

Millennium Development Goals and Their Challenge for Non-Governmental Organizations

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In this talk I would like to focus on two important aspects of the present times. I will focus on the embodiment of international concerns for poverty in the Millennium Development Goals (MDGs) and on one of the actors that has been in the forefront of this debate for a considerable period of time within the international policy debates, non-governmental organizations (NGOs). Let me first look at the MDGs and then locate the role of NGOs within that context.

According to Jeffrey Sachs, director of the UN Millennium Project, ‘around one billion people on the planet struggle for their very survival each day, and thousands lose that struggle, succumbing to hunger, illness, and natural hazards simply because they are too poor to stay alive. There is no reason for this kind of suffering in the 21st century. The people that we see are fully capable of becoming highly productive and secure members of the world community’ if they are just given a helping hand’ (2007:2). These words are no doubt shared by many people who have been working in this field both in developed and developing countries. Sachs view also highlights the thinking that had led to the creation of MDGs and has been behind them since their acceptance as global targets. This thinking is about the moral unacceptability of poverty in this century. This position is also about the possibility of *lifting* the poor out of their conditions to benefit from global processes that are influencing their lives. Another point which is highlighted in Sachs statement is that this possibility of overcoming poverty is linked with the capacities people already have. Here the role of international actors is seen as the helping hand which will create the initial push for people to build on their own capabilities. These views are very important as they acknowledge the agency of poor people to deal with their own lives while also considering the role of international actors within that context. Based on these views and motivations in 2000 189 members of the United Nations promised and committed themselves delivering eight MDGs by 2015. In this way the poverty and those 8 causes that create conditions of chronic poverty and reproduce poverty in people’s lives are put on the top of the international political agenda.

Let's see what these MDGs are:

- 1) to eradicate extreme poverty
- 2) to give children a primary school education
- 3) to promote gender equality and empower women
- 4) to reduce by two thirds the mortality rate among children under five
- 5) to improve maternal health
- 6) to combat HIV/AIDS, malaria and other diseases
- 7) to ensure environmental sustainability
- 8) to develop a global partnership

Each of these goals has targets set for them and there are 18 target and 48 indicators for monitoring and evaluation of their achievement. For instance the first goal has two targets:

Target 1 Halve, between 1990 and 2015, the proportion of people whose income is less than one dollar a day.

Target 2 Halve, between 1990 and 2015, the proportion of people who suffer from hunger.

Then goal 2 has one target:

Target 3 Ensure that, by 2015, children everywhere, boys and girls alike, will be able to complete a full course of primary schooling.

Goal 6 has two targets:

Target 7 Have halted by 2015 and begun to reverse the spread of HIV/AIDS

Target 8 Have halted by 2015 and begun to reverse the incidence of malaria and other major diseases

While the goals set for MDGs encapsulate the aims of the process in a simple and direct manner, targets and the indicators reveal a much more complicated picture. Particularly when we look at the targets set for Goal 8 it becomes clear that simple overseas development aid based interventions will not be sufficient to achieve MDGs as a package. Let's look at these targets.

Target12 Develop further an open, rule-based, predictable, non-discriminatory trading and financial system. It includes a commitment to good governance, development, and poverty reduction - both nationally and internationally

Target 13 Address the special needs of the least developed countries.

Includes: tariff and quota-free access for least-developed countries' exports; enhanced programme of debt relief for HIPC's and cancellation of official bilateral debt; and more generous ODA for countries committed to poverty reduction

Target 14 Address the special needs of landlocked countries and Small Island developing States (through the Programme of Action for the Sustainable Development of Small Island Developing States and the outcome of the twenty-second special session of the General Assembly)

Target 15 Deal comprehensively with the debt problems of developing countries through national and international measures in order to make debt sustainable in the long term

Target 16 In cooperation with developing countries, develop and implement strategies for decent and productive work for youth

Target 17 In cooperation with pharmaceutical companies, provide access to affordable essential drugs in developing countries

Target 18 In cooperation with the private sector, make available the benefits of new technologies, especially information and communications

Goal 8 and its targets I argue are setting out the conditions under which MDGs can be achieved and achieved in a sustainable manner in the long term. Targets under goal 8 are highlighting two important issues: the historical context of poverty and the global political and economic relations within that process which position poor people in a particular set of disempowering conditions. A close look at the targets reveals that the help Sachs was talking about earlier needs to be more than just help. The idea of help is about reconsidering the international structural relations, in the way they set out norms and rules of social relations at that level(for instance how do we achieve goal 6 and its targets without rethinking of pharmaceutical production and people's right to health). Another important question here is whether the possible achievement of previous goals can be sustainable without having substantial achievements related with goal 8.

Looking at the earlier goals we tend to focus on achievements within particular countries and how targeting is calibrated within those countries. But the goal 8 broadens this territorially based logic. In that way they seem to suggest that the conditions of poverty will have to be addressed not only within particular locations of a country or a particular region within a country but also locating people within the larger resource relations at the global level. This position suggests that poverty in particular contexts also historically determined and is linked with global processes in particular ways. Unless these historical conditions are addressed it will be challenging to deal with the targets of the previous goals. Here then we

have the first challenge for MDGs. This is about the possibilities for change in people lives and possibilities of change in the structural relations that have been part of the process that creates poverty. While many have argued that the former is possible with targeted interventions and increased resources, few have commented on the conditions of the latter.

In addition to this analysis number of people have also argued that while it has been an important process to crystallize these issues into MDGs and get an agreement on their importance at the United Nations level, they do not change the way international community have considered what is important within international development field. It is argued that MDGs repackage already existing interventions and their perspective under a new umbrella. Given that many interventions in number of these fields have been unsuccessful, it is not clear how this new approach will achieve its targets. Here particularly the funding issue is pointed out as another problem. It is not clear whether MDGs have received additional funding outside the existing ODA or not. It is argued that existing aid flows following the traditional channels have been inadequate in any case, without increased sustained aid over time; it will be difficult to realize many of the MDGs in most poor countries, even if the middle income countries will be able to deliver on some of the MDGs. The question raised here is about what happens when we reach 2015?

Now I would like to turn to non-governmental organizations. I would argue that the discussions, setting of, and achievement of MDGs have been part of the work NGOs have been involved with. Furthermore, the actual processes of achieving them have also set some challenges for NGOs. Before I look at their particular role in these areas I would like to look at NGOs and the way we have been thinking about this particular organizational form. The concept of non-governmental organization is related originally with the UN classification system. It has been used as distinction to identify those groups that are not state members to the system. However of course in terms of the work these organizations do, NGOs predate the UN system and have a long history within the European social relations. Also, it is important to point out that NGO community has grown in size and scope in the last two decades. Many organizations have been founded as response to particular needs of people or the observed organizational constraints within the formal international system. Furthermore, the world historic events have also allowed NGOs to appear as central actors in policy debates. The end of the Cold war in the late 1980's and the people's challenges to dictatorships in Latin America have both opened a debate about the role of civil society. In many discussions on civil society and its nature, one particular school of thought considers the organizational forms that the activism takes. In this context the non-governmental form of organizing by people to achieve their own ends also come to represent civil society. Most common form here is taken to be the NGO form although clearly when we look at the NGOs we realize that this is a generalization. There are many different kinds of NGOs.

Another aspect of this emergence of NGOs as social actors coincides with the changing international aid thinking. The end of the Cold war also signified that now developmental work can focus on different aspects of underdevelopment and social structures. It was thought that years of support provided by international financial institutions and bilateral donors to developing country governments did not really change much in the lives of ordinary people. In this situation civil society is considered to be a new way of delivering aid that can go to people more directly. Here NGOs of course have become primary actors to engage in this relationship as the organizational form of civil society in a given context. Here given the post-cold war period international donors thought to deal with two things at the same time: by funding civil society they were going to help people directly to get out of poverty but also they were investing in what is seen as the democratic institutions of civil society that will have long term impact of democratizing many political systems.

This changing view within the international development world can be traced by looking at the way new departments or positions created for civil society experts within bilateral aid agencies such as the Department for International Development, UK; USAID and in others but also for instance the new office opened within the World Bank. The change in the bank also coincided with the arrival of new president James Wolfhenson who was very much interested in social interventions that help people as a result the Bank's focus was moving more towards partnering with civil societies in various countries. In this period there was also a change in the way international aid has been delivered. The Bank developed a new approach based on country wide approaches and directly looking at very poor countries to provide comprehensive aid on the basis of Indebted Poor Country (HIPC) Initiative. The mechanism for this approach, which is now applied widely outside HIPC, is called Poverty Reduction Strategy Papers (PRSPs) which had to be produced by individual countries to map out to identify particular causes of poverty, the needs in various areas. This process has to take place in an integrated manner to be able provide a comprehensive picture to the international donors. In this way the donor community can work from the same map as a starting point for their interventions. Most importantly PRSP process has to include the voices from civil society and based on wide ranging consultations within communities. Furthermore for instance the US Presidents Emergency Aid for HIV/AIDS, with the value of 30 billion dollars requires governments to distribute the funds through the civil society implementation processes. This is of course also part of the UNAIDS' approach to dealing with HIV/AIDS in many countries. As a result NGOs emerged as one of the key policy actors in these processes within many countries.

The NGOs perceived role is to bridge the gap between various policy structures and the people in order to deliver the policies effectively and efficiently. In this story about the emergence of NGOs as major actors in many countries as well as at the international level

there are number of shared assumption underpinning this process of institutionalization of NGOs; a) NGOs are related with people or reflect their needs; b) therefore NGOs can have more effective ways of reaching people; c) therefore NGOs should be in the centre of service delivery; d) as people's organisations they can use advocacy techniques to increase the accountability and the transparency of governments in line with their development aims and restructuring plans.

In recognizing these qualities of NGOs, the international process classifies and creates a particular capability set for NGOs in this field which can be seen as agency. For instance according to the United Nations Joint program on AIDS (UNAIDS), in order to engage with the comprehensive prevention at a larger scale, a multisectoral approach, is central in which 'key collaborators include faith based organizations, NGOs organizations of people living with HIV and private industry and workers' organizations (2004: 91). The role of civil society organisations is also recognized in delivering treatment and finding innovative approaches in this area (2004: 106).¹ The UNAIDS report goes on to argue that 'civil society organisations often innovate approaches to the epidemic, and can channel funds to communities, augment state service delivery, and monitor national government policies' (2004:157). This view presents as yet another important assumption about the characteristics of NGOs as innovators and being more flexible compared to other organizations.

However, it is important to consider these assumptions within the overall context of the international aid and whether NGOs have spaces for innovation at each level of policy making. Once the dispersal of aid funds is initiated, civil society is incorporated for the delivery of these policies through already decided pools tools. Therefore, arguably NGOs and community organisations² are brought in to localise global policies as free agents, nonetheless representing the global frameworks.

Within the international system, clearly NGOs participate in the debates and try to influence the possible policy outcomes as a way performing advocacy role (Najam, 1998) In this sense they are not only influenced by the practices of governance but also engage with it. Thus, the picture is more complex than the one helpfully sketched by de Graff (de Graff, 1987). The question is related with their capability to influence the nature of the overall framework for thinking about the development in general and their particular issues within it in particular. While NGOs participate in certain negotiation of their everyday practices for their work, it is precisely through these negotiations, which involve setting procedures for accountability, implementation, and the correct language for implementation, that they are

¹ Although UNAIDS seems to be using civil society organisations generically to include diverse non-governmental actors, it seems what they are referring to is typically looked at under an NGO identity within the literature.

² Note that I have switched from a language referring to civil society to another one using NGOs in order to reflect the usage in the field.

constituted as subjects of the structure who are not able to question the overall frameworks. The impact of power relations within the system are mediated through these negotiations of practices and management for the everyday functioning of NGOs. As a result NGOs aspirational possibilities are negated on the basis of their organisational characteristics and needs. The claimed closeness of NGOs to people, hence their effectiveness, needs to be explained more in relation to the process leading to a certain way of doing is in a standardize manner.

For instance one area where explosion of NGOs is observed is related to HIV/AIDS interventions, across the world large numbers of NGOs are working in prevention, support and care projects funded by international donors. Each organisation implements a combination of intervention strategies depending on their funding base ranging from condom distribution to posters and providing care for PLWHAs. As David Lewis notes, these organizations (NGOs) work typically in the context of poverty and are concerned with poor people's well being. They try to deliver better services by building partnerships with other actors (Lewis, 2001, p.3). However partnerships often mean that NGOs construct themselves in *regular and predictable* ways to benefit from the international resources relations. While their organisational flexibility, volunteer base, flexible funding base, less bureaucratic management styles as well as ability to innovate are seen as important characteristics and qualities of these organisations (Clark, 1991; Fowler, 1997; Fyvie and Ager 1999), they are also creating the impetus for the power imbalance within which NGOs are located. The international system seems to incorporate NGOs through competitive funding dispersal according to the needs of the donors. Some of the NGO characteristics can also be a major constraint for their work once located into the limited competitive funding context as NGOs 'focus on details, not horizons, individual agendas imposed on organisational remit' (Sahley, 1995). Note that in this way ideas about achievement of aims are also constructed within funding frames and outcomes measured against these frames. As a result what needs to be achieved to deal with NGOs or people's needs is translated to what can be done according to the international policy makers. Furthermore, the funder imperatives on measurability reduces what can be done to those things that can be quantified such as distribution of condoms, producing posters and testing, whereby NGOs gradually become service delivery apparatus in the system and their advocacy role is reduced to non-controversial negotiations with other actors. None of the foregoing argument is intended to suggest that NGOs are not important or have not contributed to the well being of people, it is rather to locate the aspirational claims within a socio-political context that provides the capabilities of NGOs to be realised and then assesses their impact. Once this is done, questions are raised about their aspirational capabilities. In short, without a doubt that there are interesting and effective interventions implemented by NGOs. However, in many of these instances these interventions are based on

immediate relief and are not able to engage with long term issues. Furthermore, they are conditioned by changing international funding interests and frames. Therefore, while it is clear that that relief is an important issue, at present these NGO interventions are providing fragmented relief with a short term vision based on the international governance of the disease which is not able to engage with the socio-cultural conditions of the disease.

MDGs and NGOs

Let me start bringing together two parts of the talk.

Given the context of the emergence of NGOs and their work within the international development industry, it was only natural that they have become one of the most important actors within MDG processes. The role of NGOs and other civil society actors and activist academics such as Jeffrey Sachs must be recognized in developing and refining of MDGs (although of course the end result is a piece of international diplomatic negotiation among members of the UN). This process of putting poverty on the global agenda demonstrates the importance of advocacy work and its potential impact. Another aspect of the role we find NGOs perform is the monitoring and evaluation of the progress that has been achieved or not until 2015. In this regard NGOs have important comparative advantage to observe the changes and problems in their work environment. It is in this role that many critical voices on MDG process have been raised by many civil society group and NGOs: many questioned why these goals MDGs are better than another UN set goals in the past. They came and passed without any change in the overall conditions of people. For instance one very important public figure and activist questioned that ‘in 1980s, 1990s we had targets summed up by Health for all, education For all, none of these achieved now we have all these things put together in MDGs what is difference why they will be better than the past’. It is argued that while it is important to focus on poorest of the poor how far this agenda will get support from other groups and people who are not targeted by MDGs. Will there be a support from the general public. Also, many groups questioned what the added value of MDGs within the existing PRSP processes was, given that civil society groups are suppose to be involved with this process anyway. Others questioned how far MDGs are going to be able to engage with Goal 8 related systemic issues. Also, many women organizations wanted to see clear links being set between MDGs and the Beijing Platform for action.

These questions are highlighting the position of NGOs within the international system and particular challenges that they face in their everyday work. It is clear that for many organization

MDGs are adding new level of complication to their work. The aim of focusing most international aid and interventions towards achieving some or all MDGs also redirects the way NGOs need to work within the existing funding relations. This can present a new opportunity.

The important questions here is what will happen to the areas NGOs have been already working. This is a serious problem which is related to the survival of many organizations. This can be interpreted in two ways: a) organizational restructuring is required to be able to survive as a service delivery organization b) NGOs as people's organizations face re-articulating their aims and purposes which may not be directly relevant to their main constituents. Of course if the latter option is a reality than the assumptions about NGO characteristics of being close to people needs to be debated.

NGOs face important challenges in the context of MDGs: the most important question they face is linked with the rethinking of many NGOs existing interventions and interest areas. This rethinking can also be seen as soul searching as support for MDGs is established as an important political issue. However, the question of how far they benefit the needs of particular groups is raising the stakes for NGOs to maintain their relations with communities while also engaging with the MDGs debates at the international level. Here the other question is about the size of NGOs, clearly this double path is difficult to maintain for many organizations. While becoming partners in a crucial change process that is outlined in MDGs is attractive and fits well with the general outlook of the sector, the participation in these process can be deflecting some NGOs from their original missions and aims that are set in relation to the particular interests of their communities.

MDGs process focus attention to a set targets and their delivery this also came at the time the increased numbers of NGOs in the last 20 years as seen to be fragmenting the sector and leading to inefficient use of resources. Major funders, in the last 5 years or so, are switching back to providing budget support to governments as the main part of the donor funding. Here the dilemma is related with how to get NGOs to become partners even if direct funding of them is declining. This is where new policy frameworks that I mentioned earlier have gradually developed a new relationship for NGOs, donors and governments. NGOs are becoming partners with governments in the implementation phase of many policies. This poses an important question about the independence of NGOs and their advocacy impact. How to manage being partners in service delivery while also managing the organizational and advocacy distance from governments is a central question. Another one is that of whether there has been a decline in their policy innovation impact at the local levels while in the international forums

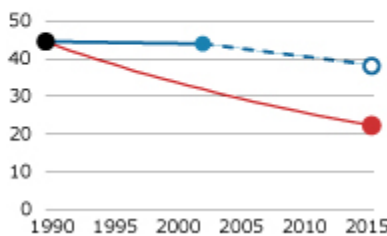
large international NGOs continue to be important. This then also raises another issue for the sector and that is the relationship between large international and western based NGOs and smaller more located country specific groups. The questions become whose voice is dominating the international debates on this issue. Do the views of smaller and more issue specific groups reach to the international forums?

Chart 1 (taken from the world Bank data monitor

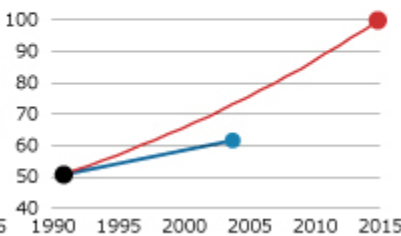
<http://ddp-ext.worldbank.org/ext/GMIS/gdmis.do?siteId=2&menuId=LNAV01REGSUB6>)

Sub-Saharan Africa

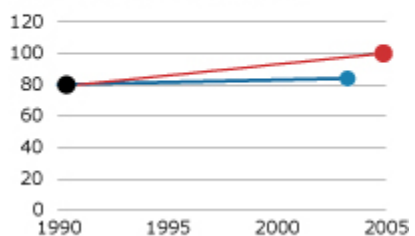
Goal 1 - People living on less than \$1 a day (%)



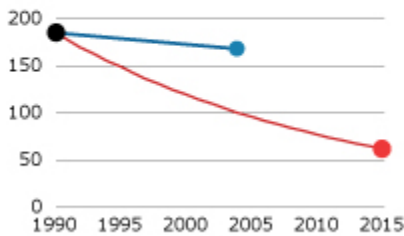
Goal 2 - Primary completion rate total (%)



Goal 3 - Ratio of girls to boys in primary and secondary education (%)



Goal 4 - Under 5 mortality (deaths per 1,000)

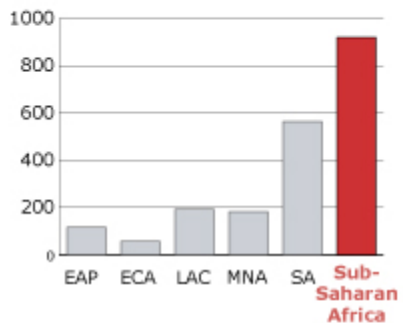


— progress needed to achieve the goal
 — progress made
 - - - projected

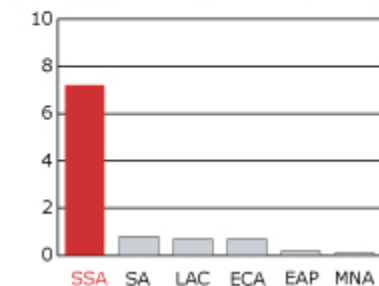
● benchmark
 ● most recent
 ● goal
 ○ projected

EAP — East Asia and the Pacific
 ECA — Eastern Europe and Central Asia
 LAC — Latin America and the Caribbean
 MNA — Middle East and North Africa
 SA — South Asia

Goal 5 - Maternal mortality ratio, (modeled estimate, per 100,000 live births, 2000)



Goal 6 - Prevalence of HIV, (% of population ages 15-49, 2003)



Goal 7 - Improved water source (% of population without access)

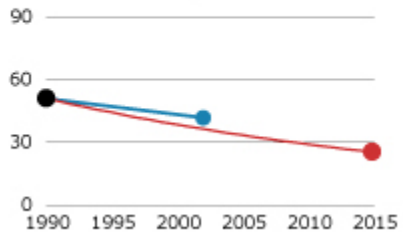
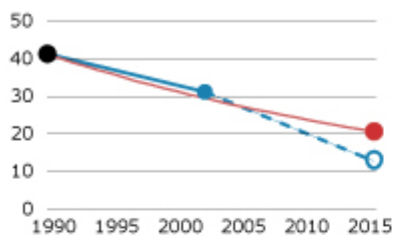


Chart 2 (is taken from the World Bank

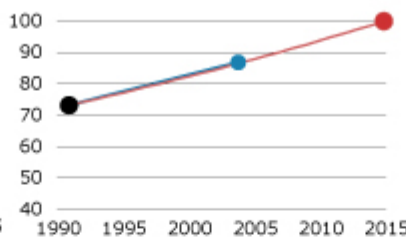
<http://ddp-ext.worldbank.org/ext/GMIS/gdmis.do?siteId=2&menuId=LNAV01REGSUB5>)

South Asia

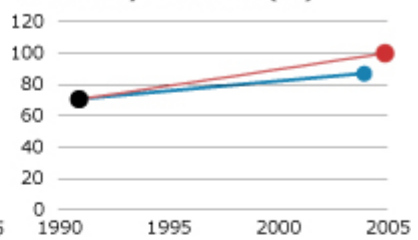
Goal 1 - People living on less than \$1 a day (%)



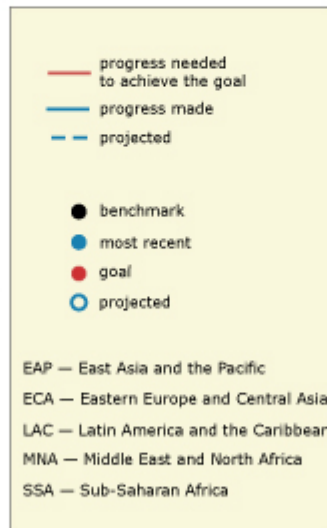
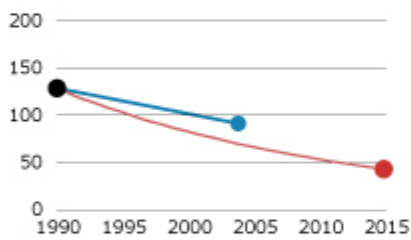
Goal 2 - Primary completion rate total (%)



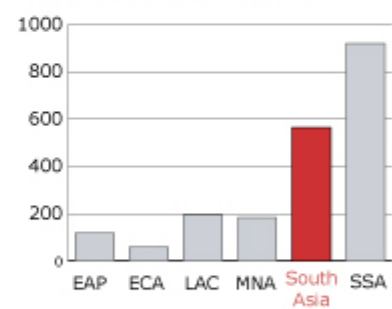
Goal 3 - Ratio of girls to boys in primary and secondary education (%)



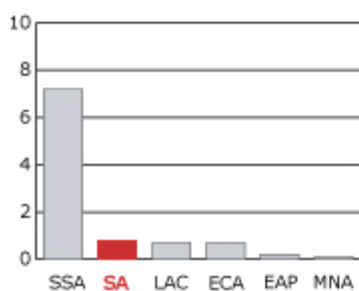
Goal 4 - Under 5 mortality (deaths per 1,000)



Goal 5 - Maternal mortality ratio, (modeled estimate, per 100,000 live births, 2000)



Goal 6 - Prevalence of HIV, (% of population ages 15-49, 2003)



Goal 7 - Improved water source (% of population without access)

