

The Broker blogs from New York

Goalposts: What next for the MDGs?

The Broker was in New York to blog from the United Nation's (UN) Summit on the Millennium Development Goals (MDGs). We invited policy makers, academics and NGO representatives to discuss the Summit and long-term strategic choices. Their thoughts are briefly summarized here. Two separate narratives have emerged from this. The mainstream debate focuses on details, statistics and methods to refine the current MDG approach. More critical voices want to replace the MDGs after 2015 with a more comprehensive development strategy.

In 2000, eight goals were set to change the lives of the global poor. With only five years left to meet these objectives, MDG advocates drew up the balance at the UN Summit held on 20-22 September 2010. *The Broker* went to New York to see who was looking beyond the short-term, direct interests and political aims of official delegations and lobbyists, to discover whether there were initiatives that would transcend the current institutional aid framework and propose viable alternatives. The burning question is: where should the world head, in terms of development, after 2015?

What is currently being discussed in mainstream forums like the MDG Summit raises the suspicion that post-2015 policies are likely to be more of the same, with minor changes to the prevailing narrative. This mainstream debate focuses on details, statistics and methods for refining the current technical, top-down and aid-oriented MDG approach. 'Partnerships' with the business sector are becoming increasingly influential and are driven by a discourse that favours terms like 'innovation' and promotes a distinctly action-oriented approach of 'helping' people and arranging necessary services for the poor.

However, approaches more critical of this traditional aid viewpoint are also emerging here and there. They could lead to a more comprehensive and policy-oriented alternative narrative that could hopefully be endorsed at the next MDG summit in 2013. These critical voices discuss how to develop alternative strategies that combine government and multilateral policies with grassroots activism and global movements. They focus on broader, less segmented

development, poverty and change concepts, and try to include ecological goals and (human) security needs. They address political, social and economic obstacles for development, and also look at global processes and the root causes of the global financial, food and climate crises.

The mainstream debate

Negotiations between the UN member states before the summit resulted in an 'outcome document' that was presented at the MDG Summit: *Keeping the promise: united to achieve the Millennium Development Goals*. The document reaffirms member states' commitment to achieve the MDGs by their target date. There was already advance consensus about the political message that the summit would make: the glass is half full. In other words, while a great deal has been achieved, a much more concerted effort is needed to achieve the development goals by 2015.

Most civil society and advocacy organizations do not share the member states' optimism. They criticize the dearth of financial pledges needed to halve extreme poverty and reach the other goals. Indeed, a number of side discussions took place in and around the UN premises, and on websites. Most of them went beyond the summit's political rhetoric, and yet they fit neatly into the current MDG narrative. They focus on concrete policies for achieving the different MDG goals in the next five years – policies that have generated a debate about numbers and statistics: how do we measure poverty or the extent to which it has been eradicated?

For example, there was the predictable discussion of traditional aid problems, along the lines of the 2005 Paris Declaration and 2008 Accra Agenda for Action. This discussion about aid effectiveness emphasized themes such as ownership, coordination of donor support, mutual accountability and transparency. While this too is necessary,

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it is not enough. Increasingly, alternatives to these traditional arguments began to rear their heads at the side events. For example, several actors made an argument for more 'policy space' for countries to determine their own course. Others advocated results-based financing methods or transparent tax systems.

Narrative shifts?

There are several signs that the MDG narrative, with its technical approach, is losing ground in the official aid community. An important novelty of the MDG outcome document is that it explicitly mentions fragile states. About one-third of developing countries are fragile states, and it is precisely these states that are largely responsible for the MDGs not being met. The violence and conflict in these complex environments stands in the way of sustainable development, presenting policy makers with a very different set of requirements in terms of aid and development.

The mentioning of fragile states is an implicit criticism of the MDG narrative, because it acknowledges that at least in these states the segmented MDG approach yields little result.

These criticisms were also raised on *The Broker* blog, for example by Phil Vernon, director of programmes at International Alert, an independent peace-building organization. The current aid structure is generating the wrong course of action, particularly in fragile states, according to Vernon. 'People in the sector know this, but they are constrained by the institutional framework within which they work, rather like surgeons operating in a dimly lit room,' he says.

Another critic of the MDG narrative, in particular of its focus on statistics and (poverty) measures, is David Hulme, professor of development studies and head of the Institute for Development Policy and Management at the University of Manchester. Hulme criticizes 'the pretence that a science of poverty reduction will yield "evidence-based policy"'. Hulme stresses the importance of measuring social and economic progress, but questions the objectivity of such an exercise since 'there is no evidence that is not based in some way on value judgements and theory'.

Combating poverty and inequality, a flagship report written by the UN Research Institute for Social Development (UNRISD), actually criticizes the goals: 'The MDGs focus on measuring things that people lack to the detriment of understanding why they lack them.'

Another recent report, by Lancet - the London International Development Centre Commission, *The Millennium Development Goals: a cross-sectoral analysis and principles for goal setting after 2015*, provides an analysis of the MDGs and proposes a holistic, interdisciplinary approach to development. Synergy is key. Elaine Unterhalter, one of the authors of the report, writes on *The Broker* blog that the 'MDGs were not derived from an inclusive analysis and prioritisation of development needs'. The commission highlights the absence of a range of key values, such as equity, a notion that promises to be a central concern in future debates.



The Broker / Frans Bleckmann

Broadway at the time of the MDG conference, New York, USA, September 2010

Towards a new narrative

Not many of the critics of the MDG narrative were actually at the MDG Summit. But some did follow the proceedings in New York. Aware that the power and money needed for change was converging at the summit, they seized the opportunity to develop a new narrative that turned away from mainstream policy.

'We have to take a radical turn', Phil Vernon writes. The MDGs are 'too narrow' and 'too technical'. 'Instead of asking "how can our existing institutions implement this new approach", we need to ask "what kind of institutions do we need, to do so?"'

Major changes are needed in the way our international institutions are organized to make them fit the new purpose. 'It is time to put the ideology back into development,' Vernon continues. 'Let's start working now to have a more genuine discussion about what human progress actually means, instead of going along with the idea that history can be described, and progress measured, only in terms of poverty, health, schooling and the like.'

With the 2015 target date fast approaching, it is time for MDG critics and sceptics to join the debate. One of them has already. Michael Edwards, from Demos, a non-partisan public policy research and advocacy organization in New York City, was never that interested in the MDGs. But Edwards realized that over time, it is politics and state building that generate the best results. 'I've no idea what that would mean for the detailed goals and mechanisms of the MDGs' he writes, 'but I'm pretty sure that they would be more effective as a result. Maybe it's time I entered the dance floor after all?'

One thing is certain. A new course needs to be charted right now. It is likely that the post-2015 targets will be agreed upon at the follow-up MDG Summit, planned for 2013. The MDG Summit's outcome document asks – read: orders – UN Secretary-General Ban-Ki-moon to start investigating a new course of action. So the debate is starting now. This will be an opportunity for both supporters and critics of the MDGs to push things in the right direction. ■

For more on the MDG Summit, visit www.un.org/en/mdg/summit2010