Time for a Rethink

It is hard to object to the Millennium Development Goals, but that doesn't mean they lay out an effective blueprint for development

Jagdish Bhagwati

Women in village of Hansdehar, Haryana, India.

AT the start of what became known as the Doha Round of multilateral trade negotiations, many proposed it be named the Millennium Round. But that suggestion went nowhere after a wit observed that this could mean it would take a millennium before the negotiating nations would reach consensus to close the Round.

This is not quite the problem with the Millennium Development Goals (MDGs; see Box 1 in "Regaining Momentum" in this issue of *F&D*). They are not specific commitments by nation-states whose feet would be held to the fire in case of "default" or shortfall—the way that, say, a multinational trade agreement creates obligations through the World Trade Organization (WTO). The MDGs are in fact aspirational do-good targets in selected areas, often with quantitative dimensions (for example, halving the hunger rate, not just reducing it) and have defined dates—with the exhortation that all goals be met everywhere by September 2015. But there are no repercussions on any nations if the goals are not met, as seems likely in most cases.

It is not surprising then that the MDGs have been affirmed repeatedly by consensus among all United Nations (UN) member states; one would have to be positively ghoulish—and unmindful of the fact that failure to achieve carries no penalties—to abstain or object. But this does not mean that when UN Secretary-General Kofi Annan proposed the MDG targets, based on the Millennium Report drafted by Assistant Secretary-General John Ruggie's team, there were no objections from nations opposed to specific MDGs. For example, South Africa did not initially wish to have a reference made to HIV/AIDS. And when multilateral agencies like the World Bank began recording progress toward the MDGs, presumably with implications for aid flows, representatives of countries like India did start recording objections to certain MDG targets. Still, there are some skeptical and even hostile questions that must be asked and answered if we are to assess the MDG initiative meaningfully on its 10th anniversary.

Setting priorities

From the outset, critics of the MDGs have asked, why these specific MDGs and not other, possibly more desirable, targets? For example, many activists have been particularly concerned that the gender-related targets addressed by MDGs 3 and 5 (on gender equality and maternal health) exclude issues such as the trafficking of women. And scholars and activists concerned with gender issues deplore the fact that gender pay equality is not specifically mentioned. Although the MDGs suggest comprehensiveness, especially when the subgroups of "indicators for monitoring progress" are spelled out, they are in fact selective. And it is regrettable that the UN officials in charge of the MDGs have not explained why the chosen MDGs are more socially desirable than those that were excluded, or examined whether they ought to be reset. It appears that once the MDGs were chosen alongside the associated indicators, attention shifted to overseeing and even steering progress toward them. As a result, even the chosen MDGs have not been systematically examined in terms of social cost-benefit analysis, including trade-offs among the different MDGs—which we must confront if all MDGs cannot be achieved simultaneously.

As it happens, even within individual MDGs, there are many ways to achieve the targets. For example, the indicators for MDG 3 on gender equality and empowering women lists the "proportion of seats held by women in national parliament." Yet women's effective representation in local governance (such as what Indians call "village panchayats") is likely to be far more important than that in national government, if we go by several recent scholarly studies on, for example, the impact of public goods expenditure decisions when women are put on these panchayats in the state of West Bengal (Chattopadhyay and Duflo, 2004). And MDG 7 on ensuring environmental sustainability lists a number of indicators—yet as the lack of agreement at the global environmental summit in Copenhagen revealed last year, the goal faces many resource constraints.

In fact, there should be far more analysis of the ranking of all MDG targets so that meaningful choices can be made among them when everything cannot be accomplished. One dramatic exercise of this kind has come, not from the MDG bureaucrats, but from the iconoclastic Bjørn Lomborg of the Copenhagen Consensus Center. Over the years, he has put together a small group of world-class economists to assess numerous scientific and economic studies that he commissioned on alternative developmental targets, including last year's exercise on spending an Environmental Superfund on alternative forms of mitigation and adjustment. The work of this group is an example of what needs to be done for each specific MDG instead of the cheerleading for the MDGs in general that emanates for the most part from the United Nations Development Programme (UNDP).

Hitting the right targets

At the same time, the use of uniform MDG targets for all countries is inappropriate. A substantial reduction of extreme poverty from its 1990 levels (MDG 1 is to halve the poverty rate between 1990 and 2015) is something that India almost certainly achieved even before the start of the MDGs 10 years ago, because of the enhanced growth rates of income resulting from "liberal" reforms that started in earnest in India in 1991 and helped pull nearly 200 million people above the poverty line. By contrast, the MDG target for poverty reduction is too optimistic for several African countries that have been handicapped by acutely bad governance for a variety of reasons. Assigning the same target to both, and then complimenting the former and condemning the latter, is not merely bad economics; it is also unhelpful.

In the same vein, it makes little sense to tell Thailand, where child prostitution and trafficking are serious problems, that the government and nongovernmental organizations (NGOs) should focus on women's participation in the national parliament to the same degree as in India, where prostitution and trafficking are not nearly as serious.

Moreover, the MDGs are not always relevant targets: sometimes an MDG target can be fulfilled without any substantial improvement in the reality the MDG seeks to improve. For example, MDG 2 specifies universal primary education as a target. But one can get all children to go to school without significantly improving their ability to read and write, let alone do arithmetic. In India, teacher absenteeism has undermined the effect of increased school enrollment: children learn little even when they attend primary school because the teachers do not turn up.

Targets versus instruments

A more serious problem with the MDG approach, however, is that the central task in development is not the specification

Skilled manpower bottleneck

Just as success follows from a constellation of good policies, failure generally results from a multitude of unfavorable factors. Yet, one can usually zero in on certain critical missing elements that can cripple a developmental effort. In Africa, an overriding problem is the lack of skilled manpower.

For example, the fight against HIV/AIDS has been hampered by shortages of doctors, nurses, and community workers in many African countries, and the distribution of aid relief during famines and pestilence has often required an influx of foreign skilled personnel.

But African nationals, whether trained at home or abroad, migrate in great numbers. For example, almost 90 percent of Ghanaian doctors work abroad. It is tempting to say, as many NGOs suggest, that the rich countries should not allow the employment of doctors and other professionals from the poor countries of Africa: "stop the brain drain" is the refrain. But, aside from the fact that emigration restrictions are unacceptable today on human rights grounds, professionals forced to remain at home are unlikely to function efficiently.

Understanding these issues, the economists working on the "brain drain" issue in the 1950s and 1960s, when nationals from countries like India began to migrate abroad, shifted to the diaspora model. The objective became to maximize the benefit from the diaspora, through programs to encourage short-term spells in home countries, incentives for remittances, and taxing citizens abroad—now known as the Bhagwati tax, like the Tobin tax on capital flows (Bhagwati and Hanson, 2009). These measures could be balanced by offering political benefits such as the right to vote.

The fact that developing countries can benefit from professionals working abroad means rich countries should keep their doors open to skilled immigrants from Africa. They should also step up training of Africans with vastly augmented scholarships and dismantle misguided roadblocks to Africans staying on in those rich countries. The diaspora would increase dramatically as a result, as would benefits to the source countries. In fact, there is no realistic alternative. If past experience is a guide, the diaspora will return once the African countries take off, just as Indians have now begun to return to India in great numbers.

The question remains: how can a country fill the need for skilled manpower until this happens? One suggestion is for the rich countries, many of which face the demographics of an aging population, to organize a Gray Peace Corps—much like the traditional U.S. Peace Corps. This corps would allow retired doctors, scientists, engineers, and businesspeople, among others, put their skills to good use in organized programs in African countries such as Botswana and Ghana.

of desirable targets (put into context for different countries based on their historical, cultural, and political circumstance) but rather the specification of policy instruments that achieve these targets. Confusion over this critical distinction between targets and instruments becomes apparent when one contrasts the first seven MDGs, which are indeed targets, with MDG 8: "Develop a global partnership for development." Partnership is of course better than discord, but that does not turn it into a development goal. MDG 8 exhorts the private sector to advance information technology and the availability of generic drugs in poor countries, but it also advocates freer trade and increased aid (including debt relief).

The problem with including these instruments as targets is that the MDG exercise has as a result drawn criticism, not just regarding the choice of goals but also regarding the apparent embrace of policies that some activist groups identify with corporate interests, neoliberal apologetics, and the like. For example, Patrick Bond, Director of the Center for Civil Society at the University of KwaZulu-Natal, South Africa, writes, the "MDG process, the international venues for the MDGs' elaboration, *and the concrete strategies for achieving these objectives*—including privatisation of basic services such as water and electricity—are doing more harm than good" (Bond, 2006; emphasis added). And Peggy Antrobus of Development Alternatives for Women in a New Era unfairly critiques the MDGs for envisaging the state as playing a principal role in achieving the MDGs, but she is also clearly turned off by "neoliberalism" as the guiding light of MDGs, a result no doubt of MDG 8. "I do not believe in MDGs. I think of them as a Major Distraction Gimmick . . . . To the extent that all the goals relate to the role of the state, one must ask how feasible it is that states weakened by the *requirements of neoliberalism* and whose revenues are reduced by privatization and trade liberalism can be expected to achieve the goals and the targets of the MDGs," she said (quoted in Bond, 2006, p. 341; emphasis added).

As a "neoliberal" who has worked for decades on several aspects of free and multilateral trade, I am happy that the authors of the MDGs believe that "an open, non-discriminatory trading system" is conducive to development. But one cannot just leave it at that. Once policy preferences are stated, opposition is inevitable and must be confronted systematically. True, credible opponents of freer trade are hard to find. Yet, it should have been possible for the UNDP, where the management of MDGs was lodged by Kofi Annan, to bring in the top luminaries in the field of international trade to cut these opponents down to size. Then again, what was the point of embracing a "non-discriminatory" trading system, and then presiding indifferently over the massive proliferation of preferential trade agreements in the past decade (Bhagwati, 2008)?

Including foreign aid as an instrument of MDG 8 poses a different problem. Uncritical reliance on aid has undermined the credibility of MDGs themselves. Many African intellectuals and economists have come to denounce it and even to disown its proponents, which include Jeffrey Sachs, the Columbia University professor and UNDP-based adviser to the UN on MDGs, and singer/activist Bono. We know now that it is the policy framework that delivers results. With a bad policy framework, neither domestic nor foreign resources, including aid, will yield high returns. India did not use aid badly, but its real growth and the resultant drop in poverty began when aid to India had virtually ended and the counterproductive framework of aid was replaced by the new "liberal" policy framework (disliked viscerally by Bond and Antrobus). Asserting that those who worry about the efficacy of aid—an issue raised by the great development economist Paul Rosenstein-Rodan in the context of absorptive capacity—are morally depraved is a lazy approach to an issue of critical importance to development in poor countries.

In addition, MDG 8 suffers from a glaring omission. Migration has become an important issue for several years. While illegal migration raises serious human rights and economic problems of its own, legal migration of skilled workers from poor to rich countries poses a different set of issues and puts other MDG targets at risk, especially in Africa. Most professionals in Africa either migrate or stay on after studying abroad: this is inevitable as African working conditions, combined with social legislation and politics, propel professionals away from home. But the continent needs a skilled workforce for virtually every problem that one can think of. The biggest challenge is how to supply that need until African development takes off and the diaspora begins to return home, as has happened with India (see box).

Time for reorganization

The 10th anniversary of the MDGs should be an occasion for member states to contemplate new leadership in managing the goals in order to address the instruments candidly and add key nuances. The management of the chosen MDGs under their present leadership, which has been in place for almost a decade, has fallen into a technocratic pursuit of increased demands for aid flows, and advocating programs regardless of governance constraints and local contexts—an approach that diverts attention from the effective pursuit of even the chosen MDG goals. Surely we can do better. ■

Jagdish Bhagwati is University Professor, Economics and Law, at Columbia University and Senior Fellow in International Economics at the Council on Foreign Relations, New York.

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