

The Politics of the Millennium Development Goals: Contributing to Strategies for Ending Poverty?

Part One:

The Politics of MDGs and Poverty Eradication

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May 2005*

TABLE OF CONTENTS

1.0	INTRODUCTION	1
2.0	THE ORIGINS OF THE MDGs	3
3.0	THE MDGs AS A STRATEGY FOR ERADICATING POVERTY	6
3.1	To what extent will the MDGs reduce absolute poverty?	7
3.2	Counting the Poor: The Politics of Methodologies.....	8
3.3	Setting the poor up for failure? Assessing the Challenges Assessing the Challenges in Meeting the MDG Targets	10
3.4	Strengthening Appropriate Economic Polities for Reducing Poverty.....	11
3.5	Citizens' Rights, Empowerment and Equality in Achieving Poverty Reduction...	13
APPENDIX ONE		
THE MILLENNIUM DEVELOPMENT GOALS AND TARGETS		16
APPENDIX TWO		
QUALITY BENCHMARKS FOR THE WORLD SUMMIT FOR SOCIAL DEVELOPMENT — A SUMMARY OF AN NGO STATEMENT, SEPTEMBER 1994.....		17

THE POLITICS OF THE MILLENNIUM DEVELOPMENT GOALS: CONTRIBUTING TO STRATEGIES FOR ENDING POVERTY?

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PART ONE: THE POLITICS OF MDGs AND POVERTY ERADICATION

1.0 INTRODUCTION

The year, 2005, represents an important political moment for the international community. It marks ten years remaining until the target year of 2015 for achieving the Millennium Development Goals (MDGs)². Civil society organizations will be challenging their governments, the UN system and the International Financial Institutions to live up to commitments to achieve these Goals and make significant progress in ending poverty.

Progress on the MDGs will be a major focus for the UN system for much of the year. In mid-January, the UN-sponsored Millennium Project set out a blueprint for realizing the MDGs by 2015.³ In March, the UN Secretary General issued his Report, *In Larger Freedom*⁴, taking up the challenge of this blueprint, along with the December 2004 Report of High Level Panel on Threats, Challenges and Change⁵, to detail his objectives for the Millennium Plus Five Special Session of the UN General Assembly in September. The latter will be a heads-of-state review of progress on the goals and commitments made by all members of the United Nations in their September 2000 *Millennium Declaration*. Towards the end of June, there will be a five-year review of UN Conference on Financing for Development, preceded by 10 year reviews of the 1995 Copenhagen UN Social Summit and the 1995 Beijing Fourth World Conference on Women

¹ This paper reflects the author's analysis and views alone. It is written in his capacity as a Policy Officer for CCIC, but does not necessarily reflect the view of the Council or its members. Earlier drafts benefited from the comments of colleagues at CCIC, KAIROS, the North South Institute, Rights and Democracy and drew from rich discussions on these themes at a conference sponsored by the North South Institute and the World Federation of United Nations Associations for the *We the People...* project in December 2004.

This Part One of three Parts of an overarching paper on *The Politics of Millennium Development Goals: Contributing to Strategies for Ending Poverty?* A Summary of all three parts is available on the Aid Policy page of CCIC's web site a www.ccic.ca. Also on the site is Part Two which deals with issues in the financing of MDGs. Part Three assesses Canada's performance on Goal Eight, promoting a development partnership in support of the MDGs. Each part can be read on its own.

² For the Millennium Development Goals and their Targets, see Appendix One.

³ See their report, *Investing in Development: A Practical Plan for Achieving the Millennium Development Goals*, January 2005, available at <http://www.unmillenniumproject.org>.

⁴ Kofi Annan, Secretary General of the United Nations, *In Larger Freedom: towards development, security and human rights for all*, available at <http://www.un.org/largerfreedom/contents.htm>

⁵ UN High Level Panel on Threats, Challenges and Change, *A More Secure World: Our Shared Responsibility*, December 2004, available at <http://www.un.org/secureworld>.

in March and April. The July meeting of G8 leaders in Scotland will focus in part on the achievement of the MDGs in Sub-Saharan Africa, and may make progress on extending debt cancellation for the poorest countries.⁶ During the summer of 2005, stakeholder hearings are to take place at the United Nations to enable civil society organizations to present their views prior to the Special Session.

These events open up unique opportunities for Canadian CSOs to press the government to advance global poverty reduction. This paper looks at the politics of the MDGs: the opportunities and challenges for CSOs as they work with counterparts to advocate policies to end global poverty. CSOs, particularly but not exclusively in the developed countries, have embraced the MDGs as unique targets through which substantial progress can be made against poverty. The MDGs are the first universal time-bound benchmarks to which to hold governments accountable. Others, particularly but not exclusively in the South, are more skeptical, seeing the MDGs as another Northern-driven agenda. The latter caution that campaigning for MDGs may divert scarce CSO effort away from key issues for increased global equity. For these CSOs, political engagement on issues such as debt cancellation, trade justice, equitable governance in global institutions, and political, social and economic rights for the poor is the foundation of making sustained progress to end poverty in the South.

Do MDGs deflect focus from the need to build broad political constituencies for structural changes within countries and in international policy discussions, through their emphasis on resources and anti-poverty strategies in the South? By framing the issue as one of “political will” to finance the MDGs, do we allow developed countries to avoid demands for transformative policies – 100% debt cancellation for the poorest countries, trade and investment rules that permit conditions for viable economies in poor countries, civil and political rights of the poor and marginalized affected by the war on terrorism, just and equitable strategies in global agreements in response to climate change, and more equitable governance of global institutions? All of these issues face far more difficult political challenges for governments to act in the North than giving political support to the goals and indicators of the MDGs. But such policy change in these more difficult areas may be essential to making sustained progress against poverty in the South.

Part One provides some background to the MDGs, assesses their capacity to create the political space for measures required to end global poverty, and raises some possible implications arising from public and government campaigns that focus solely on MDG achievements. It suggests that efforts to achieve the MDGs should be explicitly situated within a framework of existing human rights treaties and state obligations, among others the International Covenant on Economic, Social and Cultural Rights, the Convention on the Elimination of all forms of Discrimination against Women, and the Right to Development.

The series of UN conferences in the 1990s were motivated in part by the post-Cold War opportunity for states to move expeditiously to meet their obligations arising from these and other legally-binding UN Conventions. The same motivation underpins the *Millennium Declaration* as a culminating point in at the UN in September 2000. This focus on rights stresses

⁶ See the UK Commission for Africa, *Our Common Interest*, accessible at <http://www.commissionforafrica.org/english/report/introduction.html>.

the obligations of all states, including Northern governments, to give priority to their responsibility to make specific efforts to make progress on social and economic rights for all. They must do so in conformity with the principles of non-discriminatory, non-infringement and non-regression for core obligations (basic housing, adequate food, basic education, primary health care and access to water). Moreover, states must not adopt measures that undermine the indivisibility or achievement of these rights. While core obligations relate closely to MDGs, the human rights approach “changes the debate from the language of will and commitment to the language of duty and obligation”.⁷ It identifies the right to development as a political process in which citizens, particularly those who are poor and marginalized, are enabled to claim their rights, participate in development and thereby make progress against poverty.

2.0 THE ORIGINS OF THE MDGS

The Millennium Development Goals were never articulated as explicit Goals nor formally adopted in the September 2000 Special Millennium Session of the General Assembly. Rather, Heads of States affirmed objectives in seven areas for action in the *Millennium Declaration*⁸ – 1) peace, security and disarmament, 2) development and poverty eradication, 3) protecting our common environment, 4) human rights, democracy and good governance, 5) protecting the vulnerable, 6) meeting the special needs of Africa, and 7) strengthening the United Nations. Commitments to action in these areas (including reference to four of the MDGs under development and poverty eradication) follow from a common set of values and principles – freedom, equality, solidarity, tolerance, respect for nature, and a shared responsibility – found in the opening section of the Declaration. These values and principles in turn are identified with the various UN human rights conventions, including the more controversial, the 1986 Declaration on the Right to Development. The 2005 September Millennium Summit is to review progress against **these** objectives in the *Millennium Declaration*.

Section Three in the *Millennium Declaration* focuses on development and poverty. It opens with the commitment to

“spare no effort to free our fellow men, women and children from the abject and dehumanizing conditions of extreme poverty...We are committed to making the right to development a reality for everyone and to freeing the entire human race from want.” (para 11)

Within this section of the *Declaration* are the goals to halve by 2015 the proportion of people living on less than \$1 a day and those who are hungry, as well as goals relating to access to safe drinking water, primary education, HIV/AIDS (para 19). But these goals are included with other objectives in the areas of trade and debt. The *Millennium Declaration* in other sections identifies the essential importance of gender equality and the empowerment of women (para 20 and 25), human rights, democracy and the rule of law (para 24), the Rights of the Child (para 26) and Agenda 21’s principles of sustainable development. It reaffirms the obligation “to strive for

⁷ Genevieve Renard Painter, *Gender, the Millennium Development Goals, and Human Rights in the context of the 2005 review processes*, Report for the Gender and Development Network (UK), October 2004, accessible at http://www.choike.org/documentos/mdg_women2004.pdf.

⁸ The *Millennium Declaration* can be found at <http://www.un.org/millennium/declaration/ares552e.pdf>.

the full protection and promotion in all our countries of civil, political, economic, social and cultural rights for all” (para 25). With respect to economic and social rights, this obligation is to make maximum progress in advancing these rights for all citizens, taking account the starting points for each country and that all countries have an obligation to create an enabling environment for this progress to occur. This is commonly referred to as progressive realization.

The Special Session of the UN General Assembly in September 2005 takes up the commitment of paragraph 31 to assess progress in implementing the provisions of the *Millennium Declaration*. However, the focus of the global community, including the UN system itself, particularly since 2002, has been on the achievement of Millennium Development Goals. How did these Goals become the practical expression of the *Millennium Declaration*? As already noted, some of the MDGs are set out in the *Declaration*, but others were developed subsequently (Goals Seven [environmental sustainability] and Eight [development partnerships]), while others in the *Declaration* were refined by the UN Secretariat in consultation with member states. The commitment to the MDGs *per se* occurs in 2002, first at the UN Monterrey Financing for Development Conference and then in the outcomes of the Johannesburg World Summit on Sustainable Development. In fact, the MDGs have a checkered history and a politics that emerges from the series of UN global conferences in the 1990s.

Southern and northern CSOs participated actively in the preparation and outcomes of the UN Conferences and Summits in the 1990s. Each conference built commitment to an Action Plan, which in turn set the stage for the *Millennium Declaration* and then the MDGs.⁹ Throughout this period, civil society organizations were themselves setting out benchmarks for progress at the various conferences and developing strategies for holding governments accountable to the Plans of Action that were adopted.¹⁰

The 1993 World Summit on Human Rights in Vienna established the centrality of human rights for the international community. The Copenhagen Social Summit and the Beijing Women’s Conference in 1995 developed an important process of inclusion of activist civil society actors, North and South. At the Conferences, governments were pressed, with some success, to adopt Action Plans that situated progress in gender equality and in eliminating poverty within a more equitable enabling policy environment addressing economic and social impediments to their achievement. But in the Spring of 1996, Ministers from the 22 northern donors met in the OECD’s Development Assistance Committee (DAC) and set out **their own** plan of action in an important document call *Shaping the 21st Century*. While focusing on improving the effectiveness of aid in meeting the goals of the UN conferences, *Shaping the 21st Century* set

⁹ This section is drawn from excellent summary of this history in Mirjam van Reisen, “The Millennium Development Goals: A reality check on their past, present and future”, European External Policy Advisors, for Social Watch, September 2004. Commentary on the pre-2000 history of the MDGs can be found in various editions of the Reality of Aid Reports for 1998, 1999 and 2000 and in Roberto Bissio, “Civil Society and the MDGs”, UNDP *Development Policy Journal*, Volume 3, April 2003.

¹⁰ Sixty NGOs and national platforms signed, “Quality Benchmarks for the Social Summit” (mimeo) some months before the Social Summit. The Statement sought commitments from governments in the outcomes of the Summit. See Appendix Two for my summary of these Benchmarks. EUROSTEOP News (Issue 19) published an assessment of the Summit against the Benchmarks. In the words of Oxfam at the time, “The final Declaration and Program of Action, although liberally sprinkled with references to the role of the market and the importance of safety nets, unequivocally state for the first time that macro-economic policy making cannot be divorced from social development and human rights.” Patricia Feeney, Oxfam Policy Department, “The Outcome of the World Summit for Social Development”, June 1995, mimeo, page 1.

seven donor goals, which for the most part formed the foundation for the wording of the MDGs. Notably absent were any time-bound targets or policy commitments on the part of donors themselves on debt, trade or financing, i.e. taking action on the economic and more comprehensive enabling commitments made at the previous UN conferences.

Despite donor rhetoric in favour of a compact for improved partnerships with developing countries, the latter had no role in setting these goals in *Shaping the 21st Century*. Developing countries were never invited to negotiate mutually agreed and measurable goals based on the most important areas for progress, identified in the Plans of Action adopted by all countries at the UN Conferences. In fact, the seven goals were strongly criticized at the time by many in civil society. They were seen to be a deliberate attempt by the developed country governments to avoid addressing the more difficult structural questions of more equitable economic relationships (including debt cancellation), their international human rights obligations, the call for a fundamental revision of structural adjustment policies, and the urgent need for reform of global governance.

In June of 2000, **on the eve** of the Geneva five-year review of the Social Summit, the World Bank, the IMF, the DAC and notably the UN Secretary General, published *A Better World for All*, which focused exclusively on an optimistic review of the seven goals of the DAC's *Shaping the 21st Century*. This pre-emptive publication, with seeming UN Secretariat endorsement, circumvented any possibility of a transparent process at the Geneva Social Summit for all countries to negotiate a **shared** set of measurable goals and targets. CSO caucuses at Geneva were "outraged" by the presentation of a "consensus" between the IFIs, the OECD and the UN which "reinforced perspectives from the North and disempowered the South...[undermining] the concept of political inclusiveness that defines the UN"¹¹. *A Better World for All* presumed that the most urgent commitments to social development were ones exclusively in the South, with no reference to poverty and social development in the North. At the same time, like the earlier DAC document, it avoided any commitments by the rich countries to change their policies to enable social development in the South.

The *Millennium Declaration*, in September 2000, represented an important return to a shared North/South political consensus on global objectives, however vague some of them may be. As noted, it sets out a common agenda on a series of issues, including those that had been raised by development actors in the South, with implications for action on the part of countries in both the North and the South. But rather than develop further these broad areas of objectives in the *Declaration*, developed countries, with strong support from the UN Secretariat, pressed forward to integrate a set of the Millennium Development Goals, based on *Shaping the 21st Century*, into the consensus statements of the two 2002 UN conferences (Monterrey and Johannesburg).

Since 2002, the MDGs have generated an industry of costing, planning and campaigning in the UN system, among donor governments, the IFIs and many CSOs as "a framework for the entire UN system to work coherently together towards a common end", with the UNDP leading the campaign for their achievement.¹² But the degree to which Southern governments or civil society organizations have adopted, and have taken pro-active ownership of these Goals, remains controversial.

¹¹ Quoted in Van Reisen, *op.cit.*, page 12.

¹² "The Millennium Goals and the UN Role: Fact Sheet", October 2002, <http://www.un.org/millenniumgoals/MDGs-FACTSHEET1.pdf>

3.0 THE MDGs AS A STRATEGY FOR ERADICATING POVERTY

In November 2004, Canadian Development Cooperation Minister Aileen Carroll launched an extensive consultation with CIDA partners on strategies to build momentum and make progress on the MDGs, described by Minister Carroll as “the global yardstick which the world can measure progress”. In demonstrating Canada’s commitment to the Goals, CIDA has structured its reporting on the Agency’s plans and priorities to closely align Canada’s aid program with each of the Goals.¹³ In the words of Rick Cameron, Senior Vice President of CIDA, “the Millennium Development Goals provide the platform for programs and project proposals [for CIDA].”¹⁴

For many, the MDGs represent a strong international consensus that is at a critical juncture – and the central issue is what do we need to do to “make radical changes in how we foster human development” in order to achieve them.¹⁵ Others have pointed out that the MDGs are unique in that they represent the first global compact between the heads of state of developed and developing countries, together with the UN system, the World Bank and the IMF.¹⁶ Since the MDGs reflect common human aspirations, such a compact which tackles the multi-dimensions of poverty creates a commitment that can be owned and rooted in all countries. The Goals have clear targets and achievable time-bound indicators of success, which can galvanize support among citizens and governments alike. In the words of a Kenyan CSO informant, “MDGs are few in number, manageable and achievable, and if you pursue these, you can significantly change the human condition”.¹⁷

But do the MDGs represent an international “consensus” upon which campaigns can exclusively focus with the result of significant reductions in poverty in the South? The *We the People...* project, in an in-depth and global survey of civil society organizations and their engagement with the *Millennium Declaration* and the MDGs, points to increased civil society involvement with MDGs, but often from a posture of “critical engagement”.¹⁸ What are some of the concerns that lie behind this critical engagement?

¹³ CIDA, *Departmental Performance Report, 2003/04*, accessed at www.tbs-sct.gc.ca/rma/dpr/03-04/CIDA-ACDI/CIDA-ACDI434-PR_e.asp?printable=True, October 2004.

¹⁴ CIDA, “Report on International Cooperation Days 2004, The Millennium Development Goals: Moving from Consensus to Momentum”, November 1 – 3, 2004, Ottawa, accessed at www.acdi-cida.gc.ca, page 75.

¹⁵ The Honourable Aileen Carroll, Minister of International Cooperation, “The Millennium Development Goals – Moving from Consensus to Momentum”, November 1, 2004, accessible at www.acdi-cida.gc.ca.

¹⁶ Salil Shetty in Centre for Human Rights and Global Justice, “Human Rights Perspectives on the MDGs, Conference Report”, November 11, 2003, pp. 17-18 accessed at <http://www.nyuhr.org/images/NYUHRGJMDGREPORT2003.pdf>

¹⁷ Quoted in Lorna Gold, “More than a Numbers Game? Ensuring the Millennium Development Goals Address Structural Injustice”, TROCAIRE for CIDSE-CARITAS, An International Report in preparation for the UN Millennium Summit +5 in September 2005, forthcoming at <http://www.trocaire.org/> or <http://www.cidse.org/>. This study is based on field research with CSOs in Zambia and Kenya in 2004, many of whom were quite skeptical about the efficacy of the MDGs for change on the ground.

¹⁸ *We the Peoples, A Call to Action for the UN Millennium Declaration: Civil Society Engagement with the Millennium Development Goals*, 2004, The North South Institute and the World Federation of United Nations Associations, 2004, accessible at http://www.nsi-ins.ca/ensi/pdf/wtp_eng.pdf

3.1 To what extent will the MDGs reduce absolute poverty?

The Millennium Development Goals clearly put the eradication of extreme poverty and advancement on social rights firmly on the international agenda. But at the same time, the first MDG substantially limits this goal to end poverty and the obligation “to spare no effort”. It does so with two specific targets – halve, between 1990 and 2015, the proportion of people whose income is less than \$1 a day and halve, between 1990 and 2015, the proportion of people who suffer from hunger.¹⁹ The World Bank has calculated that 1.3 billion people lived in extreme poverty in 1990, or 31.4% of the world’s population.

In its current form, this first Goal is global in scope and is likely to be achieved by 2015 mainly because of (somewhat unsubstantiated) progress in reducing the numbers of absolute poor in Asia. East Asia had already achieved the Goal in 1999, one year prior to the *Millennium Declaration*. The net reduction globally of 129 million absolutely poor people between 1990 and 2001 was only realized because of a 230 million reduction in East and South Asia.²⁰ However, even these reductions are open to question, particularly for China. One study points out that so many people are still so close to the poverty line in China that using daily expenditure statistics rather than income statistics suggested that poverty *increased* in China in the mid-1990s.²¹ This study also pointed out that dramatically increasing inequality in China has reduced aggregate indicators such as infant mortality for the population as a whole, but it remains just as high among the poorest quartile of the rural population.²²

Even the more optimistic Sachs Report to the Secretary General in January suggests that, when numbers are disaggregated by region, we are not doing very well for the first MDG. By 2001, excepting East Asia and South Asia (China and India), the other regions of the developing world reported **increasing** numbers of extremely poor people, with Sub-Saharan Africa registering an increase in both the numbers of poor people (38%) and the proportion of people living in poverty (46%). Given the obligation to progressively realize economic, social and cultural rights, states are clearly not living up to their human rights commitments.

¹⁹ It is important to note that the goal agreed by all countries at the 1994 Rome Food Conference was to reduce the number of hungry people by half between 1990 and 2015. The Goal would have resulted in 440 million less people hungry or malnourished in that year. In 1990, the number of hungry people (880 million) represented 16.7% of the world population (5,265 million). Half of this proportion (8.4%) of the population in 2015 (estimated to be 7,197 million) will leave 605 million hungry or malnourished people, reduce the number of hungry people by a mere 280 million between 1990 and 2015. Population numbers from Thomas Pogge, “The First UN Millennium Development Goal”, first Oslo Lecture in Moral Philosophy, University of Oslo, September 2003, www.etikk.no/globaljustice/, page 4. In December 2004, the FAO reported that the number of chronically hungry people rose to nearly 852 million in its latest survey, an increase of 18 million since 2000! At least 5 million children are dying from hunger every year. Elizabeth Becker, “Number of Hungry Rising, UN Says”, New York Times, December 8, 2004.

²⁰ Jeffrey Sachs, *Investing in Development: A Practical Plan to Achieve the Millennium Development Goal, Overview* <http://unmp.forumone.com/>, Table 2, page 9.

²¹ “Understanding Chronic Poverty in China”, in The Chronic Poverty Report 2004-05, published by the Chronic Poverty Research Centre, 2004, accessible at www.chronicpoverty.org, page 87. This is due to small savings of rural families that push their expenditure levels below the poverty line. Daily expenditure statistics measures the money available to a family for a basic basket of goods rather than the total income for that family (i.e. \$1 per day). Human rights organizations have also questioned the accuracy of Chinese official statistics as well as issues of discrimination against rural migrant workers in urban settings.

²² *Ibid.*, page 87.

Norwegian researcher, Thomas Pogge, has point out that as a result of population increase expected by 2015 and the avoidance of regional targets for Goal One, cutting the 1990 proportion of people living in absolute poverty in half by 2015 will result in a total reduction in the number of extremely poor people of only 233 million in that year. In other words, it is likely that “success” will mean that well over 900 million people will still be living in extreme poverty in 2015.²³ This is a very modest goal for reducing poverty over 25 years in the context of a commitment of “sparing no effort”!

3.2 Counting the Poor: The Politics of Methodologies

World Bank critics have challenged the actual calculations by the Bank of the numbers of people living in absolute poverty. The Bank uses a national average “purchasing power parity” in making its calculation, rather than purchasing parity based on the goods and services that the poor are required to purchase.²⁴ Analysts Reddy and Pogge conclude that the Bank estimate of the poor (1.3 billion in 1990) is significantly understated. Using a median poverty line based on national poverty lines, the UNDP’s International Poverty Centre calculates that between 1.4 and 1.9 billion people lived in poverty around the world in 2001, a decade after 1990.²⁵ In preliminary calculations, another study by Social Watch points to 200 million more people in Latin America living in poverty than is internationally recognized, again using national definitions of the poverty line rather than the \$1 a day indicator. The more optimistic Sachs Report on the MDGs says there are currently 50 million people living in absolute poverty in the Americas. Moreover, all calculations are based on surveys at the household level that hide largely female poverty within some households that have income above the poverty line.

Some researchers suggest that the use of the \$1 a day indicator is both ideological and political. The focus on statistics for absolutely poor people leaves aside growing inequalities that have resulted from policies that promote economic liberalization and globalization. The first MDG to reduce poverty is largely achievable without the developed countries having to reassess either their global trade and finance policies, or the Washington Consensus macro-economic and governance conditionalities supporting liberalization, which have often accompanied increased aid flows for the MDGs. Statistical success in declining proportions of poor people will permit leaders in the developed world to claim globalization is working for the poor. But this progress may mask the actual realities of marginalization and poverty experienced by millions of people in most developing countries, as well as chronic structural poverty in the North.²⁶

²³ Thomas Pogge, *op.cit.*, pp 3-4. Pogge bases his calculations on an expected developing country population increase of 45% between 1990 and 2015 from a base of 4,115 to 5,967 million people. In 1990, 31.4% of this population was poor and therefore the goal is to reduce this proportion to 15.7% in 2015. Sach’s *Investing in Development: A Practical Plan to Achieve the Millennium Development Goals* has a more optimistic projection of 500 million less people living on a dollar a day, but does not provide the assumptions behind this calculation. See <http://unmp.forumone.com/>.

²⁴ Sanjay G. Reddy, Thomas W. Pogge, “How *Not* to Count the Poor”, March 2003, accessed at <http://www.columbia.edu/~sr793/count.pdf>. A summary of this debate can be found in Roberto Bissio, “Target 2005: Making the UN Relevant for the Poor”, Social Watch, 2005, forthcoming.

²⁵ Nanak Kakwani, “New Global Poverty Counts”, in *In Focus*, “Dollar a Day, how much does it say?”, published by the UNDP’s International Poverty Centre, , September 2004, accessed at <http://www.undp.org/povertycentre/newsletters/infocus4sep04eng.pdf>

²⁶ Roberto Bissio, “Target 2005: Making the UN Relevant for the Poor”, Social Watch, 2005, forthcoming.

Many will claim, quite rightly, that any reductions in the numbers of poor people can only be good news and a sign of renewed commitment to take measures to end poverty. However, the approaches adopted now by developed and developing countries to achieving these reductions matter a great deal to the remaining numbers of poor people. An approach that focuses primarily on policies for accelerated economic growth and that ignores strategies for a more deliberate empowerment of poor people and poor countries is in fact contrary to the human rights principle of according special attention to vulnerable groups and may have deep impact on the very large numbers who are condemned to remain poor in 2015. Noting the current reality of significant and growing inequality within poor countries and between the North and South, the perception that progress is being made on global *averages* for MDG indicators may mask a very different reality of no progress for many of the poor majority who live at the bottom of the pyramid (using a more realistic \$2 a day indicator).

More than 150 member states have ratified the Covenant on Economic, Social and Cultural Rights and have an obligation to tackle poverty in a manner that is non-discriminatory, participatory, does not infringe on the rights of others, and demonstrates progress for all segments of society, using the maximum resources available. The MDGs and their specific targets and indicators do not take these obligations into account. The result of “halving the proportion of people living on a \$1 a day” may be even more intractable poverty in 2015. Poverty researchers have long noted that many people exist on the margins of absolute poverty, either above or below the line for periods of their lives. This is apparent in the much larger proportion of people existing on less than \$2 a day globally, 54% of the population of developing countries in 2001.

But there are also significant numbers of “chronically poor”, those who never move above the poverty line in their lifetime, due to extreme economic marginalization, disability, gender or ethnic discrimination etc. At least 420 million people, or close to 40% of those counted by the under a \$1 a day indicator, are estimated to be chronically poor.²⁷ It can be expected that as the developed countries and the IFIs press to make maximum progress on the first MDG, these will be the poor left behind in 2015.

“Success” by 2015, measured by the MDG poverty indicator, could well leave in many countries a very large population of poor and extremely marginalized people with wider social, economic and political implications for society as a whole. In the words of the 2004-05 *Chronic Poverty Report*, “those ‘left behind’ in processes of development often have little choice but to find ways of coping that undermine their long-term well-being and that of society as a whole” (for example, in accentuating environmental damage with fragile resources).²⁸ In a rights framework, MDGs will only contribute to poverty eradication if efforts to achieve them are founded on comprehensive policies that empower and recognize the rights of all people, **including all of the poor**, without discrimination based on where they might live, or their particular condition or depth of poverty.²⁹

²⁷ *The Chronic Poverty Report 2004-05*, published by the Chronic Poverty Research Centre, 2004, accessible at www.chronicpoverty.org, page 4. More than 40% of the absolute poor in South Asia and Africa are estimated to be chronically poor.

²⁸ *The Chronic Poverty Report 2004-05*, *ibid.*, p. 4.

²⁹ *The Reality of Aid*, 2004, Focus on Governance and Rights in International Cooperation, Manila, IBON Inc, accessible at www.realityofaid.org, page 29.

3.3 Setting the poor up for failure? Assessing the challenges in meeting the MDG targets

Making progress on the social sector goals and targets in the MDGs is clearly an obligation for all countries. However, the evidence of past progress in many of these areas, including for developed countries themselves, suggests that a complex set of economic, social and cultural factors is at play in determining the ability of countries to achieve the rate of progress specified in the Goals. These factors are very different for different regions and countries. While the Goals do serve to bring attention to the needs of the poorest countries in which the achievement of the Goals is the most difficult, they do so in a somewhat arbitrary way, focusing political attention on **global** targets, rather than realistic country-determined priorities and targets. Failure at the country level, however, may well reinforce a notion that the poorest countries face inevitable poverty, no matter what commitment of aid resources by the Northern donors and the multilateral organizations.

Are MDGs simply unrealistic for many countries? According to a detailed study by Michael Clemens, Charles Kenny and Todd Moss, the costing approach to MDGs, as part of northern campaigns to make the Goals “realistic”, creates a false sense of their achievability.³⁰ They point to numerous sectoral studies that demonstrate that financial resources are sometimes not even the most important constraint.

Of the 47 countries in Sub-Saharan Africa, 42 are considered off-track for half of the targets and 12 countries for all of the targets. These researchers conclude that “many of the MDGs are simply unrealistic for many countries” where the world community is “asking [them] to perform at the top end of the world’s historical experience of the best performers of the last 50 years.”³¹ The rate of growth expected of Sub-Saharan Africa, after a decade of very marginal growth, has in fact only been accomplished by 5 developing countries in the world in the past 15 years.³² In primary education, for example, the expectation is progress at a rate over 11 years that took rich countries close to a century.

In Uganda for example, education financing to permit free enrollment did boost the rate of participation in primary school, but the fraction of grade three achieving a “satisfactory score” on an English oral test fell from 92% to 56%. Countries with a ratio of 80% girls to boys in school enrollment have taken 28 years to achieve a ratio of 90%, due to cultural and economic circumstances in the wider society. Most countries that have achieved the goal for child mortality have had per capita income above \$1600 and there is no recent precedent in poor countries. National income, ethnic divides, and the predominant religion have been the most significant determinants of slow progress on this goal. Changes in maternal mortality rates require a **quadrupling or more** of rates of change in most poor countries since 1990. These researchers are more optimistic about making significant progress in HIV/AIDS, malaria, sanitation and drinking water as they “are much more susceptible to change through investment, technological and medical advances”, although accelerated urbanization has been crucial for large changes in sanitation and potable water goals.³³

³⁰ Michael Clemens, Charles Kenny, Todd Moss, “The Trouble with the MDGs: Confronting Expectations of Aid and Development Success”, Centre for Global Development, Working Paper #40, May 2004, accessible at http://www.cgdev.org/docs/cgd_wp040Rev2.pdf.

³¹ *Ibid.*, page 3.

³² *Ibid.*, page 3.

³³ *Ibid.*, page 26. See Lorna Gold, *op. cit.*, for a detailed examination of prospects for success for each of the seven social development Goals. While urbanization may be a factor in making accessible clean potable water and sanitation, recently such urban initiatives have been accompanied by privatization of these public services, to the detriment of the poor. Focusing only on the goal of potable water may allow donors to justify privatization or private investment in this sector without discussion of these issues of access.

This comprehensive study by Clemens and his colleagues concludes that the emphasis should not be on whether a country is failing to meet a target, but on its obligation under international human rights law to make maximum sustained progress against poverty. Aid can play a role, but there are other critical policies such as debt cancellation, eliminating IMF and World Bank structural adjustment conditionalities, **democratic** governance, gender equality, fair trade and more equitable international institutions that set limiting parameters for this progress. Goal Eight, focusing on North South development partnership, with its weak targets, bias towards trade and investment liberalization, and lack of timelines, fails to deliver much hope in many of these important areas.

Being unrealistic about the MDGs in our public rhetoric and campaigns over the next decade “runs the risk of creating a climate of inaccurate pessimism about development and aid”.³⁴ Indeed, in the absence of radical reforms greater global equality on the part of developed countries, beyond delivering more aid, an exclusive emphasis on MDG targets potentially sets up poor people and poor countries to take the blame once again for “their failure” to achieve the unachievable. Yet again, it will be said these countries failed to take the advice of the international community and squandered billions of dollars of aid and debt relief without reaching the Goals.

A more effective approach to ending poverty is one that stresses universal human rights obligations as guiding principles for the policies of all countries and the multilateral system. Countries with the resources and power to shape the international system have a particular obligation to structure these policies so that poor countries and poor people can maximize progress in realizing their rights guaranteed by international law. Without such an approach, progress is likely not to exceed historical patterns of slow improvements for many countries. Incremental advances, assisted by large aid infusions, will be accompanied by growing inequality at global and national levels as a result of the continuance of Northern-driven liberalization policies in trade and investment, which potentially create conditions for a reversal of progress in later years.

3.4 Strengthening appropriate economic policies for reducing poverty

The experience of fifty years of development interventions by external actors suggests that sustained and equitable reductions in poverty cannot be “bought” by larger amounts of external resources, nor can it be achieved by setting stand-alone targets. National and international economic policies must be put in place that enhance the capacities of the poor to gain sustainable livelihoods.

In their exclusive focus on the MDG targets and indicators, the international community largely assumes a growth-oriented model to affect change in key social indicators of poverty. Education and health are clearly important areas of rights for poor people. But the Goals, for the most part, ignore the need for choices in economic policies most effective for reducing the social dimensions of poverty. Economic growth must focus on creating livelihoods for the poor based on improving their capacities and assets as well as their access to local finance and markets.

³⁴ *Ibid.*, page 30.

This growth must also produce jobs in both the formal and informal economies that respect the core labour rights of the working populations.

Global unemployment affects 185 million people (the highest figure to date ever recorded by the ILO) and many more are working in dangerous jobs at wages that cannot lift them out of poverty. The ILO estimates that there are 550 million working poor (earning less than a dollar a day). The ILO's 2004 Report from the World Commission on the Social Dimensions of Globalization recommended that "decent work for all should be made a global goal" and "macroeconomic policies to attain a more balanced strategy for sustainable global growth and full employment". The Report called for a series of coordinated measures to improve governance and accountability at all levels, including "fairer rules for international trade, investment, finance and migration, which takes account of all interests, rights and responsibilities; measures to promote core labour standards and a minimum level of social protection in the global economy".³⁵ With these policies, the benefits of globalization can be extended to many more people and shared between and within countries.

Appropriate agriculture policies are a key determinant of progress for meeting the first Millennium Goal on hunger and poverty. There is general consensus that halving the number of hungry persons by 2015 (not just the proportion) is entirely achievable.³⁶ But the current emphasis on large-scale scientific and market approaches to agricultural development, in both developed and developing countries, along with expanding export-oriented and corporate models of agriculture in the South, will largely fail the rural poor.

The vast majority (75%) of poor people are rural people and the majority of these are women who earn a living from food production and local markets. Expanded support for small-scale agriculture in poor countries where 60% to 80% of the population depends on agriculture is a critical focus for agricultural policies to reduce poverty and hunger. The particular needs and means to strengthen the rural economy are specific to each context. The Covenant on Economic, Social and Cultural Rights requires all countries to protect the human right to food. The international community, therefore, in setting goals for reducing poverty, must change policies that continue to undermine the assets and capabilities of livelihoods for the rural poor. Trade and investment agreements must provide policy space for communities and governments to enact their own food security frameworks in support of small scale producers. Current domestic agricultural and aid policies of northern governments and support for agriculture by developing country governments are oriented too exclusively to volatile trade benefits from an export-oriented agriculture.³⁷

³⁵ "World Commission says globalization can and must change, calls for urgent rethink of global governance", ILO Press Release, February 24, 2004. accessible at www.ilo.org/public/english/bureau/inf/pr/2004/7.htm.

³⁶ Millennium Project Taskforce on Hunger, *Halving Hunger: It Can be Done*, London: Earthscan, 2005, http://unmp.forumone.com/eng_task_force/HungerEbook.pdf and the International Food Policy Research Institute at <http://www.ifpri.org/>

³⁷ See Canadian Food Security Policy Group, *A Food Security Perspective on Canada's International Trade and Development Assistance Policies*, October 2004, accessible at http://ccic.ca/e/docs/003_food_2004-10_fspg_ipr_recs.pdf

3.5 Citizens' rights, empowerment and equality in achieving poverty reduction

Progress against poverty requires a holistic approach that strengthens the capacities and abilities of the poor and marginalized to claim their rights. Unfortunately, the MDGs are largely silent on basic issues of citizens' civil and political rights, empowerment and improved equality (non-discrimination). While the MDGs express concrete goals, they nevertheless ignore the politics inherent in working for their achievement in many countries. The freedom to exercise political and civil rights is crucial to the realization and defence of economic, social and cultural rights. Underneath the concept of participation which is prominent in the discourse of many development actors are a series of internationally guaranteed rights: freedom of association (including access to information), freedom of the press, freedom of association and assembly, and the right to participate in public affairs.

Ending poverty is essentially a political process that is specific to the local economic, social, cultural, ecological and gender equality circumstances in each country. As the work of Amartya Sen demonstrates, people-centred development for poverty eradication is ultimately about recognizing the rights of the vulnerable transforming the power relations, as well as affecting the cultural and social interests that sustain inequality. Action to counter impoverishment is therefore a political process. Citizens, particularly the poor and the powerless, must have the political and civic freedom to negotiate with each other to claim their rights, with political elites and their governments, and with the world community, for policies that advance their livelihood and secure their future in their world.

The poor are not objects to be acted upon by development officials who "deliver" the MDGs. The impoverishment of large numbers of people in the South has been the consequence of complex national and international economic, social and political processes. Consequently, the poor will be central actors in sometimes conflictual politics, with their aim to strengthen the hand of a political constituency supporting pro-poor development strategies. The challenge of combating poverty therefore is not so much "political will" of donor governments, as it is strengthening the means to address unequal power, capacity, and access to resources for those whose rights are systematically denied – the poor, impoverished women and children, and other marginalized peoples. The UN system, the Charter, and its various Declarations and Covenants on Human Rights provide a normative framework that codify the rights of the poor and afford them protection against exclusion and discrimination. The *Millennium Declaration*, but not the Millennium Development Goals, recognizes the primacy of this human rights framework for understanding the obligations of all countries to act and make progress against poverty.

While based on international legal codes and covenants, the rights framework is a dynamic one that continues to evolve through intense national and multilateral processes. It has emerged out of many decades of struggles by peoples' organizations – women's movements, indigenous nations, gay and lesbian networks, workers and labour organizations, fishers and farmers' organizations, human rights defenders. Human rights are essentially active and should not merely be 'promoted' or 'protected', but are to be practiced and experienced. They have implications for the actions of all donors, governments, and non-state actors in their commitment

to end poverty. In the words of John Foster at The North South Institute, “participation is central to a human rights approach to development as a right, an *entitlement guaranteed by international law, rather than an optional extra or tool for the delivery of aid*”.³⁸

Women as development actors are particularly absent from the MDGs. Progress on gender equality and women’s empowerment revolves around Goal 3 and its basic education target and indicators, but are also embedded in other social development Goals. For the most part the MDGs characterize women as vulnerable victims, instrumentally important for achieving certain goals, rather than as agents of development, acting to claim their rights:

“The faces of women in the MDGs are predominantly those of a ‘girl child’, a ‘pregnant woman’ and a ‘mother’....Women’s empowerment is pursued [in Goal 3] not because it is a human right, but because attainment of equality will produce favorable ripple effects [for economic growth and social progress].”³⁹

A focus on MDGs as the framework for making progress on poverty may become a set-back for the global agenda for women’s empowerment in the 1990s. Women’s organizations have pointed to the exclusion from the MDGs of women’s sexual and reproductive rights due to the forces of religious fundamentalism in global politics. While women’s equality and empowerment will be central to the achievement of the MDGs, few of the targets and indicators are disaggregated by gender. Others have criticized the lack of critical perspective on the impact of neo-liberal economic policies on poor women, emphasizing the importance of legislation protecting the basic labour rights of low-income women.⁴⁰ Broad goals collapse gender concerns and depoliticize the uneven distribution of power and resources within households. Equality and non-discrimination, along with participation and empowerment, were key human rights principles guiding a comprehensive Platform for Action agreed at the 1995 Beijing World Conference on Women. These principles may now be marginalized in global initiatives for the achievement of the MDGs.

A key challenge in the international human rights framework is to set in motion processes for actual change so that rights become meaningful to people who are currently unable to exercise them. Seen from this perspective, the MDGs are but *one* measure of progress for economic, social and cultural rights, to which all governments are bound and must be accountable. The MDGs can be useful targets, which serve a political purpose in leveraging commitment to poverty-focused development, particularly with Northern governments who are their primary authors. A human rights approach to poverty reduction requires commitments not just to interim targets but to the eventual elimination of poverty. Progress in meeting the MDGs will also

³⁸ John Foster (The North South Institute, Canada), “Crisis time: Repossessing Democratic Space, Governance and the Promotion of Rights in International Cooperation and Aid, A Discussion Paper for The Reality of Aid”, April 2003, accessed from the Reality of Aid website, www.realityofaid.org, p. 8.

³⁹ Painter, *op.cit.*, page 6.

⁴⁰ Peggy Antrobus, “MDGs – the Most Distracting Gimmick”, in Women’s International Coalition for Economic Justice, *Seeking Accountability on Women’s Human Rights: Women Debate the Millennium Development Goals*, January 2004, accessible at www.wicej.addr.com/mdg/toc.html Page 15. She goes on to point out that “because of the primary responsibility that women have for the care of children, the elderly, and the sick and the disabled, women’s income-earning capacity is more limited than that of men. Women’s poverty is therefore more severe than men’s poverty and carries more serious consequences.”

require a much more comprehensive set of policy changes by governments and other development actors, reflecting a holistic approach to poverty. Initiatives that promote democratic governance and citizens' rights, at all levels, without externally imposed conditions on directions for development strategies, are fundamental. They must be accompanied by international actions on the part of governments to radically reform current trade, investment and environmental agreements. And the impact of development policies must be measured against our human rights obligations, the Right to Development and the responsibility to give priority to ending global poverty.

APPENDIX ONE

The Millennium Development Goals and Targets

1. *Eradicate extreme poverty and hunger*

- Halve between 1990 and 2015 the proportion of people whose income is less than \$1 a day; and
- Halve between 1990 and 2015 the proportion of people who suffer from hunger.

2. *Achieve universal primary education*

- Ensure that by 2015 all boys and girls complete a full course of primary schooling.

3. *Promote gender equality and empower women*

- Eliminate gender disparity in primary and secondary education by 2015.

4. *Reduce child mortality*

- Reduce by two thirds, between 1990 and 2015, the mortality rate among children under five.

5. *Improve maternal health*

- Reduce by three quarters, between 1990 and 2015, the maternal mortality ratio.

6. *Combat HIV/AIDS, malaria and other diseases*

- Halt and begin to reverse the spread of HIV/Aids, malaria and other major diseases by 2015.

7. *Ensure environmental sustainability*

- Integrate the principles of sustainable development into country policies and programs and reverse loss of environmental resources;
- Reduce by half the proportion of people without sustainable access to safe drinking water by 2015; and
- Achieve significant improvement in lives of at least 100 million slum dwellers by 2020.

8. *Develop a global partnership for development*

- Develop further an open trading and financial system that is rule-based, predictable and non-discriminatory (including a commitment to good governance, development and poverty reduction – nationally and internationally);
- Address the least developed countries' special needs. This includes tariff and quota-free access for their exports; enhanced debt relief for heavily indebted poor countries; and more generous official development assistance for countries committed to poverty reduction;
- Address the special needs of landlocked and small island developing States;
- Deal comprehensively with developing countries debt problems through national and international measures to make debt sustainable in the long term;
- In cooperation with developing countries, develop decent and productive work for youth;
- In cooperation with pharmaceutical companies, provide access to affordable essential drugs in developing countries; and
- In cooperation with the private sector, make available the benefits of new technologies – especially information and communications technologies.

APPENDIX TWO
Quality Benchmarks for the World Summit for Social Development
A Summary of an NGO Statement, September 1994

1. Ratification of the six core Human Rights Treaties and legal binding obligations of the Convention on Economic, Social and Cultural Rights, including the development of an optional protocol for a complaints procedure;
2. Fundamental revision of structural adjustment policies that deepen social inequality and poverty, with greater accountability of the IFIs to the UN system (ECOSOC);
3. National and international programs for social development should be assessed explaining what steps are being taken to assist governments to comply with their obligations to economic, social and cultural rights;
4. Low income countries should receive compensation for losses as a result of the Uruguay Trade Round;
5. The new trade regime (WTO) should be subject to social audits as well as review by expert bodies on economic, social and cultural rights, including recognition of the right of Nations to establish food and agricultural policies to eradicate hunger and ensure food security;
6. Governments must take vigorous action to assure that market forces are not allowed to degrade the community and environment in which they operate, including international monitoring and a code of conduct for the operations of transnational corporations;
7. Promote the write-off of multilateral debt in Africa and all Low Income Countries;
8. Achieve the 0.7% UN target for aid and devote at least 50% to a broad range of fundamental human needs;
9. Establish effective measures to curb the arms race to minimize violent social disintegration;
10. Governments commit themselves to provide legal and regulatory frameworks for the contribution of different actors so as to involve local, regional and national civil society in social development, including measures to eradicate corrupt practices;
11. The gender specific aspects of each issue addressed by the Social Summit should be explicitly identified in the policy analysis and commitments taken by the Social Summit, recognizing the central role of women in social and economic development. The Social Summit should draw on the contributions and respect of the unique cultures of people and integrate sustainable indigenous and traditional practices which do not violate women's rights into social development; and
12. The Social Summit should vest principle responsibility for the monitoring of the commitments undertaken in the Committee on Economic, Social and Cultural Rights.