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International Norm Dynamics and ‘the End of Poverty’: Understanding the Millennium Development Goals (MDGs)

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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

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I. Introduction

The Millennium Development Goals (MDGs), the set of eight goals with quantitative targets to be achieved by 2015 in areas of income poverty, hunger, gender equality, education, environment, health and survival, and global partnerships, have garnered unprecedented consensus and commitment to ending poverty (Appendix 1). They present global poverty eradication and/or global poverty reduction¹ as an ethical imperative for all states (indeed for all their citizens) and for international organisations. The MDGs have become the overarching goal of the international development agenda.² Furthermore, the MDGs make it clear that poverty is to be understood as a multi-dimensional human problem that requires a multi-faceted attack.

This was a significant shift in the policy agenda for international development in two important ways: first, because prior to the agreement of the MDGs, poverty reduction was not the top priority; and second, when it was mentioned, poverty was viewed unidimensionally as income poverty, rather than multi-dimensionally as a set of human deprivations.³ Strategies over earlier decades had focused on economic growth, measuring progress by per capita income. These ranged from building infrastructure, human capital and an industrial base in the 1960s and 1970s, to economic liberalisation in the 1980s and 1990s to institutional reforms since the 1990s.⁴ Although issues like hunger, education and child survival had been areas of concern for a long time, they had not been at the top of the international development agenda. The First, Second and Third UN Development Decades (1960s, 1970s and 1980s) were primarily focused on economic transformation, growth and industrialisation. The MDGs reflect an important normative shift and an endorsement of poverty eradication and human well being as the central objectives of development. The MDGs seek to directly improve human lives and implicitly spell out that 'growth is not enough' for poverty to be ended.

How did this happen? Why were the MDGs so successful in shifting the focus onto broader issues of poverty. Most UN declarations and efforts at setting international development agendas have had much less reach. This paper seeks to answer a number of questions about the evolution and acceptance of the MDGs. What was the nature of the normative shifts embodied in the MDGs? What and who drove them and how did they evolve? And, have the MDGs genuinely raised the prospects for reducing or eradicating poverty? It uses the model of international norm dynamics elaborated by

¹ The ultimate goal is usually expressed as global poverty eradication. However, many individuals and organisations are concerned that such a goal is overambitious for the world we live in. As a result, they conceptualise the contemporary goal as global poverty reduction, a halfway point on the way to attaining global poverty eradication.

² Black and White, 2004; UNDP, 2003.

³ Fukuda-Parr, 2004.

⁴ Greig, Hulme and Turner, 2007.

Finnemore and Sikkink⁵ to explain how the MDGs facilitated the emergence and partial institutionalisation of global poverty eradication/reduction as an international norm. It argues that ideals and ideas played an important role in driving these shifts and that this re-definition of what international development is seeking to achieve cannot be understood purely from a realist perspective as an outcome of the end of the Cold War. Their conceptualisation of a three-stage process of norm development and the importance of norm entrepreneurs proves especially useful. Finnemore and Sikkink argue that vaguely specified norms are unlikely to reach a tipping point and then 'cascade' across countries.⁶ This paper concurs and finds that the MDGs' super-norm brought specificity and concreteness to the idea of ending global poverty. Earlier specifications of 'development and poverty eradication' had been too vague to capture the imaginations and empathy of leaders and publics around the world.

In analysing the evolution and effects of the MDGs we also seek to extend the conceptual apparatus proposed by Finnemore and Sikkink in four main ways. First, this paper introduces the concept of a 'super-norm' – a cluster of inter-related prescriptive norms grouped into a unified and coherent framework. The MDGs are represented here as a super-norm that promotes global poverty eradication by encompassing a number of specific norms that relate to particular dimensions of poverty, such as education, women's empowerment and improved health.

Second, the paper introduces the concept of 'message entrepreneurs', as distinct from Finnemore and Sikkink's 'norm entrepreneurs'.⁷ While norm entrepreneurs were central to the task of promoting the acceptance of specific norms (about which they were passionate) within the MDGs, it was message entrepreneurs who framed the MDGs as a super-norm and who played the lead role in mobilising consensus around them. In addition, the paper identifies the distinct role that 'elite technocrats' played in finalising the detailed targets and indicators of the MDGs.

Third, the paper highlights the distinction between norm institutionalisation (the processes of making policy statements and public announcements about a norm) and norm implementation (the actual allocation of budgets and the undertaking of practical actions to achieve a norm). While the MDGs have been institutionalised as a super-norm at the level of international and national policy statements, to date they have only led to behaviour change in a limited number of cases. Many important stakeholders (governments, organisations and leaders) 'talk the talk' but they do not 'walk the walk'. There is wide agreement that global poverty *ought* to be eradicated but concrete action has lagged far behind the rhetoric. Global poverty remains a continuing challenge and

⁵ Finnemore and Sikkink 1998.

⁶ Finnemore and Sikkink 1998.

⁷ Finnemore and Sikkink 1998.

progress to reduce it is too slow and uneven to achieve the 2015 MDG goals and targets. While many factors are involved in this implementation gap, we believe that the vast disparity between MDG institutionalisation and MDG implementation is in part due to the MDGs being a prescriptive super-norm, rather than a regulatory norm that can be implemented by 'the stroke of a pen'. The MDGs face severe implementation problems as they demand a broad range of behaviour changes. Finally, with reference to the EU, the paper illustrates the way in which Finnemore and Sikkink's highlighting of domestic-international linkages in the evolution of international norms can be extended into a domestic-regional-global set of interactions.

II. MDGs and the 'super-norm' of ending global poverty

In this paper we treat the MDGs as a vehicle to communicate and promote the super-norm of ending global poverty.⁸ They are a framework that attempts to incorporate several different norms into a coherent structure. A super-norm seeks to achieve more than the sum of its parts because of the positive feedback interactions between each norm. Although each MDG is important as an individual norm, they are strategic components of the broader super-norm that extreme, dehumanising poverty is morally unacceptable and should be eradicated. The components of the MDGs are interrelated, both as normative ends and instrumental means. As ends, they are related in that they are all a necessary part of human dignity.⁹ As means, the findings of research over the 1980s and 1990s have shown the synergies among these components; for example education contributes to reduced child mortality, better health contributes to improving worker productivity and raising household incomes, and a fairer trade regime increases the growth prospects of developing countries.¹⁰ An important conceptual advance in development thinking over the 1990s was the idea that poverty is multi-dimensional, and that ending poverty required addressing these different dimensions simultaneously.

However, until the 1990s global poverty reduction was, at best, only a nascent super-norm. While activists, politicians, scholars and international commissions,¹¹ and at times major international organisations (the World Bank under McNamara in the 1970s, UNICEF under Grant in the 1980s and early 1990s) had drawn attention to the idea of a multi-dimensional attack on poverty, the main idea guiding thought and action on international development had been promoting economic growth through industrialisation and modernisation. It was believed that economic development, through state guidance (1945 to 1970s) or radical liberalisation (1980s to 1990s), would create

⁸ This differs from most other analyses of them, as they are usually treated as an element of a planning process.

⁹ The MDGs, except Goal 8, reflect human rights. For analysis of the overlap, see UNDP, 2003; UN OHCHR, 2008.

¹⁰ Black and White, 2004; UN Millennium Project, 2005.

¹¹ Andrew Shonfield, 1960; Gunnar Myrdal, 1970; J. K. Galbraith, 1980; Brandt Commission. 1980.

the mass prosperity that would eradicate income poverty. Once per capita income had risen then other deprivations would automatically disappear. During the post-War years some specific norms that would eventually become part of the MDG super-norm were advanced through UN conferences and declarations.¹² The earliest was the World Declaration on Education for All.¹³ Later came freedom from hunger and gender equality. This intensified in the late 1980s, as disaffection with structural adjustment programmes and the liberalisation policy reform agenda set off civil society protests. Relatedly, a series of UN conferences on major world challenges, from the environment to family planning to women's equality, produced declarations and goals that prioritised poverty reduction, people and equality.¹⁴

In spite of the growing international concern about poverty, there was no concerted action to systematically promote global poverty eradication or reduction, or to create an overarching framework. This changed in the 1990s, when multiple processes produced a series of attempts to craft a super-norm. The first was the Copenhagen Declaration from the World Social Summit in 1995; next, came the International Development Goals adopted by the donor countries in the OECD Development Assistance Committee (DAC) in 1996; later, came the Millennium Declaration in 2000. Each of these specifications was part of an evolutionary process with its own motivation and dynamics, but in addition each was in competition with the other, as they were guided by different sets of actors and targeted different audiences. As a result, and despite substantial overlaps, each had different forms and contents. The 'noting' of the MDGs in 2001 at the UN General Assembly signified that a consensus had been reached, and brought an end¹⁵ to these processes of negotiation and bargaining. There were an infinite number of specifications that the super-norm could have taken, but the MDGs became the dominant vehicle for representing and promoting global poverty reduction. Three factors explain the dominance of the MDGs: they have unprecedented political legitimacy (approval at the Millennium Summit by heads of state or government),¹⁶ their specificity and the power of their quantitative and time-bound targets; and, because of the successful efforts of the message entrepreneurs in packaging and effectively communicating them.

¹² Jolly, Emmerij, Ghai and Lapeyre, 2004.

¹³ UNESCO, 1990.

¹⁴ UN ECOSOC (2005) summarises the totality of these conference goals, highlighting common themes and motivations. See also Schechter, 2005; UN DESA, 2007.

¹⁵ Or, more accurately, almost brought to an end these processes. As discussed later, additions were made to the original MDG listing in 2005. The MDG listing of 2001 had eight goals, 18 targets and 48 indicators. By 2008 this had extended to eight goals, 21 targets and 60 indicators.

¹⁶ The summit was the largest ever gathering of heads of state and government. Over the 1990s, global conferences began to bring together heads of state, starting with the Children's summit in 1990. 117 heads of state or government attended the Copenhagen Social Summit of 1995. But the Millennium Summit brought together 189 presidents, monarchs or prime ministers. Governments were more likely to support follow-up processes to implement the MD because it had been adopted by the head of state or government, unlike most UN declarations, where countries are represented only at the ministerial level.

III. The life cycle of the MDGs: The emergence, cascade and partial internalisation of global poverty eradication

In their seminal paper ‘Norm dynamics and political change’, Martha Finnemore and Kathryn Sikkink present a three-stage life cycle of norm progression: (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.¹⁷ Each stage is characterised by a particular set of actors, motives and mechanisms of influence (Table 1), though it must be noted that there is no guarantee that a norm will complete the life cycle and these processes can go into reverse.

Table 1. Life cycle of an international norm

	Stage 1: Norm emergence	Stage 2: Norm cascade	Stage 3: Norm internalisation
Actors	Norm entrepreneurs with organisational platforms	States, international organisations, networks	Law, professions, bureaucracy
Motives	Altruism, empathy, ideational commitment	Legitimacy, reputation, esteem	Conformity
Dominant mechanisms	Persuasion	Socialisation, institutionalisation, demonstration	Habit, institutionalisation

Source: Finnemore and Sikkink, 1998.

While Finnemore and Sikkink illustrate their study by reference to norms about women’s rights and the laws of war, their framework helps explain the processes through which the super-norm of ending global poverty emerged and gained momentum. At the heart of the emergence of global poverty reduction as a super-norm were a set of norm entrepreneurs, who used their organisational platforms (in UN agencies, NGOs and social movements) to energise and advance public debates around a variety of human deprivations. UN conferences and summits, and the associated preparatory and publicity activities, were the main venues for advancing specific norms. However, as argued below, the weaving of these different norms into a super-norm was not undertaken by norm entrepreneurs; rather a different group of people, who we term message

¹⁷ Finnemore and Sikkink, 1998.

entrepreneurs, crafted the super-norm. Message entrepreneurs applied diplomatic skills to the selection of a reasonably coherent and concise set of norms in pursuit of an international agreement by governments and international organisations.

As detailed below, two particular agreements, the International Development Goals (IDGs) and the MDGs, took the super-norm to two different tipping points. The IDGs, approved unanimously by the OECD-DAC in 1996, led to an initial specification of the super-norm of global poverty eradication cascading through the OECD's member countries. Despite the efforts of norm entrepreneurs like Clare Short to cascade the IDGs into developing countries, the diffusion of the IDGs stopped within the rich world. The governments and citizens of lower and middle income countries took little interest in the IDGs and no developing country adopted them. The Millennium Development Goals of 2001 (legitimised by the UN General Assembly's Millennium Declaration) took a different specification of the super-norm and produced the tipping point that gave the idea of global poverty eradication approval across the entire world. While the processes leading up to the IDG and MDG listings were closely intertwined, these two specifications were addressed to different but overlapping audiences. The IDGs had to gain the approval of OECD states (a group of 24 rich countries) while the MDGs sought to gain the approval of the entire UN membership – 189 countries in very different economic, social and political circumstances. The relatively close overlap between the IDGs and MDGs might be surprising, but they were drawn from the same inputs (UN conference and summit declarations) and the message entrepreneurs who were called on to produce the 'final' MDGs had close personal links, because of earlier collaborative work on the IDGs. What appeared at times to be a 'twin track' process,¹⁸ an OECD process and a UN process, achieved its global tipping point through the deliberations of message entrepreneurs with experience in the UN, OECD-DAC and the International Financial Institutions (IFIs).

Norm emergence – Eradicating poverty as a global responsibility

Multi-dimensional human poverty was a central theme that emerged through the 1990s UN conferences, from the Children's Summit in New York¹⁹ to Rio (environment and development) to Cairo (population and development) to Beijing (gender equality) to Istanbul (habitat). It was explicitly articulated at the World Summit on Social Development in Copenhagen. Driving these processes were norm entrepreneurs, who were deeply personally motivated by a commitment to poverty eradication/reduction and human wellbeing in different areas. These were individuals who had dedicated their professional lives to these causes and found themselves with potentially important organisational platforms as leaders of UN agencies, advocacy NGOs and social movements. They commissioned studies and reports, collated and synthesised scientific

¹⁸ Hulme, 2008.

¹⁹ The summit was officially not a UN summit, but was 'held at the UN'.

evidence, and engaged in public advocacy and media campaigns to promote the specific norms to which they were committed.

A leading example of an effective norm entrepreneur was Jim Grant, Executive Director of UNICEF at the time, who had spent decades researching, writing and campaigning to end poverty. He had mounted the first UN summit of the recent era in 1990 – the World Summit for Children – against considerable scepticism and opposition. In the end, an unprecedented number of countries (159) and heads of state or government (71) attended the Summit. *The World Declaration on the Survival, Protection and Development of Children* and its *Plan of Action* included a number of goals related to infant and maternal mortality, child malnutrition and illiteracy, access to basic services for health and family planning, education, water and sanitation. Subsequently, Jim Grant used these goals to mobilise action, using UNICEF headquarters and field offices as an organisational platform. He travelled the world persuading national leaders to finance and implement plans for immunisation, iodised salt and a number of other concrete targets.²⁰

The success of the Children's Summit inspired other movers and shakers within the UN system to organise their conferences more effectively, to bring in heads of government and to set concrete quantitative goals.²¹ Amongst these was another leading norm entrepreneur, Dr Nafis Sadik, the Executive Director of the UN Population Fund (UNFPA), a medical doctor from Pakistan who had spent all her professional life advocating and advancing family planning programmes in her home country and internationally. She waged numerous diplomatic and political battles to include important but controversial issues in the deliberations and conclusions of the 1994 International Conference on Population and Development (ICPD) in Cairo. She argued that the conference was about development and women's empowerment, and that politically contested issues such as reproductive rights, and even abortion, could not be ignored when these were the cause of so many pregnancy-related deaths. She won over the Vatican²² and states such as Sudan and Nicaragua, who finally accepted that unsafe abortions were a maternal health issue. This illustrates the re-framing²³ of what had been conventionally considered a narrow, sectoralised and technical issue into a broader women's rights issue that was at the heart of the global poverty super-norm. The ICPD agenda is comprehensive, setting the population and development challenge in the

²⁰ Adamson and Jolly, 2001.

²¹ Hulme, 2008. The Children's Summit also served as an important organisational model for global mobilisation, later adapted by the Earth Summit in Rio de Janeiro (1992) and the Social Summit in Copenhagen (1995). Its involvement of world leaders and its establishment of time-bound, measurable goals were pioneering endeavours, helping to mobilise resources and commitment and shape new initiatives with clear aims and directions.

²² It must be noted that the Vatican reversed its stance soon after the conference.

²³ Specialists in population issues and reproductive health call this a 'paradigm shift'.

principles of sexual and reproductive rights and gender equality. It also set many quantitative goals to be achieved by 2015.

International NGO networks also played a major role as norm entrepreneurs – often working unofficially beside official delegates to the conferences. The International Coalition on Women’s Health (ICWH) played a major role at Cairo and promoted the evolution of an accessible evidence base and an epistemic community for reproductive health.²⁴ The women’s movement played a strategic role at several summits, carefully deploying its members to lobby key audiences on key issues at key moments.²⁵

These conference processes were different from the typical UN meetings in New York, which involve only diplomats. They required detailed preparatory processes that brought together the national governments of developing and developed countries, international and national NGOs, donor agencies, and the media in protracted dialogues to formulate national and regional positions as inputs into the final outcome documents. The content of these declarations reflected a widely held dissatisfaction with global development trends, which showed economic stagnation, increasing poverty and global inequality during the 1980s and into the 1990s, reversing the gains made in the 1960s and 1970s.²⁶ The conferences were high energy events, with widespread participation and strategic coalition building across government and non-government actors.

Different norm entrepreneurs used their organisational platforms to persuade governments to adopt increasingly detailed sets of goals. Juan Somavia, as Ambassador of Chile and as Secretary General of the Social Summit, negotiated the 1995 Copenhagen Declaration with the UN member states, working closely with Nitin Desai, the UN Under- Secretary General in charge of the Department of Social and Economic Affairs. John Langmore, a parliamentarian and NGO leader from Australia energetically promoted the poverty reduction agenda in the Copenhagen Declaration. He then switched organisations to lead the post-Copenhagen implementation process from the UN secretariat as Director of Social Development.

²⁴ See its journal, *Reproductive Health Matters*, to appreciate the way it has sought to create a common value position and knowledge base for those working in what was earlier seen as ‘family planning’.

²⁵ Chen, 1995.

²⁶ The 1960s and 1970s were decades when most developing countries of Asia, Africa, Middle East and Latin America made steady – though in many cases slow – gains on several fronts, such as income, health and education. The 1980s was a ‘lost decade’, when the debt crisis and fall in commodity prices led to a major economic downturn in most countries of Latin America and Africa. By the mid-1990s, per capita incomes of most countries were lower than levels in 1980 or even 1970. These trends are widely documented, for example, in the annual UNDP *Human Development Reports*. See particularly 1996 *Human Development Report* on income and economic growth trends, 1997 *Human Development Report* on poverty trends.

The 1990s UN conferences were not the only source for the emergence of norms. Alongside the women's and environmental social movements, a massive civil society mobilisation had developed to challenge structural adjustment, neo-liberalism and corporate-led globalisation. International NGOs and NGO networks and alliances were highly influential, involving a broad range of groups focused on concerns ranging from gender equality and women's rights to environmental sustainability and to economic justice. While at times the organisations and groups in this movement appeared anarchic, there was also a central core of norm entrepreneurs who led and mobilised networks focused on key international poverty issues. These included Ann Pettifor of the Jubilee Campaign on debt relief, Martin Khor of Third World Network on international economic policies, Adrienne Germain of International Women's Health Coalition on reproductive rights, and Roberto Bissio of Social Watch on aid and social investments.

Another source for the emergence of poverty as an international norm was bilateral aid agencies. As mentioned earlier, in 1996 the OECD-DAC adopted the IDGs as a common super-norm that all OECD donors would pursue. With the end of the Cold War had come a decline in political support for development aid, which was no longer such a valuable instrument to pursue geo-political goals. Aid budgets began to decline in all DAC member countries, except Japan. The OECD's Development Assistance Committee selected seven goals from the UN conferences of the early 1990s²⁷ in an effort to communicate a vision of what donors were striving to achieve in their development work for the 21st century. The main motivation for formulating the IDGs was to create a tool to mobilise public support for international development and foreign aid in OECD countries. The leaders of these agencies also had self-interested goals – increasing funding for their agencies and advancing their careers. Unfortunately, this early association of the super-norm of global poverty reduction (in the form of the IDGs) with foreign aid and rich countries has created a legacy that continues to exaggerate the role of aid in ending poverty.

Within the donor community four development ministers played key roles as both domestic and international norm entrepreneurs. They used the IDGs to focus their country's aid programmes on poverty reduction goals and promulgated these goals wherever they travelled. Clare Short (UK), Evelyn Herfkens (Netherlands), Hilde Johnson (Norway) and Heidemarie Wiczorek-Zeul (Germany) formed the informal 'Utstein group'. They strategised collectively, energetically used the IDGs to advocate increased aid commitments, reforms to make aid more effective and a refocusing of aid on human development and poverty reduction. They also moved beyond aid and argued for developed countries to reform policies on trade, debt relief and other areas of international economic policy, so that the international environment would be more

²⁷ Hulme, 2008.

favorable to poorer countries.²⁸ Under the leadership of Jim Wolfensohn²⁹ the World Bank also became more active in promoting the anti-poverty and people-centred agenda.

The motivation that drove these norm entrepreneurs were at least in part ideational commitments to development approaches and paradigms that were either implicitly or explicitly concerned about the human impact of the dominant neo-liberal, economic approach exemplified by 'structural adjustment'.³⁰ Several 'schools of thought' flourished in the 1990s that were alternatives to neo-liberal approaches: feminism, basic needs, participatory development, social development and the human development/capabilities approach. The common element in these schools of thought is the concern with people and their wellbeing and empowerment. For all of these schools, reducing poverty and inequality is a priority. For want of a better term, they could be characterised as 'people-centred' approaches. These ideas were intellectually underpinned by recent academic and applied policy research, the most prominent of which is Amartya Sen's work on capabilities.³¹ Publications, such as *Adjustment with a Human Face*,³² and the UNDP's *Human Development Reports* launched by Mahbub ul Haq, were particularly influential in bringing policy research and public advocacy or people-centred approaches together.

Towards the global tipping point: Message entrepreneurs, the Millennium Declaration and the MDGs

In the late 1990s the vast number of norms being promoted by scores of influential norm entrepreneurs, and adopted by national governments, the UN's specialised agencies, NGOs and social movements, alongside the Copenhagen Summit follow-up process and the unrolling of DAC's IDGs presented Kofi Annan, the UN's new Secretary General, with a problem. He wanted to articulate a coherent international development agenda and assert UN leadership of that agenda, but the plethora of goals emerging from the 1990s UN conferences communicated a confusing message without any clear sense of priorities. The MDGs would turn out to be a *solution* to this problem – articulating a unified, coherent and relatively simple message on the super-norm of global poverty eradication. The MDGs were a formulation of the anti-poverty message, deliberately crafted to communicate more effectively than earlier specifications. The core strategy was to use *quantitative goals*, because that sent a strong and clear message about results for which governments would be held accountable, but to present only a *select few* of the hundreds of targets that had been adopted at the conferences.

²⁸ Hulme, 2008.

²⁹ Wolfensohn was personally committed to the people-centred poverty agenda and shifting the focus of the Bank's work to those priorities. See Mallaby, 2004.

³⁰ Many of these approaches are not 'anti-market' and are not opposed to market liberalization, but promote complementary policies to moderate their negative human impacts.

³¹ See Sen, 1999 for an introduction.

³² Cornia, Jolly and Stewart, 1988.

The primary objective of the MDGs, the Millennium Declaration (from which they emanate) and the 2000 Secretary-General's report *We the Peoples* (from which the Millennium Declaration drew), was to communicate to the leaders and citizens of the rich world that global poverty – in distant parts of Africa, Asia, Latin America – was a matter of concern for them as well as for the citizens and governments of poor countries. This was the strategic objective of the *We the Peoples*/MD/MDG exercise. Finnemore and Sikkink report that '[w]ithin norms research, there are several sets of claims that intrinsic qualities of the norm itself determine its influence'.³³ Furthermore '...norms that are clear and specific, rather than ambiguous or complex and those that have been around for awhile...are more likely to be effective'.³⁴ In addition, norms that have high levels of concordance, that are '...widely accepted...in diplomatic discussions and treaties' are more likely to be effective.³⁵ The MDGs are a case in point. They were specifically designed to meet those conditions. The MDGs communicated the global poverty agenda powerfully because they delivered a concrete and simple message in three particular ways. They referred directly to concrete human conditions that people could empathise with – rather than the abstract term 'poverty' that was open to interpretation. Second, they had quantified, time-bound targets and could be monitored.³⁶ This made it clear that these were concrete objectives, not abstract aspirations. Third, the list was relatively short, with only eight goals – not dozens – and could therefore be remembered and presented as a single PowerPoint slide. Through the 1990s, graphic presentation of development progress had become more widespread in UN debates and documents, spearheaded particularly by UNICEF's *Progress of Nations Reports* and the UNDP's *Human Development Reports*.

To produce such a focused message, the drafting processes had to be tightly managed. They were atypical of normal UN processes. *We the Peoples*, the Secretary General's report to the General Assembly that was intended to shape later declarations, was drafted 'on the 38th floor' by John Ruggie and Andrew Mack. This was a departure from the usual UN process of the drafting of text by more junior staff (usually from different departments) followed by the critique of this text by numerous other departments of the UN, UN specialised agencies, and national delegations to the UN.³⁷ Such an open process would have subjected the report to an enormous and intense lobbying process, with each stakeholder arguing for the inclusion of their favourite issue. It would have been impossible to produce a reasonably coherent and concise text from a more

³³ Finnemore and Sikkink, 1998: 906.

³⁴ Finnemore and Sikkink, 1998: 906-907.

³⁵ Legro, 1997: 35. Legro argues that this '...may be a sword that cuts both ways', but for nascent norms, like global poverty eradication, the affirmation associated with concordance adds to robustness.

³⁶ This made them especially attractive to politicians and publics in the rich world, who had become used to results-based management (RBM) approaches in their public sectors. See Hulme, 2008.

³⁷ SFP interviews with Ruggie, Mortimer, Langmore.

inclusive process. In a similar fashion, the General Assembly President and Ambassadors of Guatemala and New Zealand managed a disciplined process for drafting the Millennium Declaration (MD) and its negotiation among member states. *We the Peoples* and the MD are noted for their unusually high coherence and clarity compared to the multitude of other UN documents. In particular the MD presents a relatively focused and powerful vision of what global poverty eradication might be. A more open process would have produced a ‘Christmas tree’³⁸ with hundreds of goals, defeating the purpose of communicating a coherent global poverty eradication agenda. Subsequently, after the MD was adopted, this desire to keep to a short list of memorable quantitative targets continued when data professionals and statisticians engaged with the MDG formulation process – to translate the MD development chapter into a list that would be more conceptually coherent and technically robust.

The aims of the message entrepreneurs drafting the MD and MDGs were different from those of the norm entrepreneurs who had created the ‘inputs’ at UN conferences. They were institutionally embedded individuals who were motivated by organisational mandates (see below). This is not to doubt their personal commitment to the global poverty eradication super-norm, but their actions were not driven by these ideals in the same way. Similar motivations had influenced the individuals who had framed the IDGs.³⁹ In the formulation process, one of the major arguments was over how many goals to include, with all recognising that fewer would be better, and some arguing for only one goal, the income poverty goal.⁴⁰

Achieving the global tipping point: The MDGs

As soon as the MD was adopted by the General Assembly, the significance of the ‘development and poverty eradication’ chapter, with the nascent goals as *the message*, was recognised. Mark Malloch Brown, then Administrator of UNDP, was one of the first to do so and he rushed to publish an editorial in the *International Herald Tribune*.⁴¹ The World Bank’s chief economist and staff were also quick to see the potential and called a meeting to develop a more robust (and final) set of indicators for the goals. The Office of the UN Secretary General undertook to lead the work of developing an implementation plan (the ‘Road Map’) for the MD – this is unusual for UN declarations. This work became a major task for the senior official in charge of strategy, Michael Doyle, who had succeeded John Ruggie. Such a response to a UN General Assembly declaration is exceptional. The shelf life of a typical UN declaration or report rarely lasts beyond a few

³⁸ For an example of what more consultative processes produce, see the Declaration from the Rio Summit with 27 principles and more than 1,500 recommendations.

³⁹ DAC members needed to persuade their constituency – citizens and politicians of rich countries – to support international development. They too needed to communicate their work more clearly.

⁴⁰ SFP interview with C. Bradford, R. Carey.

⁴¹ Malloch Brown, 2000. Mark Suzman, his staff recalls that he was called on a weekend, which did not happen often, with a request to draft the editorial.

days after adoption. Those who framed and drafted the MD and the MDGs never expected that these goals would receive attention for years to come.

The individuals who drove the process that converted the MD into the MDGs were 'message entrepreneurs', with characteristics quite distinct from 'norm entrepreneurs'. They were less motivated by an ideational commitment to a human development approach and driven more by an organisational imperative. John Ruggie and Michael Doyle, in the Secretary General's Office, and Mark Malloch Brown at UNDP were committed to making the UN a more effective organisation. While they were sympathetic to the idea of people-centred development, they had neither led nor engaged in the battles that had converted 'international development' into 'poverty eradication' over the 1990s. Mark Malloch Brown was seeking to achieve more consensual relationships across the fractious development community, divided by ideology and for and against positions on the Washington Consensus agenda.⁴² His view was shared by others in the development community who wanted more effective coordination of development strategies and activities – such as the President of the World Bank Jim Wolfensohn, UK International Development Minister Clare Short and UN Secretary General Kofi Annan. They sought a more unified international community for development, which meant creating a shared vision, and more constructive relationships, among the World Bank, IMF, UN, bilateral agencies and NGOs.⁴³ By training, these message entrepreneurs were not development economists, development specialists or development practitioners.⁴⁴ They were diplomats skilled in negotiations among organisations and governments, mostly trained in history and political science rather than economics or practical work in development. They negotiated an agreement across the 189 UN delegations and also brought on board the three other sets of actors who were leading parallel efforts – the bilateral aid agencies (OECD/DAC); World Bank/IMF; and UN specialised agencies.

This happened in the context of the ideological divides that drove the development community of the late 1990s, pitting the World Bank and IMF against NGOs and social movements, with the UN caught in the middle. To illustrate the tensions of the time, in June 2000 when the UN jointly published with the World Bank, IMF and OECD a report (*2000: A Better World for All*) on progress in meeting the OECD/DAC's International Development Goals, an uproar arose from NGO networks. They were shocked that the UN Secretary General would sign a document with the President of the World Bank, the Managing Director of the IMF and the Secretary General of the OECD. This was seen as a betrayal. The anti-globalisation debates behind much NGO thinking were often framed in anti-market ideology and portrayed the World Bank and the IMF as the enemy. The

⁴² SFP interview with Malloch Brown.

⁴³ SFP interview with Malloch Brown.

⁴⁴ John Ruggie and Michael Doyle are noted political science/international relations scholars. Mark Malloch Brown is a historian and political scientist who had been a journalist and consultant in political communications.

more market friendly, but socially responsible, development thought being articulated in UN development policy and research documents, such as the UNDP *Human Development Report*, was 'too close' to the Washington Consensus for many NGOs. To communicate a coherent international agenda, which could be accepted by these fractious groups, required a message that would finesse the 'market is best...market is worst' positions of the IFIs and anti-globalisation NGOs. The MDGs achieved this through focusing on people and the ends of development – something around which a common vision could be established – rather than the means to get there, which was contested.

The process to develop the 'final' MDG list was also something of a departure from the usual UN process. It was undertaken by an *ad hoc* group, headed by the UN Secretariat's Michael Doyle, who was responsible for the MD and MDGs. Key figures in this *ad hoc* group were not the leaders of the official UN statistical world, whose efforts could be lauded and then set aside. Instead, they were the World Bank's Eric Swanson, OECD-DAC's Brian Hammond, and UNDP's Jan Vandemoortele. All had worked together on the IDG monitoring document, *2000: A Better World For All* published in June 2000. As Swanson reflected,⁴⁵ this group had developed a sense of solidarity and camaraderie, having previously put together a successful public communication document – glossy and with eye-catching diagrams – that was a departure from the standard, bureaucratic reports they had all produced for many years. They found such joint work satisfying. The group was ready made to work on the MDGs, given their experience with the IDGs. Their task was to translate the MD's development chapter into a list of targets and indicators that could be monitored and reported on annually. The main criteria were: to adhere as closely as possible to the wording of the MD to ensure the legitimacy of goals/targets/indicators; to keep the list as short and coherent as possible (which meant resisting lobbying by norm entrepreneurs and their organisational platforms); and to list indicators for which quantitative data series were available. These individuals played a central role in MDG formulation, but they were neither 'message entrepreneurs' nor 'norm entrepreneurs' – rather, they were elite technocrats. While they had private views about human development, growth and poverty reduction, their work was primarily driven by the need to meet the technical criteria set out above.

The super-norm of global poverty eradication/reduction approached a global 'tipping point' with the adoption of the Millennium Declaration in September 2000 (winning the unanimous approval of the General Assembly). With the publication and 'noting' of the MDGs in September 2001 the super-norm attained its global tipping point. In terms of policy statements, almost all national governments, multilateral and bilateral agencies started to refer to the MDGs as a central element of their strategy. The Monterrey

⁴⁵ SFP interview with Swanson.

Finance for Development Summit offered an opportunity to take this forward into full implementation with increased budgets and concrete plans of action.

Cascading the MDGs: Old obstacles and new organisational platforms

As the Finnemore and Sikkink model proposes, the key actors involved in the cascade process for the MDGs are states and international organisations who adopt the MDGs as a frame of reference because of their legitimacy, to comply with international norms and, for some, to enhance their international standing. The process of norm cascade for the MDGs can appear both simple and complex. At one level, arguably, the MDGs had an extraordinarily rapid and simple cascade process. As they derived from the unanimous approval of the MD by the UN General Assembly, and most particularly by the majority of the world's heads of state, it could be argued that their 'noting' in 2001 meant that all governments of the world adopted them at the same time. But, there are three complications.

First, the US was initially ambivalent and later opposed to the MDGs. While President Clinton stood alongside other heads of state at the September 2000 Millennium Summit to adopt the MD, the incoming Bush administration was extremely suspicious of the MD and later the MDGs. Neither Bush nor any of his advisors had been involved in the processes leading up to the UN conferences, the IDGs, the MD or the MDGs. They had their own ideas about foreign aid and wanted to pursue a more unilateralist approach to international issues. For Bush's core neo-conservative advisors, anything to do with the UN was anathema. When the MDGs were initially presented to the General Assembly in September 2001, the US did not object. But that was on 6 September and five days later the 9/11 attack meant that the MDGs became a very, very minor issue for US foreign policy.

In March 2002, after a last-minute meeting with Bono and a hastily summoned publicity event that almost left the President of the World Bank off the podium,⁴⁶ George Bush decided to attend the Finance for Development⁴⁷ meeting at Monterrey. To the surprise of most delegates he announced a major increase, around \$5 billion more per annum, in US development aid in his address at Monterrey. However, this was the peak point for his administration's support for the MDGs and subsequently they actively opposed mention of the term 'MDGs' in UN and OECD documents. This was on the grounds that the MDGs were never formally adopted by the UN General Assembly but were merely a proposal by the UN Secretariat in a document that was 'noted'. This position came to a head at the 2005 UN Millennium + 5 Summit, when the in-coming US Ambassador John Bolton arrived during the last days of the preparations and objected to the use of the

⁴⁶ Mallaby, 2004.

⁴⁷ This meeting was to decide how the substantial additional resources to achieve the MDGs, estimated at around an extra \$50 billion per annum, would be raised.

term 'MDGs', as well as many other points in the draft declaration. The US ultimately gave in, since they were overwhelmingly isolated in their position.⁴⁸ Their underlying motivations included deep concerns about Goal 8, the partnership goal that requires rich countries to do more to provide development aid, trade concessions, debt relief and technology transfer: they believed that this would mean that the US would be expected to 'pick up the tab' for the MDGs. Another possible reason is that the US had its own strategies.⁴⁹ And then there was the simple, brute antipathy and antagonism that Bush and his neo-conservative advisors had for the UN and multilateralism more generally.

A second challenge to the legitimacy of the MDGs came from international NGO networks. They argued that the MDGs were not democratically formulated,⁵⁰ but put together by bureaucrats and agreed among governments without wider consultation. They viewed the MDG process as taking backwards the gains made over the 1990s in democratising UN processes. The UN conferences and summits had opened up to broader consultation with the civil society. The NGO networks were also critical of the content (see later) of the MDGs as: (i) important goals, especially reproductive health goals, were not included; (ii) because the goals and targets were not ambitious enough – for example, eliminating extreme poverty by 2015 had been reduced to 'halving' extreme poverty; (iii) the Goal 8 partnership goals and targets were weak and lacked quantitative targets; and (iv) the MDGs did not address reforming global governance structures and other systemic issues. Underpinning these specific criticisms was the deeply felt suspicion that the MDGs had co-opted the UN and NGOs into a consensus position with the World Bank and IMF – the systemic anti-liberalisation reform agendas many NGO networks had been campaigning for were not advanced by the MDGs.⁵¹

Thirdly, most developing country governments gave lukewarm support to the MDGs because they feared that they would be used as another set of donor conditionalities, and because they could not see any value added. There was nothing new or innovative for the Global South in these goals: reducing poverty, freedom from hunger, education for all, etc. had been part of national development plans for decades.

⁴⁸ The Bush administration's international standing was low because of the war in Iraq and the scandal of Abu-Ghraib. It was looking very vulnerable domestically at this time because of its incompetent response to Hurricane Katrina. It seems to have understood that filibustering on technical detail over the MDGs had higher costs than benefits in terms of international standing. Confirming support for the MDGs was a low-cost way of indicating that the US was not snubbing the world and abandoning multilateralism.

⁴⁹ SFP interviews with Steve Radelet and Colin Bradford.

⁵⁰ See Bissio, 2003 for elaboration of this widespread position. The MDGs created a tension between the UN and NGOs. Barbara Adams, director of Non-Governmental Liaison Service at the time, reports a confrontational meeting between Mark Malloch Brown and the Civil Society Advisory Committee in 2002 (SFP interview).

⁵¹ See, for example, Roberto Bissio, 2002; SFP interviews with Barbara Adams, Marina Ponti.

In the end, these objections did not prevent the international norm cascade process. The US was not prepared to totally withdraw from the MDG deliberations: even President Bush and his advisors realised that this would be an own goal. The NGOs could complain but they could not persuade UN member states to block the MDGs. For the G-77, fighting the MDGs would have undermined their interest in keeping social and economic development issues at the forefront of global attention in competition against rich country and peace issues. And, anyway, for most delegations, their president or prime minister had approved the MD, so how would that be handled? For all stakeholders, the danger of appearing to object to reducing income poverty and hunger, reducing child and maternal mortality, promoting gender equality, etc., was a position to be avoided. The objections were about how these goals had been selected, what was left out of the MDGs and how they would be achieved.

Since their launch in September 2001 the MDGs have been taken up by the most important international development processes and events. They were central to the 2002 Monterrey Financing for Development Conference. The MDGs were used by Gordon Brown and Tony Blair to champion the responsibility for global development and poverty reduction, leading to the 2005 G-8 Summit at Gleneagles, which secured a number of rich country commitments for action. They have been championed by celebrities (Bono, Bob Geldof and recently Angelina Jolie) who have mobilised popular support and raised public awareness about global poverty in the rich world. These were all mechanisms of persuasion which promoted the MDG cascade process.

The cascade process also involved the institutionalisation of the MDGs. This included annual reporting on progress towards MDG achievement to the UN General Assembly by each member state and *Global Monitoring Reports*.⁵² These *Reports*, produced by the UN, have received unusually high media attention. It also involved setting up a new organisational platform for global poverty reduction. During 2002, Mark Malloch Brown and other 'message entrepreneurs' in the UN worked hard to develop an implementation process that would make the MDGs the leading framework for international development.⁵³ A new three-pronged structure was set up in the UNDP to promote the MDGs.

1. On the political front the Millennium Campaign was established to mobilise global public support for the MDGs.
2. On the scientific front the Millennium Project, a research project to identify the technologies and policies that would accelerate MDG achievement, was mounted and led by Jeffrey Sachs (the Secretary General's chief adviser on global poverty).

⁵² UN Country teams often provided assistance in preparing monitoring reports.

⁵³ See Hulme, 2010.

3. UN country teams were tasked with providing support at the national level for the integration of the MDGs into national planning processes.

Institutionalisation went beyond the UN and many international development organisations and bilateral donors partially restructured for global poverty reduction. Statistical staff, drawn from a diverse set of international organisations, formed a group to monitor the MDGs and to produce the data base for the annual reports. Donors agreed to adopt the MDGs as their framework, replacing the IDGs. These new arrangements supplanted existing structures, which were fragmented and seen as a source of problems. They provided new and additional platforms for the promotion of the MDGs super-norm. Inevitably there was discomfort on the part of some, who felt their functions were being supplanted, or that they were short-changed by the MDG process. But, no organisational leader was prepared to confront or dismiss the MDGs.

Norm internalisation

The internalisation of the MDGs has made rapid progress at the level of policy statements, documentation and reporting. The MDGs have become internalised as the meta-goal of virtually all international development efforts. They have entered the language of international development as a synonym for, or a clarification of, 'poverty reduction'. They are regularly referred to in policy documents of donor agencies, in national development planning documents, such as the Poverty Reduction Strategy Papers,⁵⁴ by NGOs, think tanks and in the media.⁵⁵

The process of UN reporting has continued, and the MDGs continue to command the highest profile at UN meetings. Since 2000, they were the centrepiece of the 2005 General Assembly (World Summit⁵⁶), which officially affirmed the MDGs. In 2008 the Secretary General organised a 'high level event' on the MDGs. In 2010 a major review of the MDGs will again be the centrepiece of the UN General Assembly meeting. Such events appear to have considerable significance for countries; for example, the prime ministers of India and China have both personally presented their national MDG reports at the UN.

The MDGs have also been used to mobilise action across many different communities; private corporations,⁵⁷ municipalities,⁵⁸ national governments, schools, and NGOs have

⁵⁴ Fukuda-Parr, 2008.

⁵⁵ Though this is often as a rhetorical reference rather than for setting planning targets or for resource allocation.

⁵⁶ 2005 General Assembly meeting was a summit meeting: <http://www.un.org/summit2005/>. While the Millennium Declaration was reviewed and reconfirmed, the Development chapter was the first and most prominent issue addressed. At this meeting, the MDGs were officially recognised in a declaration adopted by the General Assembly.

⁵⁷ Brookings Institution, 2005.

⁵⁸ Millennium Campaign, 2009; see also Hulme, 2010: chapter 4.

framed their activities in terms of contributions to MDG achievement. These activities are ongoing even as the three special platforms at the UN are being wound down: the Millennium Project was absorbed into a division of UNDP in 2005; the Millennium Campaign continues but with a lower profile; and UNDP headquarters no longer has special programmes to provide country support. In effect, this is a recognition that the MDGs have become a 'habit' – institutionalisation, or at least partial institutionalisation, has occurred, as predicted by the Finnemore and Sikkink model.

IV. Norm content: Contestation and consensus

The strength of the MDGs as a super-norm, communicating a complex set of norms underpinned by a more abstract idea (global responsibility for eradicating extreme poverty) in concrete and unambiguous terms, is also a weakness. They skirted around, and did not resolve, the ideational divides within the international community. The form that the MDGs now have reflects many compromises to create a consensus that the fractious development community could agree. The tension continues between the many norm entrepreneurs (and their organisational platforms) who have pushed to get 'their norm' included in the MDG super-norm framework, and the message entrepreneurs (often at the UN but also in multi-lateral and bilateral aid agencies) who have striven to keep the MDG list (and before that the IDG list) as short and simple as possible. The message entrepreneurs have often had to argue that proposed additional goals are either 'covered' by existing goals, or have negotiated proposals for additional goals 'down' to the target level (as with water and sanitation, decent work and reproductive health) or the indicator level. They will not allow the number of goals to go beyond eight.

As a result of the ideational divides within the international development community opinions about whether or not the content of the MDGs provides a constructive guide for global poverty eradication vary widely (Box 1). Sachs represents a position of extreme optimism; Easterly has strong technical reservations; while the more radical views of the left (Antrobus) and right (IMF official) dismiss the MDGs. In this section we review the content of the MDGs. In their 2001 version they have four main elements that, arguably, cover all important policy domains:

1. An economic growth/materialist goal seeking to reduce extreme income poverty and hunger (Goal 1).
2. Five social development goals promoting improvements in education, gender equality and health (Goals 2 to 6).
3. A goal seeking to ensure that poverty reduction is achieved in ways that are environmentally sustainable (Goal 7).
4. A goal seeking to develop a global partnership for development that focuses on strengthening rich country support for poverty reduction (Goal 8).

Box 1

'The end of extreme poverty is at hand – within our generation...[t]here already exist a bold set of commitments that is halfway to that target: the Millennium Development Goals...are bold but achievable...[t]hey represent a crucial midstation on the path to ending extreme poverty by the year 2025.' (Sachs, 2005:25)

'The setting of utopian goals means aid workers will focus efforts on infeasible tasks, instead of the feasible tasks that will do some good.' (Easterly, 2006:20)

'I do not believe in the MDGs. I think of them as a Major Distracting Gimmick...'
(Antrobus, 2003).

'The MDGs are European social policy. We [IMF] don't do European social policy.'
(DH interview with Senior Economist, IMF, 2006)

Achieving consensus: Omissions and self-censorship

Five content omissions⁵⁹ in the original (i.e. 2001) MDG listing were contested during the MDG formulation process and have produced continued criticisms. The 2001 MDG listing did not reflect 'state of the art' thinking in development economics, human development or best practice in international development. This list was a compromise (as explained earlier) and it was finalised by an 'expert group' seeking to keep the list as short as possible. As data professionals, they considered only quantifiable objectives for which reasonably robust internationally comparable data series were available, dating back to 1990 (so that progress since 1990 could be monitored).

The most controversial omission was the screening out of 'reproductive health services for all'. Conceptually and practically this weakened the MDGs directly, as this was an important goal in its own right, and indirectly, as this had highly negative implications for the achievement of Goals 1, 2, 3, 4, 5, 6 and 7. For example, how could maternal mortality be reduced by three-quarters without vast improvements in access to reproductive health services? How could development become environmentally sustainable when large numbers of people had no access to services that would permit them to plan the size of their family? This omission was no accident but the result of pressure from the 'unholy alliance' of the Holy See and a handful of conservative Islamic states who persuaded the G77 to block the reproductive health goal.⁶⁰ The message entrepreneurs who framed the MD and the MDGs did not want to compromise their purpose of developing an umbrella listing of poverty goals around which consensus could be achieved. For these message entrepreneurs this was merely a quibble over details. They tended to argue that it did not matter whether these specific goals were

⁵⁹ Strictly speaking the gender equality and decent work omissions are under-specifications and not full omissions.

⁶⁰ Hulme, 2009a.

included or not as they would in any case be part of any reasonable implementation strategy.⁶¹

The second omission relates to governance. By the late 1990s many leading researchers argued that liberalisation had not worked because of institutional weaknesses, such as laws for contract enforcement or controlling corruption. Others argued that poor people remained poor because institutions did not protect their rights and give them voice. At a time when the World Bank's flagship *World Development Report 2000-2001* on poverty concluded that the three most important strategies for poverty reduction were empowerment, opportunity and security, the MDGs did not include any of those issues.

The third omission was gender empowerment, which only had the target of eliminating inequalities in schooling in the original formulation. Indeed, so weak was the formulation of this goal that many people referred to it as 'the second education goal', not realising what the goal was actually about. The women's movement had moved far beyond an early focus on educational disparities to issues that were as much or more fundamental to women's disempowerment: gender-based violence, lack of property rights, economic discrimination and political participation. The MDG Goal 3 took the agenda back to the priorities of the 1970s.

The fourth 'omission' was the limiting of the 'decent work' target to youth employment. Reportedly, during the 1990s the top management of the International Labour Organisation was dismissive of the IDG and MDG exercises.⁶² They advised staff looking to engage with the MD and MDGs that such lists were 'a passing fad, we don't need to get mixed up with them...this is not the only game in town'. The ILO position changed in the early 2000s, and by 2005 it was effectively advocating for decent work to become an MDG target.

The fifth omission was in Goal 8, which lacks quantitative, time-bound targets. While the results-based management principle of having SMART⁶³ targeting was rigorously pursued for Goals 1 to 6, and partially applied to Goal 7, it was systematically avoided for Goal 8. Because Goal 8 was not a quantitative goal in the MD, there was a limit to what the framers of the MDGs felt they could negotiate; the 'expert group' engaged in self-censorship, assuming that there would be opposition, for example to the 0.7 percent GDP target for development aid, especially from the US and Japan, who were far from achieving that level. By 2001, the lack of support for the MDGs in the Bush administration was understood (SFP interview with Doyle) and there was little to be

⁶¹ SFP interview SG staff

⁶² DH interview with A Sylvester Young, ILO, 30 May 2007.

⁶³ Results-based management calls for goals that are SMART – stretching, measurable, agreed, realistic and time-limited.

gained by raising the likelihood of US withdrawal from this process by pushing for SMART goals.

In 2005 some of these 'omissions' were corrected with the addition of targets for reproductive health, women's political representation and decent work, along with more detailed environmental targets. The belated inclusion of reproductive health targets was driven by inter-governmental politics. They were a result of energetic lobbying led by norm entrepreneurs – the head of United Nations Population Fund and a group of countries who were committed to women's reproductive health rights. They acted politically and mobilised much of the UN membership to support the inclusion of this target, overturning the self-censorship exercised by the original framers of the MD and MDGs.⁶⁴

Ideational trajectory: Negotiating a 'third way' content for the MDGs

The norm entrepreneurs who mobilised and energised the UN Conferences and Summits were often reacting against the Washington Consensus (and for reproductive health against the Mexican gag). But the message entrepreneurs wanted to avoid these divides within the international development community and achieve a broader consensus around poverty reduction. This meant attempting to create a ceasefire and moving beyond the contests over debt relief, structural adjustment and many other issues, because the MDGs had to be championed not only by the UN but also by the World Bank and the IMF. The leading message entrepreneurs, like Mark Malloch Brown and Michael Doyle, wanted a unified front. They were also seeking a 'new bargain' between the aid donor countries and developing country governments. Reaching a consensus was critical. According to Malloch Brown at that time:

both the uncontrolled and ultimately mismanaged entitlement culture of aid that characterized the '60s and '70s and the top-down, destructive conditionality approach of the so-called Washington Consensus that dominated development thinking in the '80s and '90s have been discredited. In their place, what is emerging is a new consensus that demands that we match mutual commitments and mutual accountability: a political bargain being built around a partnership of self-interest between the countries of North and South under which sustained political and economic reform by developing countries will be matched by direct support from the rich world in the form of the trade, aid and investment needed if they are to succeed.⁶⁵

⁶⁴ Some interviewees reported that by 2005 many G77 members were keen to see reproductive health targets included because they knew that this would annoy the Bush administration.

⁶⁵ Quoted in Bissio, 2003, 157.

But the ideational divides were strong and entrenched, as evidenced by the NGO protests against the UN signing up to *2000: A Better World for All* (see earlier). Kofi Annan had to stand firm, writing back that the report was not a policy document but rather a compilation of goals and targets which the UN had previously committed itself to. He added that he welcomed the support of the other sponsoring organisations in joining the UN in pursuit of the same goals.⁶⁶ In the formulation of the MDGs and the MD, the message entrepreneurs consciously laid out the objectives which were shared among the dissenting parties and avoided the more contentious issue of the economic strategies needed to achieve them. The lukewarm support for the MDGs from NGOs and developing country governments (referred to in the previous section) reflected their unease in endorsing a consensus with the Bretton Woods organisations.⁶⁷

It is no accident that the MDGs are headed by the goal of reducing the proportion of people living in extreme income poverty (Goal 1/Target 1). This was the preference of the OECD and, by ensuring this was at the top of the list, the message entrepreneurs sought to make it clear that the shift from a focus on 'international development' to 'global poverty reduction' did not suggest that economic growth, based on the deepening and extension of global capitalism, was to be marginalised. This meant that the MDGs had a significant degree of continuity with earlier ideas about dealing with mass poverty. It also meant that the message entrepreneurs could disguise the complexity of the MDGs through the simple shorthand of 'halving extreme poverty around the world by 2015'.

The MDGs are a grand simplification of the many goals and targets identified by the 'norm entrepreneurs' of the 1990s. The goals and priorities of the 1990s UN conference processes had in common an emphasis on equality, human rights, and partnerships across state, business and civil society and across poor and rich countries. The vision of the MD was driven by the principles of human dignity, equality and solidarity that reflect international human rights principles.⁶⁸ The MDGs barely reflected these human rights principles.⁶⁹ While the MDGs adopted a human development conceptualisation of poverty, approved by many opponents of neo-liberalism and structural adjustment, they took a relatively conservative 'basic needs' position⁷⁰ rather than a more assertive human rights perspective, which asserts the meeting of basic needs as a global responsibility. This is the position reflected in the MD but not in the MDGs.⁷¹

⁶⁶ Raghavan, 2000. See also Raiser, 2000, General Secretary of World Council of Churches, and response by SG.

⁶⁷ The fact that Jeff Sachs, the champion of the most radical liberalisation approach – 'shock therapy' – of the 1990s, was appointed adviser to the UN SG and director of the Millennium Project further discomfited the NGOs.

⁶⁸ UNDP, 2003; Alston, 2004; UN DESA, 2007.

⁶⁹ UN OHCHR, 2008.

⁷⁰ Hulme, 2008.

⁷¹ See, for example, UN OHCHR, 2008 for a detailed critique of the MDGs from this perspective.

V. Influence of the MDGs on international norms and policies

Has there been a shift in policy approaches?

Whether the super-norm that the MDGs represent is to be seen as a great advance, as a missed opportunity or as regressive depends on the ideational framework applied. From a neo-liberal growth perspective, the MDGs have shifted attention to 'social policy' and may slow down the economic growth that is needed to reduce poverty. But for critics of the neo-liberal growth strategies of the late 20th century the MDGs are not 'progressive enough'. Their middle of the road and post-Washington Consensus stance promoted by the message entrepreneurs opened them to criticisms from the left and the right, and from many perspectives. For feminists (Antrobus; Eyben) and the more radical left (Saith) the MDGs were seen as only a minor shift in the status quo, perhaps merely pretence.⁷² The MDGs accepted that global capitalism should be the engine for achieving poverty reduction; failed to recognise the need for redistribution (both material and in terms of political power); and conceptualised poverty reduction as a lack of goods and services rather than as a relational problem.⁷³ With the exception of gender equality within nations the MDGs avoided directly promoting the reduction of social and economic inequality (between and within countries) or the achievement of human rights for all (see next section). For critics from the right, concerns about the MDGs were equally strong, but from a different angle – the MDGs neglected the centrality of growth and the private sector for poverty reduction and dangerously exaggerated the role and capacity of the state.

From these critical perspectives the main question is not 'what is in the MDGs', but rather 'what alternative frameworks for generating a global super-norm were passed over?' While there were many 'lost visions' for a super-norm these can be summarised in terms of three alternative frameworks – neo-liberalism, human rights and global equality.

The first alternative believes that a neo-liberal super-norm, akin to that guiding structural adjustment in the 1980s, would have been better. While this would probably have been presented as neo-liberalism with a human face (the state might have a role in education and health, to create human capital for the economy), at its heart is the belief that the best way of reducing global poverty is to push all goods and service production activities into an open market. While, by 2000, support for this position was not widespread (with the failure of structural adjustment in developing countries and the collapse of Russia after shock therapy), it remained a potential alternative as it appealed to many in the incoming Bush administration in the US, was supported by influential right-wing think-tanks (such as the Cato Institute, American Enterprise Institute and the Heritage

⁷² Antrobus, 2003; Eyben, 2006; Saith, 2006.

⁷³ Green and Hulme, 2005.

Foundation), had a powerful epistemic community behind it and remained at the heart of much IMF policy and action.

The second alternative would have been to pursue a full-blooded human rights approach. Rather than using human rights merely as background 'principles' and 'values' for the MDGs, state obligations under international law would need to be taken seriously. This position would have used the opportunity created by the Millennium to re-activate the Universal Declaration of Human Rights. This might have meant modifications to the 1948 specification, but the primary focus would have been on identifying a process to ensure the more effective implementation of the Universal Declaration. Thomas Pogge elaborates this position in detail and argues that the costs (economic and in terms of structural reforms) of such an approach for the citizens of the rich world would be extremely small.⁷⁴ However, in the *realpolitik* of the late 20th and early 21st centuries this was a non-starter. The US was strongly opposed to any moves that might impinge on its sovereignty or limit the freedom of its corporate sector and China was highly suspicious of the human rights agenda.

The third alternative, related to the human rights approach, would have been to promote economic and social equality and/or to develop a super-norm aimed at reducing global inequality.⁷⁵ This would have a material dimension, involving the redistribution of incomes and perhaps assets, and a political dimension, shifting decision-making at local, national and international levels towards more democratic norms and forms. Despite concerns about growing inequality, from governments in Europe, Latin America and China, and a growing social movement dissatisfied with the inequity of global governance (as witnessed by the protests in Seattle and the evolution of the World Social Forum), there was no clear intellectual base from which such a super-norm might evolve. Contemporary Socialist thought could articulate what it was against (neo-liberalism) but struggled to develop a coherent proposal for an alternative.⁷⁶ The EU was keen to present a European alternative, but its membership was too diverse to reach a coherent position...and the World Social Forum faced even greater difficulties.

In a global intellectual environment struggling to define a 'third way', and with a political environment demanding that many different interests be accommodated, it is perhaps no surprise that none of these three more radical alternative bases from which to create a global super-norm for poverty reduction achieved ascendancy. While many bemoan the failure of the super-norm for global poverty reduction to take a more radical stance (Eyben, Saith, Pogge), intellectually and politically a pluralist super-norm, that avoided

⁷⁴ Pogge, 2002 and 2008.

⁷⁵ Jan Vandemartele reported efforts to include targets to reduce economic and social inequality in the MDGs but these were powerfully resisted by rich countries (SFP and DH interview, March 2009).

⁷⁶ As Ben Fine expressed it in 2007, 'What are we against? Neo-liberalism...What are we for? Anti neo-liberalism'.

specifying what economic policies should be prioritised, appeared to the message entrepreneurs the best deal available for advancing global poverty reduction as an issue for the international agenda.

More effective poverty reduction efforts and results?

The MDGs have been institutionalised on paper and in print but did this lead to behaviour change on the part of national governments, donors and other actors? Global poverty trends do not show a significant inflexion point in the early 21st century. Many success stories can be told, such as a significant acceleration in Malawi in food production,⁷⁷ educational enrolment for girls in Bangladesh, and others. But the overall global trends of the 1990s in the main MDG indicators have not changed significantly since the early 2000s⁷⁸ – most MDGs are likely to be achieved in most of Asia and Latin America but not in most countries of Africa, and not globally.⁷⁹ The global recession of 2008 onwards threatens to reverse many of the quantified improvements of the last decade. The MDGs have influenced national development plans, and most Poverty Reduction Strategies (PRSs) incorporate some MDG targets, but selectively. An emphasis on income poverty reduction and investment in education and health sectors is relatively common, but much less attention is given to hunger, environment and gender equality goals, and very little attention is given to issues of equality, empowerment and democratic governance that are the guiding ethical values and commitments of the MD.⁸⁰

There is little evidence that more resources are being allocated to multi-dimensional poverty reduction,⁸¹ while a major controversy within the international community has been about whether MDG-based PRSs would be realistic. Jeff Sachs and the Millennium Project have argued that PRSs should be constructed to achieve the MDGs, and the resources required to do so should be calculated and the financing mobilised from both domestic and international sources. Such costing exercises have been mounted in almost all countries of Africa and several in Asia but, to date, they have not materialised into revised PRSs. In practice, PRSs focus on allocating 'what can be afforded' rather than mobilising 'what is needed'.

There are many anecdotal stories of more effort being mobilised globally to support poverty reduction. For example, corporations have mounted initiatives and

⁷⁷ See annual inter-agency MDG Monitoring Reports issued by the UN/DESA.

⁷⁸ See annual inter-agency MDG Monitoring Reports.

⁷⁹ See annual inter-agency MDG Monitoring Reports issued by UN/DESA and other specific reports published at the country and regional levels by the World Bank and UN agencies such as regional commissions and national governments supported by UN country teams.

⁸⁰ Fukuda-Parr, 2008.

⁸¹ The significant increases in DAC ODA in 2004-2006 were associated with one-off debt forgiveness, reconstruction in Iraq and Afghanistan and the Asian tsunami. Since 2006 ODA has declined.

philanthrocapitalists have made charitable donations at levels that were previously unimaginable. Some progress has been made in expanding access to treatment for HIV/AIDS and in debt relief. But the Goal 8 partnership targets and the commitments made at the Gleneagles Summit are far from being met.⁸² The secular decline in development aid flows was stemmed in 2001 and aid began to climb, but this stalled by 2006.⁸³ The Doha 'development round' of multilateral trade negotiations has stalled.

These experiences could have negative long-term consequences, with leaders making big promises about global poverty reduction and then conducting business as usual. If 'everyone gets away' with making and breaking big promises then this may become an ingrained practice. There has also been a disproportionate emphasis on development aid as the main obligation of rich countries for global poverty reduction, when other policies such as trade, international migration, the governance of the global finance system and economic stability are as important, or more important.

But, the impacts of the MDGs on policy and behaviour vary from country to country and region to region. In rich countries the most significant impact of the MDGs appears to have been in the European Union. Here there has been a positive dynamic between domestic and international norms,⁸⁴ and alongside this a significant regional norms internalisation process has been initiated. The enthusiasm of the like-minded EU countries for the MDGs (Denmark, Sweden, Finland and the Netherlands) was bolstered by the arrival of New Labour in the UK in 1997 and the formation of the Utstein Group. Thus, an influential group of EU member states came in powerfully behind the MDGs with particularly strong support from the UK Chancellor, Gordon Brown, who effectively lobbied EU finance ministers to commit themselves to increasing financial flows to poorer countries at Monterrey. The British premier, Tony Blair, became highly involved in promoting the MDGs and this took the debates to national heads. As a result of these and other efforts, the EU committed itself to achieving quantitative and time-bound targets to increase aid (and other targets) that it defined for its membership. The creation of this regional norm has meant that even new members of the EU, many with only limited domestic political constituencies supporting aid, now have to pursue aid targets. EU countries which joined the Union before 2002 have committed to reach .56 percent ODA/GNI by 2010 and .7 percent by 2015. Countries which joined the EU after 2002 have committed to reaching at least .17 percent ODA/GNI by 2010 and .33 percent by 2015.⁸⁵ The MDGs have been used by influential European super-norm entrepreneurs to create regional enforcement mechanisms (formal EU agreements) that are much stronger than the wider international enforcement mechanisms. The MDGs are also being used to re-engineer public norms in countries with little development experience

⁸² UN DESA, 2008; UNDP, 2005.

⁸³ If debt relief is removed from the figures, ODA levelled out but did not decline.

⁸⁴ Finnemore and Sikkink, 1998.

⁸⁵ Council of the European Union, 2005.

through public action. The EU, in conjunction with the UNDP, has run a series of events based on the MDGs for the parliamentarians of EU new member states. These force a debate on the MDGs in the parliament and generally lead to the government and opposition stating that they will pursue the MDGs. Personal involvement in these initiatives revealed that these 'MDG events' introduced many politicians to 'development' and 'global poverty reduction' for the first time and created powerful opportunities for domestic NGOs and lobbyists to meet politicians and ministers and achieve progressive policy statements about pursuing the MDGs in public.⁸⁶

There are other positive effects. The MDGs have increased pressure for data and there has been a great increase in the amount of data collected on human development in poorer countries. There are also significant efforts to improve the quality of data. More and better data increase the opportunities for evidence-based policy making. They have certainly contributed to increasing public awareness about poverty in both rich and poor countries. The MDGs have increased the number of opportunities for politicians and activists to publicly address the issue of global poverty and have created a 'hook' for the media to publish or present materials. This has increased the awareness of people in some rich countries about global poverty and raised the pressure for aid to be better targeted on poverty reduction than in the past.⁸⁷

VI. Conclusions

This paper has analysed the evolution of the international super-norm to eradicate extreme poverty as a global responsibility. The framework developed by Finnemore and Sikkink has proved valuable in understanding the processes and interactions that generated the vehicle that presently dominates global discussions about poverty eradication – the MDGs. But, we have also sought to extend the conceptual apparatus of their paper in four particular ways. First, this paper argues that some international norms are best understood as 'super-norms' – carefully structured sets of inter-related norms that pursue a grand prescriptive goal, in this case global poverty eradication. Second, while our analysis confirms the centrality of norm entrepreneurs and their organisational platforms for the emergence of international norms, it also identifies a significant role for a different set of actors, whom we term 'message entrepreneurs'. These are leading individuals who select and craft the specific norms within a super-norm so that the super-norm reaches a consensus position and can be agreed across national governments and international agencies. Message entrepreneurs have personal normative positions (often strong positions) but their primary function is to achieve an agreement over the super-norm. The detailed content of the super-norm is of secondary importance for

⁸⁶ DH in Autumn 2007.

⁸⁷ In Brazil, MDGs have motivated Petrobras to develop initiatives in the state of São Paulo and elsewhere, with the goal of reducing poverty and inequality in Brazil (Petrobras, 2007). In India, MDGs are being used by campaigners to raise awareness among the middle class.

them. They must operate diplomatically to achieve consensus and minimise confrontation. While a norm entrepreneur can be expected to stick to his/her principles, the message entrepreneur must mix principles with pragmatism to achieve a 'deal'. Thirdly, the findings of this paper point to the vast disparity between the official adoption of a prescriptive super-norm, through its articulation in policy, and actual implementation through changes in behaviour. Clearly, a super-norm as broad and ambitious as the eradication of multi-dimensional human poverty cannot be implemented overnight, especially when there is no consensus on means of implementation. Perhaps such implementation gaps are more likely to exist with prescriptive norms, such as the MDGs, in contrast to regulatory norms such as the prohibition of slavery or voting rights for women. The main reasons for this are the weakness of enforcement mechanisms and the lack of influence that moral arguments have over many national governments and polities. Finally, while the progress of the MDGs in the EU demonstrates the way that norms can be changed, in other parts of the world their impact, to date, seems negligible. This finding extends Finnemore and Sikkink's theorising of the cascade process. While they highlight the importance of domestic-international norm dynamic linkages we might now think of these as a triangle in which domestic, regional and global norms interact and influence norm trajectories.

The norm entrepreneurs are not only essential in achieving norm cascade and internationalisation, but also influence the content of the norms. The poverty eradication super-norm emerged in the context of a fractious international community, divided by ideological battles over structural adjustment. The MDGs came on the scene as a useful communication device and a means of coordination. They argued for a shift away from structural adjustment but did not refute a market-based approach to development. This was only a partial solution to creating a larger and more coordinated attack on poverty, since it brought with it several contradictions. First, while the motivations and intent of the norm entrepreneurs were to change policies they believed were contributing to global poverty, the motivations of the message entrepreneurs were to avoid controversies, which they perceived to be driven by the ideologies of earlier eras, and achieve a pragmatic consensus to increase resources and efforts for poverty eradication/reduction. As a consequence, the institutionalisation of the norm did not really lead to substantial change in policy approaches. Second, the norm entrepreneurs sought behavioural change in policy makers, while the message entrepreneurs were targeting the public at large who might support policies for poverty reduction.

The recent evolution of the agenda for international development, and especially its re-working as global poverty eradication, can only be partially explained by norm dynamics. Ideas count, but when it comes to global altruism the economic and political interests of states, and the elites who manage national affairs, take priority. A realist analytical perspective must lie alongside our constructivist approach. The slow movement on implementation of the norm through behaviour change contrasts with the fast spread of

the norm: only limited evidence (for specific countries and specific targets) suggests that poverty reduction is being accelerated; the 'development round' in trade talks has been stymied; after an initial increase in the late 1990s, aid flows have stagnated; and, progress in finding alternative approaches to manage intellectual property regimes to allow for increased access to technology has been slow. Moreover, the MDG super-norm's origins and trajectory have to be seen in terms of the political and economic interests of corporations and rich states who want to maintain a neo-liberal economic agenda of market globalisation, and thus have sought to accommodate the challenge of global poverty through a 'Third Way' framework.

Despite the limited reach of the MDGs implementation, the emergence of MDGs has put global poverty eradication/reduction on the international agenda at the level of heads of state. Occasionally it is placed at the top of the agenda, as at the Millennium Summit, the Gleneagles G8 meeting and the 2008 High Level Event. So it is no surprise that, as the global economic recession looms, many opinion leaders are calling NOT to cut development aid as they seek ways to finance bail-outs to key financial and manufacturing institutions.

Appendix 1: The MDGs List – see The UN Millennium Project 2008

- Goal 1: Eradicate extreme poverty and hunger
- 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

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