

Putting Inequality at the Centre of the Post-2015 Agenda

Introduction

The Millennium Development Goals (MDGs) have guided the course of development efforts since their establishment in 2000 with the United Nation's Millennium Declaration. With the timeframe set for the MDGs set to expire at the end of 2015, consideration must be given to how effective they have been in addressing key issues of global poverty to date, and what should come next. While the MDGs have been successful in drawing public and donor attention to a number of important areas in development, they have also attracted criticism for reducing development to a series of indicators that ignore the power dynamics and inequalities that are root causes of poverty.

Notions of equality have been central to earlier pronouncements on development, particularly those reflecting a rights-based approach. The UN General Assembly's Declaration on the Right to Development in 1986 asserted the existence of inalienable human rights, equality of opportunity for development, and the need for a new economic order based on sovereign equality (UNGA, 1986). Building on this, the 1990s saw a series of conferences and summits, including the United Nations World Summit for Children (1990), World Conference on Human Rights (Vienna, 1993) and World Summit on Social Development (Copenhagen, 1995), that further established a development discourse centred on rights and equality. Equality is one of the core values of UN Millennium Declaration, as the preamble states the global "collective responsibility to uphold the principles of human dignity, equality and equity at the global level".

The MDGs were the next step in this process that sought to articulate a vision of a decent world and galvanize support and action to achieve it. Based on the International Development Goals developed and promoted by the Development Assistance Committee (DAC) of OECD countries, the MDGs were the negotiated product of consensus between the DAC, the UN and other institutions such as the World Bank and IMF (Hulme,

2009). MDGs themselves highlighted some aspects of inequality, especially the gender inequalities in access to health, education, and employment. However, while the fulfillment of rights and the reduction of inequality are reflected in the underlying principles of the MDGs, the language and structure of the final goals and their associated targets and indicators are far more neutral and technocratic, and the original emphasis on the importance of equality has arguably been lost in attempts to meet targets that don't take into account those left behind.

Why is addressing inequality post-MDGs important?

There is a growing body of research that suggests that inequality is a key factor in perpetuating poverty, both within countries and between them. High levels of inequality are 'economically inefficient', contributing to 'a whole range of social ills that impact the poor and non-poor alike' (Fischer, 2013, 4). At a national level, inequality is linked to 'slower economic growth, high crime rates, political unrest and limited social mobility' (Melamed, 2012, 4). Yet the importance of equality for development is not reflected in the MDGs, with many targets seeking progress without acknowledging the potential for this to exacerbate pre-existing inequalities

The targets of the MDGs are measured through average progress at country and global level making it difficult to discern where or for who increases or decreases have occurred (Herfkens, 2011, 5). Without a focus on equality, national governments and the international community may quickly lose sight of the hardest to reach groups. In many cases, the desire to reach certain MDG targets has resulted in funds being channeled away from those most in need to where it was easiest to achieve results (UN System Task Team, 2012, 3). This has contributed to increasing disparities at the sub-national level as progress towards some targets (e.g. to halve the number of poor people) has been more easily achieved when resources were channeled away from the poorest groups and towards those who were better off and more accessible (Gisselquist 2013). Progress in the form of action directed at those near the threshold may therefore have been 'at the expense of growing inequality' as it pulls the most accessible populations across the poverty line and widens the gap for the most disadvantaged (Herfkens, 2011, 5). This could therefore

account for why the indicators across all the MDG goals are 'consistently worse for disadvantaged groups, in every global region' (STC, 2012, 6).

Inequality is not purely restricted to the local, but must also be addressed on a global level to effectively address intersecting causes of inequality on a broader scale. Poverty and social exclusion 'are not purely national in their causes or consequences' but 'the product of structural inequality at the global level' (Kabeer, 2010, 10). Goal 8 of the MDGs reflects the need for the developed world to make changes in the way it interacts with the developing world, particularly in regards to trade relations, access to technologies, debt and aid delivery. However, Goal 8 fails to provide any tangible targets or indicators to monitor its progress (Kabeer, 2010, 10). Minimal international pressure seems to be in place to hold developed governments to account, and as a result global inequality remains largely unaddressed towards the end of the MDGs. In the post-2015 agenda, it will be vital for global inequalities to be acknowledged as 'it is extremely unlikely that developing countries will be able to achieve growth, prosperity and social justice without greater attention to building greater solidarity, a genuine partnership of equals, at the global level' (Kabeer, 2010, 10).

Possible methods for targeting inequality in the post-2015 agenda

Including inequality in the post-2015 agenda will be challenging. As inequality occurs in a variety of forms and for a variety of reasons, it will be imperative that any attempt at real action on inequality will require significant restructuring of the current MDG format.

Whatever method is chosen, it will be imperative that adequate data is collected to enable meaningful targeting and monitoring of progress. Global and local level analysis and monitoring of currently excluded groups will be vital (Melamad, 2012, 7). Action on inequality requires 'a comprehensive policy on information' that allows for the collection of disaggregated data if inequality, particularly social exclusion, is to be adequately identified and monitored (Kabeer, 2010, 8).

Outlined below are some of the possible methods for incorporating inequality into the post-2015 agenda, none of which are perfect but all of which offer some potential means of contributing towards a more meaningful effort to combat inequality.

1. Have a target of Gini Coefficient of income inequality for each country

The idea of incorporating a goal that focuses on a target GINI Coefficient has been present in much discussion around the post-2015 development agenda. Such a target could aim to reduce national GINI to within a specified level or range (Melamed, 2012). Such a method is simple and could be universally applied (Melamed, 2012). It would also ensure more explicit attention is paid to income disparities within countries and would help to counter the existing gap (Herfkens, 2011, 9).

However, a lack of quality data could impede the accuracy of results, and use of the GINI could lead to misrepresentation of progress if there is a reduction in the income of the richest without an increase in income for the poorest (Melamed, 2012). The GINI coefficient would also still prescribe an outcome based on income inequality and may be too narrow to effectively address broader issues of inequality (Herfkens, 2011 and Melamed, 2012).

2. Weight progress on all indicators using equity criteria

In an equality-focused agenda, progress among the poorest should count for more than progress in the richer groups (Melamed, 2012). Using equity-adjusted weights could allow for a greater understanding of whether progress on each indicator has been distributed equitably or not (Vantemoortele and Delamonica, 2010, 9). This will help incentivize the targeting of the most disadvantaged groups, as 'measurement influences action' (Vantemoortele and Delamonica, 2010, 6).

However, this approach would require collection of enormous data and could be more challenging politically as it requires an assessment of who is benefitting more than others from the current global structure (Melamed 2012).

3. Make all targets universal

Universalistic modes of social policy are some of 'our most powerful policy tools to date for dealing with poverty and inequality' (Fischer, 2013, 12). Universal targets, although they do not necessarily eradicate inequalities, do mean that inequalities will prevent achievement (Kabeer, 2010, 6).

There is, however, a danger that this approach could lead to rising inequality if improvement at the top outpaced progress at the bottom (Gisselquist 2013). It would be important to still incorporate some degree of targeting for the most disadvantaged groups to prevent a further exacerbation of global and local inequalities (Fischer, 2013, 12).

Conclusion

Addressing inequality in the post-MDG Agenda will be a challenge. Inequality is diverse in its forms and consequences, and as such it is vital that any effort to measure and target inequality allows the flexibility required for different contexts. Each of the options above provide a way for the post 2015 development agenda to highlight inequality. While none are perfect, a combination of these options, or any other method that allows for greater focus on inequality, will allow for a more just advancement towards alleviating poverty for those most in need.

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