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The MDGs post-2015: why we should do less

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Three years out from the 2015 deadline for the MDGs, and debate about ‘what next’ is already reaching fever pitch. Proposals for a post-2015 version of the MDGs are coming from an increasingly crowded field that includes individual experts and academics, think tanks and research institutes, NGOs and civil society groups.

The Centre for International Governance Innovation proposes 11 potential [goals, targets and indicators](#), including areas such as ensuring freedom from violence and sustainable management of the biosphere. The [Center for Global Development](#) (CGD) also identifies possible goals, targets and time frames, and even goes so far as to incorporate them into suggested draft language for an updated Millennium Declaration. Just a few days ago, Oxfam released a [draft paper](#) on how a post-2015 agreement can drive ‘real change’ (and is calling for comment).

These and other proposals amount to a substantial body of thinking, so there is no shortage of options for the post-MDG framework. But what do they tell us about we should do in the lead up to 2015? The best that organisations like CIGI, CGD and Oxfam can do, as well as the rest of us based in developed countries, is to take a deep breath and do less.

Adopting a ‘do nothing for now’ approach at the moment when debate is hotting up on the post-2015 framework might be anathema to those deeply invested in development thinking and action, and in ensuring the next version of the MDGs is better than the first. It might also be just what developing countries need right now: the rest of us out of the way, and the time and space to stake their own claim on the post-2015 agenda.

Here’s why. The majority of proposals on the next MDGs have been put forward by people and institutions based in developed countries. Thinking and proposals emanating from developing countries, and that reflect the interests and priorities of people in those countries, have so far gained relatively limited traction in policy

debates and discussions.

That's not to say they don't exist. Ernest Areetey (Vice Chancellor of the University of Ghana) and Charles Abugre (Africa Regional Director of the UN Millennium Campaign) both recently shared their thinking on the post 2015 framework ([here](#) and [here](#)). Abugre argues for a model aimed at the global community that addresses systemic threats to equitable and sustainable development, and is based on the principle of 'common but differentiated needs and responsibilities', which (among other things) would tackle the global financial, food and energy systems.

The UN Economic Commission for Africa [is also taking a role](#) in articulating that continent's perspectives on the post-2015 agenda. Drawing on studies and consultations with member countries and other stakeholders, it proposes a model that would adapt the existing MDGs while maintaining a balance between development outcomes and enablers, the latter including aspects such as good governance, human rights for all, and a credible participatory process.

These are just a sample of what developing country thinkers and stakeholders are saying. Yet the noisier proposals coming out of North America and Europe, mostly from usual suspects like CGD and the Overseas Development Institute, are dominating the conversation. And who can blame them? Everybody wants their proposal to be the one that makes a difference, what's the point of putting it forward otherwise? What this means though, is that in the rush to prepare for 2015 we are at risk of making exactly the same mistake that we made when designing the MDGs. On that occasion, people in developing countries had woefully inadequate engagement in the process. If proposals emanating from developed countries continue to dominate policy dialogue on the post-2015 model, many people will see the outcome in the same way that they now see the MDGs: as something [concocted by the elite](#), that has little relevance for them, and that they have little ownership over.

The UN appears to have recognised that it's essential that the post-2015 framework should take developing country priorities and perspectives into account. UNDG is set to conduct [consultations](#) in 50 countries. So far, Papua New Guinea and the Solomon Islands are the only Pacific Island countries on the list but there could be more if, as has been suggested, the number of countries is increased. UN agencies will also canvas opinion on nine thematic areas, including on topics not covered by the MDGs such as inequality, growth and employment, and population dynamics.

Then there is the question of how the consultations will be conducted, and with whom. As a [ONE report](#) recently suggests, "notwithstanding [the UN's] impressive program of consultation, there is a real risk that the most critical voices will be largely missing – *the world's poorest citizens*". To its credit, UNDG seems to be aware of this possibility, and has developed [comprehensive guidelines](#) for undertaking the country dialogues, "to ensure the post-2015 debate is informed by inputs and ideas from a broad base of civil society, marginalized groups, and others previously left out of discussions on development priorities".

But irrespective of how well the consultations are conducted, the UN remains an

outside actor intervening within countries to *extract* information. As a result, the consultations run the risk of being seen as a yet one more externally-driven process, designed and undertaken not by local actors within each country, but under the auspices of the UN, and contrived within an unrealistic time frame: the country consultations will be completed by March 2013, and thematic consultations by June 2013, so that they can feed into the next major UN meeting on the MDGs in September 2013.

It's not surprising that there are alternative suggestions for generating developing country engagement with, and ownership over, the process. The ANU's Scott Wiser suggests [in a recent paper](#) that deliberative (rather than extractive) approaches be used, which would complement the UN and other consultations. These could take the form of citizen assemblies, in which participants would have the opportunity not just to speak, but also "to be heard, listen, reflect, negotiate, analyze and decide" on issues. An IDS project called '[Participate: knowledge from the margins](#)' focuses on participatory methodologies, and aims to engage vulnerable and marginalised groups. ONE proposes a 'What the World Wants Poll' to canvas opinion in both developed and developing countries.

These suggestions on *process* remind us that existing proposals for the format of the post-2015 framework are putting the cart before the horse. By identifying new goals and targets they are pre-empting the information gathering and consultation processes that should inform what the final framework will look like. The problem is that the suggestions on process are also coming from developed country individuals and organisations. And together, they add to the increasingly cluttered array of options on the post-2015 MDG agenda, one in which developed countries are over represented.

That's why now is the right time for practitioners and analysts in developed countries to take a step back, and to make room for people in developing countries to advance their own thinking on a post-2015 framework. That doesn't mean the existing thinking isn't worthwhile. It's just that there is enough of it for now. It's fair enough that we loosen our grip on the post-2015 agenda a little, and give those who it will affect most the opportunity to shape it.

Bill Morton is an independent researcher and policy analyst based in Ottawa, Canada. He previously worked for Oxfam Australia and The North-South Institute.

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