Post-2015 agenda: mission impossible?

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The Millennium Development Goals (MDGs) have stirred people and mobilized actors into action to foster human well-being. Most stakeholders want a similar agenda beyond 2015. The article argues that a post-2015 agenda fit for the purpose is not ‘mission impossible’. Yet, it will require that some prerequisites are fulfilled which are currently being circumvented. Most importantly, two vital questions have to be answered regarding the ultimate purpose of global targets and whether the post-2015 agenda will be universal in scope or merely an extension of the existing global deal. Member states will also have to clarify the time horizon of the new agenda, its structure, its level of ambition, the benchmarks to be used, the integration of cross-cutting issues, as well as how to capture growing inequalities. Although they may seem technical in scope, most are political in nature. If stakeholders continue to focus on the list of global targets, the outcome of their negotiations will be either an overloaded agenda or no agenda at all. Each stakeholder has to choose between keeping the DNA of the MDGs intact – i.e. clear, concise, computable – or venturing into genetic modification that risks turning into an unending and fuzzy wish list.

Keywords: MDGs; post-2015 agenda

1. Introduction

Throughout the 1990s, world summits and international conferences generated global commitments regarding specific aspects of human development in the form of time-bound targets in the areas of education, health, water, children, women, nutrition, etc. The Millennium Declaration summarized the most important ones (UN 2000). But just as previous declarations did, that document also receded into oblivion. In order to rescue some of the major commitments from obscurity, the idea arose of selecting a few targets from that Declaration and placing them in a stand-alone list. In 2001, a group of mostly UN experts, co-chaired by the present author, selected 18 targets verbatim from the Millennium Declaration, grouped them under eight goals, and identified 48 indicators to monitor global progress. The list became known as the Millennium Development Goals (MDGs). The MDGs have been quite successful in keeping these commitments in the limelight.¹

Although it was never the aim of the MDGs to spell out a global agenda for development, they have been interpreted as such; and it is generally expected that the post-2015 agenda should express a new agenda of that nature. At the time, the Millennium Declaration provided the framework for the MDGs. Today, such a text does not exist. Those who couch the post-2015 agenda in terms of the Millennium Declaration seem to adhere to an old and rather aid-centric script of the ‘Age of the West’. It is questionable whether a 15-year-old text can still be adequate and relevant for addressing global challenges beyond 2015. Although the values and principles embedded in the Millennium Declaration remain valid, the world has changed too much – e.g. emerging economies and the rise of the South, population dynamics, growing inequalities, climate change – to claim that a document that was agreed in 2000 can still serve as the basis for developing the post-2015 agenda.

The article offers some practical suggestions for formulating the successor arrangement to the MDGs. It starts by correcting three misinterpretations of the MDGs and proceeds by spelling out two vital questions that need to be addressed by the stakeholders before agreeing on a new agenda. It argues that a post-2015 agenda fit for the purpose will require a gatekeeper to avoid overload and fuzziness. The article also raises some practical points that the architects of the post-2015 agenda will have to consider in some detail.

2. Three misconceptions

Over time, and given their success, the MDGs have come to mean different things to different people. As in the tale of

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the blind men touching the elephant, the stakeholders participating in the post-2015 debate hold quite different views of what global targets actually mean. It is, therefore, essential to have a correct understanding of their purpose, sense and their nonsense. A meaningful discussion about the post-2015 agenda must start by setting three misconceptions straight.

2.1. Collective targets
The first misconception is that all countries must achieve the MDGs for the world to achieve them. This interpretation is wrong. The MDGs represent a numerical statement of what is feasible at the global level but not necessarily at the national level. They were set on the basis of global trends observed in the 1970s and 1980s. Their basic premise was that global progress would continue at a similar pace as in the past. This explains why the MDGs call for different numerical reductions – e.g. halving hunger but reducing infant mortality by two-thirds. That is why the MDGs call for a reduction in income poverty by one-half and not by two-thirds or by three-quarters.

The important implication is that global targets cannot be confused with national ones. Nevertheless, the MDGs have often been misinterpreted as one-size-fits-all targets, which need to be achieved by every country. It is incorrect, however, to state that country X is offtrack to meet the MDGs because the global targets were not set on the basis of past trends for country X, but on the basis of global trends. Coloring the world map in green (for countries that are on track), in red (for those that are off-track) and in orange (for the maybe-countries) is illogical – albeit widespread. The World Bank’s conclusion that two-thirds of developing countries are on track or close to meeting the MDGs (World Bank 2011) misses the point that the MDGs are about people, not about countries. Gauging the state of affairs regarding the MDGs can only be done at the global level. The World Summit for Children in 1990 was quite clear about the distinction between global and national targets. It stated:

These [global] goals will first need to be adapted to the specific realities of each country. […] Such adaptation of the goals is of crucial importance to ensure their technical validity, logistical feasibility, financial affordability and to secure political commitment and broad public support for their achievement. (UNICEF 1990, paragraph 1.6)

That wisdom seems to have been lost in the wake of the MDGs.

Collective goals do not have to be attained by each country for the world to attain them. Were all countries to achieve the targets, the world would actually exceed the MDGs – because several countries would surpass them. The post-2015 agenda must explicitly caution against this misinterpretation. The MDGs are collective targets; they can never be equated with national targets. It is mindless to transpose global targets to the country level without adapting them to the national context and the initial conditions.

2.2. Perfectibility
The second misconception is that the MDGs can be perfected. To be effective, however, a set of global targets must satisfy the three C’s: they must be clear, concise and computable. Global targets cannot be comprehensive and concise at the same time. Had all the aspects mentioned in the Millennium Declaration been incorporated in the MDGs, they would not have had the same staying power. Any attempt to cover all the important dimensions of human well-being in a set of global targets will undermine its strengths and effectiveness.

While some observers still question their validity and speak of ‘flawed targetism’ (Saith 2006), most players agree that the MDGs represented a watershed. The large majority of the staff members from civil society organizations that were surveyed in 26 developing countries want ‘some kind of overarching, internationally agreed framework for development after 2015’ (Pollard et al. 2011, 1). The overwhelming majority of the representatives from government, civil society organizations, research institutions and academia who were surveyed in 32 African countries agreed that the MDGs ‘should feature in the post-2015 agenda’ (UNECA 2012, 9). The High-Level Panel of Eminent Persons on the post-2015 agenda expressed ‘a deep respect’ for the MDGs (UN 2013a, 12). The UN Development Group has collected the views of over a million people through an online consultation called ‘My World’. The majority subscribe to the view that the areas covered by the MDGs should ‘continue to be directly addressed in the future agenda’ (UNDG 2013, v).

2.3. Ends, not means
The third misconception is that the MDGs fail to identify the appropriate policies and necessary inputs for achieving the targets. However, global targets must represent ends or ultimate outcomes; they should not dwell on the means for achieving them. It would be unwise to spell out in great detail the strategy for achieving the post-2015 agenda – for two reasons: (i) it is naïve to think that world leaders will ever agree on a particular strategy for achieving human well-being and (ii) it is utopian to believe that a single framework for macroeconomic, sectoral and institutional policies can foster human development in every country. This would lead to policy myopia for there are no silver bullets or blueprints for human development.

Development is best seen as a process of collective self-discovery – in rich and poor countries alike. There are no
we want a universal agenda or a global deal? Before proceeding with the intergovernmental negotiations, the stakeholders would be well advised to address them; if not, a clear and concise post-2015 agenda will be ‘mission impossible’.

3.1. Why global targets?
Discussions so far have focused on the content of the post-2015 agenda: the ‘what’ – especially on the missing dimensions and the omitted topics of the original MDGs. While the ‘what’ is taking center-stage, a question that is side-stepped is why global targets are needed. What is their conceptual value? Answering this question is important to clarify the ultimate purpose of global targets, their sense and their nonsense, their strengths and their limitations. A discussion on the ‘why’ is essential to bring closer together the different views about the meaning and essence of global targets. The ongoing debate is unlikely to yield a desirable outcome unless the stakeholders first address the very purpose of global target-setting.

An analogous event took place in the 1940s when the UN Organization was looking for a permanent home. Once it was agreed to locate the new organization in the USA, a Site Committee was established to find an appropriate venue. Its work was not made easier by the fact that about 250 locations wanted to host the world organization (Mires 2013). Moreover, views regarding the nature of sites differed. Some wanted to create an entirely new town (‘A Capital of the World’) while others looked for regular headquarters (‘A Workshop for Peace’). The 51 member states were hopelessly deadlocked and could not reach a decision. In the end, the decision was taken by outsiders – John D. Rockefeller Jr. and his son, Nelson – who purchased a site along the East River in mid-town Manhattan, got the factories and slaughter houses on it demolished, and offered the plot to the UN. Mires (2013, 221) observed, ‘the search for a site proceeded without first determining exactly what the new organization wanted to build’. The parallel with the post-2015 process is striking. Today, the 193 member states are building a global agenda without first determining its exact nature and ultimate purpose.

3.2. Global or universal agenda?
The second point the architects of the post-2015 agenda have to clarify is whether they will design a universal agenda or make a global deal. Indeed, the post-2015 agenda can be formulated as a global deal between the North–South – as embodied in the existing MDGs. In essence, the MDGs contain a series of performance targets for developing countries and a few delivery targets for developed nations. A universal agenda, on the other hand, would transcend the North–South divide by comprising targets that are relevant to all countries, not
just for the least-developed countries, sub-Saharan Africa, or so-called fragile states. It should be noted that a global agenda is not necessarily universal in scope. A post-2015 agenda focused on the eradication of extreme income poverty (i.e. below US$1.25/day) is not universal in scope because it will have little or no relevance for emerging economies and middle- and high-income countries. 

Obviously, not all global targets are universal in scope, yet several can be formulated as such. Take nutrition, for example. In a global deal as the MDGs, the relevant target will focus on malnutrition. A universal agenda, on the other hand, would not only deal with underweight alone but also with overweight – a growing public health concern in many countries. Actually, obesity is not only on the rise in developed countries but also in emerging economies and in several developing nations. In a similar way, a universal agenda could include targets on topics such as youth unemployment, gender discrimination, growing inequalities and climate change – challenges that are not limited to particular categories of countries. They are universal in scope, though their manifestation will vary across country-groupings. It is a moot question, however, whether developed countries are ready to commit to an agenda that is universal in scope.

4. Gatekeeper

The gravest pitfall facing the post-2015 agenda is that too many targets will be included, and that several of them will be fuzzy in nature. Non-measurable targets inevitably lead to interpretative leeway and latitude in future assessments. Therefore, a gatekeeper is needed to avoid overload and fuzziness.

The maxim ‘not everything that counts can be counted’ is valid but global targets must maintain a degree of objective measurability. Some observers categorically state that the post-2015 agenda should not fall into the trap of excluding issues that cannot be readily measured. If they prevail, it will become impossible to track global progress based on objective observations. In that case, the development discourse is likely to remain opinion-based instead of evidence-based. To avoid this, global targets must satisfy three conditions: (i) clarity of concept, (ii) solidity of indicator and (iii) robustness of data. Several of the current MDG targets do not quite satisfy these conditions.

It has been widely reported that the world is on track for three targets: halving poverty, halving the proportion of people without access to safe water, and improving the lives of at least 100 million slum dwellers (UN 2013b). The claim that these targets have been met five years ahead of schedule may be plausible, but there is no solid evidence to support it. Although stated in numerous reports of bilateral and multilateral donor agencies, the claim is matter of dispute. The problem is that the claim is not based on direct observations but largely results from artifacts of measurement. The artificers of the post-2015 agenda must have the honesty and humility to accept that not all statistics and indicators are value-free or equally solid and robust. Some are more imperfect than others. It is, therefore, advisable to block out the most problematic indicators – such as the proportion of the population below US$1.25 per day and the proportion of people with access to safe drinking water.

Targets for which the indicators are problematic and for which data are tenuous create room for subjectivity, under the semblance of scientific rigor. They allow players to make assertions as if they were based on empirical evidence; while they actually reflect beliefs and opinions. A Department for International Development (DFID) assessment of the performance of 43 multilateral organizations is a case in point. It claimed that the results were ‘rigorous and robust’ (DFID 2011, i). Yet institutional performance is extremely difficult to assess in an objective manner. Imperfect methods, measurement errors, omitted factors, and incorrect assumptions undermine the scientific rigor of any such attempt. DFID’s assessment was based more on judgments and impressions than on direct observation. Although it used 41 criteria, it was not clear what it ultimately measured. Van Thiel and Leeuw (2002) cautioned against the ‘performance paradox’; whereby measured performance has little or no relation with actual performance. Bilateral donors have the sovereign right to decide which multilateral organizations to fund, but that decision essentially reflects political priorities and perceptions. When it is presented under the false pretense of rigorous scientific analysis, it must be exposed for what it is, namely ‘policy-based evidence-making’.

Pseudo-scientific assessments can only be avoided by making sure that targets are clearly defined, use solid indicators and for which robust data exist. Otherwise, a plurality of facts and truths will emerge – often subjective. The danger, then, is that the global discourse about human development will be based on opinion, not on evidence. Proponents argue that the inclusion of fuzzy targets is necessary to improve monitoring; but that argument is flawed. The measurement of income poverty, safe water and slum upgrading, for instance, has not seen much improvement since they were included among the original MDGs.

The current debate about the post-2015 agenda is more inclusive and participatory than the process that led to the formulation of the MDGs; which is very welcome. However, at the end of the day, when all is said and done, some hard and difficult decisions will have to be taken regarding what will be included in the post-2015 agenda and what will be left out. That choice will be controversial and contested. But if the objective is to produce an outcome that is clear, concise and computable, a fair but strong gatekeeper will be indispensable to take on that thankless but crucial job.
5. Some practical points

Once the two big questions have been answered – regarding the purpose of global targets and the universal or global nature of the post-2015 agenda – the architects of the new agenda will still face a series of practical challenges. They will have to decide on the following points: (1) the time horizon; (2) the structure; (3) human rights and global targets; (4) the balance between ambition and feasibility; (5) the type of benchmarks; (6) cross-cutting issues; (7) inequalities; and (8) a global custodian. These are briefly discussed below.

5.1. Time horizon

The Millennium Declaration was ambiguous regarding the period over which the targets had to be achieved. The post-2015 agenda must clearly indicate the baseline year and the period over which the targets are to be achieved. Without much debate, member states seem to have set 2030 as the target year for the new agenda. However, a debate about the pros and cons of a medium-term or a long-term time horizon needs to be weighed carefully. Targets for 25 years hence have the advantage of allowing for sufficient time for major transformations to take root in the social, economic and environmental spheres. Targets for 15 years hence have the disadvantage that the costly and time-consuming process of formulating a new agenda will have to be repeated within less than a generation.

Both deadlines – either 2030 or 2040 – suffer from weak political accountability because they will not occur on the watch of the leaders who will commit to them in 2015. This shortcoming can be overcome, however, by introducing intermediate targets per five-year period. The latter are best seen as stepping stones toward the realization of long-term goals that will serve as quantitative goalposts when world leaders gather at the ‘plus-5’ conferences to review global progress on the post-2015 agenda.

The selection of the base year needs to take into account the usual time lag for generating global statistics. Statistics regarding the global state of human development in 2015 will not be available by 2015. Many lament about this, but a delay of two or three years for generating global statistics is perfectly reasonable. Therefore, the period for the post-2015 agenda could start in the year 2010 – for which solid and robust data will be available when the new targets will be agreed in 2015.

5.2. Structure

The MDGs contain three health-related goals (i.e. child mortality, maternal health and communicable diseases), which can be collapsed into one overall health goal, thereby making space for other universal concerns in the post-2015 agenda. The MDGs also include overlapping targets, which are unnecessary and unfair. Several observers have rightfully criticized the MDGs for their poor coverage of gender equality and sustainable development. These dimensions need to be improved and reformulated. New goals can be included but at the same time Ockham’s razor will be indispensable to cut out unnecessary complexity. While it cannot become a substitute for rigor, the principle of simplicity and succinctness will be as vital for the new agenda as it was for the MDGs.

5.3. Human rights and global targets

The MDGs have been severely criticized from the perspective of human rights, often faulting them for their negative externalities (Langford 2010). The claim is often made that the MDGs do not include human rights; but this is incorrect. The MDGs represent social, economic and cultural rights, expressed as numerical targets. They do not include civil and political rights because these areas still lack conceptual clarity and objective measurability.

The MDGs were never intended to supplant existing human rights instruments. Actually, human rights conventions, and their monitoring systems, precede the MDGs by many years. Human rights and quantitative targets have to be seen as complementary, not as substitutes. Numerical targets can only partly express universal values. Targets are quantitative, values are qualitative. Targets can be contextualized, values are absolute. Targets can be clearly delineated, values are hard to define. Targets are concrete, values are abstract. It is for these reasons that some people are not stirred into action by normative standards and universal values; they prefer numerical and doable targets instead.

A practical way of incorporating human rights in the post-2015 agenda is to cast the goals of the post-2015 agenda in the language of human rights. These rights can then be expressed in numerical targets as concrete stepping stones toward their gradual realization. Finally, solid indicators will validate the objective nature of the target’s measurability. The latter is important because global targets will lose much of their power and appeal if they lack reliable statistics.

5.4. Ambition versus feasibility

Targets that are too ambitious engender quick disappointment; whereas targets that lack ambition are unlikely to stir people into action. The architects of the post-2015 agenda will have to strike a judicious balance between the level of ambition and the sense of realism of the numerical targets. As global targets, their level of ambition can only be determined at the global level; not at the country level. The European Report on Development 2013 proposed a mixed approach, by combining global goals and national targets. ‘National targets could be aggregated in
order to calculate a global target value’ (EU 2013, 177). However, the practical feasibility of that idea is not obvious; neither is it explained in the report.

5.5. Benchmarks
Performance can be measured in terms of absolute or relative progress (ODI 2010). Both are valid but incomplete. Most MDGs are expressed in relative terms – reducing poverty by half; cutting infant mortality by two-thirds; slashing maternal mortality by three-quarters. Since proportional changes tend to be inversely related to the initial level of development, the MDGs have implicitly led to an unfair assessment vis-à-vis the least-developed countries. This is especially the case regarding sub-Saharan Africa (Easterly 2009). To anyone who repeats the refrain that Africa will miss the MDGs, one has to reply, ‘Africa will not miss the targets; you are missing the point’. Indeed, an unintended consequence of the way the MDGs were formulated has been an implicit discrimination against countries with low initial levels of human development. The post-2015 agenda must be careful to avoid this mistake. There are precedents in formulating global targets that combine relative and absolute benchmarks. The post-2015 agenda will have to carefully consider the implications in selecting benchmarks.

5.6. Cross-cutting issues
The treatment of cross-cutting issues is always challenging. Broadly speaking, three options are possible: (i) highlight, (ii) mainstream or (iii) ignore. Some argue that the latter two are essentially the same – that mainstreaming a topic invariably means to ignore it. While this has been the case, it would be wrong to assume that effective mainstreaming is impossible. The selection of the appropriate strategy will depend on the issue at hand. Gender, for instance, deserves to be highlighted as a separate target, due to its intrinsic, instrumental and positional value. The case of inequalities is less straightforward. On the one hand, the issue is so critical that it deserves to be highlighted in a separate goal; yet a stand-alone goal risks an insular treatment. Governance should be neither highlighted nor mainstreamed because it is too difficult to measure objectively and too hard to deal with politically. Hence, there is no single strategy for dealing with cross-cutting issues. While some aspects merit highlighting in the form of specific targets, others are better handled by mainstreaming them. Still others are best kept off the agenda altogether. Based on wide consultations and expert advice, the architects of the new agenda will have to consider the appropriate approach on a case-by-case basis.

5.7. Inequalities
Compelling evidence shows that inequalities in the majority of countries approach or already exceed the threshold for an equitable society. It is no exaggeration to posit that the world will miss the MDGs because inequalities within countries have grown to the point of slowing down global progress. Monitoring must bring this to the fore. Virtually all stakeholders agree on the need of incorporating inequalities in the new agenda – a rare point of agreement in an otherwise divisive post-2015 debate. Though this consensus is quite remarkable, there is no consensus yet about how to embed inequalities into global targets – as a separate goal or mainstreamed under the other targets.

At the UN, the Open Working Group on the SDGs (Sustainable Development Goals) has been struggling with this point too. Inequality was a stand-alone goal in the second version of the SDG document, but in the third version it was inserted under two other goals. At the time of writing, the final outcome was unclear because several member states objected to mainstreaming.

The original MDGs included an indicator for monitoring equity; i.e. the share of the poorest quintile in national consumption. By and large, it has been overlooked because inequality was not seen as a major concern by the prevailing narrative. Its mantra was ‘first grow, distribute later’. But the narrative has started to change. In 2012, the World Economic Forum placed ‘severe income disparity’ first among the global risk factors that the world has to battle (2012, 12). The International Monetary Fund issued a publication entitled ‘All for One – Why Inequality Throws Us Off Balance’ (IMF 2011). The Organisation for Economic Co-operation and Development published ‘Divided We Stand – Why Inequality Keeps Rising’ (OECD 2011). The Economist included a 19-page special report on inequality (‘True Progressivism’, 2012). And the list goes on.

The coverage and quality of data collection have steadily improved, so that the argument about high inequalities, and the damage they can cause, has gradually become accepted. The data make it now possible to take the analyses beyond national averages. Disaggregated statistics regarding several dimensions of human development exist for the majority of countries – by rural–urban location, gender, level of education, ethnic group, and wealth quintile. Various options for incorporating inequalities in the post-2015 agenda have been proposed, including adjusting standard statistics to reflect the equitable or inequitable pattern of progress (e.g. Vandemoortele and Delamonica 2010).

The ‘Palma-ratio’ deserves a mention here. Palma (2011) observed that in most countries about half the national income accrues to half the population – those comprised between the bottom 40% and the top 10%. This is
quite remarkable, given the important differences in terms of human development, political and economic regimes, and the degree of income inequality itself. Hence, what really matters for inequality, according to Palma, is the ratio between the income-share of the top 10% vis-à-vis that of the bottom 40%, which is referred to as the Palma-ratio. The target on inequality could be expressed as a proportional reduction in the Palma-ratio.

5.8. Global custodian
The fact that world leaders meet at regular intervals to discuss the global state of affairs regarding human well-being is a welcome development. Yet the current format does not quite lead to a real dialog. Actually, world summits do not exert their full authority. To address this gap, the post-2015 agenda must be accompanied by a different format for conducting global summits in the future. A ‘Global Custodian’ for the post-2015 agenda would make the format better fit for the purpose. A small group of eminent persons could play that role. They would serve as independent facilitators at world summits to review the progress regarding sustainable development. These individuals would be of sufficiently high caliber so to be apt, able and ready to challenge world leaders and the conventional narrative, based on evidence-based arguments. Their profile would need to be such that they inspire widespread respect from the majority of stakeholders.

Their role would be to present an objective synthesis of global progress toward agreed intermediate targets (see Section 5.1) – giving credit where it is due and pointing fingers where it is needed. They would challenge world leaders to go the extra mile to avoid their legacy being one of broken promises. Without an independent and objective custodian, global targets set by world leaders will gradually lose credibility because they lack a real accountability framework.

6. Conclusion
Numerical and time-bound targets can stir people and mobilize actors into action to foster equitable and sustainable development. Although the world will not achieve the MDGs, it cannot be denied that global targets have galvanized political commitment as never before; more so than during the development decades of the 1960s and 1970s and the widespread ratification of human right treaties in the 1990s. Most stakeholders want a successor arrangement beyond 2015.

Developing a post-2015 agenda that is fit for purpose is not ‘mission impossible’. Yet, it requires some prerequisites, which member states are currently evading. First, three important misinterpretations about the MDGs have to be set straight. Second, two vital questions have to be answered – regarding the ultimate purpose of global targets and whether the post-2015 agenda will be universal in scope or merely an extension of the existing global deal focused on extreme poverty. Third, the stakeholders need to designate a fair but strong gatekeeper to avoid too many and fuzzy targets getting included. Finally, the stakeholders have to be clear about several practical points of the post-2015 agenda; namely its time horizon, structure, and level of ambition, the benchmarks to be used, cross-cutting issues, inequalities, and the global custodian.

Most importantly, member states have to agree on the purpose of global targets and have to be specific whether they want a global deal or a universal agenda. If they continue to evade these vital questions, the outcome is likely to be, at best, an overloaded, aid-centric and prescriptive agenda. At worst, there may not be a post-2015 agenda at all.

The success of the MDGs was due to their clarity and conciseness. An overloaded agenda with fuzzy targets will not generate the same staying power. Any belief in the perfectibility of the post-2015 agenda will yield too many targets or no agenda at all. Each stakeholder will have to choose between either keeping the DNA of the MDGs intact – i.e. clear, concise, computable – or venturing into genetic modification by including particular items and topics. Too many participants are currently engaged in the post-2015 debate with the mind-set of a salesperson. They may want to heed the words of Antoine de Saint-Exupéry: ‘Perfection is reached, not when there is nothing left to add, but when there is nothing left to take away.’

Finally, it must be noted that it took several world summits before global targets were internationally accepted. The MDGs only came into being after the Millennium Declaration was adopted. The post-2015 agenda seems to invert the sequence. Member states are now focused on targets, without first agreeing on the broader narrative. By putting the cart before the horse, too much attention is being placed on the list of targets, making the stakes simply too high for a reasoned debate. Most stakeholders are now preoccupied with getting their topic inserted in the post-2015 agenda. It would be unwise to continue this course. The selection of the list of global targets should come later; once the narrative of the post-2015 agenda has been decided and the 2015 declaration has been adopted. Agenda-setting for development cannot be reduced to mere target-setting.

Such a gridlock is not uncommon at the UN. In the past, it was usually overcome by a few member states coming together to change the direction of the global debate. Such leading from behind, combined with an assertive leadership by the UN Secretariat, is what is now critically needed.
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Notes

1. Success tends to have many parents; and several players naturally claim credit for the MDGs. Malloch-Brown, for example, who was the Administrator of the UN Development Programme at the time, claims that he and a small group wrote up the MDGs in the basement of the UN office in New York (quoted in The Guardian, November 2012, http://www.guardian.co.uk/global-development/2012/nov/16/mark-malloch-brown-mdgs-nuclear, accessed February 2013).

2. One notable exception was the target regarding maternal mortality. No evidence can be found to show that a reduction by three-quarters over a period of 25 years has ever been achieved. This target reflects a normative goal rather than a realistic objective. Little wonder that global progress is most offtrack vis-à-vis that target.

3. Since they aim to maintain the same rate of progress as in the past, some critics have belittled the MDGs as the ‘Minimum Development Goals’. The sad reality is that global progress has slowed down since 1990 and that the world will actually not meet the targets in 2015.

4. An analogy is that of a class whose objective is to attain an average score of say 70% on the final exam. When the class meets the target, not every student will necessarily achieve that score. Approximately half of them will score above 70%; the other half will score below it. The same principle applies to the MDGs.

5. It was never the intention of the Millennium Declaration to exceed the global targets.

6. This misinterpretation can have grave consequences, often in the form of describing respectable progress as a failure because the country is not on track for meeting the global MDGs.

7. When the UN Secretary-General took steps to establish the panel, he initially sought to appoint two former Heads of State to co-chair it (memo dated 19 September 2011). Instead, three sitting leaders ended up co-chairing it – the UK Prime Minister and the President of Indonesia and of Liberia.

8. More than 1.5 million people from 194 countries have voted on the web version of ‘My World’. Foremost, they want to end hunger and income-poverty, achieve full gender equality, improve health services and guarantee access to education for every child.

9. An editorial in The Guardian newspaper argued: ‘it would be cynical to pledge new goals without a plan for achieving them’. In: ‘Global development: reimagining the goals’, Editorial, 30 December 2011, http://m.guardian.co.uk/commentisfree/2011/dec/30/global-development-reimagining-the-goals?cat=commentisfree&type=article (accessed January 2013).

10. The discourse about development co-operation and aid effectiveness – from the Paris Declaration (2005) to the Aacra Agenda for Action (2008) and the Busan Partnership Agreement (2011) rightly underscore the importance of national ownership and policy space at the country level. The relevant documents are available at http://www.oecd.org/dac/effectiveness/.

11. They paid the non-negligible amount of US$8.5 million in 1946.

12. While underweight is down from about 25 to 16% of the children below age five, overweight has reached about 7% of the global population of this age group. Sub-Saharan Africa is home to nearly one quarter of the world’s overweight children (UN 2013b). According to the Lancet, over 2 billion people in the world are now obese or overweight, up from 875 million in 1980. In 2010, overweight and obesity caused some 3.4 million deaths worldwide (Ng et al. 2014).

13. The gender target cannot be reduced to a demographic balance between girls and boys below age five, as some have proposed (Karver, Kenny, and Sumner 2012). Such a donor-centric view of the post-2015 agenda lacks universal validity. Female infanticide, however objectionable and unacceptable, is only one expression of pervasive gender discrimination.

14. Even income poverty remains a universal challenge. Stiglitz (2012, 16), for instance, wrote, ‘by 2011 the number of American families […] living on two dollars a day per person or less, the measure of poverty used by the World Bank for developing countries had doubled since 1996, to 1.5 million’.

15. Rich countries seem more focused on climate finance than on climate change; more ready to promise resources to mitigate its consequences than to change behaviors that actually cause climate change.

16. The indicative list proposed by the high-level panel on the post-2015 agenda was three times as long as the original MDGs; contradicting the panel’s own recommendation to keep it to ‘a limited number of goals and targets’ (UN 2013a).

17. Kahneman (2012, 62) writes, ‘A reliable way to make people believe in falsehoods is frequent repetition, because familiarity is not easily distinguished from truth.’

18. The targets on income-poverty, safe drinking water and slum upgrading are ill-defined and cannot be measured objectively on the basis of direct observations. For how the claim is biased by measurement, see Vandemoortele (2012).

19. Atkinson (1973, 66), for example, indicated that ‘measures such as the Gini coefficient are often presented as purely “scientific”, but in fact they explicitly embody values about a desirable distribution of income’.

20. Numbers are often used and abused to distort public debate. It is not uncommon for people to select statistics in order to confirm preset conclusions. About a century ago, Andrew Long, a Scottish poet put it plainly, ‘They use statistics as a drunken man uses a lamp post; for support rather than for illumination.’ In other words, numbers do not always reveal facts (Fioramonti 2014).

21. At global summits, member states usually fall into two camps: those that want to set ambitious targets (mostly donor nations) and those that are more concerned about their feasibility (mostly developing countries). In the absence of a compromise at the Millennium Summit, the level of ambition was left vague by omitting to clarify the period over which the agreed targets were to be achieved. Such ambiguity is not uncommon in political agreements. It was the architects of the MDGs who decided to take 1990 as the baseline year; thereby equating the period over which the global targets were to be achieved with that of a generation – namely 25 years.

22. Intermediate targets are also essential for changing the current format of global summity; a point addressed under 5.8.
23. There are more indicators regarding health than any other aspect of human well-being. In education, the principal indicator remains the net enrollment ratio. Attendance and completion rates are more relevant but they suffer from methodological weaknesses and incomplete coverage (Cameron 2005). Agreement about which indicators gauge the quality of education remains elusive. By contrast, indicators such as the under-5 mortality rate (U5MR), the proportion of births attended by skilled health personnel, and the immunization rate, are well established and less problematic.

24. Countries that achieve universal primary education automatically comply with the target on gender equality in basic education.

25. Named after the fourteenth-century English friar, Ockham’s razor is also known as the law of parsimony, succinctness or simplicity. The “razor” refers to the need to shave away unnecessary assumptions and complexities.

26. For a discussion on some caveats related to human rights and global targets, see Vandemoortele (2013).

27. That not all statistics are reliable was already understood by Benjamin Disraeli, a British Prime Minister in the nineteenth century. The oft-quoted remark attributed to him goes as follows: ‘There are three kinds of lies: lies, damned lies, and statistics.’

28. Data show that absolute reductions in the U5MR, for instance, are positively correlated with the initial U5MR level, while reductions in relative terms are inversely correlated (Vandemoortele 2009). Since most MDG targets are expressed in relative terms, they make them extra-ambitious for countries with low levels of human development.

29. The point being that the MDG targets were defined on the basis of global trends; not on trends observed in Africa. Initial conditions and the local context cannot be abstracted away.

30. For example, the 1990 World Summit for Children set the target for the year 2000 of reducing the U5MR by one-third or to a level of 70 per 1000 live births.

31. It is often asserted that human development is underpinned by good governance and hampered by its absence. Beyond the commonsensical argument that governance and development influence each other, their relationship is more complex and less linear than what is usually assumed. Too many exceptions on the general rule undercut the validity of any specific association between the two. Chang (2007) presents some concrete examples. Moreover, good governance remains conceptually unclear, statistically fuzzy and politically touchy. The use of proxy indicators may be preferable to pushing the issue of governance onto the post-2015 agenda. As a proxy, we argue that equitable development is generally associated with good governance and the respect of human rights. Thus, monitoring the equitable pattern of progress will indirectly provide feedback regarding governance and human rights.

32. Fukuda-Parr (2010) makes a strong case for a separate goal on inequality.

33. The High-Level Panel of Eminent Persons on the post-2015 agenda made the interesting point that ‘targets should only be considered “achieved” if they are met for all relevant income and social groups’ (UN 2013a, 14). Implicitly, the panel advocated for mainstreaming.

34. After reviewing the growth literature, Temple (1999, 146) concluded: ‘it has become extremely difficult to build a case that inequality is good for growth’. Two IMF researchers found that ‘longer growth spells are robustly associated with more equality in the income distribution’ (Berg and Ostry 2011, 3). Milanovic (2012, 12) wrote, ‘the pendulum has swung from a rather unambiguous answer that inequality is good for growth to a much more nuanced view that favors the opposite conclusion’. In short, growth and equity are no longer seen as foes.

35. They should not only come from the world of politics but also from the media, entertainment, civil society, philanthropy, socially responsible business, academia, etc.

36. By early 2014, the Open Working Group had, after eight working sessions, proposed some 150 targets to be included in the post-2015 agenda. And the number was expected to grow as targets on the ‘means of implementation’ were yet to be considered. By contrast, the original MDGs comprised a mere 18 targets.

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