



No. 1 – June 2012

Millennium Development Goals: Measuring progress towards social justice

Health has not been a high priority during the last 20 years despite its pivotal place in the Rio Declaration adopted in 1992. It is critical to consider how synergies between health and other priorities, such as renewable energy consumption, or the green economy, can be strengthened by reconsidering the Millennium Development Goals (MDGs). It is argued that measurable health targets can be a useful way of reforming governance on sustainable development because health indicators are good measures of social progress to reduce inequalities and inequity.

In the context of the Rio+20 Conference, a Policy Dialogue was organized on the 24th April 2012 by GEPP in partnership with the World Health Organization. It considered the potential for giving a higher profile to health in the debate and follow-up to Rio+20. A closer look at the Millennium Development Goals also gives the opportunity to assess the relevance of launching new Sustainable Development Goals in Rio.

Anne Hassberger (Regional Health Advisor for Eastern Europe, Swiss Agency for Development and Cooperation, Bern) presented a review of the Millennium Development Goals from the perspective of Switzerland, before **Jaya Krishnakumar** (Department of Economics, University of Geneva) focused on how to measure and address inequity and social justice.

Achievements and shortcomings of the MDGs

The Swiss Agency for Development and Cooperation (SDC) fully supported the MDGs process and still do, though there is room for improvement. Some positive achievements of the MDGs are:

- **Their brevity:** Limited to eight topics, it is easy to communicate about them. They focus attention and catalyse action;
- **Increased aid volumes:** From \$53b in 2000 to \$134b in 2011 (source: OECD). However, correlation does not necessarily imply causality, though MDGs probably fostered the increase;
- **More rationalised aid:** Concentrated in social sectors,

e.g. aid for primary education and child health doubled;

- **Increased accountability at the national level:** Though processes and conditions at this level were not taken into account appropriately, it was found that MDGs fostered accountability (CAFOD survey);
- **Improved data collection:** Increased pressure was put on outcomes to know what works in order to report to tax payers whether their funds have been well invested.

Some shortcomings were also identified in the process:

- **Lack of participation:** The process was mainly driven by CAD donors, the United Nations and the World Bank with a top down approach;
- **Distorted priorities:** Were the priorities detrimental to job creation and growth, and thereafter to development?
- **Masked inequalities:** As only averages were considered, inequalities were not properly addressed;
- **Lack of commitment from rich countries,** though they initiated the process;
- **Missing issues:** Climate change, conflict, security and disability, among many other topics, were not included;
- **Problematic translation of global trends into national policy making:** The process was unfair for the countries starting with very low levels and it was not cost-effective for those with initial high levels.

Measuring progress towards social justice

As mentioned above, MDGs did not properly address inequality (except for gender bias), although it is a key element of social justice. Measures of inequality should be integrated and monitored, in all their dimensions: among different sections of the population – be they social, ethnic, gender or religious. Inequality is not limited to income; health, education, conditions of living, etc. should also be considered. There is an overarching inequality in access to progress and development.



All these dimensions need to be clearly defined before targets and indicators are agreed. They may be initially imperfect and incomplete, but they would be a starting point and should be refined as more data become available. Beyond data collection, sound theoretical methodologies should also be adopted to aggregate the various dimensions of inequality using weighting procedures. Weights carry value judgments over the relative importance of dimensions and could be adjusted at national levels to take account of cultural differences. Aggregation gives the possibility of compensating lack of progress in one dimension by progress in another, but is it really meaningful to compare final results as in the case of the Human Development Index?

The number of dimensions and indicators to be taken into account is also an issue, with the need to find a balance in order to have a good picture of reality without being swamped with figures. Ultimately, with systematic monitoring and feedback it becomes possible to adjust or redirect policies when indicators are used to assess change with respect to policy objectives and goals.

Towards social justice along with environmental sustainability

Environmental sustainability should not be opposed to social development and justice. Inter-generational solidarity requires that we stop using more resources than what can be regenerated for future generations. We should also not consume resources (e.g. forests) that affect the livelihoods of poor people without providing them with viable alternatives. Social sustainability also implies that no deterioration of living conditions should occur due to major developmental projects, even if they are sustainable in the standard sense of environment criteria.

Deprivation and inequality should actually be made as important as, if not more important than, growth in all policies. All actors must be involved in all stages of poverty reduction processes (definition of the problem, choice of dimensions and indicators, data collection and policy design): business community, government, civil society, local communities, NGOs, and especially the deprived and vulnerable communities whose conditions we want to improve.

However, for social justice to be achieved, we must also change the unsustainable consumption patterns that

prevail in the North and that are emerging in other countries.

Perspective on Sustainable Development Goals

In 2000, the Millennium Declaration presented a fundamental and historic consensus on pressing global challenges. It still provides a comprehensive foundation for action to discuss holistic approaches, promote synergies and overcome uncoordinated contributions. It is also a valuable basis to address global challenges neglected by the MDGs related to conflict, fragility, climate change, resource scarcity, population growth, migration, global epidemics, etc.

Forthcoming Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs) could be based on the legitimacy of the Millennium Declaration. Some issues to be considered for the definition of SDGs include:

- They should be **universal** and applicable to all countries, while allowing for differentiated approaches. It is important to avoid importing the blockages of the climate change negotiations.
- **Synergies** with existing agreements and efforts should be considered; SDGs should be in harmony with other development agendas. It could also be the occasion to shift from a strong focus on aid (donor/recipient) to a focus on global public goods, to go **beyond aid** and integrate other policy levels such as trade policies.
- **Holistic approach:** SDGs should go beyond economic growth, consider the multidimensional nature of poverty and go beyond averages to look at inequalities, using both quantitative and qualitative measures. They must also be sustainable over the long term.

SDGs should be **action-oriented** with clear linkages to policies, investments and aid implementation. They should also be time-framed, with targets and indicators focusing on outcomes, and mechanisms for monitoring and reporting on progress.