

In 2015

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In 2015, Barack Obama will be into the latter part of his second term as US President but China will have overtaken the world as its superpower. The London Olympics will have finished over-budget, but we will be waving goodbye to the last of the global recession at least. A climate change treaty will be in force and our reliance on oil may have weaned, just a bit. Perhaps the war in Iraq will be over and stability reign in Afghanistan, though peace in the Middle East will still be elusive. In rich countries, baby boomers would have almost all retired, while in developing countries a young workforce will have emerged. And the global development industry will have 70 years of history of failed attempts to solve the problem of under-development.

So what happened to those three consonants awkwardly strung together, the MDGs? While it may still be part of our collective global lexicon, a term at the back of all of our heads somewhere in between ABC, GDP and 123, its gloss will have faded. We will have a new term to capture our imagination and plan our next major global conference around, something that expresses concern of an impending crisis (whatever the next one might that be) but also hopeful enough to empower and energize the industry. After all, the MDGs themselves emerged at the UN Millennium Summit of 2000, at a time when the aid industry was suffering from its own personal crisis. Official development assistance had tumbled by more than 20 billion between 1991-1997, while anti-globalization movement increasingly questions what aid monies and aid organizations were actually achieving. There was growing competition from new actors, including the private sector and increasingly professional non-governmental organizations. The MDGs arrived at the fortuitous time when the development industry needed a new *raison d'être*, an extra injection of legitimacy that could ensure its continuity and credibility into the new millennium. The goal of poverty reduction as encapsulated by the MDGs, tied prettily with a participatory, inclusive bow, provided exactly that.

Don't get me wrong. I'm no fan of "deadening" aid. The MDGs have led to some ambitious efforts on the part of some countries, and individuals (think Sachs, Bono, Brown) to address serious development problems. Budgets for health, education and water and sanitation are all up. People now actually care about what donor agencies are doing with their tax dollars, and poor people are seeing a bit more of this money. Nonetheless, reading some of the self-described successes of the MDG

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by country makes one wonder whether its biggest contribution has been the public spectacles and community hoopla it has generated inside countries.

Vietnam, Jordan Ryan (UNDP Resident Rep): One highlight of our public advocacy was the live hour-long TV debate on the MDGs on a popular national television program, featuring senior government officials; and, of course, who could ever forget the Eight MDG Swans (led by yours truly) who danced the MDG Ballet in front of all 500 UN Staff and their families celebrating UN Day.

Ukraine, Douglas Gardene (UNDP Resident Rep): One advocacy experience that has had a profound impact at many levels was the October 2002 MDG Youth Summit in Kiev. The UNCT felt that adults only on this topic would be an injustice and that it would be critical to tap the ideas and voices of young people as equal partners, especially since the goals for the year 2015 are fundamental to today's youth who will be at the prime of adulthood during the target year!

This is not just a selective use of referencing. The purpose of the UNDP document from which these quotes are taken is to consolidate MDG success stories by country. Yet, going through the list, what you find is a tremendous amount of text describing the success of the MDGs as an advocacy device rather than as an instrumental tool actually achieving poverty reduction. MDG performance is largely defined in terms of its outreach activities: for example, the MDGs now features in the country's Poverty Reduction Strategy Papers, there are growing consultations with marginal segments of the population, a new report is being written to monitor MDGs, a committee is struck to talk about them, ballet is being danced.

What all this suggests is that the MDG's greatest success has been as a political tool to draw attention to poverty-related issues. Who would have guessed that measuring poverty could be so, well, useful?

The real question that needs to be answered is whether this increased profile has translated into new convictions and commitments to tangibly do something about poverty that is both sustainable and structural. And this is ultimately what the MDGs are not doing. Providing anti-retrovirals to increase the survival prospects of HIV/AIDS sufferers (Goal 6) is not the same thing as building a functioning and accessible health system. Primary schooling for all children (Goal 2) does not ensure there are jobs for them once they're done, or guarantee that basic literacy and numeracy skills are mastered. The measurement of poverty has not translated into its appropriate management for long-term sustainable development.

Looking into the future, the question of what comes after has to take into consideration that a post-MDG world will again deal a significant blow to the credibility of the global development community. The failure to universally achieve the high-profile goals, in conjunction with the largest global recession since the Great Depression, will inevitably lead to a dip in aid funding. Development policy wonks know this and are already thinking earnestly about what comes next, what will serve as the next holy grail for development as well as the life buoy for the

industry. And mark my words, helping those deemed too desperate and miserable to help themselves will feature yet again, the new development paradigm a loosely edited version of ones gone by over the last seventy years.

Electorates the world over must anticipate this future call to arms and demand something different. They need to mobilize support for a new development paradigm that engages with questions of political reforms, both inside countries as well as globally, rather than continues to swatch itself in poverty rhetoric. They must protest against the inequalities that are the underlining and ultimate source of poverty. They should define a new paradigm that draws attention to pockets of under-development in the rich world, and bastions of tremendous wealth in the developing world. They must recognize that the problem of poverty is not a problem of money, or a problem of not knowing what to do, but a problem of vested interests, unequal power relations and the triumph of greed over good.

The new development paradigm in a post-MDG world needs to be about acting politically for dramatic political change. This doesn't lend itself to easy slogans, catchy acronyms or simple measures. But what it might just do is actually eradicate poverty for good once and for all, and thus perhaps eventually redeem the MDGs in the eyes of its bittersweet critics.