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Can Africa Deliver on the Millennium Development Goals?

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Almost half way to the 2015 deadline for the achievement of the Millennium Development Goals, (MDGs), this question will be asked again and again across this continent. Did 189 leaders of the world representing both poorer countries and richer ones who met at the UN Millennium Summit to make the Millennium Declaration and agree that the MDGs have to be met; adopted the MDGs and just went back to their old default of "business as usual"?

MDGs and its critics

It is a question that invites cynicism from many corners. There are many who are ideologically opposed to the MDGs who regard it as a neo liberal surrender dictated by the current needs of the hegemonic powers for a more rapacious globalisation but pretending to listen to the poor. In this group are those who even see the MDGs as a conspiracy against the poorer countries of the world by imperialism.

There is also a resilient Left Cold Warriors group, who claim the Central Intelligence Agency (CIA) drafted the MDGs! There is a another group that see the MDGs as laudable but believe they are not deliverable because the big powers that cause poverty on a global scale are also the ones pushing the agenda. Since turkeys cannot be expected to vote for early Christmas it is therefore unrealistic to expect those who benefit and control the current unjust global order to also be its leading reformers.

In between these are many others who take a tactical view of the MDGs. They admit that the goals are minimal, and may not be fully deliverable without a fundamental restructure of power in favour of the poor masses, both within nations/peoples and between nations and peoples of the world.

However, they see and use it as a campaigning tool, legitimised by the declaration made and commitments undertaken by 189 government leaders across the world, with timelines, indices of progress and targets for fulfilment. Yes, it could have gone much further but holding the leaders accountable for even these minimal goals will do more for the poor and create the space for bigger demands. Where do I stand between the critics?

Before stating where I stand, the case of the various critics needs to be addressed in more detail. First, the Neo-liberal critiques.

It is true that the consensus around MDGs were built within the hegemonic power structures of today, predicated on a triumphalist, capitalist imperialism consequent to the collapse of the previously existing socialist order of Eastern Europe. This neo-liberal ideology proclaims TINA (There Is No Alternative) to its profit-before-people principles and insists we all have to become slaves to the market. Its support for MDGs, therefore, is to ensure that the poorer countries of the world adjust to this worldview.

But the argument is not one way. China formally remains a Communist state but is witnessing the highest growth rate over a longer period than any of the leading capitalist states including the US, Japan and Germany. It cannot be true, therefore, that only a capitalist state can guarantee economic growth. Even the Asian Tigers that are often negatively compared to African countries have shown that state intervention is not "inherently" bad. They could not have achieved the level growth that sets them apart from comparable African countries at independence without a well-ordered state intervention in the economy.

Secondly, are MDGs a conspiracy against the poorer countries of the world? The problem with conspiracy theories is that they are self-affirming and self-justifying. They are like religious fundamentalists. The more you disagree with them the greater their need to save you! Or like the man accused of paranoia that retorted that: "The fact that I am paranoid does not mean that there is nobody conspiring against me." It is difficult to shift somebody consumed by paranoia. Even if the MDGs were conspiracies, however, are there no ways in which the poorer peoples of the world can get a breathing space in this grand conspiracy? Whatever the ferocity of two fighting or love-crazed elephants, would there not be patches of grass untouched? Would grass not grow again on their stumping grounds?

Thirdly, those who believe that the CIA inspired the MDGs are cancelling out their own argument. They are providing a legitimising narrative for the institution they hate so much. It is unfortunate that one of the greatest political economists and consistent critics of the Global system of exploitation and a frontline progressive Pan Africanist, Professor Samir Amin, fell into this category in a well-publicised critique of the MDGs, many aspects of which I share.

If the CIA now want to halve global poverty - what is wrong with that?

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If the CIA will support universal provision of Anti-retrovirals to everybody who is HIV positive - what is wrong with that?

In cases of life and death, as most of the MDGs are, it will not matter to the victims where the support is coming; what institution, government, agency or group of people that the support comes from - they will take it and they will be right to do so. This does not mean that they support the CIA. But if the CIA is now supporting laudable goals like MDGs what does that say of the world we live in? It could be that we are winning some of the arguments but not realizing it? Or are we so steeped in Cold War rhetoric and knee jerk reaction not to see the world changing before our eyes. But more importantly are we so engrossed in oppositionism that we are not even able to see when we are winning?

Fourthly, there are those who think that as laudable as the MDGs are, they are not deliverable because the global power relations will not allow it. This group also suffers from underestimation of the campaigns and little victories won over the years by progressive peoples engaged with all governments of the world and the Two Washington Vulture Institutions (International Monetary Fund and World Bank) and even the World Trade Organisation (WTO). At the height of Structural Adjustment Programmes (SAPs) there was progressive consensus that yielded programmes like Adjustment with a human face, Programme of Action for the mitigation of the social effects of Adjustment, etc.

There were concessions won by advocacy, campaigns and struggles carried out by reformers linked to broad social movements in the north and south of the world. There was a time when whatever the IMF and World Bank said were gospel truths. Without the so-called 'clean Bill of health' from the two, many countries had their growth and development postponed until they succumbed to their dictates. Governments were changed and Ministerial reshuffles embarked upon at the behest of these institutions. In many countries across Africa anti-IMF/World Bank demonstrations and protests were put down mercilessly as 'Law and Order' matters and in some cases treated as 'communist inspired'.

But today the situation is different and thanks to the doggedness and determination of campaigners even the IMF and the World Bank are recanting some of their dogmatic positions. But more than this, their meetings which used to be shrouded in secrecy are now objects of Global campaigners. They are the ones running for cover instead of those opposed to them.

What all these mean is that changes may not come by fiat or in one swell swoop but that should not stop activists and other reformers from engaging policy processes even when there are genuine reservations.

The fifth category of people engaged with the MDGs process, while sharing many of the misgivings above, believe that there is both a tactical and strategic importance to engage with it. This last view is the consensus of many activists working within the Global Call to Action Against Poverty (GCAP) and the wider MDG campaigns in many countries.

In July, key leaders within the CSO coalitions from all the regions of Africa were present at a Consultative meeting organised by the Africa Office of the UN Millennium Campaign. The public part of the discussions, moderated by Irungu Houghton, Pan Africa Policy Programme Adviser at Oxfam, were led by Ms Sarah Ochekepe (National Coordinator of the Campaign in Nigeria), Mr Sylvestre Baessa (of the Mozambique Debt Network), and Mr Deo Nyanzi (Coordinator for the MDG Campaign in Uganda).

All the speakers reported on the situation in their countries and discussed the opportunities and challenges facing them in the realisation of the MDGs come year 2015. There was consensus in accepting the MDGs, in spite of their limitations, as providing a great opportunity to put issues of poverty and development on the agenda of all governments in Africa. Unlike in the past when progressive, pro-people ideas are discredited and labelled as 'communism', all the leaders signed up to the MDGs, therefore all we are saying is that they live up to their commitments. More importantly these commitments were not made by only the rich countries to the poorer ones but also by the poor countries to themselves.

While all speakers recognised that Goal Number 8 - that deals with the inequities of Global Trade, Debt and Aid - is very important and needs a global campaign for genuine progress, all the other goals (1-7) can only be achieved at the National Level. Even in the countries it is only at the local and community levels that the impact of change or lack of it can be felt. MDGs can only be delivered at community level. There was a lot of information sharing on the challenges facing campaigners.

Challenges in the Campaign

1. The MDGs remain largely in the domain of governments, even here in the executive branch, with legislatures having little role in monitoring any progress. There is a way in which most African governments see MDGs as providing yet another window of opportunity for more Aid to come to their countries. They are in support of Goal 8 issues but often defensive on the other goals on which they have political sovereignty.
2. There is still popular ignorance about the MDGs among the vast majority of the peoples. If this is not addressed MDGs may become yet another piece of document signed by our governments but left to gather dust in ministries. CSOs have to ensure that the goals are known, but more than that, hold governments accountable for their fulfilment.
3. Although NGOs are very active in many countries their being largely better-organised in cities has meant limited percolation of the information down to the masses in the rural areas. There are positive developments that may be worth reproducing in other countries.

Deo Nyanzi shared with the meeting the Uganda experience of moving away from Kampala and organising at District level. The Nigeria campaigners are also strategically looking at ways of decentralising their work into all the 36 states of the country.

4. There is also a problem of competition for resources by NGOs that make them vulnerable to donor manipulation and also mercenary activists. There is a risk that some of the active groups will 'capture' MDGs as a yet another project with which they can attract funds and render accounts to their Donors instead of the people they serve. It could become like many of the Poverty eradication schemes or Poverty Reduction Strategy Papers (PRSPs) that eradicate poverty for an army of foreign consultants and their local junior partners without making a dent in the mass poverty facing the populace. Unlike PRSPs (which tended to be very technical) the MDGs offer a better opportunity for mass involvement if the NGOs and CSOs involved are committed to doing so.

5. Campaigners all agreed that there was a need to popularise the MDGs and widen the constituencies to include all stakeholders whether they are based in urban or rural areas, employed and unemployed, Youth, Women, Students, Labour, Political parties, legislatures, farmers groups, etc.

The biggest challenge is mobilising the political will by our leaders to honour their commitments. Political wills are not made automatically; they have to be cultivated, nurtured and mobilised. Governments cannot deliver on the MDGs if people are not aware of them and are not insisting that they do. Therefore the biggest task is to make people aware of the commitments. When they are equipped with that knowledge they can then begin to insist that their leaders deliver on them. At the official level there is information in lead government ministries like National Planning, Economic Development, Ministry of Finance, etc. In some countries the Presidents have taken MDGs as executive pets. While PRSPs were mostly dealt with by 'experts' in Ministries of Finance and Economic Planning, MDGs are acquiring the status of 'President's Plan' in many countries. Some countries like Nigeria have a Senior Presidential Adviser on MDGs and even a National Committee chaired by the President. Somehow MDGs are seen as politically important as NEPAD in some of the countries.

The UN System

At the intergovernmental level all UN agencies are supposed to mainstream MDGs in their programmes. The UNDP is the key agency in coordinating MDG activities and programmes. Civil society, including but not limited to NGOs, needs to demand, of right, that all of these agencies give them information, but more than that, involve them in their activities. Involvement should mean more than just "inviting" them to meetings, in which they were not central to the conception, planning and execution. Again this should be a lesson learnt from the PRSP processes.

The experiences in this area are not uniform across the countries. In some places they work well, whereas in others there are suspicions between governments and UN agencies on the one hand, and civil society on the other. Sometimes the UN is seen as too close to the government and wary of activists who are critical of governments.

While openness, accountability and coordination at the local and national level are both desirable and necessary to achieve the MDGs, there are still structural problems about the way in which our world is currently organised around the hegemony of a triumphalist neo-liberal ideology that will severely limit the capacity of many African states to achieve the MDGs.

1. The ideology of free market at all costs and rampant liberalisation puts poor countries at the mercy of the richer countries who determine both the cost of what we produce and most of what we consume.

2. It is contradictory to expect poor countries to deliver on safe water, universal access to education, reduce infant and maternal mortality during birth, while at the same time limiting their powers to spend on social welfare. How can everyone have access to healthy, drinkable water if water is privatized?

3. Though there has been some progress on debt and aid - these are not sustainable if debt relief does not transform into universal cancellation.

4. Aid is the weakest link in the troika of debt, trade and aid that are at the core of the campaign in the rich North. Politicians can easily double, triple or even quadruple aid and show their voters that they care. Aid in itself, without the fundamental reform of the unjust trade rules and exploitative financial regimes that pauperise the majority of the peoples of the world, gives no hope of redeeming the billions of peoples in the world who are desperately poor. This is where the poverty of Africa connects structurally with the vast riches of the West. Justice needs, instead of sympathy and compassion, to be the focus in the north. You are rich because we are poor.

It is not surprising that little progress has been made in this respect. The final collapse of the so-called development round of the WTO talks is indicative of how far we are away from creating a world in which we can satisfy the need of the poor, as opposed to the aggrandisements of the greed of the rich. Does this mean that the MDG campaign is pointless? The consensus from our Nairobi meeting is that no matter how bad the scenarios and outlooks may seem, activists must strive to organise instead of agonising. What is more, it should not distract us from organising for what ought to be.

Progress may come in dribs and drabs but the struggle must continue. In Africa and many poor countries all politicians stand for elections, whether they are aware of it or not, mostly on an MDG platform. The challenge is to hold them accountable for it. Unlike the party manifestos, which they often conveniently ignore once elected, the MDGs were signed and have signposts every step of the way: No excuses in 2015. Do not wait till then.

The time to push is now.

The bigger question that all critics who still go on and on about how inadequate the MDGs are have to answer is: Who will be hurt if they are achieved in 2015?

About AFRODAD

AFRODAD Vision

AFRODAD aspires for an equitable and sustainable development process leading to a prosperous Africa.

AFRODAD Mission

To secure policies that will redress the African debt crisis based on a human rights value system.

AFRODAD Objectives include the following:

- 1 To enhance efficient and effective management and use of resources by African governments;
- 2 To secure a paradigm shift in the international socio-economic and political world order to a development process that addresses the needs and aspirations of the majority of the people in the world.
- 3 To facilitate dialogue between civil society and governments on issues related to Debt and development in Africa and elsewhere.

From the vision and the mission statements and from our objectives, it is clear that the Debt crisis, apart from being a political, economic and structural issue, has an intrinsic link to human rights. This forms the guiding philosophy for our work on Debt and the need to have African external debts cancelled for poverty eradication and attainment of social and economic justice. Furthermore, the principle of equity must of necessity apply and in this regard, responsibility of creditors and debtors in the debt crisis should be acknowledged and assumed by the parties. When this is not done, it is a reflection of failure of governance mechanisms at the global level that protect the interests of the weaker nations. The Transparent Arbitration mechanism proposed by AFRODAD as one way of dealing with the debt crisis finds a fundamental basis in this respect.

AFRODAD aspires for an African and global society that is just (equal access to and fair distribution of resources), respects human rights and promotes popular participation as a fundamental right of citizens (Arusha Declaration of 1980). In this light, African society should have the space in the global development arena to generate its own solutions, uphold good values that ensure that its development process is owned and driven by its people and not dominated by markets/profits and international financial institutions.

AFRODAD is governed by a Board of seven people from the five regions of Africa, namely East, Central, West, Southern and the North. The Board meets twice a year. The Secretariat, based in Harare, Zimbabwe, has a staff compliment of Seven programme and five support staff.

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