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Introduction

Situating the Debate

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The creation of the Millennium Development Goals (MDGs) in 2001 promised the opening of a new chapter in international development. By 2015, global income poverty, hunger, and water deprivation were to be halved; even larger reductions were to be achieved in maternal and infant mortality; primary education would be universal; and the lives of 100 million slum dwellers were to be improved (see Table 1.1). In the eighth goal, wealthier states agreed to provide greater amounts of aid and debt relief, create a more responsive trade system, and place increased developmental focus on poor and small-island developing States.

The MDGs were soon hailed for their "catalytic effect on the global development debate" (Malloch-Brown, 2004: xviii). Despite early signs of sluggish progress, they were strongly defended for their potential to reshape and invigorate development discourse and practice and for supporting a 'big push' to mobilise substantial aid increases (Sachs, 2004; 2005; UNMP, 2005). Substantively, the goals presented, at least on their face, a new international consensus on the objectives of development: prioritising poverty reduction and diminishing the focus on economic growth, economic liberalisation, and donor self-interest. In terms of process, they offered a new form of "real-time accountability" for developing and developed States (Malloch-Brown, 2004). Simple, time-bound, outcome-based, and monitorable commitments presented a new tool to help spur policy reforms and the more equitable allocations of resources. The goals also possessed that elusive quality of international political legitimacy. Earlier attempts at target setting had been driven primarily by donors; for instance, the OECD's 1996 International Development

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TABLE 1.1. *MDG targets*[1]

Goal 1 – Eradicate extreme poverty and hunger
Target 1.A: halve the proportion of people whose income is less than $1 a day (between 1990 and 2015)
Target 1.B: achieve full and productive employment for all, including women and young people
Target 1.C: halve the proportion of people who suffer from hunger (1990–2015)

Goal 2 – Achieve universal primary education
Target 2.A: ensure that, by 2015, all children will be able to complete a full course of primary schooling

Goal 3 – Promote gender equality and empower women
Target 3.A: eliminate gender disparity in primary and secondary education, preferably by 2005, and in all levels of education no later than 2015

Goal 4 – Reduce child mortality
Target 4.A: reduce by two-thirds the under-five mortality rate (1990–2015)

Goal 5 – Improve maternal health
Target 5.A: reduce by three-quarters the maternal mortality ratio (1990–2015)
Target 5.B: achieve by 2015, universal access to reproductive health

Goal 6 – Combat HIV/AIDS, malaria, and other diseases
Target 6.A: have halted by 2015 and begun to reverse the spread of HIV/AIDS
Target 6.B: achieve, by 2010, universal access to treatment for HIV/AIDS for all those who need it
Target 6.C: have halted by 2015 and begun to reverse the incidence of malaria and other major diseases

Goal 7 – Ensure environmental sustainability
Target 7.A: integrate the principles of sustainable development into country policies and programmes and reverse the loss of environmental resources
Target 7.B: reduce biodiversity loss, achieving, by 2010, a significant reduction in the rate of loss
Target 7.C: halve, by 2015, the proportion of people without sustainable access to safe drinking water and basic sanitation
Target 7.D: have achieved by 2020 a significant improvement in the lives of at least 100 million slum dwellers

Goal 8 – Develop a global partnership for development
Targets 8.A–8.D cover aid, trade, debt, landlocked, and small-island States
Target 8.E: in cooperation with pharmaceutical companies, provide access to affordable essential drugs in developing countries
Target 8.F: make available the benefits of new technologies, especially information and communications technologies

[1] Note that some targets were added in 2005 by the General Assembly: the inclusion in Target 5B on reproductive health (see discussion in Chapter 9 in this volume), access to HIV treatment in Target 6, and the loss of biodiversity in Target 7. The targets were also rearranged: the original target on youth unemployment under Goal 8 was transferred to Goal 1 and broadened to include a wider range of beneficiaries (UN OHCHR, 2008).

Goals.[2] The MDGs carried the imprimatur of the world community, being derived from the Millennium Declaration of September 2000, which was adopted by Heads of State across the world.

Contemporaneously, the MDGs have generated their fair share of detractors, and even the UN General Assembly itself did not formally endorse the 2001 goals until 2005 (UN OHCHR, 2008). On the one hand, the targets were faulted for their lack of ambition. Halving certain poverty indicators appeared miserly and callous, and in the case of slum dwellers the threshold for success was even lower: the goals only targeted 9 per cent of the beneficiary group. Moreover, Pogge (2004) and others argued that the income-poverty, hunger, and other targets were manipulated to make the threshold even easier to reach. For instance, compared to the 1996 promise of Rome to halve the *number* of people living with hunger, the MDGs envisage an effective reduction of only 20 *per cent* of the number living in extreme poverty: the target is only to halve the *proportion* of persons living with hunger and the baseline was shifted back to 1990 (Pogge, 2010).

On the other hand, the over-ambitiousness of the targets was criticised. In the case of universal primary education, Clemens (2004: 1) argued that it is "economic conditions and slowly-changing parental education levels [that] determine children's school enrolment". Thus, historically determined goal setting would be more reasonable than "utopian" policy interventions as represented by the MDGs with the goal of universal primary education by 2015. The ambitiousness can be particularly visible at the regional level. Easterly (2009: 26) argued that the goals essentially set up Africa for failure, with the "unfortunate effect" of making this region's "successes look like failures".

Other critiques focused on the framework itself. Sceptics of the new public management philosophy behind the MDGs have argued that simplistic targets can produce adverse and unintended effects. Because efforts are focused on what is measurable and identifiable, attention is distracted from the root causes of problems that may persist well beyond the 2015 deadline (see discussion in Black and White, 2004).

The human rights community has generated some of the most sustained criticism. Human rights are conspicuously absent from the MDGs, despite the fact that the Millennium Declaration, from which the goals were drawn, reaffirms commitments to a plethora of human rights with a particular focus on the rights of minorities, women, and migrants. From a historical perspective, this silence might be viewed as entirely natural. The fields of human rights and development – globally and nationally – have been largely conceptually delinked and institutionally discrete (Uvin, 2004: 1). However, this situation was changing by the time the MDGs were adopted. By 1997, then UN Secretary-General Kofi Annan had directed all UN agencies to mainstream human rights in their activities, and many donors and development NGOs had begun experiments in the field.

[2] See also the 1992 UN Conference on the Environment and Development (UNCED) and the 1995 World Summit on Social Development.

These human rights critiques went beyond condemning the declaratory silence of the MDGs, with concern resting on the more systematic "betrayal" of the universal values and rights embodied in the Millennium Declaration (Saith, 2006). The decision to drop from the goals those Millennium Declaration targets with a strong human rights orientation – such as *affordable* water, *fair* trade, and support for *orphans* – was met with disbelief (Langford, 2010; Smets, 2009; UN OHCHR, 2008). Others questioned the lack of any emphasis on civil and political rights despite the more integrated approach of the Declaration (Alston, 2005: 778–84). Women's rights groups bemoaned the lack of reproductive health targets in the Millennium Declaration itself and the failure to include many of the earlier State commitments from the 1994 Cairo and 1995 Beijing Declarations. The United Nations Development Fund for Women (UNIFEM, 2004: 7) asked whether limiting gender equality and women's empowerment to primary and secondary education in the MDGs could "send the international community backwards", and Caribbean gender activist Antrobus (2004: 14) re-labelled the MDGs as the "Most Distracting Gimmick".

The design of the MDG architecture was also criticised. The use of globally fixed targets appeared to allow middle-income countries to evade any major responsibility, whereas relative-based targets permitted cherry-picking of more advantaged groups to the exclusion of minorities, persons with disabilities, or the poorest of the poor (Amnesty International, 2010; Langford, 2010; Saith, 2006; UN OHCHR, 2008). Others went further and worried that the MDGs represented and fostered a largely de-politicised and technocratic approach to development: they would not get at the root causes of the problems or encourage political spaces for more transformative development (Crossette, 2005; Yamin, 2010). International NGO networks such as Social Watch also criticised the lack of civil society participation in the formulation of the goals and targets (Bissio, 2003).

These various human rights critiques have been resisted in two ways. The first held that nothing can be gained from simply trying to advocate more 'human rights'; attention should be focused instead on achieving the goals as simply and as soon as possible. Moreover, if attempts were made to impose certain rights on the development process – for example, confidentially requirements for HIV tests or civil rights conditionalities for aid transfers – then human rights constituted a problem rather than a solution for poverty reduction. A second response was that the two fields of human rights and development are complementary and that the challenge is to ensure bridges between them are built in practice (Jahan, 2003; UNDP, 2007). Rights-based strategies – such as accountability mechanisms or the use of non-discrimination principles in indicator measurement – need to be added and stirred into the MDGs policy mix. Indeed, Alston chastised the human rights community, of which he is a leading member, for not recognising the opportunities posed by the MDGs. He called on them to "engage more effectively" with the MDGs and to "prioritize its concerns" rather than overly "prescriptive" norms (Alston, 2005: 755).

The above debates largely concerned the design of the MDGs, but the discourse and practice around the MDGs have not been monolithic. Their trajectory has been refined, appropriated, contested, and extended in different directions over the past decade. The manner in which the goals have been understood, defined, and implemented and intersected with human rights has varied significantly across governments and development agencies (UN OHCHR, 2010), making it difficult to speak of a unitary concept or approach.[3] Some of the rights criticisms have also been addressed in the intervening years: targets such as women's reproductive rights were added later to the list of goals, and in 2010, during the Millennium Summit, the General Assembly began to emphasise the importance of rights in realising the MDGs.[4] At the same time, others have argued that the MDGs have shifted further away from more progressive paradigms due to their capture by different actors (Fukuda-Parr and Hulme, 2009).

Consistent with this moving picture, a debate on the development paradigm post-2015 has emerged, and the UN Secretary-General has created a process for moving forward. The emerging debate is informed by calls for human rights to play a greater role, although in differing ways (cf. Gore, 2010; Langford, 2010; Sumner and Tiwari, 2009). Recommendations range from a new global social contract with the production of new public goods, to the creation of an explicit rights-based development agenda, to a mere tinkering of the target design to ensure harmonisation with human rights. Still others are calling attention to the need to avoid the marginalisation of Southern and grassroots voices in setting international development agendas.

To date, no major scholarly book on the MDGs and human rights has been published,[5] and this volume is intended to fill that gap. In this context, we set out to answer three questions:

1. The first is normative: how should we understand the potential relationship between MDGs and human rights from different theoretical perspectives?
2. The second is empirical: what has been the actual relationship between MDGs and human rights in practice over the past decade?
3. The third is consequential and future oriented: how should the two paradigms be integrated (or not) in the last period of the MDGs and in any post-2015 development agenda?

[3] As conceptual historian Quentin Skinner (1998: 64) puts it, the "terms we use to express concepts have a history".

[4] *Keeping the Promise: United to Achieve the Millennium Development Goals*, UNGA Resolution, U.N. Doc A/65/L.1, 17 September 2010.

[5] There have been two short special issues in the *International Journal of Human Rights* and *SUR: International Journal on Human Rights*, but the focus of each was limited, some of the content was dated, and none of the articles examine the post-2015 scenario. See Millennium Development Goals and Human Rights, *International Journal of Human Rights*, Vol. 13 No. 1 (2009); *SUR: International Journal on Human Rights*, Vol. 7 No. 12 (2010).

In answering these questions, authors were encouraged to take historical, contemporary, and forward-looking perspectives; in this way, the analysis is relevant to the ongoing dynamism of the human rights and development paradigms and enables a broader perspective on the trajectory of ideas and various path dependencies.

However, in embarking on this course, authors were advised to avoid *excessively normative* defences of either human rights or the MDGs. This book's objective is to ground different theoretical perspectives in actual discourses, practices, constraints, and available empirical evidence. If authors promote human rights as instrumentally valuable, for instance, we would expect them to provide some evidence or adequate reasoning for justifying this consequentialist contribution. One way of avoiding such Panglossian views has been to invite a diverse range of contributors from different disciplines: thirteen are economists; nine are lawyers; and the remainder are from political science, political philosophy, health, and architecture. Although a majority of the contributors have a critical perspective on the MDGs, a significant number are either largely defenders of the MDGs or are sceptical about the application of human rights approaches to solve the underlying problems with the MDGs.

The remainder of this introductory chapter establishes several key premises for the book. Understanding the current and potential interaction of human rights and MDGs requires knowledge of how the MDGs are conceived of in practice. Section 1 therefore tries to untangle what the MDGs are – in theory and practice – with a discussion of the literature on their impact. Section 2 adopts a similar approach with regard to human rights and discusses competing understandings in theory and practice, and Section 3 introduces the chapters in the book; drawing out the key themes in the book is reserved for the concluding chapter.

1. ROLE AND IMPACT OF THE MDGS

1.1. *The Purpose of the MDG Framework*

The MDGs are different things to different people. They are a set of indicators, but they are also an idea or 'global norm' for poverty reduction, an incentive structure for pro-poor development, and a view of development in themselves (see discussion in Sumner and Melamed, 2010). There are several detailed histories of the MDGs worth studying[6] – from the personal narratives that sketch out the opportunism of insiders and what Fukuda-Parr and Hulme (2009) call "message entrepreneurs" who sought to sustain and keep visible the gains of the Millennium Declaration (Vandemoortele, 2010) to those that place the MDGs in the context of broader political and policy trends (Black and White, 2004). Indeed, the assessment of the

[6] For a detailed history of the MDGs, see Manning (2009: Annex 2), Hulme (2007) in particular, and Vandemoortele (2010).

MDGs – both conceptually and the 'lived' MDG experience – is an emerging area of academic interest.

The MDGs are undeniably a set of indicators to assess progress on poverty reduction – specifying both quantitative (and non-quantified) targets – announced by the UN Secretary-General in 2001 and updated in 2005 by the Inter-Agency and Expert Group on the MDG Indicators (see Table 1.1). They consist of eight goals, twenty-one quantifiable targets (originally eighteen), and sixty indicators (originally forty-eight).

However, the way in which the indicators have been used in global and national monitoring and targeting schemes has varied considerably and has gone beyond mere monitoring of commitments. They have been used as a *planning* tool, providing the definitive determination of outcome achievement.[7] A body of literature and discourse that has evolved around the MDGs has taken this focus – a practical concern – and developed it by asking of the MDGs, 'how to do it?' or, more fundamentally, 'is it possible to do by 2015?' Soon after the MDGs were formulated, the United Nations Development Programme (UNDP) promoted the development of MDG-based planning and costing using the indicators (with 2015 as the key date), as well as the feasibility (or tracking) of the MDGs (see for a range of discussion Atkinson, 2006; Bourguignon et al., 2008; Chakravarty and Majumber, 2008; Reddy and Heuty, 2005).

But the MDGs represent more than quantitative targets for planning. They are an *idea* or *norm* constituting a package of sorts and, relatedly, an incentive structure. The indicator framework was and continues to be embedded within attempts to legitimise certain ideas or norms and incentivise particular actions.[8] For example, Manning (2009:13) hypothesises that the purpose of the MDGs was to "encourage sustainable pro-poor development progress and donor support of domestic efforts in this direction":

> It is clear that the MDG framework was conceived in the context of encouraging development and the reduction of poverty, seen as a multi-dimensional issue, drawing on previous approaches to highlighting 'basic needs', and not least on the Human Development paradigm developed in the 1990s.

[7] There is an enormous amount of applied writing on the MDGs from the UN and other international and national organizations. There are the UN's Annual *MDG Report* and national *MDG Reports*, as well as the main report and numerous sub-reports of the UNMP (2005) and the IMF/World Bank's *Annual Monitoring Report*.

[8] Fukuda-Parr and Hulme (2009) discuss how the 'poverty norm' became a 'new international norm'. They contend that the MDGs embody global poverty eradication as an ethical, moral imperative and that an international norm emerged, "cascaded", and became internalised. They draw on Finnemore and Sikkink's (1998) *Life Cycle of an International Norm*, which has three stages that they summarise as (i) "norm emergence", in which a norm begins to receive domestic and international attention that culminates in a "tipping point" – when a critical mass of states adopt the norm; (ii) "norm cascade", when the norm diffuses throughout the international community; and (iii) "internalisation", when the norm changes behaviours. Each stage is characterised by a particular set of actors, motives, and mechanisms of influence.

This argument has an affinity with Severino's (2007: 1) suggestion that the MDGs could be understood as "sketching at the global level the social safety net" – a "social counterpart to globalisation".

An alternative conception is that the MDGs were an attempt to push the poverty paradigm towards public management approaches rather than the development of global safety nets: "human development meets results-based management" (Hulme, 2007: i). Country governments and donors would be held to account on their delivery of poverty reduction against the MDG benchmarks, a pattern earlier adopted in the 1990s in many public sector reforms around the world. Together with Fukuda-Parr (2010: 4), Hulme characterised the MDGs as a "super-norm" – a cluster of inter-related prescriptive norms grouped into a unified and coherent framework. The goals emerged as a "useful communication device", "a means of coordination", and a way of "mobilising consensus" amongst the development and international community, long fractured by disputes over neo-liberal policies (Ibid.: 4, 31). The MDGs meant "a shift away from structural adjustment", but they "did not refute a market-based approach to development" (Ibid.: 31).

Even defining the MDGs has been difficult. At the national and regional level, there have been various so-called MDG-plus approaches that adopt (or adapt) additional targets and indicators. Further, as the authors in this book demonstrate, the MDGs have been appropriated at the national level for a wide array of justifications: from perpetuating slum evictions to legitimising civil society action on human rights. Internationally, some commentators have also pointed to how different actors have used the MDG framework to underpin the case for continued aid for poverty reduction (Manning, 2009) or to provide the moral justification or fig leaf for prevailing international development policies.[9] The relative openness and ambiguity of the goals, and even of the targets, combined with their political legitimacy, provide ample room for ideational and strategic creativity.

1.2. *What Has Been the Impact of the MDGs?*

Perhaps the defining question is this: how do global agreements and conventions contribute to social change? Assessing the impact of a normative framework such as the MDGs is, of course, an art rather than science, particularly as one

[9] As to the latter, Fukuda-Parr (2010: 33) argues that "[t]he MDGs are embedded in a new architecture of development aid that has shifted some instruments but maintained the neoliberal economic strategy intact. Under this new architecture, poverty reduction MDGs define the long-term objective, the PRSPs [Poverty Reduction Strategy Papers] define the nationally owned strategy to this end; while partnership and mutual accountability define the donor–recipient relationship. This is a major move away from the architecture of the earlier decades dominated by economic stabilisation and growth as an objective. . . . But the fundamental policy approach of neoliberalism continues to be applied, while incorporating social investments to meet basic needs as an important addition. More fundamental changes in institutions and norms are not accommodated."

TABLE 1.2. *Evidence on MDG impacts*

Channel of impact	Key findings
Adoption in global policy discourse, and in PRSPs and donors statements	• Global – high impact; PRSPs – medium impact • Donor statements – medium impact
Adaptation to locally defined goals, indicators, and targets	• Good evidence of impact in some countries, but mixed/unclear/needs more systematic research
Allocation (of resources) towards social spending by donors and governments	• High impact on overseas development aid (ODA) and sub-sector allocations to MDG-related areas such as primary education and infectious diseases; unclear impact on government social spending
Aberrations distortions and other forms than expected	• Unclear in general. but evidence of poorest quintiles with considerably higher deprivations than average indicators and comparison of net primary and teacher ratios; for example, evidence in sub-Saharan Africa suggests net primary enrolment may have improved at the expense of education quality
Acceleration of poverty reduction post-2002	• Globally – weak evidence of acceleration Least developed countries and sub-Saharan Africa – stronger acceleration

Sources: Bourguignon et al. (2008); Fukuda-Parr (2010); McKinley (2010); UNDP (2010); Vandemoortele and Delamonica (2010).

moves from contested quantitative findings to qualitative and conditional conclusions. Moreover, conclusions as to the causality of specific outcomes simply cannot be drawn. However, the task of assessing a range of effects is not unfamiliar to the social sciences or to evaluations of other international regimes, including human rights treaties (e.g., Hafner Burton and Ron, 2007; Simmons, 2009). Although the literature on the effects of the still evolving MDG regime is only emerging, it is possible to delineate different types of impacts and gesture towards their significance and the degree of causality.[10]

The available evidence on the effects of the MDGs is summarised in Table 1.2. As can be seen, the types of impacts extend beyond direct material effects to include indirect and, to a lesser extent, deeper symbolic and political effects (see Langford, 2013; Rodríguez-Garavito, 2011). In the quest for alliteration, albeit with an underlying

[10] This section partly draws on Sumner and Tiwari (2011).

logic of impacts at various 'moments' in the policy process – they have been categorised as follows:

- adoption (in policy);
- adaptation (to locally defined goals, indicators, and targets);
- allocation (of resources);
- aberrations (and unintended distortions);
- acceleration (of MDG progress in actual poverty reduction outcomes).

Adoption

Recent analysis by Manning (2009: 25–26) suggests that the influence of the MDGs on the international poverty discourse has been "strong, and significantly stronger than previous attempts to use indicator sets to highlight issues". He cites as evidence the regular MDG Reports and Global Monitoring Reports issued by various multilateral agencies, the national and international work of UNDP, high level events, the use of the MDGs in G8 Summit discourse, and the use of MDG target data in agendas such as Education for All. At the country level, adoptive effects are more diffuse. In terms of Poverty Reduction Strategy Papers (PRSPs) and donor statements, Fukuda-Parr (2010: 29) notes that "all but four of the 22 PRSPs reviewed emphatically state commitment to the MDGs as a principle", and most included key MDG priority areas. However, as Table 1.3 shows, donor strategies have emphasised some priority areas more than others. Multidimensional poverty (including income poverty, education, and health) is often the stated central policy objective of most bilateral aid programs, but "some objectives such as maternal mortality and child survival receive surprisingly limited emphasis" (ibid.).

Adaptation

At the country level, the MDGs may have inspired the adoption of *new* and more contextually appropriate poverty frameworks There is some evidence of local adaptation in that locally defined MDGs were added in a number of countries – Afghanistan, Albania, Azerbaijan, Benin, Bhutan, Cambodia, Cook Islands, Kenya, Kosovo, Mongolia, and Vietnam. Furthermore, a recent UNDP/Columbia University study of thirty countries revealed that twenty-five had adapted the MDG goals or indicators (see examples in Africa; also see Table 1.4). Yet evidence remains relatively thin in this area.

Allocation

One beneficiary from the MDGs has been official development assistance (ODA) mobilisation, particularly in areas of health and education. As Clemens, Kenny, and Moss (2007: 747) put it, "there can be little doubt that the MDGs helped galvanise the aid community and reverse the aid declines". At a global level, bilateral ODA has gone up in absolute terms since 2000 from US$46 billion to US$74 billion and from