

Beyond the MDGs: What Development Framework after 2015? Post-2015 MDG Consultation Meeting

Summary

The day-long consultation meeting on the Post-2015 MDG framework was organized by the Global Development Network (GDN) in New Delhi on March 19, 2013, in cooperation with the High Level Panel of Eminent Persons set up by the UN Secretary General to advise on the post-2015 MDG framework. Over 80 participants from across Asia, Africa and Mexico attended, including academics, policy-makers from India and representatives of the major international organizations, civil society, donor agencies and media. The event was preceded by an online survey of GDN grantees and members, with over 160 responses (summary findings available at <http://www.gdn.int/mdgpost2015live>).

The event focused on two main themes:

- Health, water, sanitation, and sustainability
- Livelihoods, employment, and social protection

Prof. Abhijit Banerjee, Ford Foundation International Professor of Economics, Massachusetts Institute of Technology and Mr. Andris Pielbalgs, EU Commissioner for Development represented the High Level Panel, while Prof. Abhijit Sen, Member, Planning Commission and Mr. Montek Singh Ahluwalia, Deputy Chairman, Planning Commission, India provided interesting insights into the Indian policy making process in as far as development goals and plans are concerned and the interplay between global and national agendas.

The key concerns addressed through the day focused on redefining MDGs to account for the synergies and inter-linkages between the goals, and the complexities of poverty reduction, social inclusion, inclusive growth, and the need to ensure sustainability of progress. The urgency of redefining poverty and inequality beyond just an income-based indicator, to address inequality of opportunity and vulnerabilities, was underscored. New vulnerabilities emerging today, such as HIV, living in conflict regions, and demographic changes were highlighted. At the same time, the discussion cautioned against penalizing growth or rising per capita incomes in the process. It was stressed that the new framework should still center on poverty reduction, but move beyond it to fostering inclusive and sustainable growth as well as equal access to opportunities and reducing vulnerability of marginalized groups or people in conflict areas for instance.

The forum witnessed a rich discussion on the role of institutions in each session, the need for accountability, better governance, the rule of law, the role of technology, and the need to enhance the role of the private sector in the global development agenda. The gathering also expressed concern about corruption, and misallocation of funds. This, they noted, was also linked to ownership of productive capital, which, they said, would incentivize better governance and encourage accountability, leading to lesser misallocation of resources. The need for creating a sustainable fiscal space and drawing a balance between capital and revenue expenditures in the implementation of MDGs was also emphasized.

Gender issues also garnered great attention, particularly, equity, domestic violence, empowerment of women, education of women and maternal health, and their links with sustainable development. There seemed to be consensus around the need to formally introduce a goal focused on gender in the post 2015 agenda.

Livelihoods, health, water and sanitation were underscored as key issues of unfinished business, despite significant progress under the current MDG framework. It was asserted that for each of these objectives, there is a clear need to move beyond just quantity and more towards quality of for example the drinking water, health services or the jobs available for the poor. The human rights aspect of MDGs was also noted, making a case for including law and policy in the future framework.

The discussion underlined the role of the inter-linkages and synergies between goals and the potential trade-offs involved in pursuing one over the other (i.e. investments in infrastructure versus social policies, or poverty reduction through accelerated inclusive growth versus environmental sustainability, or better jobs versus more jobs). Another issue raised was that of the convergence or divergence between MDGs and national development goals and the political buy-in required for their success or that of the post 2015 framework. Moreover, participants discussed the consistency or inconsistency of various lists of goals emanating from the MDGs and from other global objectives such as those emanating from the RIO+20 process. The discussion, however, suggested that there could not be one single, common way to address trade-offs and inconsistencies among valuable objectives and that internalizing these trade-offs and inconsistencies was not an objective of the consultation. The forum stressed the need for simple, clear and measurable indicators (though not a simplistic approach) in the post 2015 development agenda, as well as the need for better data and monitoring, especially at the local level, since aggregate data on progress is less meaningful for tracking progress or corrective action if needed.

The fundamental issue of the actual role of the MDGs was raised and the related question of the progress in the last decade or so that can be attributed to the MDGs (as opposed to domestic policies that would have taken place even without the MDG framework). The discussion emphasized the major role played by local policies and by ownership of any set of global objectives. It was agreed that MDGs remained an important tool for policy-making, allowing governments and policy-makers to focus

attention on a few key priorities widely accepted as a minimum threshold for development. More importantly, MDGs provided a global framework for shared responsibility for development, both in terms of financing and in terms of policies.

Furthermore, it was underscored that MDGs are not solutions to development problems, but should be seen as suggestive guidelines for development. From the perspective of the report of the HLP too, it was pointed out that the idea of the HLP was not to provide an international agreement, but to provide a consultative document on the post 2015 agenda.

Mr. Montek Singh Ahluwalia, Deputy Chair of the Planning Commission, India delivered the keynote speech. He spoke of the Indian development experience, stating that the idea of development not being measured by growth was not new to the country. He also said that while several international organizations have accorded primacy to the poverty objective, the India approach was to focus on development of capabilities and inclusive growth, where the latter is measured using 25 listed monitorable indicators in the latest development plan of the government.

He asserted the need for not just convergence in growth, but also convergence in per capita incomes, with a focus on equality. He also noted that where society is fragmented and/or in transition, inequality is inevitable, since there may not be progress in all layers of society. However, he noted, having accepted that amount of pessimism, the system in any country should be perceived as “just” and able to respond to a situation where something does not work the way it should.

Further, he cautioned against obsessing over the need for a common basis for the MDGs, risking, in the process, to lose the richness of the discussions across countries. Additionally, he critiqued the MDG framework for not being self-critical enough in that it only provides indicators, with very little recommendation for the actions required to have a noticeable impact on the indicators. He also asserted that the key significance of MDGs was as a means to bind together the global community around these development milestones, rather than an end in and of themselves.

Highlights of the Consultation

Role of MDGs and Progress to Date

1. Setting a common global framework which individual countries can use to tailor their own objectives and strategies for pursuing them.
2. There is a need to use evidence to inform policy makers. There is a need to better monitor progress towards these goals and to introduce community based monitoring. The lack of disaggregated data is a major obstacle towards tailored policies and progress and needs to be addressed urgently.

Role of institutions

1. Institutions and local policies are determining factors of progress towards all MDGs.
2. Which kinds of institutions are effective?
3. Accountability, efficiency and transparency are central in using the limited resources, particularly in light of the global financial crisis and downward trends in ODA.

Unfinished business

1. Most health indicators have to be repeated in post 2015. Focus on non-communicable diseases also, for which costs are high and there is tremendous loss of livelihoods and productivity.
2. Is safe drinking water an achievable goal? There are different opinions.
3. Should employment per se be a goal? And if so, how to define it in light of large informal sector jobs etc.? And what practical recommendations would this imply for public policies?
4. Disparities in MDG achievement, for example, rural VS urban achievement in goals. And other regional and spatial disparities.
5. Need for complementary inputs. Examples are roads to a hospital and well trained doctors, not just the health facilities.

Overarching take-aways

1. There are inter-linkages among the different goals. However the direction of causality is not clear. It is essential to better understand these linkages and academic inputs on this would be helpful.
2. Financing the goals from both domestic and international sources is important for sustainable progress. Lower aid dependence and a higher share of domestic financing would also increase national and local ownership of these goals.
3. Data/measurement issues, especially regarding quality of indicators, are crucial to inform public policies on the basis of good evidence.
4. South-South cooperation to be pursued in sharing approaches and modalities for pursuing the goals, especially where there have been notable success stories in a particular area.
5. Make livelihoods, inclusive employment and social protection a goal
6. Identify and focus on vulnerable groups (women, children, war migrants, small states or islands, religious minorities, casts, HIV/AIDS affected, disabled)
7. Fiscal systems should be assessed to examine whether current public spending and taxing patterns are regressive or progressive and at what level
8. Technology is vital in accelerating progress towards the goals in the current or post 2015 framework, particularly for targeting the poor better.
9. The private sector plays a key role, not just in co-financing the goals or providing jobs for the poor, but also in determining labour force participation (through family friendly work policies and benefits for instance), which in turn has a large impact on gender equity

10. Framework of regional commitments to foster regional integration and growth (e.g. Africa). Major role for partnerships, both local and global in pursuing development goals
11. Sustainability includes the environment, inclusive growth and social protection, and also the provision of complementary inputs, in terms of infrastructures, institutions, and understanding of synergies that are necessary to insure the lasting profitability of social and economic investment.
12. Should not leave out crucial development issues that cannot be measured.