

Global goals as policy tools: The Power of Numbers and unintended consequences

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Outline

1. Global goal setting and some concerns from the MDG experience
2. Power of Numbers Project
3. Post 2015 process

Importance of global goals

- International agreement on international development priorities:
 - Post 2015 development agenda
 - Sustainable Development Goals
- History of global goals:
 - one of the most important contributions of the UN in shaping priorities (Emmerij, Jolly and Weiss, UN Intellectual History Project)
- MDGs experience and implications for economic and political relations
 - mobilized international policy attention
 - MDGs agenda – too narrow and unbalanced
 - redefined concept of 'development' and purpose of international cooperation for development

Motivation: Global goals

- Tool of global governance - Little known about how they work and broader consequences, **intended and unintended**
- Objective: mobilize political support for neglected priorities
 - a communications tool
- Unintended consequences
 - Potential for distortionary policy effects when used as a planning and programming tool, or a monitoring and accountability tool?
 - Potential for creating new narratives to frame development agendas
- Broad question
 - Role of ideas in influencing international policies and action (constructivism)

(Merry 2011) - Indicators as tools of governance



- **Power of numbers:**
 - Aura of scientific certitude, concreteness
- **Governance effects:**
 - Creates incentives for policy change by setting standards for performance that can put up for monitoring, reward and penalty
- **Knowledge effects:**
 - Simplifies complex concepts – ‘poverty’ to every child in school
 - Reifies intangible phenomena – gender equality to disparities in school enrollment
 - Abstracts contextually specific phenomena – universally applicable one size fits all goal for all countries
- **MDGs effect behavior and thinking by:**
 - creating incentives by setting performance standards;
 - introducing a new narrative and discourse, redefining concepts

Power and problem of numbers/strengths as weaknesses



- Simplicity or reductionism
- Concrete objectives or reifying what is intangible?
- Quantification or what counts is what can be measured?
- Universal goals or ‘one size fits all’ targets for diverse country conditions

Reductionism



MDGs simplified, and distorted the transformative agendas of the Millennium Declaration and the 1990s conference agendas

- Key principles and ethical norms of Millennium Declaration - equality, solidarity, freedom and dignity – are difficult to measure
- Broad and multi-dimensional/multi-sectoral strategies replaced by results-oriented management goals

Missing agendas in MDGs



- Development
- Context specific national strategies
- Sustainability
- Developmentalism
- Systemic reforms in global institutions (climate change, financial institutions, Doha round, etc)
- Productivity, employment
- Development as transformation
- **EQUALITY AND EQUITY**

Sociology of Knowledge - Indicators as tools of governance (Merry 2011)

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Power of Numbers: A Critical Review of MDG Targets for Human Development and Human Rights

- An independent research initiative on global goals
- Objective: empirical study of consequences of MDG targets on policy change and idea change
- 11 Case studies, each focused on a goal/target, examined:
 - Normative origins
 - Empirical effects on policy priorities
 - Normative effects on discourses and narratives
 - Choice of indicators used and their incentive effects
 - Alternative indicators that could have been used

Findings - intended consequences

mobilizing support –not all goals/targets are the same.

- Spectacular successes (HIV/AIDS)
- Ambiguous effects (water, sanitation, reproductive health, child survival, education)
- ‘Poor cousins’ (employment, food, partnership)
- Food security as a global priority – neglected since the 1980’s until 2008 food (price) crisis

Findings – unintended consequences

Unintended consequences:

- **Policy effects**
 - diverting attention from important objectives and challenges, redefining agendas
 - Silo effects
 - Perverse incentives
- **Knowledge effects**
 - Reductionism and redefinition of objectives
 - From transformative social change and empowerment to meeting basic needs

Mis-specification of targets and indicators

- Mis-alignment between indicator/target and goals
 - e.g. Measles vaccination for child survival
- Poor definition of quantitative target
 - e.g. Slums, universal primary education – underambitious
- Not amenable to disaggregation
 - e.g. income poverty, proportion undernourished
- Susceptibility to perverse interpretation/unintended consequences
 - e.g. Weight for age & prevalence of undernourishment - will likely drive caloric/supply based solutions to hunger, and neglect quality and sustainability of access.

Mis-Selecting Indicators

MDG target 1(c): halve the proportion of people suffering from hunger

- Issues: revises WFS goal number to proportion

Indicator: prevalence of underweight children under 5 years of age

- Issues: potential for perverse incentive to favor calorie rich diets; does not reflect *long term* undernutrition

Indicator: proportion of population below minimum level of dietary energy consumption

- Issues: methodology of estimation; caloric supply focus; derived from national aggregates; *difficult to disaggregate*

Highlighting human development and human rights priorities

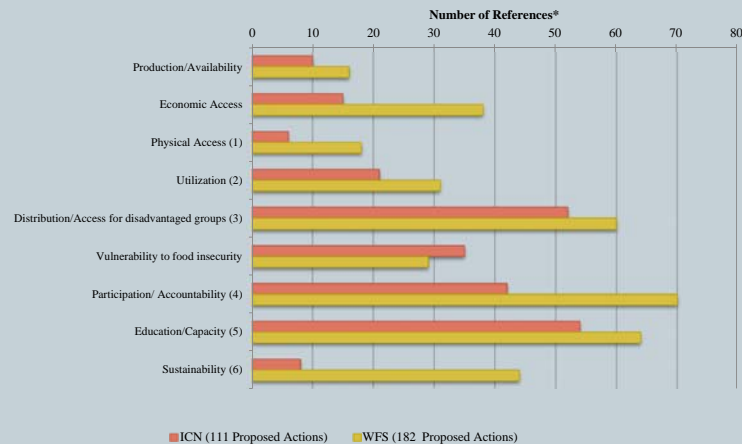
- Outcomes and capabilities – stunting reflects severe and chronic undernutrition with long term consequences for life choices
- Access through exchange – share of food expenditures – note Brazil vs. Egypt
- Distribution – survey based outcome data more amenable to disaggregation
- Vulnerability and instability – food price volatility. Global markets and local markets.

Shifts in strategies: 1990s food security – access centered human development and human rights framework

- 1992 International Nutrition Conference – Broad human development agenda addressing structural constraints (including international)
- 1996 World Food Summit – Broad human development agenda, human rights principles. 7 commitments, 27 strategic objectives. *Goal* to halve the *number* of undernourished
- Food security, nutrition in 1990s UN conferences on women, social development, children, sustainable development, population.

ICN (1992) & WFS (1996)

Human Rights/Human Development Focus



Misuse of MDGs

- Global goals are a tool for: Rallying cry to mobilize support and Monitoring progress
- Misuse as planning targets
- Global targets used as one size fits all national targets

Post 2015 agenda and Sustainable Development Goals – some controversies

- Transformative agenda?
 - civil society priorities: rights-based agenda; equity; sustainability; means of implementation; systemic issues in the international economy; accountability
 - mainstream priorities: outcome results and investments
 - Copenhagen consensus: cost benefit to prioritize (no distribution, no process)

- Goals for N-S compact or global commitment?
 - applicable to LDCs or all countries?
- Actors and alliances
 - private sector
 - foundations



THANK YOU