

# The Politics of the Millennium Development Goals: Human Rights and Poverty Eradication

A Summary Report of a CCIC-NSI Conference  
May 26–28, 2005  
Ottawa, Ontario

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*1 Nicholas Street, Suite 300  
Ottawa, Ontario K1N 7B7  
Canada*

*Tel: (613) 241-7007*

*Fax: (613) 241-5302*

*Web site: [www.ccic.ca](http://www.ccic.ca)*

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**1.0 INTRODUCTION**

The Canadian Council for International Cooperation and The North South Institute hosted an international conference on the implications of *The Politics of the Millennium Development Goals (MDGs)* with respect to human rights and strategies for poverty eradication. The Conference took place on the occasion of the Annual General Meeting of the CCIC, which brought together more than 130 participants from Canadian organizations working in international cooperation, the constituencies of The North South Institute, along with experts from civil society in Tanzania, Brazil, Malaysia, Zimbabwe, Bangladesh, Uganda, Europe and the United States (see the attached agenda for details).

The Conference was designed to critically assess the MDGs in making progress on poverty eradication and to identify the critical policy issues, opportunities and strategies that will bring urgent real change for the world's poor majority. These issues have been a major focus for the Global Campaign to End Poverty in the lead-up to July G8 Summit, the June UN review of the Financing for Development Conference, the September UN Special Session to review progress on the Millennium Declaration and the December WTO Hong Kong Ministerial meeting on the Doha Round of trade negotiations. The Global Campaign has created unprecedented public discussion and opportunity to make progress in 2005 on issues of international assistance, achieving peace and security, investing in people and local economies, trade justice and debt cancellation.

Rather than detail the panel presentations and workshop reports, this report highlights issues, key points and recommendations for action suggested by participants. The goal of the Conference was not consensus, but rather to stimulate debate and point the way forward for both the Canadian government and civil society organizations on urgent issues raised by the campaigns to reach the MDGs. The Conference was facilitated by two background resources, a policy paper by CCIC on the politics of MDGs<sup>1</sup> and the 2005 report from the *We the peoples...* project, *Civil Society and the Global Agenda: from evaluation to action*.<sup>2</sup>

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<sup>1</sup> CCIC has produced a three part analytical background paper on The Politics of MDGs and Poverty Eradication, Financing the MDGs through a Global Partnership for Development, and Canada and the Global Partnership. In addition there is a summary of all three papers and a chart summarizing Canada's progress with respect to Goal Eight of the MDGs. These resources can be found at <http://www.ccic.ca/e/002/aid.shtml>.

<sup>2</sup> *We the peoples* is a joint project of The North South Institute and the World Federation of United Nations Associations. Its reports are based on an annual online survey of civil society engagement with the implementation of the Millennium Declaration and the MDGs. The 2005 Report reviews the lesson learned and the progress made over the past five years. The 2005 Report was launched at the Conference and can be found at <http://www.nsi-ins.ca/english/publications/default.asp>. Social Watch's *Benchmarks for the 5 Year Review of the Millennium Summit* was also circulated to participants and Canadian CSOs were encouraged to sign onto this statement. The Benchmark document is available at <http://www.un-ngls.org/MDG/social-watch-Benchmark-2005.pdf>.

## 2.0 OVERVIEW OF ISSUES

The linking of overarching MDG goals to end poverty with time-bound targets is clearly an important benchmark to hold the international community accountable. Nevertheless, many civil society organizations, particularly in the South, remain highly skeptical about the ways northern governments assert the MDGs as a global consensus. While CSOs have made MDGs the centre of their campaigns for a new North/South partnership, others are concerned that focusing on MDG targets miss important issues for global equity – trade justice and debt cancellation, equitable governance in global institutions, political, economic and social rights for the poor – all largely missing from the actions of many governments. Hence “the politics of the MDGs” for both governments and civil society actors!

This Conference focused on five thematic questions:

- ❑ Do the MDGs, as explicit measures for progress in areas important for poverty reduction, enhance or detract from a rights-based approach to development cooperation?
- ❑ How can government’s support for measures and rules in trade, investment and debt cancellation, which have perpetuated global inequality and poverty, be made consistent with government commitments to MDGs?
- ❑ As CSO campaigns call for more immediate aid to finance the MDGs, for health, education or improved child mortality, will donor-imposed macro-economic and political reform conditions undermine its effective impact on poverty?
- ❑ In meeting the MDGs, will donors recognize the critical importance of empowering citizens, strengthen the capacities of the impoverished and marginalized, to claim their rights?
- ❑ Given Canada’s commitment to the MDGs and its human rights obligations, what are the most important policy changes for the Canadian government to adopt or promote internationally?

## 3.0 MDGs AS A FRAMEWORK FOR POVERTY ERADICATION

### 3.1 MDGs, Human Rights and Poverty Eradication

The MDGs are drawn from the Millennium Declaration, which situates the MDGs within a normative commitment to human rights, equity and global justice. However, the MDGs themselves do not emanate from human rights principles and legal framework; otherwise they would have very different targets and an explicit approach (participation, accountability, non-discrimination). For several of the MDGs, the rate of progress for the poorest quintiles of populations is often far behind the target’s *average* country improvement. This discriminatory impact raises concerns for a human rights approach in which the rights of the poorest and most marginalized populations are privileged.

The observation that human rights are not intrinsic in the MDG project is most apparent in their marginalization of women’s rights. The MDG goals and targets assume that the same approach will move both men and women out of poverty, largely ignoring decades of research on gender

discrimination as a major structural impediment to poverty reduction. Advancing women's empowerment through the 1995 Beijing Platform of Action has been reduced in MDG Goal Three to closing the gender gap in primary and secondary education, while women's reproductive rights are entirely absent from the MDGs. Women's rights, when considered at all, are understood, not as human rights, but as instrumental to achieving effective poverty reduction.

### **3.2 Failure to Address the Root Causes of Poverty and Inequality**

For many conference participants, the importance of the MDGs is their role as a set of (minimal) time-bound benchmarks that have been universally endorsed to be monitored. For the first time, there are some measurable targets with which to hold governments and international institutions accountable in selected areas that are without question important for poverty reduction. Explicit government commitments to MDGs have opened space for CSOs to press governments to address the centrality of poverty in all aspects of their policies. Many CSOs are taking (critical) advantage of this space, most notably through the Global Campaign Against Poverty and the UNDP Millennium Campaign.

The UNDP and others have made the strong case that poverty cannot be significantly reduced without addressing issues related to profound inequality in the distribution of economic and social assets. The MDGs largely fail to take up the root causes and the distinctive nature of poverty across nations, gender and vulnerable groups. There are simplistic assumptions advanced for the MDGs by advocates such as Jeffrey Sachs and the Millennium Project, that poverty is like dirt that can be sucked up by "the vacuum cleaner" of more aid. While aid is an important catalyst, making poverty history is much more complicated. The history of poverty demonstrates that highly unequal structures at all levels perpetuate and continue to create poverty. At the end of the day it is the particular struggles of citizens on the ground that will create governments accountable to poor people and build capacities for poor and marginalized people to claim their rights.

The UNDP has documented growing rural/urban inequalities in China, which accompanied by privatization of health financing, is leading to deteriorating health outcomes for the rural poor. In Tanzania, it was noted that the causes and impact of poverty are complex and structural – agriculture and local industry, which employ 80% of the population, have been affected by liberalization of trade and investment policies, conditions of the World Bank and IMF loans. As noted above, the causes and consequences of poverty for women are very different than for men. Despite dependence on agriculture, Tanzanian women have not been able to own property in customary law; men dominate the household and cash income, while domestic violence remains a growing concern.

Many conference participants commented on the essential importance of addressing inequality on every level (local, national, global) in meeting the human rights obligations to reduce poverty. It was noted that the MDG agenda is largely driven by northern governments and multilateral institutions. In so doing, an exclusive focus on the MDG framework may marginalize human rights principles of non-discrimination and inclusion in meeting long-standing human rights obligations.

- ❑ For many poor countries, what happens in trade agreements is much more important and often contradicts the intent of aid in support of progress on the MDGs. Inequality has been compounded by the effect of trade liberalization, privatization of government services, and other aspects of neo-liberal economic policies, have taken different forms in different countries. These policies, along with highly intrusive governance conditions, are demanded by northern donors as the basis for increased aid flows and debt reduction. The privatization of public services for example takes away the rights of citizens to question and bargain with their governments in essential areas of health, education or water. Privatization of these services turns “citizens” into “consumers”.
- ❑ The deep structural dimensions of resource transfers that reduce capacities in the South to tackle poverty are largely ignored – the transfer of resources from South to North through debt servicing, investment flows and a northern biased international trade system.
- ❑ The health goals, while important, fail to take a comprehensive approach to the right to health in terms of universal access and the underlying conditions needed to achieve this goal in developing countries (such as the important presence of health infrastructure and medical personnel such as nursing on the ground). As noted above, goals and targets related to sexual and reproductive health are absent from the current MDG framework. A human rights approach with respect to HIV/AIDS implies greater recognition and response to the important political voice of individuals and grassroots organizations involved with HIV/AIDS around the world.
- ❑ The implicit approach to poverty reduction in the MDGs focuses attention on growth as the motor for poverty reduction. This ignores evidence that in China where poverty has been reduced through growth, the “conversion” of growth into poverty reduction has been substantially reduced since the late 1990s. MDG Goal One does not go far enough to pick up existing FAO frameworks based on the right to adequate food, equitable distribution and access to resources that enable food security.
- ❑ Recent overriding attention to global security and counter-terrorism by northern governments is politicizing the aid agenda through the securitization of aid. Aid in support of the MDGs must be used to protect human rights rather than violate human rights. At the same time, the role of conflict and insecurity in undermining poverty reduction goals are ignored by the MDGs.

### **3.3 Understanding Unequal Power Relations**

Understand and addressing unequal power relationships is essential for effective strategies to reduce poverty and inequality while respecting human rights principles.

- ❑ Policy conditionalities, particularly through the IFIs, which continue to be attached to aid relationships and debt cancellation, is a key mechanism for transmitting the power of donors and limiting the policy alternatives for developing country partners. While the language of donors has changed (“ownership by developing country partners”), the practice of conditioning aid and debt cancellation continues unabated. The UNDP has documented more than 90 trigger mechanisms for release of funds in World Bank loan agreements.

Macro-economic conditions limiting spending by line ministries for social services undermine the achievement of the MDGs in these areas.

- ❑ International institutions focus on a narrow “dollar-a-day” definition of poverty that is reinforced by the MDGs. These institutions use their power to promote the “commodification” of basic social services such as water, rather than work to guarantee universal access to basic services, that include access for the poor.
- ❑ In responding to conditions of poverty, there is often a “hierarchy of poverty” which includes the feminization of poverty, child poverty, particularly the under-six age group, the chronically poor, and the working poor in the informal economy. Within the women’s movement in recent years there is more awareness of class issues in building alliances among women, particular workers rights. At the other end of the spectrum, it is equally important to see how those with privilege can use this privilege to empower ways of struggle for the rights of all people, including those who are chronically poor.

### **3.4 Strengthening Alternative Bases for Power**

The MDGs ignore issues of democratic governance and the corresponding need to strengthen alternative bases of power in citizens acting together to claim their rights.

- ❑ The MDGs and the Millennium Declaration provide an important normative and accountability framework for CSO activism, exemplified in the Global Campaign Against Poverty and the Make Poverty History campaign in Canada. The 2005 *We the peoples...* Report documents the incredible diversity and scope of CSO activities. At the same time, concern was expressed that global campaigning may be distracting from the critical importance of organizing and thinking strategically about changing values and transforming lives on the ground. A human rights framework informs this work, but the more difficult task is to build cultures of social justice and human rights on the ground. Who is continuing to work on issues of violence against women, effects of privatization, sexual rights, conflict or fundamentalism?
- ❑ The global Social Watch project and the *We the peoples...* Report stress the importance of addressing democratic governance in the UN and International Financial Institutions, consistent with the normative framework of human rights, labour rights and environmental standards. CSOs should work to strength parliamentary accountability for these institutions nationally and enhance access to the UN system globally. Even the minimal promises of IFI reform made in 2002 at Monterrey have not been fulfilled.
- ❑ While issues of corruption are centrally important to achieving poverty goals, alternative forms of accountability through systematic civil society engagement with government, parliamentarians and local communities are essential counter-balances to controlling corruption. Eliminating corruption must also be a policy responsibility in the North where improved regulation and monitoring of banking and transnational companies is essential.
- ❑ CSOs have been the driving forces behind proposals for alternative financing mechanisms for both controlling speculative currency transactions and as a source for innovative alternative development financing; these CSOs need to take advantage of renewed official discussions of global levies (e.g. airline taxes) to secure new reliable and predictable resources over and

above ODA commitments to 0.7% of GNI. Despite early parliamentary interest in the currency transaction tax, Canada more recently has been silent or resistant to these discussions. CSOs in developing countries are also focusing on more equitable redistributive forms of tax to finance government services.

#### **4.0 CANADA'S POLICIES FOR MEETING THE MDGs AND ITS HUMAN RIGHTS OBLIGATIONS**

CIDA's 2002 policy on *Strengthen Aid Effectiveness* and the 2005 International Policy Statement commits the Canadian government to "a growing international consensus on the goals of development cooperation – a consensus that found expression through the international community's endorsement of the MDGs" [Ric Cameron, Senior Vice President, CIDA, Notes for Remarks, May 28<sup>th</sup> 2005).

- ❑ While recognizing their flaws, the MDGs for CIDA and the Canadian government represent "goals with a human face", with a focus on people in areas that make a difference for those living in poverty. The IPS focuses CIDA's support for five sectors in 25 countries, taking advantage of new forms of aid delivery (as set out in the recent Paris Declaration on Aid Effectiveness), in achieving the MDGs. Many of the focus countries are in Africa where Canada is committed to doubling aid by 2008.
- ❑ CIDA recognizes the importance of policy coherence and the need for a "whole of government" approach to achieving the MDGs, stressing untying aid, attention to failing states, investment and fair market access for developing countries.
- ❑ New aid relationships depend on country ownership of Poverty Reduction Strategy Papers (PRSPs) and Canada supports the idea that these Papers should be revised to map out ten year plans based on achieving the MDGs (as proposed by Jeffrey Sachs), matched by long term donor commitment to funding.
- ❑ CIDA's focus on governance is essential if local ownership of development strategies is to become a greater reality. "Local ownership must mean more than listening to the priorities of developing country governments....In the interests of transparency, and overall impact, CSOs in the South – supported by their Northern partners – must play a much stronger role in developing capacity for good governance, holding their governments accountable for action towards the MDGs, and engaging the public in the process. We must make sure that we [CIDA] engage in activities that help grow rather than supplant southern voices." (Ric Cameron, Notes for Remarks, May 28<sup>th</sup>, 2005)

A number of participants and panelists recognized the importance of Canada's support for the MDGs as a platform upon which to build ("MDGs Plus") and a basis for making Canada's international policies coherent. Legislation was suggested that make MDGs central to Canadian international cooperation policies and established ways for performance of all relevant departments to be evaluated as to how they lived up to MDG commitments. However, it was emphasized that the International Policy Statement, while setting out a vision of a more equitable world and making a number of interesting proposals, fell far short in providing a coherent framework for Canadian policy along these lines.

- ❑ The vision and plans for achieving the MDGs are largely isolated within the Development policy paper and have little resonance and may be contradicted by policies set out for Diplomacy, Defence and Commerce. The Department of Finance, which plays the primary role with the International Financial Institutions, was not even a part of the IPR process and IFIs are not reflected in the IPS.
- ❑ While focus and attention to failed states is an important emphasis in the IPS, diversion of aid resources to Canadian security interests remains a concern with Iraq and Afghanistan becoming Canada's largest aid recipients in recent years. We were reminded that in making a positive priority for Sub-Saharan Africa Canada needs to remember that the majority of poor people still live in South Asia, where growth is only benefiting the 5% upper castes.
- ❑ The IPS fails to set out any timetable for achieving the UN goal for aid of 0.7% of our GNI. The IPS's silence about agriculture as a sector for concentration is alarming given the fact that the majority of poor people live and work in rural areas. (The Minister for International Cooperation subsequently clarified the continued importance of agriculture in a speech to a CCIC conference in May 2005.)
- ❑ The IPS has an overwhelming emphasis, not on plans to achieve the MDGs, but on traditional (military and territorial) security concerns in Canadian foreign policy; Canada's obligations to international human rights are barely mentioned and are certainly not a framework for understanding Canadian foreign policy choices. Human rights obligations cannot be an add-on to policy; Canadian international cooperation must be informed by universal human rights values and politics, despite well-known weaknesses in the international human rights system.
- ❑ Addressing poverty is given priority by the IPS in part because "they [the poor] may find more ominous ways to make their voices heard" (IPS). Despite a rhetoric of ownership for Development, the IPS as a whole is characterized by an aggressive notion that we know best how to promote "Canadian values" in deployment of forces overseas, in securing fragile states, in promoting good governance and reconstruction. The poorest countries do not figure in Canada's diplomatic priorities which emphasize the so-called emerging super powers – China, India and Brazil. On the other hand, Canada remains committed to multilateralism and the United Nations, which can counter-balance the interests of the rich and hold governments accountable to human rights and the MDG goals. This commitment could be challenged by recent Canadian proposals for a L20 leaders forum independent of the UN and the diversion of Canadian peacekeeping resources to forces under the NATO umbrella.

## **5.0 SUMMARY RECOMMENDATIONS**

In the remaining months of 2005 there will be important opportunities to influence the international agenda on poverty and inequality. Canadian CSOs must join with others around the world to press our government to demonstrate leadership in upcoming global meetings.

It was noted that Canada at the time of the Conference had not produced a report on its performance with respect to the Millennium Declaration and the MDGs for the September Special Summit. While the Conference did not endorse a consensus statement, participants and speakers highlighted a number of recommendations to the Canadian government.

1. Adopt and promote the human rights principles in the Millennium Declaration, with particular attention to the rights of women, for the achievement of the Millennium Development Goals and for policy coherence across all relevant departments in Canadian international cooperation towards the UN goal to eradicate global poverty.
2. Acknowledge and actively promote an optional protocol for the UN Covenant for Economic, Social and Cultural Rights that assures the ability of a wronged individual or group to appeal to an international body with respect to their rights, while strengthening the capacities of governments to assure the right to food through improved livelihoods for poor and vulnerable people, in both rural and urban areas.
3. Strengthen an “MDG Plus” framework by leading a dialogue on new targets and indicators that address current limitations, rather than re-opening or conflating the Goals themselves with human rights obligations. It is particularly important to place sexual and reproductive health rights as well as the Beijing Platform of Action within this framework.
4. Adopt a policy on conditionality for Canadian aid modalities and debt cancellation that respects “local ownership” by measuring developing country results on overall progress in the delivery of mutually agreed social policy goals, rather than focusing on prior prescriptive political and economic policies determined by the most powerful donors.
5. Develop a policy framework on civil society in the development process that take account of roles for CSOs in Canadian aid effectiveness for both democratic governance and effective programs that reach the poor and vulnerable; and in particular re-assess the effectiveness of the current almost exclusive emphasis by CIDA on government-to-government donor coordinated budget support mechanisms to support MDGs.
6. Take measures that untie Canadian food aid, currently 90% tied to Canadian purchases, and that assure policy coherence between aid policies for food security needs of developing countries and the impact of Canadian trade and investment policies on these countries.
7. Promote policies through our aid program and multilateral institutions based on universal access to health and other social services, taking account of Canada’s experience in universal health programs, while explicitly addressing Canada’s human rights obligations to make progress in reducing poverty and inequality in Canada.
8. Promote an approach to health care that is based on public resources, universal access and choice in health care treatments and approaches to good health, with significantly multiplied resources allocated to public health systems and particular attention to chronic diseases affective developing countries such as malaria and HIV/AIDS, removing current trade related blocks that obstruct universal access to affordable treatments.
9. Extend existing access to the Canadian market for least developed countries to all low income countries, while also supporting international trade rules to maximize flexibility for developing countries, including special and differential treatment, to pursue viable and unique development paths that reduce poverty and honour their human rights obligations.
10. Adopt a currency transaction tax nationally-applied, building on an early Canadian parliamentary resolution, and in cooperation with like-minded countries, assert leadership internationally to promote the tax as a development resource independent of donor aid commitments and to control of currency speculation.
11. Take account of the OECD policy guidelines on tax havens and suspend economic relationships with non-compliant countries.