

The politics of poverty and social development

● Denys Correll

The Millennium Development Goals (MDGs) have captured the imagination of a range of actors, varying from governments to civil-society leaders to rock stars. But are the MDGs misnamed? Are they development goals or poverty reduction targets? And are they really the main game in social development?

‘The MDGs are quantitative targets that identify progress towards certain minimum standards of well-being and decent living which should be achieved globally and nationally by 2015’ (Gore, 2004: 278). It is the contention of this article that the MDGs are a sad and minimalist collection of random targets, disconnected from development. Does this matter? Indeed it does, as fixation with minimal targets has removed the focus from the origin of the MDGs, which was the Copenhagen World Summit for Social Development (WSSD), which was primarily about development.

Leading intellectuals and a few civil-society organizations, including the International Council on Social Welfare and parts of the United Nations, are now working to reclaim the Copenhagen vision.

The Copenhagen vision

The WSSD was held on 6–12 March 1995 in Copenhagen, Denmark. At the end of the Summit, 117 world leaders signed the Copenhagen

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Declaration. The declaration contains 10 commitments (United Nations, 1995).

- Commitment 1: We commit ourselves to creating an economic, political, social, cultural and legal environment that will enable people to achieve social development.
- Commitment 2: We commit ourselves to the goal of eradicating poverty in the world, through decisive national actions and international cooperation, as an ethical, social, political and economic imperative of humankind.
- Commitment 3: We commit ourselves to promoting the goal of full employment as a basic priority of our economic and social policies, and to enabling all men and women to attain secure and sustainable livelihoods through freely chosen productive employment and work.
- Commitment 4: We commit ourselves to promoting social integration by fostering societies that are stable, safe and just and that are based on the promotion and protection of all human rights, as well as on non-discrimination, tolerance, respect for diversity, equality of opportunity, solidarity, security, and participation of all people, including disadvantaged and vulnerable groups and persons.
- Commitment 5: We commit ourselves to promoting full respect for human dignity and to achieving equality and equity between women and men, and to recognizing and enhancing the participation and leadership roles of women in political, civil, economic, social and cultural life and in development.
- Commitment 6: We commit ourselves to promoting and attaining the goals of universal and equitable access to quality education, the highest attainable standard of physical and mental health, and the access of all to primary health care, making particular efforts to rectify inequalities relating to social conditions and without distinction as to race, national origin, gender, age or disability; respecting and promoting our common and particular cultures; striving to strengthen the role of culture in development; preserving the essential bases of people-centred sustainable development; and contributing to the full development of human resources and to social development. The purpose

of these activities is to eradicate poverty, promote full and productive employment and foster social integration.

- Commitment 7: We commit ourselves to accelerating the economic, social and human resource development of Africa and the least developed countries.
- Commitment 8: We commit ourselves to ensuring that when structural adjustment programmes are agreed to they include social development goals, in particular eradicating poverty, promoting full and productive employment, and enhancing social integration.
- Commitment 9: We commit ourselves to increasing significantly and/or utilizing more efficiently the resources allocated to social development in order to achieve the goals of the Summit through national action and regional and international cooperation.
- Commitment 10: We commit ourselves to an improved and strengthened framework for international, regional and sub-regional cooperation for social development, in a spirit of partnership, through the United Nations and other multilateral institutions.

These commitments are the top level of a much longer document and much more detailed commitments. After each of the 10 commitments the governments outlined what they would do to fulfil the commitments. In addition to the commitments the governments adopted a Programme of Action. This programme has four components: an enabling environment for social development; eradication of poverty; expansion of productive employment and reduction of unemployment; and social integration.

The declaration contains some very significant commitments. Throughout there is a positioning of social development in the context of economic, political, social, cultural and legal environments. This is significant because it does not separate social from economic. In the first commitment, social development is the result of a coherent approach within a society. Full employment is noted as a basic priority of economic and social policies (commitment no. 3). Equality and equity between men and women in commitment no. 5 is significant, as only a remnant of the commitment survives in the MDGs. Commitment no. 6 is explicit in its reference to universal access to services. Where the MDGs are built on minimum achievement, commitment no. 6 refers to 'the highest attainable standard'. The final sentence in commitment no. 6 suggests: 'The purpose

of these activities is to eradicate poverty, promote full and productive employment and foster social integration' (United Nations, 1995: 22). Poverty eradication is just one of the purposes, whereas it became the central and dominant theme of the MDGs.

The last point to emphasize in the commitments is no. 8, which puts structural adjustment programmes in the context of social development goals, the eradication of poverty, promoting full and productive employment, and enhancing social integration. Once again poverty eradication is a part of the whole of social development.

The WSSD commitments alone, without the Programme of Action, leave little doubt that there is a vast gap between the conclusions of Copenhagen and the pathetic observation by world leaders that even the minimalist MDGs will not be achieved by 2015.

The Copenhagen vision is a very integrated approach. Later arguments in this article will draw attention to the gap that has been created between economic and social development.

Before discussing the MDGs it is necessary to address the intervening influences that adversely affected the hopes of the WSSD. These are outlined in the United Nations *Report on the World Social Situation 2005* (United Nations, 2005a). The report observes that the new international trade regime has had serious implications for the hopes raised at the WSSD. Structural adjustment programmes have done the opposite of the intentions of Copenhagen. They have made economics and market reforms the driving global and national force. This contrasts with the WSSD vision in commitment no. 1 of 'an economic, political, social, cultural and legal environment that will enable people to achieve social development' (United Nations, 1995: 12).

The observation that economics and social agendas are fractured is reinforced by the United Nations. 'One of the more important asymmetries relates to the unbalanced agenda underlying the current process of globalization; more precisely, there is a contrast between the rapid pace of economic globalization and the relative weakness of the international social agenda' (United Nations, 2005a: 106).

Development

In reflecting on 50 years of development, Allo of Tanzania says: 'I feel development is one of the most abused words in my region' (2007: 5). Kothari (2007: 17), writing in the same journal, remarks: 'Development is dangerous precisely because it can be used by anyone to justify almost any economic, social or cultural activity ... it has become a tool to legitimize the dominant patterns of economic development.'

In building the argument that the MDGs are not about development, this section looks at different interpretations of development. Nayyar (2007: 298) traces the concept of development from the 1950s when it was seen as growth in gross domestic product (GDP) or GDP per head. Nayyar refers to his underlying presumption that economic growth and economic efficiency are not only necessary but also sufficient for bringing about an improvement in the living conditions of people. The 1970s saw new indicators of development, including reduction in poverty, inequality and unemployment. At that stage development was seen as inevitably resulting in the improvement of the living conditions of people. Nayyar argues it is essential to make a distinction between means and ends. Economic growth and economic efficiency are means. Development is the end. The literature of development tends to focus on economies. People are the centre of development and not the passive recipients of economic growth. They need to be at the centre and be main actors in the decisions that determine their lives.

Fritz and Menocal (2007) describe the developmental state as one which has the vision, leadership and capacity to bring about a positive transformation of society within a condensed period of time. Development can take many forms. It can be state-led or it can be led by the private sector with state acquiescence. It can be focused on economic development. There is a variety of development ideologies. The common factors are strong leadership coupled with a period of stability, if the development is to be maintained. Development can run into trouble if the state becomes removed from the society in which it is embedded. Some of the African states started well after independence but faltered with increasingly autocratic leaders who neglected their population at best and oppressed them at worst. Then there was the period of military coups d'état with resulting periods of economic and social instability.

Good governance

There is a clash between the needs of economic development and good governance. Corporations with an urge to invest quickly with minimum controls are not happy to work with states that believe that processes for investment must be tempered with adherence to environmental and societal requirements.

Good governance has become central in donor thinking. Volumes are being written on deficiencies in good governance but few resources are being directed to creating societies that balance competing needs. The neoliberals¹ believe all society benefits from economic development.

But contradictions abound. Neoliberals believe in low taxation. Companies want low taxes as an encouragement for their further investment. The poor cannot afford services that were once provided by the state and now are provided on a for-profit basis. Since there is a low tax base in developing countries, the governments say they cannot afford universal services.

Good governance has the inbuilt implication of accountability but the components of a developing society have quite different perceptions of accountability. Governments believe their accountability lies in the ballot box regardless of whether that box is sealed or has no bottom. Governments are resentful of any presumption that they are accountable to the non-public sector. The corporate sector's first accountability is to its shareholders. Civil society is too diverse and dispersed to have any major role in holding governments or corporations accountable.

Good governance must balance the needs of society with the vision of government and private-sector interests. Currently the balance is heavily skewed toward economic and private-sector interests. And thus we have the MDGs tacked on to the outside of the economic development cart. They are not integral to the concept of development.

Development is perceived differently by the different actors. Commercial and central ministries in government see development as economic development. Civil society sees development as involving all aspects of society.

Social policy and social development

A useful definition of social policy is provided by Ortiz (2007: 6): 'Social policy is often defined as social services such as education, health, employment, and social security. However, social policy is also about redistribution, protection and social justice.'

Social development, according to the United Nations, implies 'the continuous promotion of more equitable distribution of opportunities, income, assets, services and power in order to achieve greater equality and equity in society' (United Nations, 2005b: 5).

The neoliberal approach to social development has been that economic growth comes first and then the benefits trickle down and thus relieve poverty. Ortiz (2007) challenges this by arguing that economic growth and social development policies must be pursued simultaneously. Ortiz argues that: 'poverty and inequality inhibit growth, depress domestic demand and hinder national economic development ... developing countries with high inequality tend to grow slower' (p. 7). Ortiz describes

labour liberalization with resultant cheap labour as leading to a 'race to the bottom' (p. 7).

Ortiz's view supports that of the United Nations which stated in 2005: 'Since the Summit, the traditional dependency of the "social" on the "economic" has been inverted' (2005b: 6), and 'since the Summit, the concept of social development has gradually become less comprehensive' (2005b: 8).

Ortiz's arguments are in direct contrast to the market-oriented reforms and the structural adjustment programmes started in the early 1980s. A common feature of structural adjustment programmes was reductions in social expenditures. The international financial institutions may have recognized that the demolition of social programmes was a cut too deep as they pasted poverty reduction programmes on to their neoliberal policies. But still social policies were seen as consequent to economic policies. The neoliberal philosophy had not changed. Rather it accommodated social policy by grafting on minimalist targeted welfare.

The targeted approach was inevitable, as the neoliberal conditionality of the World Bank required national public goods to be sold to private-sector providers. Governments tended not to build any form of social protection into the sold-off services. Health, education and other former public goods are now owned and operated by private companies. Governments found they could not afford to subsidize access by the poor to the privately-owned former public goods.

The move to residual welfare is not in keeping with the commitments of governments at the WSSD. In Copenhagen the leaders of national governments recognized that residual approaches to social policy were likely to have adverse consequences for society. Thus we see in the commitments the recognition of the importance of universal services.

The millennium development goals

What happened to the vision of Copenhagen? By 2000, the neoliberal agenda had gathered force and concepts of universal services were replaced by minimum standards and safety nets. The main pillars of the Copenhagen vision had all but disappeared.

The United Nations Millennium Declaration (General Assembly resolution 55/2) was adopted by all 189 member states of the United Nations. Of these, 147 were represented by the head of state or government. Whereas the WSSD commitments have an appearance of consistency, the *Road Map* (United Nations, 2001) arising from the Millennium Declaration is discursory. The map wanders from peace and security to development and poverty eradication to environment,

human rights, democracy and good governance. Then it drifts back to protecting the vulnerable, Africa and strengthening the United Nations.

The so-called MDGs are minimalist targets (Centre of Concern et al., 2007; Deacon, 2007; United Nations, 2005b) and ignore any commitment to social development. The 1995 commitment to equality and equity between men and women is reduced to targets of eliminating gender disparity in primary and secondary education, women sharing in wage employment in the non-agricultural sector and more seats held by women in parliaments. No longer is there reference to the commitment to 'recognizing and enhancing the participation and leadership roles of women in political, civil, economic, social and cultural life and in development' (United Nations, 1995: 20). Full employment, which was one of the four components of the 1995 Programme of Action, disappeared. The only remaining element is a target (not even a goal) of implementing strategies for decent and productive work for youth (target 16).

In arriving at the MDGs, the United Nations suggested that the MDGs do not undercut the agreements of the 1990s (United Nations, 2001: 55). This statement is disingenuous. The WSSD commitments have been undercut. They are a mediocre, minimalist, disjointed selection of leftovers that have been presented to a global community that does not remember the noble vision of Copenhagen. 'MDGs are essentially outcome targets' (Deacon et al., 2005: 2) or 'quantitative targets' (Gore, 2004: 278).

The change in language is noticeable. Gone is the commitment to social development being central to the needs and aspirations of people throughout the world (United Nations, 1995: 4). Gone is the enabling economic environment aimed at promoting more equitable access for all to income, resources and social services. Gone is the commitment to full employment. Gone is the concept of universalism.

The watering down of Copenhagen is discussed in the *Globalism and Social Policy Programme (GASPP) Policy Brief* (Deacon et al., 2005). In the context of the MDGs the authors warn that emphasizing the access of the poor to only basic education risks detracting from the broader Copenhagen commitment to universal access to education and primary health care.

Washington consensus and the World Bank

To understand influences on social and economic development we need to recognize the content of the Washington Consensus which underlies the policies of the World Bank and the International Monetary Fund.

The parts of the amended Washington Consensus that are relevant to this article are the reduction of public expenditure, including targeted social expenditures and infrastructure; and the competitive economy – privatization and deregulation should improve competition between firms and improve conditions for market entry (Williamson, 1997, 2000). The Washington Consensus is in conflict with the commitments of Copenhagen to universal and equitable access to services (Naim, 1999; Rodrik, 2006).

After the 1995 Copenhagen Summit the emphasis swung from social development to poverty eradication. During the same period economists in the international financial institutions and political leaders embedded the neoliberal approach in the economies of developing countries.

The neoliberal approach advocated minimal state involvement and the privatization of public goods. The emphasis was on economic growth with the stated expectation that poverty would be reduced as a result of growth. The global North followed Thatcher and Reagan in the privatization of public goods. That was done with little consideration for the social casualties.

Economic institutions, both national and international, became the arbiters of social policy but within the framework of neoliberalism. At the national level spending ministries such as those with responsibility for social benefits, social welfare, employment and health were seen as out of alignment with neoliberal policies.

The neoliberal policies were extended to the developing world and more recently to the former member countries of the USSR. The World Bank has applied the requirement that countries adopt the Washington Consensus model if they wish to receive a World Bank loan. The economic policies unfortunately coincided in Latin America with the presence of dictators who anticipated personal gain from the sale of public services to the entrepreneurs. The entrepreneurs in turn saw an opportunity in buying infrastructure at low prices.

The World Bank, while espousing a mission of poverty reduction, is an adherent to the Washington Consensus. The Bank is more known for its influence on economic development than its promotion of social development. Social policy is a more recent component of the Bank's operations. Hall (2007) observes that in the Bank the term 'social policy' is used infrequently. Rather the terms 'human development', 'social protection' and 'social safeguards' are used. The Bank does not give the appearance of having a coherent social policy. Social protection is seen as a means to confront absolute poverty. This fits with the programmes of poverty reduction and with meeting basic needs. The preferred way of doing this is through targeted programmes.

Targeted programmes have been an offshoot of the shift in the 1980s to the neoliberal ideas of reducing public expenditure and making the consumer pay. Governments became aware of the growing resentment of the poor to their reduced access to privatized services. Governments responded with a variety of targeted programmes which were introduced in an attempt to counteract the negative impact of user pay policies.

While the World Bank may believe in targeted programmes, Humphrey asserts that it is: 'widely recognised that private sector investment will not substitute for a continuing involvement of public-sector finance in infrastructure' (Humphrey, 2006: 38).

Privatization and the charging for services in the 1980s and 1990s have reduced access to education and health by the poor. Farrington and Robinson (2006: 9) suggest that: 'the lion's share of public spending in health and education goes to the non-poor'.

Privatization of pensions since the 1980s has been another World Bank condition for its loans. Within a few decades it has become clear that pension reform has not been a success. The driver for pension reform was not social policy but the reduction of government budget commitment to public pensions. The World Bank's policy research report, *Averting the Old Age Crisis: Policies to Protect the Old and Promote Growth* (1994), is not about averting a crisis for old people. Rather the crisis is a fiscal one for governments. The World Bank predicted governments would not be able to maintain public pensions.

These examples of transferring social welfare to the market have not been to show that the policies work or do not work. The intention has been to illustrate that the Bank cannot claim to have a coherent social policy or coherent approach to social development. The Bank has reacted to the unintended and unexpected consequences of one policy by adding another. Thus a Social Protection Unit was grafted onto the Bank in 2001. Hall (2007) suggests that social protection was introduced to the Bank to deal with the consequences of economic stabilization and structural adjustment. During the period of structural adjustment countries were obliged to reduce government expenditures on public goods. The casualties were the poor and vulnerable to whom the new economically stable states had nothing left to offer. Social development is still not a clear concept in the World Bank.

2005 Millennium+5 Summit and beyond

There appears to be some effort by the United Nations and United Nations member states to retrieve losses they agreed to previously in the social development agenda.

Martens (2005) commented that the immediate reaction to the 2005 Summit outcomes was disappointment. The disappointment was expressed by Kofi Annan, then Secretary-General of the UN, who said in a speech to the UN on 14 September 2005 that the Summit had not achieved the sweeping and fundamental reform that he and others expected. He later put a positive perspective on it by referring to the glass being 'at least half full' (Annan, 2005).

The ministerial declaration after the 2007 high-level segment of the United Nations Economic and Social Council's (ECOSOC), attempted to embrace elements of social development. Unfortunately the declaration has none of the coherence of the Copenhagen commitments. The text wanders from MDGs to reaffirming development as a central goal, picks up gender equality, peace, security, human rights, poverty and numerous other issues but fails to place them in the framework of social and economic development (United Nations, 2007).

In another forum, the Organization for Economic Co-operation and Development (OECD) and their specialized network POVNET (Dohlmán and Soderback, 2007) claim that the Washington Consensus may have worked well in OECD countries but was disappointing in most developing and transition countries. POVNET argues for a pace and pattern of growth that enhances the ability of poor women and men to participate in and contribute to growth. Curiously, in the POVNET article, development is not a central theme. The main theme is the potential or real conflict between the protagonists of growth and poverty reduction.

A new direction for social development: reclaiming Copenhagen?

There is a new wave of academics and policy-makers who wish to reclaim the Copenhagen agenda. José Antonio Ocampo, who until 2007 was the United Nations Under-Secretary-General Department of Economic and Social Affairs, noted:

The comprehensive vision of social development agreed upon at the WSSD ought to dominate and shape the agendas of national governments and international organizations so that the strategic benchmarks identified in the Millennium Development Goals and the larger objectives of sustainable and equitable social and economic development can be achieved. (United Nations, 2005a: 6)

Ocampo quite rightly recognizes that the Millennium Development Goals should not be seen as a substitute for the larger United Nations development agenda.

A meeting of experts in development met in 2006 at the invitation of the governments of Finland and Sweden. The resulting report describes a new consensus on comprehensive social policies for development (Wiman et al., 2006). The participants were clear in their call for social policy to become the foundation of national development strategies (Wiman et al., 2006: 13). The concluding declaration of the meeting referred to the limited progress in achieving the main goals of the Copenhagen Summit: an enabling environment for social development; poverty eradication; full productive employment; and social integration. The conclusions point to the failure of current policies and fragmented projects that were intended to reduce poverty, global and national inequality, unemployment, informality, social exclusion, vulnerability, social conflict and the feminization of poverty.

The main thrust of the recommendations was to move to comprehensive social and employment policies as an essential part of balanced, socially, economically and environmentally sustainable development.

There is a rising tide against the neoliberal prescriptive policies of targeted benefits for the poor. There is a resurgence of the opinion that the Copenhagen commitment to universal public services was valid and should become dominant again in development policy (Deacon, 2005; Wiman et al., 2006).

Conclusion

This article has had one main intention: to suggest to practitioners and policy-makers that the Millennium Development Goals are one small part of a much bigger global social development agenda. The MDGs and poverty eradication have successfully diverted attention from the much broader goal of individual country social agendas which are integrated with economic, fiscal and employment policies. Not until each nation has succeeded in laying a value base and has established coherent and integrated social development policies will we have a society for all and a sustainable means to overcome poverty.

Note

1. 'Neoliberalism in its international usage refers to a political-economic philosophy that rejects government intervention in the market. The philosophy specifically emphasizes free-market principles and the opening of foreign markets by political means. Neoliberals argue that markets free of government influence are essential for sustaining economic prosperity' (Beeson and Islam, 2005: 199). 'Neoliberalism is ... a theory of political economic practices that proposes that human wellbeing can best be advanced by liberating individual entrepreneurial freedoms and skills within

an institutional framework characterized by strong private property rights, free markets and free trade ... State interventions in markets (once created) must be kept to a bare minimum because, according to the theory, the state cannot possibly possess enough information to second-guess market signals (prices) and because powerful interest groups will inevitably distort and bias state interventions (particularly in democracies) for their own benefit' (Harvey, 2005: 2).

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