to report remarkable success in their

achievement rates, while constructing others as failures (or, worse still, cloaking dramatic improvement—Stewart 2011 Murphy 2012). This highlights the need for national input into, and ownership of, a post-2015 process of GDG formulation, and underscores the necessity of real feedback mechanisms that deliver local knowledge into policymaking arenas. One way of ensuring a better fit between policy formulation and the construction of policy subjects, then, is to ensure that appropriate feedback mechanisms exist between subjects and policy formulators. But, as the literature on NGOs and IFIs (above) shows, those feedback loops that do exist tend to be dominated by groups other than those of the poor. Despite being well meaning, they often put forward constructions of the poor and what they need that are at odds with the reality.

Compounding matters further, a third body of literature has shown how international institutions tend towards static modes of policy formulation and institutional development, leading in some instances to an aversion to change that can have negative impacts on effective policy formulation. At an extreme, Michael Barnett's (1997) classic study of UN inaction during the Rwandan genocide shows how a cultural aversion to action born of a fear of criticism contributed to "doing nothing". Likewise, Bessma Momani (2010) and Catherine Weaver (2010) show how the IMF and World Bank also have institutional cultures that lack dynamism in addressing new challenges. Momani, for instance, shows how the IMF's move to take issues of poverty and inequality seriously was done very much under the guise of "business as usual", rather than signaling a dramatic shift in policy and ideas about macroeconomic management. Weaver shows likewise how the World Bank also exudes an aversion to substantive change in its operational activities. The problem of institutional tendencies to eschew change and reform—well noted features of many other international organizations (Wilkinson 2006; Weiss 2012)—is that without the infusion of different kinds of locally and nationally sensitive forms of knowledge, they continue and will continue to "see" policy subjects in the same ways and construct problems that are seen as resolvable via one-size-fits-all policies.

The point here is that, taken together, these three insights from the literature—the wrong kind of representation in those feedback loops that connect localities with global policymaking machineries; the fixity of some constructions of policy recipients; and tenacious institutional cultures that militate against change—suggest that, in as far as it is possible, any set of GDGs that replaces/carries on from the MDGs must be built from the national level or even from the bottom up. Given that the kind of mass participatory model envisaged in option two of the process-based approaches is unrealistic, drawing national actors into the core of a post-2015 formulation, implementation and monitoring machinery represents the best way forward.

## **6. Conclusion**

As the preceding sections have revealed, there is a wide range of very different ways in which post-2015 global development goals might be formulated. In practical terms, the options that we have identified in this paper (along, no doubt, with others we have failed to recognize) do not need to be treated as mutually exclusive. The key issue for the post-2015 development goals is not about selecting the "best option", but about identifying the "best mix of options". Our analysis is that any future goals should include the goal of reduced inequality (between individuals and groups and within and between countries). Alongside this, a process must be promoted that deepens national ownership of, and commitment to, national development goals. In addition, a more rigorous

approach to reporting, monitoring and accountability processes is essential, with a particular focus on donor pledges, the performance of international institutions and governance in developing countries.

Moving beyond this applied focus, we argue that any post-2015 development goals need to be thought about in a more dynamic sense than was the case with the MDGs. The global development goals need to be framed so that (i) they contribute to the improvement of the conditions and prospects of the world's poor and poorest people, and (ii) they contribute to reshaping processes of global governance so that these become more representative of the preferences of humanity, rather than the preferences of national and international elites.

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The University of Manchester  
**Brooks World  
Poverty Institute**

MANCHESTER  
1824

**Executive Director**  
Professor David Hulme

**Research Directors**  
Professor Armando Barrientos  
Professor Rorden Wilkinson

**Contact:**

Brooks World Poverty Institute  
The University of Manchester  
Humanities Bridgeford Street Building  
Oxford Road  
Manchester  
M13 9PL  
United Kingdom

Email: [bwpi@manchester.ac.uk](mailto:bwpi@manchester.ac.uk)

[www.manchester.ac.uk/bwpi](http://www.manchester.ac.uk/bwpi)

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