



# GLOBAL FORUM TO FOCUS ON DEMOCRACY, POVERTY REDUCTION AND THE MILLENNIUM DEVELOPMENT GOALS MDGS: A CRITICAL ANALYSIS<sup>1</sup>

## FORO MUNDIAL CENTRADO EN LA DEMOCRACIA, LA REDUCCIÓN DE LA POBREZA Y EN LOS OBJETIVOS DE DESARROLLO DEL MILENIO ODM: UN ANÁLISIS CRÍTICO

Ezana Habte-Gabr<sup>2</sup>

### ABSTRACT

The social contexts of the Education, Gender Empowerment and Poverty Reduction MDGs are critically analyzed. It is suggested that the evolution of such goals are institutionally embedded and not only are they far from being attained, but their very definition is devoid of an understanding of cultures and local goals and objectives such as family and society. The approach emanates from the reconstruction approach of the Marshall plan which is difficult to apply to issues of development.

Key Words: Millennium Development Goals, Local Society, Policy, Empowerment.

### ABSTRACT

Los contextos sociales de la educación, el empoderamiento de la mujer y la reducción de la pobreza, objetivos de desarrollo del milenio, son analizados críticamente en este trabajo de reflexión. Se sugiere que la evolución de dichos objetivos sea incorporada institucionalmente y no sea solamente algo difícil de ser alcanzado, debido a una definición carente no solo de comprensión de las culturas locales sino también de las metas y objetivos de las familias y de la sociedad. Y esto debido a que se trata de una reconstrucción del enfoque del plan Marshall, el cual es difícil de aplicar a cuestiones de desarrollo.

Palabras clave: Objetivos de Milenio, Sociedad Local, Políticas, Empoderamiento

- 1 Trabajo de reflexión elaborado en el Departamento de Ciencia Política de la Universidad de la Sabana. [www.unisabana.edu.co](http://www.unisabana.edu.co) Entregado en 18/04/2008 Aprobado en 05/22/2008
- 2 Ezana Habte-Gabr is an Assistant Professor in the Department of Political Science, Humanities Institute, Universidad de la Sabana. His undergraduate degree is from the University of Iowa and Master's degree is from the University of Northern Iowa. Presently he is undergoing doctoral studies in geography through Atlantic International University. Ezana is a member of the Population and Development Research group at Universidad de la Sabana, Colombia. [ezana.habte@unisabana.edu.co](mailto:ezana.habte@unisabana.edu.co)
- 3 UNDP Millennium Development Goals <http://www.undp.org/mdg/basics.shtml>



## INTRODUCTION

Since the year 2000, development programs around the world have gravitated around the Millennium goals proposed by the United Nations Development Program (UNDP) centralizing development objectives under eight principle goals. These objectives were determined on the basis of "commitments made separately at the international conferences and summits of the 1990s" and measured by indicators<sup>3</sup>. The summation of the results of these indicators permits a comparison of a country with others in terms of reaching attaining the objectives the Millennium Development Goals (MDGs) by the year 2015. Governments in developing countries committed themselves to incorporating the objectives through their national development plans and objectives, resulting in these objectives in becoming the essence of discussions and perspectives of development at all levels of society<sup>4</sup>. While, the implantation of MDG's is increasingly becoming decentralized as municipalities from around the world participated in evaluating MDGs at a recently held conference in Athens, the essence of MDGs as a paradigm of development is questionable as issues such as international relations and the actual objectives of the people seem not to be addressed by MDG's well meant objectives. Furthermore, MDG's seem to be contextually devoid of the interplay of natural social relations such as the family at the grassroots of development and global economic structural impediments which impact local economies.

A UNDP webpage graphically demonstrates the progress countries are making in reaching the objectives of the millennium by the year 2015. These objectives include: 1. Reducing extreme poverty and hunger by half. 2. Achieving universal primary education. 3. Promoting gender equality and empowering women. 4. Reducing infant mortality by two thirds 5.Reducing maternal mortality by three-fourths 6. Stopping the spread of pandemic diseases. 7. Ensuring environmental sustainability 8. Developing global partnerships for development<sup>5</sup>.

Each country is represented by a circle whose size and location along the X axis indicate the progress being made in achieving the objectives. The page permits the viewer to compare and contrast the progress of countries over time. Circle size corresponds to the population of the country, suggesting that this is an important criterion in attaining MDGs.

At recent forum on MDGs held at Universidad de La Sabana in Colombia, this was compared to an international marathon race in which the participating athletes were immensely diverse in terms of their level of training and preparation for the race. While international cooperation and aid are considered to be important factors in attaining the MDGs, we will see that global economic factors tend to impact the attainment of these objectives. Let us closely take a look at each objective conceptually and in terms of viability. Four non health MDGs are analyzed here.

## REDUCING EXTREME POVERTY AND HUNGER BY HALF

The end of the Cold War brought about the international convergence of a global economic system based on Neo-liberalism, a system based on supply side economics, promoting free trade and the footlessness capital and production. While generating efficiency in production and diminishing state bureaucratic transactions in production and exportation, the unleashing of a growing gap between rich and poor has been a consequence of this economic transformation, particularly in the poorest countries. Economists such as Joseph Stiglitz who are theoretically largely Neo-liberal have increasingly begun to see these challenges. He noted that "Many have actually been made worse off, as they have seen their jobs destroyed and their lives become more insecure"<sup>7</sup>.

The World Bank, a proponent for Neo-liberalism even notes "the first target of the Millennium Development Goals appears in sight, the effort to eliminate poverty must be renewed."<sup>8</sup>.

4 Richard Black, Howard White Targeting Development: Critical Perspectives on the Millennium Development Goals. Routledge, London. 2006

5 UNDP Millennium Development Goals <http://www.undp.org/mdg/basics.shtml>

6 UNDP Millennium Development Goals <http://www.undp.org/mdg/basics.shtml>

7 Stiglitz, Joseph E Globalization and its Discontents, by Joseph E. , published by W.W. Norton & Co

8 World Bank Group [http://devdata.worldbank.org/wdi2005/Section1\\_1\\_1.htm](http://devdata.worldbank.org/wdi2005/Section1_1_1.htm) 2005



The same report identifies the countries demonstrated on the MDG graph that a substantial number of countries are short of meeting the poverty reduction objective. Interestingly, population size does not seem to correlate with poverty reduction as countries such as India and China, with the highest populations are on track and others with substantially large populations such as Nigeria and other African countries appear to be off track.

There exists a scenario whereby the gap between rich and poor is increasing every year, particularly in the developing world, irrespective if these countries are Low Income or Middle Income countries. Merrill Lynch economists view growing inflation rates as "an accident in waiting" as global inflation rates begin to raise from 3.5 to 4.9% this year<sup>9</sup>. Structural adjustment programs around the world have resulted in cutbacks in state orchestrated social programs such as food and education subsidies through privatization programs which seek to redress social disparities through the market, acknowledging that social disequilibrium would exist, through what Neo-liberals call "economic shock therapy" which is largely associated with the Post Soviet era which involved reducing the state's role in transitional economies<sup>10</sup>. In some of the poorest countries of the world, while there has been a high level of technology transfer and infrastructural modernization programs which are intended to enhance participation in the world economy.

The world media in the first half of 2008 has been dominated by gas and subsequently food crises literally throughout the world, in both developed and developing countries. Developed countries such as Spain are experiencing raising food prices as a result of growing petroleum prices during the first half of June 2008. While the pinch of this crisis would be felt in the general population, it is important to realize that this country is a member of the EU in addition to being amongst the strongest economies worldwide with mechanisms to alleviate the crises as opposed to Lower or Middle Income countries.

In Colombia for instance, Cesar Caballero, country coordinator of MDGs recently reported that regional disparities within the country have not permitted the nationwide progress in meeting MDGs due to preexisting poverty, given that some parts have been historically poorer<sup>11</sup>. In a Lower Income country such as Ethiopia, the financial constraints are even higher in spite of large infrastructural investment during the last decade which would enhance meeting the objectives. However, it is argued that this could only be achieved through "scaling up aid"<sup>12</sup>.

Should the issue of uneven development and growing food prices are not resolved; the reduction of global poverty is bound to be far from attainable by the year 2015. While there strides have been made in improving urban conditions as has been the case in cities such as Bogota, Colombia and Addis Ababa, Ethiopia through the internationalization of capital, serious considerations in stimulating development must be given to regions poorer regions.

#### **ACHIEVING UNIVERSAL PRIMARY EDUCATION**

Since the 1960s, the United Nations, through UNESCO has sought to combat illiteracy and increase levels of education in developing countries. In surveys conducted in courses on development, students unanimously agree that education is the most important solution towards reducing the inequality and stimulating development. This opinion is often reiterated through the world. While there may be a consensus in public opinion regarding the importance of education, this is not manifested in public expenditure around the world. The latest report on primary education by UNESCO indicates that countries throughout the developing world, be they Low Income or Middle income countries are short of meeting this goal in the near future. The report indicates the growing discrepancy within developing countries and between the developed and developing world when it comes to access to primary education. Staggering statistics is provided in a recent UNESCO report which notes

9 Clark, Surging inflation will stoke riots and conflict between nations, The Guardian, Friday May 23, 2008

10 Popov, Vladimir. Shock Therapy versus Gradualism Reconsidered: Lessons from Transition Economies after 15 years of Reforms. Comparative Economic Studies, Forthcoming Available at SSRN: <http://ssrn.com/abstract=918226>. 2008

11 Báez, Yeny. Avanzamos, pero con grandes diferencias. Entrevista con César Caballero. Iglesia Sin Fronteras. Junio 2008. Pages 31-33.

12 Bourguignon, F and Sundberg, M - UN Department of Economic and Social Affairs Working Paper 2006- un.org



that such as one out of every three children in the world are not attending school<sup>13</sup>.

Many countries have succeeded in providing a primary and secondary nationwide coverage of education. In Colombia and indeed many other developing countries, this goal seems to be plausible. However attaining the goal in many countries, particularly, the poorest, would be a lot more difficult. In Africa, another report notes that 140 million adults in Africa are illiterate, a factor which staggers primary education, as illiterate parents are less likely to send their children to school or provide the necessary parental support required for schooling<sup>14</sup>.

In addition to reporting shortages of schools in developing countries, UNESCO also reports the lack of facilities and structures in existing schools which contributes to slowing down the process. A report on the quality of primary schools indicated a great discrepancy between rural and urban schools in developing countries. A study conducted in High and Middle income countries revealed a lack of electricity, water and toilets. Countries such as India which have grown in terms of technology continue to struggle with rural schools lacking electricity. Should this be the case of such countries, what could be said about the Less Developed ones in terms of meeting the this MDG?

The attainment of this MDG or the rest for that matter is very much contingent upon the first one, reduction of poverty and improving expenditure in the education sector. While the privatization of social services in developing countries has contributed to efficiency and efficacy, it is important to reflect on the fact that developed countries, who are at the vanguard of Neo-liberalism continue to provide free primary education because they are aware of the adversities of not providing this service. It is therefore important to place on emphasis on actually increasing public expenditure in this sector while also permitting the existence of private education. Some social critics suggest that privatization has actually contributed to holding back this MDG<sup>15</sup>. They could be proven correct should structural adjustment programs continue to promote cut-

backs in the sector as most people in the Low Income countries are unable to pay schools.

It is important to also broaden the concept of education when analyzing this MDG as it goes way mere access to schooling, but also towards the context under which children grow under, the family. It seems that another objective of the UN should also be strongly considered in this MDG, the Convention on the Right of the Child, which identifies "the family, as the fundamental group of society and the natural environment for the growth and well-being of all its members and particularly children"<sup>16</sup>.

Therefore, successful primary education can be devoid without considering the family context of the child. D'Entremont notes that in the Western world, there is a removal from the "natural framework" of society, the family when considering the economic and social development of societies in considering social progress<sup>17</sup>. Therefore, in addition to considering the infrastructural and curricular improvements, this MDG, must also analyze the progress of education in the developed world in terms of how the family has been exempt from the educational progress. Compared to the developed world, irrespective of its poverty, the developing world is at an advantage given the intactness of the family structures which is increasingly not the case in the wealthiest countries and increasingly seen in Middle Income countries where there is a growing sense of anomie and abandonment resulting in deviancy, addiction and depressiveness in spite of economic success. As UNESCO has been successful in preserving cultural patrimonies in the developing world, emphasis must be placed on persevering family cultural attributes coupled with improving primary education services.

## **PROMOTING GENDER EQUALITY AND EMPOWERING WOMEN**

This MDG webpage notes that women have been generally in disadvantage when it comes to access to services and access to capital. The goal seeks to empower women in the ar-

13 UNESCO <http://portal.unesco.org>

14 UNESCO [http://www.unesco.org/education/GRM2006/full/africa\\_eng.pdf](http://www.unesco.org/education/GRM2006/full/africa_eng.pdf)

15 Amín, Samir. "The millennium Development Goals: A Critique from the South" Monthly Review. March 2006

16 Office of the High Commissioner for Human Rights 1989. [www.unhcr.ch/html/menu3/b/k2crc.htm](http://www.unhcr.ch/html/menu3/b/k2crc.htm) - 63k

17 D'Entremont, Alban. "Sustainable Development and the family" Persona y Bioética Vol.11 Number 1 p.9-22. 2007



eas of politics, education and employment. Facts such as women having very little access to property, earning 10% of the world's income and 75% of the world's illiterate being women, are amongst some the dismal data cited in the page. Increasing female enrollment in schools is a primary objective of this goal as school completion would empower woman in the factors mentioned above. It is reported that advances are being made in this goal throughout the world. The UN reports that globally, 95 girls for every 100 boys are attending school throughout the world suggesting that woman would eventually have equal access to schooling<sup>18</sup>. The report goes on to indicate that female parliamentary representation, an index for political participation, has increased to about 17% worldwide. The Arab and Sub-Saharan countries are reported to be behind in this endeavor.

From and a cultural and anthropological perspective, this MDG, perhaps generates the most controversy, while the data on the status of woman may be accurate. Several questions arise regarding the notion of gender empowerment and its cultural authenticity in that underpinnings of the MDG seem to be based on the Western experience of empowerment, without considering the diverse cultural contexts in which woman have lived and define their notion of empowerment.

Kabeer<sup>19</sup> (2005) suggests that this goal is viewed as being a final one as opposed to a means of reaching other goals. In the West, this has been the case. However, in developing countries, the fact that women largely see themselves as part of a household and raising children with strong community networks should be considered as a factor to strengthen this and indeed the other objectives. To what extent is this MDG based on imposing a perspective from the First World, where sociologically the unit of society has been the individual as opposed to the family?

Today, cities in Middle Income countries seem to be replicating the problems associated with this perspective through the increase of single parent families headed by women, who increasingly view empowerment from the perspective of the individual as opposed to the

family. There is no doubt, based on the data selected for measuring the indicator that women are not as empowered as men. Should the unit of analysis be based on gender and the individual? It seems that this MDG while improving the condition of women worldwide, it should go beyond the strictly focusing on gender but look into enhancing the role of woman within the context of the family. Furthermore, bettering the condition of woman should not be viewed from a modernization paradigm, but from the desires of the women within the context of their societies.

Furthermore, should the existing indicators be strongly adhered to paradoxes which actually overlook the poorest women could arise. For example, should we look at empowerment from the perspective of political representation, already, several developing countries, such as Liberia, India, Pakistan, Sri Lanka, Panama and Argentina have surpassed the developed world as their executive bodies have been occupied by women. If we are to look at access to schooling, there are many women, upper class, in the developing world, particularly in Middle Income countries who have access to girl's schools which have higher standards than most schools in the developed countries. The challenge here is how to expand educational coverage throughout the developing countries while considering the cultural aspects of empowerment. Therefore, gender should be addressed within a socio economic context as opposed to merely a single entity.

## **DEVELOP GLOBAL PARTNERSHIP FOR DEVELOPMENT**

Improving favorable trading conditions and economic assistance from the developed countries is considered to enhance the living conditions in the developing world. Aspects such as reducing the debt of poorer countries, lowering pharmaceutical product costs and providing more access to communication technologies are also components of this MDG. These are factors which would contribute immensely to reaching the health related MDGs not discussed here, particularly AIDS. This MDG is increasingly important as the interdependence between countries continues to grow through

18 UN Statistics Division: UN MDG Development Report 2006. [www.mdgs.un.org](http://www.mdgs.un.org)

19 Kabeer Naila. Gender equality and women's empowerment: Gender and Millennium Development Goals. Ed. Sweetman, Caroline Oxfam Publishing. London. 2005





Globalization. Furthermore, economies are much more strongly linked than ever, a factor which can clearly be seen with food and gas prices hitting the poorest countries of the world the hardest.

This MDG emanates from the North-South conflict or uneven global development which has resulted in a world system whereby there has been an antagonistic relationship between the rich and poor countries, often pointed out by dependency theorists such as Amin, Wallerstein and Cardoso to mention a few. While the electronics industry has permitted a worldwide convergence of technology irrespective of levels of development as the processes of innovation diffusion have bolstered, there is a growing lack of access to basic needs. The success of this MDG would largely depend on the commitment of the developed world and particularly the G9 in reducing interest rates and creating favorable prices for the product from poorer countries as most of these countries are complying with the economic restructuring policies which favor investment and devaluation of currencies. However, these policies are of little use should there not be much investment and a rise in gas prices which end up triggering further poverty.

International cooperation would also require the compromise of the worlds' polluting industries to reduce carbon emissions given their negative impact upon the developing world. The expanding Sahel region could be curbed if industries in the developed world are made to comply with the international agreements which reduce pollution. Global warming which is associated with this phenomena should also be reduced through international cooperation if health MDGs such as malaria reduction are to be met because presently the developing world is at a risk of a resurgence of malaria as the vector is has more favorable living conditions in tropical Africa<sup>20</sup>.

The end of the Cold War era actually enhanced international cooperation at the level of Non Governmental Organizations (NGOs) throughout the world. NGOs seem it increasingly be devoid of geopolitics as was the case during the Cold War and there seem to be less red

tape in setting them up irrespective of their ideological and social persuasions. However, should they be considered the final product of cooperation and not the means to local empowerment, will the developing world continue to be in a dependency milieu which would be difficult to overcome? Furthermore, while many NGOs are able to address calamities such as providing immediate relief for calamities, their long term development objectives are antagonize other NGOs and the local concepts of development. For example, there are NGOs which view development from the perspective of reducing fertility as it supposedly contributes to gender empowerment and focus heavily on contraceptive diffusion as a major vehicle to stimulating development. Other NGOs, tend to view this approach as being completely top-down and not considerate to local concepts of the family and the moral and ethical aspects involved in impacting the number of children a family should have.

At this juncture, the question of the destiny of a developing society arises. To what extent are concepts of development being determined by members of the developed world? Research conducted by Nelson on forty NGOs regarding their with MDGs and international cooperation reveals the existence of fundamental differences between conceptual approaches towards poverty reduction and those of the actual social actors in international cooperation. Finally, when international cooperation is based on theoretical frameworks which are completely derived from the developed world and their feasibility is not anthropologically analyzed and they are merely products of social engineering programs, the developed world would continue to fall victim to exogenous development.

## CONCLUSIONS

Since the end of WWII the success rate of the Marshall plan which reconstructed Europe, paved the way for the World Bank and also the initiatives of the UNDP through the creation of the United Nations. Much enthusiasm was generated over the potential benevolence of development programs and initiatives generated by these organizations in redressing

---

20 Patz and Olson, Patz, Johanathen and Patrz, Sarah "Malaria risk and temperature: Influences from global climate change and local land use practice" Proceedings of the National Academy of Sciences April 2006. Volume 103. 5635-5636



economic and social disparities in developing countries. It seems that this institutional intervention in rebuilding Europe was viewed as being a plausible approach to development. The approach is institutional in that development programs are orchestrated by state agencies in a "top down" manner, based on what UN experts have detected as being the key obstacles to development through meetings held during the 90's.

The Marshall plan was perhaps the first full-fledged international response to a global problem resulting in success and contributing to not only to the restitution of the world's most powerful nations, but also to enhancing their physical quality of lives as welfare states were fortified and able to redress social disparities. While in general terms, attributing the Marshall plan to post WWII development in Europe is not difficult, prescribing this approach which seems to be the case of the MDGs, through its list of what should be done by the year 2015 is somewhat difficult. The objectives of the Marshall plan were indisputably clearer as they involved restoring and modernizing what was damaged during the war, making the top down approach utilized in the MDG formation, much more viable for policy implantation.

Unlike the problems addressed by the Marshall Plan which were rectifiable within the context of national boundaries, solving today's problems at the level of states, as is the case with MDGs is somewhat farfetched, given that they permeate national boundaries. Major problems which hold back some of the MDGs such as Global Warming, and growing food prices are difficult to redress through national policy adjustments. Other, issues which involve education and gender equality require a much more insight into their underpinnings, through enhancing participation at local and grassroots levels.

## REFERENCES

Amin, Samir. "The Millennium Development Goals: A Critique from the South" *Monthly Review*. Volume 57, Number 10, March 2006

Báez, Yeny. "Avanzamos, pero con grandes diferencias" Entrevista con César Caballero. Iglesia Sin Fronteras. Junio 2008.

Black, Richard and White, Richard. *Targeting Development: Critical Perspectives on the Millennium Development Goals*. London: Routledge, London. 2006

Bourguignon, F and Sundberg, M - UN Department of Economic and Social Affairs Working Paper 2006 - un.org

Clark, A. "Surging inflation will stoke riots and conflict between nations", *The Guardian*, Friday May 23 2008 <http://www.guardian.co.uk/business/2008/may/23/inflation>.

D'Entremont, Alban. "Sustainable development and the family" *Persona y Bioética* Vol. 11 Number 1 p.9-22. 2007

Hayman, Rachel. "Are the MDGs enough? Donor perspectives and recipient visions of education and poverty reduction in Rwanda" *International Journal of Educational Development* Volume 27, Issue 4, July 2007, Pages 371-382

Kabeer, Naila. "Gender, equality and women's empowerment". In: *Gender and Millennium Development Goals* Ed. Sweetman, Caroline, London: 2005. Oxfam Publishing.

Patz and Olson, Patz, Johanathen and Patrz, Sarah. "Malaria risk and temperature: Influences from global climate change and local land use practice" *Proceedings of the National Academy of Sciences*. April 2006. Volume 103. Pages 5635-5636

Popov, Vladimir, "Shock Therapy versus Gradualism Reconsidered: Lessons from Transition Economies after 15 Years of Reforms" *Comparative Economic Studies*, Forthcoming Available at SSRN: <http://ssrn.com/abstract=918226>

Sachs, J. and McArthur, J. "The Millennium Project: a plan for meeting the Millennium Development Goals". *The Lancet*, Volume 365, Issue 9456, Pages 347 - 353

Stiglitz, Joseph E *Globalization and Its Discontents*, New York: Published by W.W.

Norton & Co. in 2002.

UNESCO <http://portal.unesco.org>

UNESCO <http://www.unesco.org/education/>



GMR2006/full/africa\_eng.pdf

UN Statistics Division 2006: UN MDG development Report. [www.mdgs.un.org](http://www.mdgs.un.org)

World Bank Group [http://devdata.worldbank.org/wdi2005/Section1\\_1\\_1.htm](http://devdata.worldbank.org/wdi2005/Section1_1_1.htm) 2005

UNDP Millennium Development Goals <http://www.undp.org/mdg/basics.shtml>

---

Students were interviewed at Universidad de La Sabana in courses on Population and Development.