

# Viewpoint

## FROM MDGs TO SDGs: WE NEED A CRITICAL AWAKENING TO SUCCEED

**Stephen McCloskey**

**Abstract:** 2015 is considered a pivotal year for the development sector with the agreement and introduction of a new international framework for development that will supersede the Millennium Development Goals (MDGs). This article suggests that one of the reasons that new goals are necessary and the MDGs failed to meet all of their targets was the absence of a critical consciousness that considered the structural causes of poverty. The development sector's preoccupation with overseas development assistance (ODA) has diverted our efforts away from larger, arguably more significant issues for the global South such as illicit financial flows, debt and unfair trade rules. Above all, we have failed to relate the dominant neoliberal economic model to persistent levels of poverty and climate change. Unless the Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs) come to terms with these larger obstacles to development they will fail to meet their targets. The article concludes that development education is ideally placed to provide the kind of critical awakening necessary to support the delivery of the SDGs.

**Key words:** Millennium Development Goals; Sustainable Development Goals; international development; development education; critical consciousness; social change; overseas aid.

2015 has been described as a landmark year for international development with big implications for global co-operation in poverty reduction. It is the European Year for Development and the end point for the Millennium Development Goals (MDGs), the eight targets agreed in 2000 to harness global efforts toward poverty reduction. Later this year, world leaders and civil society groups will agree new targets – Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs) – with a similar fifteen year timeframe for achievement. The SDGs

are an acknowledgment of the failings of the MDGs with around one billion people still living on less than a \$1.25 a day and more than 800 million people not having enough food to eat. On the plus side, Ford (2015) argues that the MDGs ‘provided a focal point for governments on which to hinge their policies and overseas aid programmes to end poverty and improve the lives of poor people – as well as provide a rallying point for NGOs to hold them to account’. On the debit side, the goals failed to adequately address human rights, economic development, environmental sustainability and gender equality.

This article argues that the post-2015 development framework needs to be more than a ‘measuring rod’ for development by providing the critical awareness necessary to investigate the structural causes of poverty and inequality. Part of this process should involve the international development sector focusing more directly on the pressure points for change in the global North in key areas such as illicit financial flows, debt, unfair trade rules and corporate power. This requires naming and challenging the neoliberal economic model that underpinned the 2008 global financial crisis and has brought the world to the ‘existential crisis’ of climate change. The article suggests that unless the SDGs challenge these issues head-on with the support of the development sector they are bound to fail in meeting their targets. It concludes by arguing that development education can help to create the critical awakening needed to mobilise the public for the achievement of the SDGs.

### **Assessing the MDGs**

Perhaps the biggest failing of the MDGs was their lack of critical analysis of the fundamental causes of global poverty and the persistently high levels of regional disparity in wealth, employment, infrastructure, food security and education within the global South and between global North and South. The goals were specifically applied to developing countries and appeared to isolate the causes of poverty within the domestic policies of governments in the global South. This approach ignored the impact of ‘development’ programmes implemented, or enforced, by Northern governments and

financial institutions on the South. Critical policies in the areas of globalisation, trade, debt and migration which are pivotal to the question of development in the global South were largely spared analysis and criticism in the MDG framework. As Walden Bello suggests: ‘The embrace of the MDGs by governments and international bodies was, to a significant degree, a defensive response and a strategy of obfuscating the structural sources of these manifestations of social injustice’ (2015: 155).

In sizing up the overall impact of the MDGs, Bello argues that they:

“had great value, not in terms of disseminating an analysis of the causes of poverty, hunger, gender inequity, maternal mortality, and environmental crises, but in creating moral outrage globally at the persistence of these conditions and making people question governments and global institutions on their efforts to eradicate them” (ibid).

Bello argues that we cannot afford to invest another fifteen years in targets that dance around the structural causes of poverty; the neoliberal economic medicine disastrously imposed on countries in the South. Neoliberalism comprised a series of rigid, uniformly enforced economic ‘adjustments’ designed to allow the market, rather than governments, to lead economic policy. These adjustment programmes cut public services, accelerated privatisation, reduced tariffs on imports, and encouraged production in commodities for export rather than an industrial policy informed by local needs. The American economist Joseph Stiglitz described this economic cocktail as ‘a set of policies predicated upon a strong faith – stronger than warranted - in unfettered markets and aimed at reducing, or even minimizing, the role of government’ (2004: 1). The removal of social protections and reigning in of the state inevitably increased poverty, reduced living standards and weakened economic performance. As Bello suggests: ‘The dismal period of little progress from the 1990s to 2005 occurred during the high noon of neoliberal reform and globalisation’ (2015: 154).

## **New global landscape**

The global landscape has changed significantly since the introduction of the MDGs in 2000. The world has endured the worst financial crisis in living memory, which has not only discredited neoliberalism as a mainspring to development and stability, but brought entrenched poverty and economic instability to the door of the global North. Where they once preyed only on low and middle-income countries, the International Monetary Fund (IMF) and World Bank, have brought structural adjustment and austerity programmes to Ireland and other parts of Europe. In countries that have struggled to reach the forty-five year old target of 0.7 percent of their GNI for overseas aid, a king's ransom was found to bailout failing banks. In Britain, a 'peak outlay' of £1,162bn was provided in support to UK banks in the immediate aftermath of the crisis (NAO, 2012) while a comparatively paltry sum of £8.62bn was provided in official development assistance in 2011 (DfID, 2013). If this travesty were not enough to endure, governments across Europe proceeded to implement belt tightening austerity programmes to pay for the bailout. As happened for years in the global South, profits were privatised, debts were socialised.

Another looming presence in the global development landscape is the climate change crisis which was meticulously linked to neoliberalism's rampant and unsustainable consumption of natural resources in Naomi Klein's *This Changes Everything: Capitalism v the Climate* (2014). The dominant global economic system has been recklessly deregulated to the point where the natural environment that sustains us all stands on a precipice of dangerously high temperatures. Klein describes this as an 'existential crisis' that should compel us to 'transform our failed economic system'. A key question for the development sector is whether the SDGs will be sufficiently radical and resourced to tackle the twin challenges of neoliberalism and climate change? For its part, the development sector itself seems to be perennially and frustratingly engaged in a debate on aid when the challenges for the sector and our constituencies are more far-reaching and urgent.

## **The aid debate**

Just how significant is development aid in the global policy environment? According to Provost (2013), remittances from migrants to their countries of origin topped \$530bn in 2012 which is more than three times larger than total global aid budgets. Provost suggests that these statistics have sparked ‘serious debate as to whether migration and the money it generates is a realistic alternative to just doling out aid’. Remittances have the advantage of going directly into the bank accounts of citizens in the global South while aid is often mediated through a third party. Although transfer fees can claim anywhere between 10 and 20 percent of remittances they still represent significant transfers to the global South. Zoe Smith (2013) suggests that while ‘government aid accounted for just 18% of total financial flows within international development in 2010, philanthropic giving, remittances, and private capital investment accounted for 82% of the developed world's economic dealings with developing countries’. Aid not only represents a proportionately small amount of the total inflows to the global South from the North but is not always effective as a purveyor of development. Patrick Marren, an aid enthusiast, argues that:

“Recent developments addressing aid effectiveness have been helpful, but basic systematic failings remain. There are too many players, too much fragmentation of effort, insufficient political analysis and not enough learning from mistakes” (2015: 73).

In recent examples of progressive development from Latin America, in which one country after another has been rejecting old neoliberal orthodoxies, we have seen national movements for social change start to reverse decades of neglect and poverty. Bello argues that:

“the combination of government intervention, economic nationalism, redistributive populist policies that promoted both equity and expanded internal markets, and the commodities boom triggered by China’s development made up a potent combination that reversed trends in poverty” (2015: 154).

For the most part, these initiatives have been led at national or regional levels rather than the outcome of hitherto global ‘one size fits all’ policies largely imposed from Washington. From Bolivia to Venezuela we have seen popular power expressed in new democratic frameworks informed by local needs despite internal and external pressures from elites trying to reclaim old entitlements. For these countries, it wasn’t aid that was the decisive factor but a popular rejection of the tried and failed neoliberalism of the past. A new, more radical political leadership in Latin America, buoyed by social and grassroots movements, have asserted their independence from the discredited ideological hegemony of Washington. Rather than promulgating an aid agenda for the global South, the development sector should be advocating the political and economic independence of developing countries. What many of these nations need more than anything else is for global North governments and institutions to get off their backs and allow them to plot their own path to development.

For example, the Debt and Development Coalition Ireland (DDCI, 2015) has recently highlighted Ireland’s voting twice in the United Nations against debt restructuring processes that would help to remove the burden of debt from the world’s poorest people. Rather than standing in solidarity with global South countries shackled by debt, Ireland chose to vote with creditor countries and institutions such as the IMF. Development NGOs should be using their good offices with governments to create a more benign policy environment for global South countries. Biron (2013), for example, reported that developing countries lose \$1 trillion a year in illicit financial flows arising from crime, corruption and tax havens used by corporations to avoid tax liabilities. This represents a major loss of revenue by developing countries and ‘is already ten times the amount of foreign aid these countries are receiving’. Ensuring that corporations pay their way in the global South and respect labour and environmental legislation in their host countries would help address the current power imbalance between national governments and global corporations and institutions.

## **Conclusion**

Aid is a small piece in the post-2015 global development framework. There are larger policy questions that loom over developing countries – illegitimate debt, illicit financial flows, unfair trade rules, climate change and corporate power – with many of the pressure points for change on these questions in the global North. Above all, however, is the question of neoliberalism which has fashioned the chaotic economic order that unravelled in 2008. Another set of development goals lacking the critical capacity to analyse and name the fundamental causes of poverty and injustice will arrive at the same kind of unsatisfactory conclusion as the MDGs. Walden Bello has argued that we need to complement the post-2015 development framework with ‘a critical exercise in development assessment that would provide an analytical framework for understanding the structural sources of poverty, inequality, and marginalisation, and promote a development agenda that would address them’. He adds that this critical exercise should ‘illuminate the structural causes of poverty and underdevelopment and provide policy paths towards altering those structures’ (2015: 156).

Awakening this critical consciousness clearly falls into the domain of development education and involves drawing the public into sustainable engagement with the structural causes of poverty. However, it also includes persuading the development sector as a whole to take a larger view of the development process rather than continually prioritise the aid agenda. There are several policy interfaces that we need to engage which dwarf the importance of aid to the global South. The post-2015 policy agenda will not be achieved if it simply becomes a ‘measuring rod in poverty reduction’. It has to go further in combining development education’s critical consciousness, analysis and action toward structural social and economic change. As Paulo Freire suggested education is the means by which ‘men and women deal critically and creatively with reality and discover how to participate in the transformation of their world’ (1972).

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