

Abstract

Since their emergence in 2001, the Millennium Development Goals (MDGs) have become accepted as consensus objectives of international development efforts. They have generated controversies and literature that focus on the economics of whether and how they can be achieved. However, little work has been done to understand why they became so widely accepted as an international normative framework of development. This paper focuses on the MDGs as ideas and international norms to explain how they emerged, became institutionalised, yet stalled in implementation and behaviour change. The paper applies Finnemore and Sikkink's analytical framework of international norm dynamics, and argues that the MDGs have proved an effective mechanism to promote the broad norm of eradicating global poverty. Finnemore and Sikkink note that broad and vaguely specified norms are difficult to implement. Global poverty eradication is an example of such a norm, but the MDGs gave it specificity and then provided an effective vehicle for its diffusion and institutionalisation. This paper introduces the concept of the 'super-norm' to clarify the nature of poverty eradication, as being a composite of several sub-norms. The paper also introduces the concepts of message entrepreneurs (as distinct from norm entrepreneurs) who play a key role in this process, who are motivated primarily by organisational objectives rather than ideational commitments. This in turn influences the content of the norm itself. In its conclusion, the paper explains the way in which both realist and constructivist ideas have to be utilised to explain the faltering advance of extreme poverty being seen as morally unacceptable in an affluent world.

Keywords: Millennium Development Goals, Norms, UN, International Development Goals, Global Poverty, Inequality

Sakiko Fukuda-Parr is Professor of International Affairs at the New School, New York.

David Hulme is Professor of Development Studies at The University of Manchester, and Director of The Brooks World Poverty Centre (BWPI) and The Chronic Poverty Research Centre (CPRC).