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ARE THE MDGs PRIORITY IN DEVELOPMENT STRATEGIES AND AID PROGRAMMES? **ONLY FEW ARE!**

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ARE THE MDGs PRIORITY IN DEVELOPMENT STRATEGIES AND AID PROGRAMMES? ONLY FEW ARE!

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ABSTRACT

The gap between strong political commitment to the Millennium Development Goals (MDGs) and slow progress towards meeting them is often attributed to weak “ownership” by developing country governments. This Working Paper addresses the issue of ownership by analysing the substance of 22 developing countries’ Poverty Reduction Strategy Papers (PRSPs) and the policy frameworks of 21 bilateral programmes. Two major findings of the analysis are as follows. First, economic growth for income poverty reduction and social sector investments (education, health and water) are important priorities in most of the PRSPs; decent work, hunger and nutrition, the environment and access to technology tend to be neglected. PRSPs also emphasise governance as an important means of achieving the MDGs, but they focus mostly on economic governance rather than on democratic (participatory and equitable) processes. Since the key motivation for the MDGs as reflected in the Millennium Declaration was to promote a more inclusive globalisation through participatory processes, the PRSPs are undercutting their core policy purpose. Implementation could be refocused if greater attention were paid to the neglected objectives and dimensions in the MDGs’ design, as major goals and with quantitative indicators. The single most effective revision could be to add a goal of reducing inequality in income and other dimensions of poverty within and between countries. Second, this Working Paper distinguishes between three functional uses of global goals: as consensus objectives, as monitoring benchmarks, and as planning targets. Most donor policy statements and PRSPs use MDGs as consensus objectives. Most PRSPs also use MDGs as planning targets, but without adapting them to local conditions and priorities. In most cases where MDG targets are set, they are in line with the MDG 2015 targets; this is not necessarily a sign of “ownership” because these targets are not accompanied by coherent action plans. If the MDGs are to be used as planning targets for resource allocation purposes, the international community could develop a more consistent and effective approach to the local incorporation of MDGs into national planning and priority setting.

Keywords: MDGs, PRSPs, development cooperation, poverty, inequality, global goals.

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1 INTRODUCTION

The Millennium Development Goals (MDGs) have received unprecedented political commitment and have given rise to a strong consensus that poverty eradication should be the main aim of international development efforts. At the current rate of progress, however, the quantitative targets of only one of the eight goals will be met at the global level by 2015 (UN DESA, 2007; World Bank, 2008). Implementation of the partnership goals has lagged, and significant progress is apparent only in debt reduction. Reforms to the global trading system, which are meant to foster the international integration of poor countries, have not advanced as the Doha Round has stalled (UN DESA, 2007; World Bank, 2008). Aid flows have begun to stagnate following an initial increase that began in 1997,¹ and only five countries (Denmark, Luxembourg, the Netherlands, Norway and Sweden) have reached the agreed target for development aid of 0.7 per cent of GNI. Despite the pledge made at the G-8 summit in Gleneagles in 2005 to double aid to Africa by 2010, disbursements to the region increased by only 2 per cent between 2005 and 2006 (OECD, 2007).

These failures of implementation are often attributed to weak commitment or ownership, especially on the part of developing country policymakers who give poverty reduction a lower priority than boosting growth or meeting ill-defined partnership targets for donor countries (Martin and Stever, 2007).

This paper aims to explore “ownership” by examining the extent to which national development strategies and donor policies are aligned with MDG priorities and targets. It analyses the Poverty Reduction Strategy Papers (PRSPs) of 22 countries and the development cooperation policy statements of 21 bilateral aid programmes.

The paper has four parts, including this introduction. Part 2 explains the MDGs and the concept of global goals as defining a normative framework, an evaluative framework and a planning framework. Parts 3 and 4 present the analysis of the PRSPs and donor policy documents, respectively. Part 5 concludes with suggestions for strengthening the links between global goals and national policymaking, as well as for attending to the neglected priorities.

2 BACKGROUND: WHAT ARE THE MDGs?

Global goals are meant to raise awareness of neglected global issues, and to mobilise attention and action from policymakers in order to hasten progress. This section explains the MDG policy agenda (or MDGs as ends), and the mechanisms through which global goals can be used to make a difference.

2.1 THE MDG AGENDA: MOTIVATION, NORMATIVE FRAMEWORK AND POLICY PRIORITIES

The MDGs speak for themselves in defining poverty eradication and greater human well-being as the central purpose of international development. This focus on poverty is new and is in contrast to approaches that have emphasised other priorities, such as economic growth. It reflects a shift in development thinking during the 1990s, when ideas about participative development and inclusive globalisation became prominent in UN debates, especially on the agendas of global conferences about development challenges.² These conferences focused on

the most critical issues facing developing countries on a global scale, including the environment, women, human rights and habitat. Taking place in an era of globalisation, when almost every country in the world liberalised its economy, these conferences' agendas focused on how globalisation affected poor countries and people. The agendas recognised the benefits of globalisation but sought a more "inclusive" process in which the benefits would be shared more broadly. They also focused on people as both beneficiaries and central actors in development, and on the important role of civil society. The full set of goals emerging from the 34 summits and conferences held up to 2005 comprise the Internationally Agreed Development Goals (IADGs), and the full agenda is known as the UN Development Agenda.

The MDGs originated in these conference agendas; the major commitments of the conferences in the 1990s were combined as a single package in the 2000 Millennium Declaration. The MDGs are a selection of eight goals encompassing 34 targets and 60 indicators from the broader list.

The Agenda and the Declaration are strongly embedded in the UN's ethical values and fundamental purpose—namely, human freedom and dignity, solidarity and burden-sharing, equality, and tolerance. Arguably, they are attempts to define concrete means of implementing the UN Charter. As José Antonio Ocampo writes in the preface to *The United Nations Development Agenda: Development for All* (UN DESA, 2007, p. iii), "Two elements have permeated the content and character of the Agenda since its inception. First is a fundamental concern for equity and for equality of all persons, as human beings and as citizens ... [And] the second essential element [is] partnership. The conference process has engaged all the key stakeholders: governments, UN system organisations, other intergovernmental and non-governmental organisations, civil society, and the private sector." These two commitments are fundamental because they are at the heart of the UN's purpose.

From this perspective, a consistent criticism of the MDGs has been that they leave out human rights values, as well as the principles of equity and participation, and are weak on gender equality (Nelson, 2007; Saith, 2006; OHCHR, 2008). They are also said to be too narrow, to omit systemic issues of global governance, and to be weak on donor accountability (Bissio, 2003; Nelson, 2007).³

2.2 THE INSTRUMENTALITY OF THE MDGs

Global goals also have instrumental value in accelerating development. Goals that are time-bound and quantifiable are powerful because they can be translated into action, achievements can be monitored and actors can be held to account. They can be instrumental in three ways:

- As *normative objectives* that define long-term visions. Such normative goals are particularly useful for political leaders in forging consensus on a common aim of the efforts of many in their community, be it a village or the world. The numerical targets make objectives actionable, set the level of ambition and call for a scaling-up of effort.
- As *evaluative benchmarks* against which progress can be measured. Such benchmarks are particularly useful for political leaders in mobilising effort, and also for technocrats in charge of implementing development endeavours.
- As *planning targets* to frame priorities for policy and for resource allocation. These are useful for planners in government and among donors, especially in financing agencies.

The MDGs were intended to build consensus among world leaders at the Millennium Summit, and to induce them to pledge to take concrete actions for which they could be held accountable. In other words, they served and continue to serve as normative objectives and evaluative benchmarks in global policy processes.

It is less clear whether they were ever intended by their designers and adopters to be planning targets at national or local levels. Moreover, using them as planning targets gives rise to several contradictions, which have caused a number of controversies.

To begin with, applying globally set quantitative targets in national planning runs counter to the local specificity and ownership that are also MDG principles, and that are widely recognised as good practice. National and local authorities have been planning in the MDG domains for decades on the basis of some kind of assessment of local constraints and possibilities. How can those authorities take ownership of an agenda without relating it to the local context? Given the comprehensive nature of the MDGs, even when governments were committed to the full MDG agenda they would still face choices about timing and resource priorities.

This is why it has not been a straightforward task to integrate the MDGs into national planning. Doing so runs counter to institutionalised practices in priority setting, budgeting, data gathering and other national government procedures. For example, governments and donor agencies have been managing resources using categories that overlap with the MDGs but are not consistent with them. Hence donors cannot readily report expenditures according to MDG categories.

A central issue is whether the MDGs are global or national targets—whether the quantitative targets are meant to apply as aggregates at global, regional, national or subnational levels. Many initiatives for progress monitoring and policy planning (such as costing) use the global targets as country-specific goals, but there is debate about whether they are applicable to each country regardless of its history and its starting point in 1990, its constraints, and its financial and institutional capacities. Many argue that the goals were designed on the basis of global historical experience (Vandemoortele, 2007) and that they were intended to set benchmarks for average global progress (Vandemoortele and Roy, 2004). In this view, the MDGs are not intended to be “adopted” but to be “adapted” to national contexts and re-defined in the form of country-specific targets. These national targets can be further disaggregated into subnational targets.

Another major controversy has been the macroeconomic impact of the expenditures required to meet the goals, when the mobilisation of the external resources needed will have a destabilising impact on macroeconomic balances (Gupta et al., 2005). Others have challenged these views, arguing that conventionally prescribed policies are too restrictive (McKinley, 2005; Weeks and McKinley, 2007). Yet others have questioned whether MDGs as a strategy will create growth and development momentum (Roy and Heuty, 2005); whether the constraints on faster progress are institutional and policy-based rather than rooted in a lack of resources (de Renzio, 2005); and if development stagnation can be explained by a theory of “poverty traps” (Millennium Project, 2005) or if a “big push” to escape this trap would be effective (Easterly, 2006). Economists in the International Monetary Fund (IMF) and the World Bank, as well as among governments, have voiced concern that the goals are over-ambitious, would raise unrealistic expectations (IMF and World Bank, 2002)⁴ and undermine support for development aid (Clemens et al., 2007).

3 ANALYSIS OF NATIONAL STRATEGIES

In order to assess governments' "ownership", the PRSPs of 22 countries were analysed to determine the extent of their alignment with the MDG priorities. A PRSP can be expected to reflect a government's intention to implement the MDGs, since it is an important policy vehicle for national poverty reduction efforts—setting out national priorities, policies and action plans, and often including quantitative targets and monitoring frameworks. PRSPs were introduced in 1999 as a framework for negotiations with most major bilateral⁵ and multilateral donors on the mobilisation of resources and the coordination of those resources with national priorities.

Annex 1 lists the 22 PRSPs examined. They are all "second generation"⁶ strategies and reflect some experience with developing these documents. They were prepared after the 2000 Millennium Declaration, and 16 of them date from 2005. Together they cover a third of all low- and middle-income countries (Table 1). All but three are for low-income countries, those that are most dependent on aid to finance national strategies in order to meet the MDGs.

TABLE 1

Total Number of PRSPs and Those Reviewed, by Region

	Sub-Saharan Africa	Latin America/ Caribbean	CIS*	Asia	Arab States	Total
Reviewed	14	2	2	3	1	22 low-income: 19 middle income: 3 LDCs: 17
Total low- and middle-income countries	32	7	12	11	2	64
% reviewed	44	29	17	27	50	34

* CIS = Commonwealth of Independent States.

Three aspects of implementation were analysed:

- *MDG priorities.* Which of the MDG priorities were reflected in the PRSPs? Each PRSP was examined to determine whether it made a policy commitment to an MDG agenda item as a priority, a strategic priority such as a "pillar", or one of the several key objectives; whether there was a defined action plan; and whether quantitative outcome targets were defined.
- *Ambition of MDGs.* Were the PRSP quantitative targets in line with the ambition of the MDGs? A statistical analysis of the quantitative, time-bound targets in each of the PRSP compared the implied rate of progress with what it would take to meet the goals, and historical rates, assuming a linear progression to determine whether the PRSP targets were in line with, exceeded or undershot the MDG targets and historical trends.
- *Instrumental role of MDGs.* In which of the three ways was the PRSP using the MDGs? As a normative framework of broad priorities; as benchmarks in an evaluative framework; or as targets in a planning framework?

3.1 MDG PRIORITIES IN PRSPs

To determine the level of priority and commitment in the PRSP, each of them was rated according to whether it mentioned an MDG priority as: an important objective or a core strategic objective, such as constituting one of the “pillars” of the strategy; whether an action plan was developed and articulated in a section of the document; and whether numerical targets were set. This effort sought to distinguish rhetorical “priorities” from those that were actually being implemented.

For the purposes of the content analysis, the MDGs were grouped into 10 priority areas covering 34 sub-priorities. The 10 areas include two important objectives that are not included among the eight MDGs but are key priorities of the UN Development Agenda and the Millennium Declaration. These categories, which are more compatible with conventional planning processes, are as follows: poverty and hunger (MDG 1); employment (MDG 1); education and literacy (MDG 2); gender equality and empowerment of women (MDG 3); health (MDGs 4–6); the environment (MDG 7); science and technology (MDG 8); partnership (MDG 8); democracy, good governance and human rights (Millennium Declaration, chapter 5); and social integration of vulnerable groups (Millennium Declaration, chapter 6). Annex 2 presents the full list of categories and sub-priorities.

The results of the content analysis are given in Annex 2 and summarised in Table 2. The major trends are as follows:

- Almost all the PRSPs stated a commitment to the MDGs (though none mentioned the broader MDG framework) and almost all the key MDG priority areas were included as a priority, with the exception of one or two priorities in one or two countries. But there was substantial variation in the degree of commitment to the different priorities and to the agendas within the priority areas. Some “commitments” were rhetorical in that they were only mentioned as priorities and lacked an implementation plan or monitoring targets. Others were mentioned not only as priorities but were also among the handful of core and overarching objectives constituting a strategic “pillar”, for which action plans and monitoring targets have been developed. Curiously, some objectives were accompanied by monitoring targets but not by explicit action plans.
- There was a strong commitment in the areas of income poverty, basic education and health, which in many cases include the environmental priorities of water and sanitation. Almost all the PRSPs emphasised these goals as core objectives and included implementation plans and monitoring targets.
- Employment (full employment), health (HIV/AIDS) and governance (rule of law and eliminating corruption) were core priorities in more than two-thirds of the PRSPs, supported by significant action plans and monitoring targets. But these priorities did not cover all the dimensions of MDG agendas. Employment focused on reducing joblessness but not full employment, decent work, women or youth. The health priorities were HIV/AIDS, and less explicitly child survival and maternal health. The governance agenda focused on the rule of law and eliminating corruption, not democracy, free media or human rights. Fewer than a third of the PRSPs included action plans and monitoring targets on these issues.

- Apart from these, the most neglected priorities (reflected in fewer than a third of the PRSPs among priorities or action plans and monitoring targets, and virtually absent from the priorities of the PRSPs reviewed) were hunger, gender equality (education, political representation and violence), human rights (especially minority and migrant rights, social integration including migrants, and respect for cultural diversity), and partnership with civil society and the private sector. Some of these, such as gender empowerment and partnership, were sometimes mentioned rhetorically, but often without explicit action plans.

There was strikingly little attention to the two overriding principles of equality and partnership in most of the PRSPs analysed. Most of them referred to regional, rural-urban or gender inequalities. Only one (Bolivia) referred to the exclusion of ethnic minorities and only one other (Tanzania) identified equity as an objective in itself. Equality and non-discrimination, central principles of human rights, were also weak in the PRSPs or entirely absent from them. This was particularly evident in the lack of attention to ending violence against women as part of the gender equality goal, decent work as part of the employment goal, reproductive rights under maternal health, and equal access under education. Social integration was a priority in more than two-thirds of the PRSPs, and more than half included some action plans, but most addressed issues such as accommodating the handicapped rather than historically entrenched discrimination against racial and cultural groups. Only three PRSPs had specific goals in the areas of respect for cultural diversity, minority rights and migrant rights.

All the PRSPs emphasised economic growth as the principal means of achieving the overall objective of reducing poverty, but not all specified policies for pro-poor growth. The literature on the links between economic growth and income poverty in the last decade shows the important role of economic growth in reducing poverty, but also indicates that attention must be paid to pro-poor growth. The impact of growth on poverty reduction is by no means automatic, and GDP growth may only lead to further increases in the incomes of the highest quartiles, rather than of the lowest.⁷ The 22 PRSPs varied in the attention they paid to the distributional consequences of growth. Some (such as Tanzania, Uganda and Vietnam) stressed pro-poor growth and efforts to accelerate growth in lagging regions while providing protection for vulnerable or marginalised groups. Others (such as Yemen, Nicaragua and Madagascar) emphasised economic growth as a goal without differentiating it from reducing poverty; or they mentioned agricultural development without emphasising hunger (Malawi, for example), implicitly assuming an automatic trickle down. Attention to employment was similarly weak, despite its critical role in linking growth to household incomes and consumption.

The low level of attention to equity is also reflected in the neglect of human rights-based approaches in economic, social and cultural areas such as gender equality in education (which was not always emphasised) or decent work provisions under the employment objectives. Rarely did the PRSPs give prominence to democratic governance and human rights-based participatory approaches: governance was a priority in 17 of them, but these focused on decentralisation and the rule of law. Only a few (Tanzania and Senegal, for example) referred to democratic governance and the people's participation in development.

Even more striking was the lack of attention to partnership, especially as regards civil society and the private sector. Almost all the PRSPs mentioned the roles of these groups but

only rhetorically, without elaborating on what these roles could be or outlining an action plan to strengthen them.

The PRSPs were also weak on international partnership, the MDG Goal 8 issues of aid, trade and access to technology. Surprisingly, these matters tend to be mentioned rhetorically. With few exceptions (such as Benin), which referred to the importance of regional integration and donor support in financing development, there was little mention of the need for international partnerships to help resolve systemic issues such as international financial instability, rich countries' agricultural export subsidies and the use of compulsory licensing facilities under the trade-related intellectual property rights (TRIPS) agreement.

TABLE 2

MDG and PRSP Priorities Compared (number of countries)

	Important objective	Core strategic objective	Action plan	Monitoring targets
More than 15 countries (two-thirds of total reviewed)	Income poverty Hunger Employment Education (primary with gender equality) Health (maternal, child, HIV/AIDS), gender empowerment Environment (natural resource protection and conservation, water and sanitation) Governance (rule of law and corruption) Social integration Science and technology Partnership (aid, trade, private sector, civil society)	Income poverty Education (primary schooling) Health (general)	Income poverty Education (primary schooling) Health (HIV/AIDS) Gender empowerment Environment (water and sanitation) Governance (rule of law and corruption)	Income poverty Education (primary schooling with gender equality) Health (maternal, child, HIV/AIDS) Gender equality (political representation) Environment (water and sanitation)
7-14 countries		Employment Health (HIV/AIDS) Governance (rule of law, corruption)	Hunger Employment (general, through growth) Education (equal access to all levels) Health (child) Governance (democracy, media) Social integration (general) Science and technology (general, new technology) Partnership (aid, trade)	Employment (general) Education (equal access to all levels) Gender equality (general, political representation) Health (HIV/AIDS access to treatment) Environment (natural resource protection) Science and technology (electrification)

6 countries or fewer		Hunger		Hunger
		Employment (decent work, women and youth)	Employment (decent work, women and youth)	Employment (decent work, women and youth)
		Education (gender equality in primary schooling and equality of access to all levels)	Education (gender equality)	
		Gender equality (general, political representation, violence)	Gender equality (political representation, violence)	Gender equality (violence)
		Health (maternal, child, HIV/AIDS orphans)	Health (maternal, HIV/AIDS orphans, HIV/AIDS access to treatment)	Health (HIV/AIDS orphans)
		Environment (natural resource protection, water and sanitation)	Environment (natural resource protection)	
	Governance (free media, minority human rights)	Governance (democracy, free media, human rights)	Governance (human rights, minority rights)	Governance (governance, democracy, free media, human rights, minority rights)
	Social integration (cultural diversity, migrants)	Social integration (general, cultural diversity, migrants)	Social integration (cultural diversity, migrants)	Social integration (vulnerable groups, cultural diversity, migrants)
	Science and technology (general, new technology, access to medicines)	Science and technology (access to medicines)	Science and technology (new technology, access to medicines)	
	Partnership (aid, trade, civil society, private sector)	Partnership (civil society, private sector)	Partnership (aid, trade, civil society, private sector)	

3.2 MDG AMBITION IN PRSP TARGETS

In addition to focusing attention on neglected policy priorities, global goals are intended to challenge all stakeholders to make greater effort to meet ambitious targets and to go beyond “business as usual” (Millennium Project, 2005; UNDP, 2003). This is especially important for most of the 22 countries analysed, which have some of the world’s highest levels of poverty and lowest levels of GDP per capita. With a few exceptions, the continuation of historical trends would mean the persistence of high levels of income poverty and human poverty for generations to come.⁸ In these countries, business as usual would not be enough to realise the vision of the Millennium Declaration and meet the MDGs. Annual MDG monitoring reports from the UN’s Department of Economic and Social Affairs (UN DESA, 2007), the World Bank (World Bank, 2008) and other agencies, including regional commissions, consistently show that the MDGs would not be met in the lowest-income/lowest human development countries if historical trends continued.

Quantitative targets were not set for all MDG priorities. More than three-quarters of the PRSPs set targets for income poverty, primary schooling, gender equality in primary school, maternal mortality, and water and sanitation; but they did not set targets for hunger, employment, child survival, the environment, governance, social integration, science and technology, or partnership.

Overall, as Table 3 shows, most PRSPs set targets that exceed the MDGs in ambition, as well as historical trends. This is partly because the PRSPs aimed to achieve the MDG targets in a shorter period; the MDGs are to be achieved over 25 years (1990–2015), while many PRSPs aimed to meet the same targets in 10–15 years, starting in the MDG year. A handful of the 22 PRSPs, however, set targets that are well below the those of the MDGs and, more troublingly, below historical trends. These findings are consistent with a World Bank analysis of 44 PRSPs (Harrison et al., 2005).

TABLE 3

PRSP Targets Compared to MDG Ambition (% of PRSPs)

MDG priority	Exceeds MDG targets (historical)	In line with MDG targets (historical)	Falls below MDG targets (historical)	No. of countries with targets and available data
Income poverty	80 (65)	10 (10)	10 (20)	19 (17)
Hunger	94 (42)	0 (21)	1 (37)	16 (14)
Primary schooling	81 (42)	5 (50)	14 (7)	21 (19)
Gender equality in primary schooling	100 (14)	0 (28)	0 (56)	10 (7)
Maternal mortality	68 (71)	5 (0)	21 (29)	19 (7)
Reproductive health	72 (78)	1 (0)	18 (22)	11 (9)
Child survival	61 (61)	6 (6)	33 (33)	18 (18)
HIV/AIDS and other diseases	43	7	14	14 (3)
Water and sanitation	95 (88)	5 (0)	0 (12)	21(16)

3.3 THE INSTRUMENTAL ROLE OF THE MDGs

All but four of the 22 PRSPs made emphatic statements of commitment to the MDGs and used them as a global normative framework. They also used the MDGs as evaluative and planning frameworks, inasmuch as they are integrated into the planning and monitoring targets, as shown in the previous section. This was not done systematically, however, since not all MDG targets were included in the PRSP planning and monitoring targets. Of the 22 PRSPs examined, 13 used MDGs as a planning framework in this limited way.

There were differences in how the PRSPs used the MDG targets in policymaking. One country, Cambodia, systematically adapted the numerical targets and developed “Cambodia MDGs”. Others used MDG targets in combination with other strategic frameworks such as “Vision 2025” in Tanzania and “Vision 2020” in Rwanda. Others appear to have adopted the MDG targets without adapting them; as already explained, many PRSP targets exceed the MDG targets because of the shorter time period.

In many of the countries reviewed, governments with UN Millennium Project support estimated the investment needed to meet the MDGs that depend on public spending on social services such as education, health, and water and sanitation. None of the PRSPs referred to these cost estimates. The estimates were not fully incorporated into the countries’ planning

and budgeting because resources could not be mobilised, and also because of concerns about the reliability of the estimates themselves and their potential macroeconomic impact on public expenditure ceilings and aid dependence.⁹ These analyses must have provided useful information for devising the PRSPs and for budgeting, but the potential of MDGs to mobilise the resources needed to hasten progress and meet the MDGs has not been fully exploited.

4 ANALYSIS OF DONOR POLICIES

The policy documents of 20 bilateral aid programmes and one multilateral (European Union) programme were reviewed to assess their “ownership” of the MDG priorities. The documents analysed included general policy statements and the MDG reports. As with the PRSPs, the documents were examined for content. Since they did not consistently include indications of resource allocations, quantitative analysis of allocation and disbursement priorities was not undertaken.

4.1 MDGs AND DONOR PRIORITIES

While PRSPs are designed to set a comprehensive agenda for poverty reduction in a country, donor priorities reflect support in selected fields because external resources are not intended to support all development agendas. Donor priorities depend not only on the perceived priorities for global development, but also on where a given donor can do most to contribute.

Like the PRSPs, major bilateral donors’ aid policy statements were consistent with the MDG priorities only partially and in different ways. Annex 3 lists the MDG priority objectives that were included in policy statements. Table 4 presents the priorities most commonly selected by more than half of the donors. This list includes peace and security, which is neither an MDG nor one of the priorities reviewed in this study.

TABLE 4

Most Commonly Selected Priorities (Number of donor programmes)

	Core priority	Important but not included as core priority
Environment–general	19	
Human rights	17	
Education–general	15	
Governance	15	1
Peace and security	15	4
Health–general	14	
Democracy	14	
Income poverty	13	1
HIV/AIDS and global diseases	12	1
Countries with special needs (Africa)	12	
Water and sanitation	10	1

Tackling multidimensional poverty—including income poverty, education and health—is the central policy objective of almost all the bilateral aid programmes. But some objectives, such as addressing maternal mortality and child survival, received surprisingly limited emphasis in donor priorities. There were also some contrasts with recipient priorities:

- The environment and governance were top priorities for more than three-quarters of donors. In contrast to the PRSPs, the environment and sustainable development priorities did not focus mainly on water and sanitation, but on environmental protection and conservation; the more recent statements mentioned climate change. Governance was not concerned mainly with rule of law but also gave priority to promoting human rights and democracy.
- More than three-quarters of bilateral donors gave priority to promoting peace and security, an objective that is not included among the MDGs, according to their current definition (UN DESA, 2007). On the other hand, this priority is a central goal of the Millennium Declaration and is grounded in the UN Charter. Historically, peace and security have not been part of the “development” agenda, but there is a strong case for making them so for the simple reason that violent conflict is a major source of poverty and poverty raises the risks of violence.
- MDG priorities that were underemphasised, but for which there were significant action plans, include employment, hunger, maternal mortality, child survival, gender equality, social integration, and science and technology.

The two principles of equality and partnership, including global solidarity, were included in about half of the donor policy statements, more consistently than in the recipients’ PRSPs. As in the PRSPs, however, there was strong emphasis on growth as the main means of reducing poverty. Not much attention was paid to the impact of economic policy choices on the distribution of benefits, job creation and other pro-poor concerns.

4.2 PARTNERSHIP COMMITMENTS AND DONOR POLICIES

One of the most significant achievements of the MDG process was its inclusion of commitments to “strengthen partnership”—action by the international community and donor countries, alongside the efforts of developing country governments, to end global poverty. These efforts go beyond the obligations to provide development aid. They extend to reforming the world trading system, dealing comprehensively with debt relief, and expanding access to new technologies in cooperation with the private sector, especially in the areas of information and telecommunications technology and pharmaceuticals. These issues (MDG Goal 8) received little attention in the donor policy statements reviewed; fewer than half of them mentioned the international systemic reforms in trade, aid, debt and technology.

The donors’ MDG reports elaborated on these issues. Almost all reiterated support for the Doha Development Round to expand developing countries’ integration into world trade and provide aid for trade, as well as backing for debt relief under the heavily indebted poor countries (HIPC) initiative. As regards aid quality, the reports expressed support for the agenda of the Paris Declaration. Half of the countries said they favour enhancing access to technology, but most of them failed to explain a specific action taken.

Not surprisingly, therefore, these documents reflect the prevailing international consensus. Nonetheless, there were some interesting exceptions to this pattern; some policy statements adopted positions to further the agenda in an effort to accelerate progress. Denmark and Ireland, for example, advocated stronger debt relief provisions beyond the HIPC initiative; and the statements of the Netherlands and Sweden included policy support for the expansion of access to essential medicines through compulsory licensing provisions under TRIPS.

The MDGs are used heavily as a normative framework for global development, within which donor policies emphasise poverty reduction as an overall objective. Beyond this, there is little evidence that donors use the MDGs as a planning framework for resource allocation and for programming more generally.

5 CONCLUSIONS AND POLICY IMPLICATIONS

Have donor and developing country governments taken “ownership” of the MDGs, and are they being pursued through the countries’ main policy instruments? This analysis of PRSPs and donor policy statements has considered whether the MDG priorities are being implemented, and has looked at how the MDGs are being linked to national planning processes. The paper finds that there is a high degree of commitment to MDGs as an overall policy objective and endorsement of a global consensus, but that action programmes are selective. PRSPs prioritise economic growth as a means of reducing income poverty, as well as social investment and good governance issues such as the rule of law. In these areas the MDG targets are consistent with the ambition of the MDGs. Many PRSPs, however, neglect the broader agenda of equity, pro-poor growth, employment, hunger and nutrition, social integration, environmental protection, democratic governance and human rights, science and technology, and partnership. Links with national and donor policy processes can be strengthened if the MDGs are used in programming and evaluation. Donor policy statements tend to prioritise a broader agenda and place a stronger emphasis on democracy and human rights. Additionally, peace and security is a priority for many donors. These findings raise a number of issues.

5.1 POVERTY, EQUITY AND PARTICIPATION

The key issue is not whether the countries have taken ownership of MDGs as such, but how this is interpreted, which of the MDG priorities are being implemented, and what policies are being adopted. Many of the PRSPs emphasised economic growth as the main means of reducing poverty. Although almost all PRSPs stressed both poverty reduction and growth as priorities, most did not present a strategy for increasing productivity and employment, nor for generating growth in a way that ensures the benefits would be shared more widely—“pro-poor growth”. The implicit assumption is that that poverty will be reduced by means of a “trickle-down” process when the overall economy grows and investments are made in the social sectors.

This approach relies on a model of poverty reduction that was prevalent in the 1980s, and it ignores much of the progress made in development thinking and literature in the 1990s. The 2000 *World Development Report*, for example, notes that labour-intensive growth, social protection and social investments are necessary but not sufficient for poverty reduction. It proposes opportunity, empowerment and security as pillars of an effective poverty reduction strategy.¹⁰ Such policy proposals build on extensive research in the 1980s and 1990s that increased our understanding of the nature of poverty: it is more than a lack of income; it is a multi-dimensional deprivation in human lives and its causes lie not merely in lack of growth but in lack of voice, vulnerabilities to shocks and obstacles to accessing opportunities.

Few PRSPs mentioned other aspects of the more recent thinking on poverty eradication, such as giving priority to vulnerable populations, sustainability and people’s participation in development. In the social sectors there was an emphasis on social investments but the

implementation plans were not consistently targeted on the poor and vulnerable, or on improving human lives. For example, many of them underscored the need to increase agricultural production but not necessarily the reduction of hunger or an improvement in the nutrition of the vulnerable. Environmental conservation was among the neglected areas.

Moreover, most PRSPs were almost silent on the ethical values that are fundamental to the Millennium Declaration and the UN Development Agenda: equality, human dignity and freedom, and other human rights principles. Only a few PRSPs mentioned equity as an objective or a policy concern. Employment goals focused on increasing the number of jobs rather than on securing decent work. This interpretation of the MDGs is far from the Millennium Declaration's original aim of making globalisation more inclusive and implementing the fundamental principles of the UN Charter, namely equality and human dignity.

One way to recognise and overcome these neglected priorities would be to add some goals in missing areas, especially the *reduction of disparities and inequalities within and between countries*. This can be readily monitored with quantitative measures and benchmarks, such as a decline in the Gini coefficient or the ratio of the income shares of top and bottom quintiles of the population, or a narrowing of rural-urban divides in social indicators such as life expectancy or mortality among the under-fives. Since equality is a core principle of human rights, this indicator would also serve as a proxy human rights indicator. Decent work was added as a target in 2005 but not as a goal in itself. Attention to pro-poor growth can only be raised if it is a goal of its own.

5.2 PARTNERSHIP: AID, TRADE, DEBT AND TECHNOLOGY

Neither the PRSPs nor the donor statements explored the constraints on poverty reduction posed by the global market environment, and neither did they examine the initiatives needed to advance the trade and aid agendas. The MDGs and PRSPs are not the main mechanisms for these agendas, since trade issues are being debated in the Doha Round and the World Trade Organisation (WTO), while aid is being discussed in the Development Assistance Committee (DAC) of the Organisation for Economic Cooperation and Development (OECD), as well as in the recently launched Development Cooperation Forum of the UN's Economic and Social Council (ECOSOC). Defining stronger quantitative indicators under Goal 8, however, could help bring pressure to bear in these other fora.

5.3 SECURITY, DEMOCRACY, HUMAN RIGHTS

Together with development, security, democracy and human rights make up the agenda of the Millennium Declaration. These other elements, however, are not included in the MDGs. No doubt this is partly because of the difficulty in finding quantitative goals, but also because they are not considered to be part of the development agenda, following the historical divide between these different issues as fields of international policy. Nonetheless, over the last decade these matters have become part of the development agenda, and vice versa, as the links between them have become recognised. There is a growing literature on these links. Security is a development challenge, since armed conflict affects more than half of all low-income countries. The aim of development is not just economic growth but also democracy and human rights. It is unsurprising that these three issues are among donors' important development cooperation priorities. Hence the MDGs should include these objectives, so as to draw more attention to their links with social and economic challenges.

5.4 MDG TARGETS AS EVALUATIVE BENCHMARKS AND AS PLANNING TARGETS

Controversies over whether targets should be global or local neglect the different ways that global goals can be used. As normative goals and evaluative benchmarks, global targets make sense. But they are problematic if used as planning goals at the national level without adaptation for a host of reasons, many of which have been noted in the literature. Local adaptation is an essential part of the ownership of the MDGs. But most PRSPs use global goals/targets in the education, health, and water and sanitation sectors without significant local adaptation. In fact, only two of the PRSPs reviewed (Cambodia and Malawi) have done this. Even in these cases the adjustments were minor.

The donor community and the UN support systems should establish a more coherent position on local adaptation. Much of the country support effort has gone to costing on the basis of global targets, rather than on the basis of locally adapted targets. Costing on the basis of global targets is useful for resource mobilisation and evaluation, but not for resource allocation.

The UN has introduced the idea of MDG-based national development strategies, including “MDG-based PRSPs”, or PRSPs that “link systematically with the MDGs, goals, targets and timelines and are based on an assessment of public investment strategies needed to achieve the MDGs (UNDG, 2008)”. But this approach has focused more on costing to achieve global targets than on developing locally adapted strategies.

The history of goal-setting as a means of promoting neglected development priorities dates back to the 1960s. Since then, there have been recurring debates about their effectiveness; some have dismissed UN goals as overambitious and unrealistic, while others have argued that global goals distort national priorities. In a study of the history of global goals, Jolly et al. (2004) show that there have been more success stories than is often recognised. Many goals have been met, such as the eradication of smallpox in 1977; immunisation of infants against childhood diseases, achieved in 70 countries by 1990; and halving child deaths from diarrhoea by 1990. Substantial progress has been made towards other goals, even if they have not been fully achieved. Jolly points out that in these cases, time-bound and quantitative goals have helped focus attention on critical areas for action and have given rise to more rigorous evaluations. These success stories indicate that global goals are only meaningful if they effectively mobilise international and national action for implementation. Locally adapted national action plans that identify achievable targets for different stakeholders have been the most effective at the local level (UNDP, 2003; Jolly et al., 2004).

The MDGs provide an important normative framework for international development cooperation. That framework must remain open to any new challenges that emerge. This study proposes adding the goals of decent work (as a goal in its own right), security, democracy and human rights, and equality.

ANNEX 1

Poverty Reduction Strategy Papers (Latest date reviewed)

Country	Income group (World Bank)	Aggregate/region (UN)	Year(s) of PRSPs	PRSP progress reports
Benin	Low	LDC/Sub-Saharan Africa	2000 (interim), 2003	2005
Bolivia	Middle	Latin America and Caribbean	2000 (interim), 2001	
Bosnia and Herzegovina	Middle	Commonwealth of Independent States (CIS)	Mid-term development strategy only 2004, 2006	
Burkina Faso	Low	LDC/Sub-Saharan Africa	2000, 2005	2001, 2002, 2004, 2005, 2006, 2007
Cambodia	Low	LDC/East Asia and the Pacific	2000 (interim), 2002, 2006	2004
Ethiopia	Low	LDC/Sub-Saharan Africa	2000 (interim), 2002	2004, 2006
The Gambia	Low	LDC/Sub-Saharan Africa	2000 (interim), 2002, 2007	2006
Ghana	Low	Sub-Saharan Africa	2000 (interim), 2003, 2006	2004, 2006
Laos	Low	LDC	2001 (interim), 2004	
Madagascar	Low	LDC/Sub-Saharan Africa	2000 (interim), 2003, 2007	2004, 2006
Malawi	Low	LDC/Sub-Saharan Africa	2000 (interim), 2002, 2007	2003, 2005, 2006
Mauritania	Low	LDC/Sub-Saharan Africa	2000, 2002, 2007	2003
Mozambique	Low	LDC/Sub-Saharan Africa	2000 (interim), 2001, 2005, 2007	2003, 2004, 2005
Nicaragua	Middle	Latin America and Caribbean	2000, 2001, 2006	2002, 2004
Rwanda	Low	LDC/Sub-Saharan Africa	2000 (interim), 2002, 2008	2004, 2005, 2006
Senegal	Low	LDC/Sub-Saharan Africa	2000 (interim), 2002, 2007	2005, 2006
Tajikistan	Low	Commonwealth of Independent States (CIS)	2000 (interim), 2002	2004, 2006
Tanzania	Low	LDC/Sub-Saharan Africa	2000 (interim), 2000, 2001, 2006	2003, 2004, 2008
Uganda	Low	LDC/Sub-Saharan Africa	2000, 2005	2001, 2002, 2003
Vietnam	Low	East Asia and Pacific	2001 (interim), 2002, 2004	2004, 2006
Yemen	Low	LDC/Arab states	2000 (interim), 2002	
Zambia	Low	LDC/Sub-Saharan Africa	2000 (interim), 2002, 2007	2004, 2005

ANNEX 2

MDG Priorities in PRSPs (Number of countries)

MDG priority	Policy priority (pillar or core objective)	Action plan defined	Targets defined
Poverty and hunger (MDG 1)			
Income poverty	18 (15)	18	21
Hunger	17 (2)	14	1
Employment (MDG 1)			
General	21 (9)	14	7
Decent work	7 (0)	4	0
Women and youth	12 (1)	3	0
Education and literacy (MDG 2)			
Primary schooling	22 (20)	21	21
Gender equality	17 (1)	6	18
Access to all levels	14 (0)	9	12
Gender equality and empowerment of women (MDG 3)			
General	20 (4)	16	8
Political representation	10 (0)	2	7
Violence against women	12 (1)	0	2
Health (MDG 4–6)			
General	21 (19)	20	20
Maternal health and reproductive rights	18 (1)	6	22
Child survival	17 (1)	9	21
HIV/AIDS and other diseases	19 (7)	15	17
HIV/AIDS orphans	8 (0)	2	2
Access to treatment	9 (10)	4	8
Environment (MDG 7)			
Natural resources protection and conservation	17 (4)	2	7
Water and sanitation	20 (6)	18	21
Democracy, good governance and human rights (Millennium Declaration V)			
Governance (rule of law, corruption)	21 (11)	18	3
Democracy	15 (0)	7	0
Free media	6 (0)	7	1
Human rights protection and promotion, UDHR	15 (0)	6	5
Minority rights	4 (0)	2	0
Social integration and vulnerable groups (Millennium Declaration VI)			
Social integration and vulnerable groups	19 (6)	13	0
Cultural diversity	6 (2)	3	3
Migrants	5 (0)	1	0

Science and Technology (MDG 8)			
S and T general	17 (2)	9	9
New technology	13 (0)	9	2
Access to medicines	9 (0)	1	4
Partnership (MDG 8, Millennium Declaration, Monterrey, Johannesburg)			
Aid	21 (3)	13	1
Trade reform	21 (3)	8	6
Civil society	18 (2)	2	0
Private sector	20 (1)	2	1

ANNEX 3

MDG Priorities in Donor Policy Statements (Number of countries)

	Core priority	Important but not included as core priority
Environment–general	19	
Human rights	17	
Education–general	15	
Governance	15	1
Peace and security	15	4
Health–general	14	
Democracy	14	
Income poverty	13	1
HIV/AIDS and global diseases	12	1
Countries with special needs (Africa)	12	
Water and sanitation	10	1
Primary schooling	8	
Gender equality and empowerment of women	8	
Trade	8	5
Hunger	7	3
Reproductive rights	7	2
Natural resources	7	
Private sector	7	7
Civil society	7	10
Social integration and vulnerabilities of social groups including cultural diversity and minorities (Millennium Declaration VI)	5	
Employment	3	4
Violence against women	3	(trafficking) 6
Science and technology (MDG 8)	3	5
Decent work	2	1
Gender equality in education	2	2
Child survival	2	2
Free media	2	1
Women's political representation	1	
Maternal health	1	3
Employment–women and youth	0	2

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NOTES

1. Net disbursements have been increasing since 1997, following a decade of decline and 'aid fatigue' in donor countries. After disbursements peaked in 2004, the 2005 data show a decline of 5.1 per cent to US\$ 103.9 million, with the prospect of further declines. Furthermore, increases to the poorest countries have stalled since 2003 (UN DESA, 2007). Official development assistance (ODA) now accounts for 0.3 per cent of GNI, falling well short of the commitment to reach 0.7 per cent set decades ago, and reiterated in the 2002 Monterrey Consensus.
2. See Jolly et al. (2004) for this intellectual history, particularly Chapter 7, 'Rediscovering a Human Vision' for developments in the 1990s, when the UN conferences played a central role.
3. For review of these controversies, see UNDP (2003) and more recently Nelson (2007).
4. 2002 review <<http://www.imf.org/external/np/prspgen/review/2002/comm/v1.pdf>>.
5. This includes the OECD DAC member countries but does not apply to the 'new donors'.
6. Second strategy prepared in a given country.
7. See, for example, UNDP (2003).
8. Important exceptions include Vietnam, and Bosnia and Herzegovina.
9. There is much controversy about the costing exercises that have been carried out in almost all countries of Sub-Saharan Africa.
10. See Fukuda-Parr, 2007.



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