

# The MDG legacy: social, cultural and spatial engineering

**Clive Gabay, February 2013<sup>1</sup>**

With the 2015 deadline for the Millennium Development Goals (MDGs) rapidly approaching, debate has rightly turned to what should come next. Before we push forward, we need to look back and revisit some of the legacies of the drive towards the MDGs. This paper is particularly concerned with providing critical reflection on the role the MDGs have played in redefining cultural, economic and spatial norms in developing countries. This process has undermined development values such as rights-based development, cultural diversity, participation and local ownership, which development practitioners and NGOs have long fought for. And yet as we look back over the last decade and more, it is these very practitioners and NGOs who have most bought into the MDG paradigm, perpetuating the market-friendly re-engineering of developing societies.

This paper begins by outlining three dominant camps in the MDGs debate, all of which focus in different ways on their limitations. The MDGs have not met with mixed success because they have not gone far enough, or been too limited, but because they have gone too far in seeking to re-engineer developing societies according to a market logic which does not take into account the resistant agency of people living in poverty. To miss this is to risk repeating the mistakes and failings of the MDGs all over again. This is illustrated through an analysis of key MDG texts, including the MDG indicators and the 2005 Sachs Report. Through this it will explore ways in which the problems of the MDGs are not necessarily their limitations, but in fact their ambitions in re-making developing-country societies, and where these ambitions run up against the ordinary and everyday agency of people living in poverty. If we fail to take account of this dynamic, then just as with the MDGs, whatever comes after 2015 will largely fail by its own measures, and more importantly fail to deliver for people living in poverty.

## Three MDG camps

Debates and critiques of the MDGs tend to fall into three camps. First, there are those who fret over the progress being made to reach the goals, and whose energies are thus spent trying to find more efficient ways to achieve them, as well as any successor targets (the fretters). Second, there are those who believe the goals offered an opportunity for social and economic justice, but that they were hijacked by ideological and economic interests. The MDGs (or whatever follows them), for this camp, need to be 'saved' (the purists). Lastly, there is the group who argue that the goals represented a reductionist and neo-liberal vision of development (the reductionists). For this group, the goals were a *diminished* development agenda serving the interests of the powerful and masking the real underlying causes of poverty. The following will assess the fundamental weaknesses of all three camps, notably their failure to take account of the ambitions inherent in the goals.

---

<sup>1</sup> Clive Gabay ([c.gabay@qmul.ac.uk](mailto:c.gabay@qmul.ac.uk)) is a Lecturer in International Politics at the School of Politics and International Relations, Queen Mary University of London. The views expressed here are the author's own.

## Camp one: the fretters

Fretters seek to understand whether the world is on track to meet the goals, and if not, what more can be done in this regard; they *fret* over the success of the goals. Academic journal special issues are dedicated to such concerns<sup>2</sup>, whilst a cursory search for ‘Millennium Development Goals’ on major book-stocking websites reveals long lists of technocratic volumes detailing attempts to ‘scale up’ efforts to reach the goals.<sup>3</sup>

Fretters are the most ambitious of the three camps. They accept development orthodoxy and hold most tightly to the underlying ambitious logics which we will see are inherent to the goals. This has become much clearer recently with the greater volume of literature dedicated to what might come *after* the MDGs expire in 2015. For example, Poku and Whitman in the *Third World Quarterly* special issue on the MDGs, list a number of criteria which would need to be applied to a post-2015 development settlement. They talk of “*country and sector enablement*”, “*emphasising disaggregated targets over global benchmarks*”, “*improving [country] data collection*”, and focussing on “*qualitative aspects of complex forms of human relatedness over technical ‘solutions’*”.<sup>4</sup> At first, these suggest tailoring development strategies more closely to country requirements, and scaling up in-country abilities to monitor progress. However, on another level, we can read these assertions as requiring further social and cultural penetration of development-recipient societies. For instance, measuring development against more disaggregated benchmarks requires an array of ever more deeply embedded international monitoring procedures to ensure country compliance. What we see here then is not a programme of intentional control on the part of international organisations and donors, but an underlying logic which portrays the problem of development as being located in those countries not experiencing it, and the solution as being a wholesale transformation of those societies. Importantly, this transformation is not here a result of development, but a precursor to it, an affinity shared with all other development agendas of the past 65 years.<sup>5</sup>

## Camp two: the purists

Members of this camp tend to assert that the purity of the MDGs has become corrupted by other interests and processes. Hulme for example argues that the MDGs are constructed around two discourses in tension with each other, human development on the one hand, and results-based management on the other, which seeks measurable outputs from investments of resources. Hulme argues that “*this focus on the ‘measurable’ leads to a reduced interest in difficult to measure goals, such as human rights*”. And so, even though Hulme goes on to argue that “*...the MDGs are surprisingly coherent*”, this is *despite* the fact that the goals have been hijacked by a technocratic and reductive rationale.<sup>6</sup> The MDGs, if and where they succeed, will do so in spite of attempts to shoehorn the complexity of human development into measurable log frames and matrices.

---

<sup>2</sup> See, for example, *International Journal of Social Economics* (2004) 31 (1/2); *International Journal of Human Rights* (2009) 13 (1); *IDS Bulletin* (2010) 41 (1); *Third World Quarterly* (2011), 32 (1).

<sup>3</sup> See, for example, Black, R. and H. White. 2004. *Targeting Development: Critical perspectives on the Millennium Development Goals*. London, New York: Routledge; Fantu, C., and C. Bradford. 2005. *The Millennium Development Goals: Raising the Resources to Tackle World Poverty*. London: Zed Books; McGillivray, M. 2008. *Achieving the Millennium Development Goals*. London: Palgrave Macmillan; Fukuda-Parr, S. 2012. *Millennium Development Goals: For a People-Centred Development Agenda*, Abingdon: Routledge.

<sup>4</sup> Poku, N. and J. Whitman. 2011. ‘The Millennium Development Goals and Development after 2015’ *Third World Quarterly* 32 (1): 191-193

<sup>5</sup> See Hettne, B. 2009. *Thinking about development*, London: Zed Books.

<sup>6</sup> Hulme, D. 2007. ‘The Making of the Millennium Development Goals: Human Development meets Results-based Management in an Imperfect World’ *Brooks World Poverty Institute Working Paper 16*, Manchester: University of Manchester Brooks World Poverty Institute, pp. 2-3

Building on this perspective, Vandemoortele admonishes those who expect too much from the MDGs, arguing that if the MDGs have been used as a Trojan horse for other (i.e. neoliberal) interests, then that is the risk run by international targets.<sup>7</sup> Again we arrive at an idea that the MDGs are in and of themselves somehow pure, only becoming tainted by other interests and actors once they had been launched. This is reinforced by the assertion that “*they focus on ends, not on means, on the destination and not on the journey*”.<sup>8</sup> What this move does is distract our attention from the content of the goals. The MDGs themselves are deemed pure, beyond reproach, capable of eradicating poverty if only everyone could agree on the equitable and just means of pursuing them.

### **Camp three: the reductionists**

For reductionists, the MDGs represent a hegemonic and therefore exclusionary definition of development. It is argued that they are technocratic<sup>9</sup>, that they make individual and weak nation states responsible for their own development<sup>10</sup>, and are devoid of any structural<sup>11</sup> or gendered<sup>12</sup> analysis of poverty. The MDGs represent the culmination of a neo-liberal logic which ties developing countries into a hegemonic project of market-led development. The MDGs at best leave untouched, or at worst perpetuate, the rising inequalities and worsening forms of social and service exclusion that have become characteristic of the Washington Consensus and post-Washington Consensus eras.<sup>13</sup>

The MDGs may indeed represent a hegemonic view of what development *is* (absolute poverty reduction, rather than inequality; a focus on income rather than production), but the reductionist camp fails to provide us with an understanding of the work that hegemony *does*. Implicit in an argument which states that the MDGs (or anything) are hegemonic must be an admission of their power to shape imaginations and practices, rather than exist as a simple abstraction. In other words, if we are to say that the MDGs represent a diminished and exclusive perspective on development then we cannot stop there, but must explore how this perspective is enacted by people and agencies on the ground.

And so even given all the issues that the MDGs exclude, what remains requires wide-ranging social, economic and spatial transformation in developing countries if the goals are to be met. At a headline level, for instance, eradicating half of all extreme poverty would clearly result in a much-changed society. But below the headline statements of the individual goals, the targets, indicators and other associated MDG documents provide a rich tapestry from which to construct a set of market-friendly neoliberal societies. Reflecting on the MDGs in this manner is important at the current time given the uncertainty which surrounds the post-2015 agenda. Many in the NGO sector might be uncomfortable with the kind of vision encompassed in the goals, particularly because this is exactly the kind of hegemonic, top-down development policy which we were supposed to be moving away from. As the following sections will show, what is most pernicious about the MDGs is the way they seek to inscribe market and neoliberal logics into the very actions and sensibilities of people living in poverty. It is the agency of such people to resist this project which provides us with clues about how to construct a post-2015 agenda more responsive to their desires.

---

<sup>7</sup> Vandemoortele, J. 2011. 'The MDG Story: Intention Denied.' *Development and Change* 42 (1): 8

<sup>8</sup> Ibid

<sup>9</sup> Amin, S. 2006. 'The Millennium Development Goals: A Critique from the South' *Monthly Review*, March.

<sup>10</sup> Harrison, G. 2010. *Neoliberal Africa: Global Social Engineering*, London: Zed Press.

<sup>11</sup> Amin (2006)

<sup>12</sup> Antrobus, P. 2005. 'MDGs: Most Distracting Gimmicks?' *Convergence* 38 (3):.49–52.

<sup>13</sup> Saith, A. 2006. 'From Universal Values to Millennium Development Goals: Lost in Translation' *Development and Change* 37 (6): 1185

## The MDGs as an ambitious social, cultural and spatial agenda

What follows here is an analysis of some of the logics contained within the MDGs which help us to see them as ambitious goals of social, spatial and cultural engineering. This is precisely what is missed by dominant approaches to the goals, even those which might be considered as being critical of them. In order for the MDGs to be achieved there would need to be wide-ranging socio-cultural-spatial transformations across and within areas of high poverty. It is only by seeing them in this context that we can make sense of the perhaps unintended, yet resistant, practices that have resulted from the imposition of such a broad and deep agenda.

The rest of this paper then will analyse some of the major MDG texts which have been issued since their introduction, focusing on three broad themes: risk, sex, gender and family; the economic being; and the urban space.<sup>14</sup> This is not an exhaustive list, but provides important insights into how the MDGs shape development discourse, and the social, spatial and cultural conditions which constitute what a 'developed' society should be. The paper will conclude with a brief reflection on what resistance to this agenda has looked like. Such issues need to be kept in mind in current debates on the future of the MDGs. Only by doing so will we arrive at a more effective, and people-centred development agenda, which takes critiques of structural poverty seriously, but not as the end point.

### Risk, sex, gender and family

Throughout the MDG texts, risk, sex, gender and family are consistently articulated together. Risky sexual behaviour (the definition of which, as we will see, is itself not a pre-given) is portrayed overwhelmingly as an issue for women that can be most safely dealt with in the confines of the monogamous nuclear family.

To begin with, sexual behaviour which involves several partners, whether simultaneously or not, is deemed to be risky. So for instance, according to the rationale for MDG indicator 19<sup>15</sup> (MDG 6, Target 7), "*AIDS prevention programmes try to discourage high numbers of partnerships and to encourage mutual monogamy... delaying age at first sex, reducing the number of non-regular sexual partners and being faithful to one partner*". What Indicator 19b (MDG 6, Target 7) thus deems to be "*comprehensive correct knowledge of HIV/AIDS*" consists of knowing that condoms prevent HIV transmission and that sexual activity should be limited to one faithful uninfected partner.<sup>16</sup> This immediately marks out those carrying the HIV virus as inherently risky, with implications for the kinds of relationships deemed socially acceptable for HIV carriers. It further constructs a terrain upon which multiple interventions are thus made possible, not simply or directly connected to the virus (i.e. drug and condom distribution) but also to behaviour change and public education programmes (See for example the 'social marketing' campaigns for condoms which proliferated in and around the time of the launch of

---

<sup>14</sup> The goals and associated indicators themselves ([www.un.org/millenniumgoals/](http://www.un.org/millenniumgoals/) accessed 26 January 2012); the Millennium Declaration ([www.un.org/millennium/declaration/ares552e.htm](http://www.un.org/millennium/declaration/ares552e.htm) accessed 26 January 2012), the UN Millennium Project report for the Secretary General (also known as the 'Sachs Report') ([www.unmillenniumproject.org/reports/fullreport.htm](http://www.unmillenniumproject.org/reports/fullreport.htm) accessed 26 January 2012); and the Secretary General's report to the 2010 MDG World Summit, 'Keeping the Promise' ([www.un.org/millenniumgoals/pdf/sgreport\\_draft.pdf](http://www.un.org/millenniumgoals/pdf/sgreport_draft.pdf) accessed 26 January 2012).

<sup>15</sup> Each MDG is constituted by a sub-set of targets, each with their own subset of indicators. In this paper this is represented as follows: Indicator x (MDG y, Target z)

<sup>16</sup> United Nations Development Group (UNDG). 2003. *Indicators for Measuring the Millennium Development Goals*, New York: United Nations Development Group/UN Publications. pp. 43-46

the MDGs<sup>17</sup>). In this framing, everyone in developing countries is at risk of contracting HIV, and so efforts must be made to induce populations to engage in safe sexual behaviour, from a pool of fewer and fewer prospective partners.<sup>18</sup>

Critical commentators in the 1980s noted that the Western fixation on monogamy in that period was a direct result of a realisation amongst those societies that HIV was *not* simply a disease confined to gay communities.<sup>19</sup> This belief that we are *all* potential victims has thus subsequently fed into a discourse of developing world promiscuity as a reflection of Western fears and values. However, as Griffin has recently argued in relation to World Bank activity in the area of HIV/AIDS, there is little evidence to support these fears of hyper-sexuality: *“In terms not least of attitudes to sex and promiscuity in Western society, many African societies seem noticeably chaste in comparison with the West”*.<sup>20</sup> Nonetheless, it is precisely those very local attitudes and knowledge which are deemed inhibitive to the project of fighting HIV, which requires *“comprehensive, correct knowledge”* (Indicator 19b, MDG 6, Target 7) for those attitudes to be overridden. Risk must therefore be mediated through external expertise (at least in the first instance) and regulated through appropriate behaviour, such as monogamous sex. HIV is thus embedded as a cultural problem, and individualised. Efforts to diminish its prevalence become an individual (normally a woman’s) act, rather than linked to a range of socio-economic and structural processes which sees developing countries uniquely vulnerable to the HIV virus.

It is women who are deemed to be most at risk, which is made quite explicit in Indicator 19a (MDG 6, Target 7):

“Women’s risk of becoming infected with HIV during unprotected sexual intercourse is higher than that of men. The risk is even higher for younger women. Social and cultural factors may increase women’s vulnerability to HIV infection. For instance, cultural norms related to sexuality often prevent girls from taking active steps to protect themselves”.<sup>21</sup>

Thus women are reduced to being at the whim of culture in ways men are not. Indeed, it is men who produce this culture and thus simultaneously those who can liberate women from it.<sup>22</sup> Again, this provides a discursive rationale for a raft of programmatic interventions aimed at male and female role-making, based on pre-ordained ideas about what their current roles are (i.e. female victimhood and male aggression), devoid of any structural analysis for how these roles are themselves constructed.

So it is that the rationale for the nuclear family is produced through and from the ‘sex as risk’ discourse found in the MDG texts. For instance, the Sachs Report asserts that:

“Households, in particular, are important in “producing health.” They do this by practicing health-promoting behaviors and by delivering home-based interventions.”

---

<sup>17</sup> UNAIDS. 2000. *Condom Social Marketing: Selected Case Studies*. Accessed 11 November 2011. [http://data.unaids.org/publications/IRC-pub02/jc1195-condsocmark\\_en.pdf](http://data.unaids.org/publications/IRC-pub02/jc1195-condsocmark_en.pdf); UNFPA. 2003. *State of World Population: Investing in Adolescents’ Health and Rights*. Accessed 11 November 2011. [www.unfpa.org/swp/2003/english/ch1/index.htm](http://www.unfpa.org/swp/2003/english/ch1/index.htm), p. 26

<sup>18</sup> According to Griffin, sex itself in developing countries thus becomes *“...inherently problematic, instituting policy interventions...to classify, medicate, and regulate sexual practice”*. See Griffin, P. 2011. ‘The World Bank, HIV/AIDS and Sex in Sub-Saharan Africa: A Gendered Analysis of Neoliberal Governance.’ *Globalizations*, 8 (2): 236.

<sup>19</sup> Sabatier, R. 1988. *Blaming Others: Prejudice Race and Worldwide AIDS*. London: Panos Institute. p. 67

<sup>20</sup> Griffin (2011) p. 236

<sup>21</sup> UNDG (2003) p. 46

<sup>22</sup> Griffin (2011) p. 239

and that “*healthy and responsible sexual behaviour...occur[s] in households and communities*”.<sup>23</sup> Needless to say these communities should not be polygamous! What then should these households look like?

They should, implicitly, be nuclear. The Sachs Report is explicit that “*smaller families and longer birth intervals allow families to invest more in each child’s nutrition and health...Families with fewer children, and children spaced further apart, can afford to invest more in each child’s education*”.<sup>24</sup> Whilst this may be the case, such assertions rest on two pillars. One, that projections of the nuclear family, when articulated with discourses on sex, risk and gender, rest on pre-ordained imaginations of the predatory male and promiscuous yet vulnerable female, and rule out other ways of imagining the kinds of households that could produce respectful and loving adult relationships, healthy children and improved life-chances for all.

Secondly, these statements about the nature of family rest on an assumption that existing conditions of corporate land acquisition and other resource extractive models of economic development are perfectly valid. This is an assumption which fails to establish a connection with why it is that large families have become increasingly unsustainable. For instance, child mortality may be high in some areas not because families are large, but because resources (especially land) are unevenly distributed, and because access to healthcare is often prohibitively expensive. The absence of recognition of structural conditions is underlined by the following assertion that “*sexual and reproductive health can help stabilize population numbers in rural areas, slow urban migration, and balance natural resource use with the needs of the population*”.<sup>25</sup> Such statements reinforce prejudices about poverty-related hyper-sexuality and sexual productivity, and ignore the structural production of large families where they exist, as well as alternative economic conditions under which they may well be more sustainable i.e. the equitable distribution of land. The MDGs thus compel an engineering of social life which conforms to liberalised economic conditions, and not vice-versa (i.e. creating economic conditions which conform to social needs).

The promotion of the nuclear family is thus part of a broader imagination of the kind of society necessary to eradicate poverty, one which is entrepreneurially and capitalistically productive. Of course, this is not the stated *raison d’être* of the MDGs, and many MDG texts go to great lengths in order to reject naked neo-liberalism.<sup>26</sup> Nonetheless, it is the logics implicit in the goals which construct capital-friendly family units in this way, which again, should make us all stop and think as we approach 2015 about the irrevocably top-down nature of any global development agenda which unfolds in the context of a capitalist world economy, which requires individual productivity and new consumer markets. To get these things society as a whole must be made market-friendly.

## **The economic developmental agent**

All paths lead to productivity in the MDGs. Nowhere is this more explicitly put than in the Sachs Report, which states that “*For the billion plus people living in extreme poverty, they [the goals] represent the means to a productive life*”.<sup>27</sup> At the very top level, the MDGs articulate fighting poverty with increasing productivity, and thus poverty with sub-optimal productivity. The very first Millennium Development Goal aims to “*Eradicate extreme poverty and hunger*” and the

---

<sup>23</sup> ‘Sachs Report’ (2005) p.78

<sup>24</sup> Ibid pp.82-83

<sup>25</sup> Ibid p.83

<sup>26</sup> See Greig, Hulme, and Turner. 2007. *Challenging Global Inequality* pp. 153-155, for an overview.

<sup>27</sup> ‘Sachs Report’ (2005) p. 2

very first target listed under MDG 1 to achieve this goal then aims to “*Halve, between 1990 and 2015, the proportion of people whose income is less than \$1 a day*”. By equating poverty with income, this is as clear an example as possible of the ways in which the MDGs place what the Sachs Report repeatedly labels ‘the productive life’ right at the heart of eradicating world poverty. It is the picture of the individual-as-economic agent, predicated on “...*an economic rationality inherent in all persons*”.<sup>28</sup> Whilst at times this is elaborated into a macro picture of economic development (for example in Indicator 4 (Target 2, MDG 1), child survival is explicitly connected to broader efforts to scale up economic development), most of the time the productive life is envisaged as something which will have to be embodied at the individual level in order for the MDGs to be successful. This opens up an array of potential interventions for socio-cultural-spatial engineering in individual lives and on individual bodies which may be more or less successful.

As with the case of sex, risk, gender and family considered above, we can see this kind of engineering already at work in Western development strategies more broadly. Ruckert has noted how the World Bank’s conditional cash transfer programmes involve an array of micro-interventions to condition the lives of individual recipients and their families from mandatory school attendance for children, through regular visits to health clinics, to regular stints of community volunteering: “*If beneficiaries do not comply with their ‘co-responsibilities’ under CCTs, families lose their cash benefits*”.<sup>29</sup>

The MDGs provide a rich spectrum for donors and development professionals to further these kinds of interventions. This is because it is the individual who is ostensibly identified as the key productive agent. So, for example, hunger must be eradicated because it affects labour productivity and earning capacity (Indicator 5, Target 2, MDG 1), whilst gender disparities must be eradicated in order to increase the capabilities (productivity) of women (Indicator 9, Target 4, Goal 3). Even what might be seen as those more fundamental aspects constitutive of any number of imagined productive lives are subsumed to a logic of neo-liberal capitalist productivity and accumulation. So, for instance:

“A healthier worker is a more productive worker, as is a better educated worker. Improved water and sanitation infrastructure raises output per capita through various channels, such as reduced illness. So, many of the Goals are a part of capital accumulation, defined broadly.”<sup>30</sup>

Of course one could easily imagine all kinds of activities a healthy, educated person might engage in which might diverge from such narrow a definition of the productive life. We see the interventionist potential of framing the individual as an economically productive agent, when the Sachs Report turns its attention to education policy. The report states that:

“...there are few jobs beyond subsistence for people who are illiterate and innumerate. A lack of education is thus a sentence to a lifetime of poverty.”

However, this is only the case in a certain kind of economy, as the report goes on to admit, for “...*they cannot earn their way in a competitive world economy*”.<sup>31</sup>

---

<sup>28</sup> Williams, D. 1999. ‘Constructing the Economic Space: The World Bank and the Making of Homo Oeconomicus’ *Millennium* 28: 79

<sup>29</sup> Ruckert, A. 2010. ‘The forgotten dimension of social reproduction: the World Bank and the poverty reduction strategy paradigm’ *Review of International Political Economy* 17 (5):824

<sup>30</sup> ‘Sachs Report’ (2005) p. 28

<sup>31</sup> ‘Sachs Report’ (2005) p. 84

This approach does not simply mean skills transference but results in a more holistic pedagogical approach concerned with increasing pluralism and challenging more traditional modes of thought which may be based on authoritarianism and hierarchy.<sup>32</sup> The point here is not to judge whether this is desirable or not, but to highlight the socio-cultural-spatial implications which emerge as a result. So for instance, Jean-Francois Bayart notes the remarks of a Yoruba planter in Nigeria, who states that “*At one time, sons worked for their fathers but today we have schools and civilisation, and fathers now work for their children*”.<sup>33</sup> Similarly, George Sefa Dei notes how in Ghana:

“...children who went to “school” were uprooted from their families, cultures and communities. Their formal learning was disconnected from the “land” and community to which they belonged”.<sup>34</sup>

As Ilcan and Phillips have argued, the logics of individual economic productivity which run throughout the goals become “...*key instruments that privilege and oblige particular conceptions... [encouraging] certain individuals, groups and places to reinvent themselves*”.<sup>35</sup> It is in this final sense of spatial reinvention (the reinvention of place) that we can understand another strand of the MDGs as producing implications for the individuals and societies which become the developmental subjects of the MDG project. In as much as the first two of these aspects (risk, sex, etc., and individual economic productivity) have focused largely on the social and cultural facets of engineering in the MDGs, the final aspect to be considered, the urban space, brings a more spatial dimension to the discussion. This once again draws our attention to ways in which the goals entail top-down developmental thinking which runs counter to the struggles of movements and campaigners in recent decades.

## The urban space

“...neoliberalism represents a strategy of political-economic restructuring that...uses space as its ‘privileged instrument.’”<sup>36</sup>

MDG 7 (Ensure Environmental Sustainability), target 11 aims to have achieved by 2020 “*a significant improvement in the lives of at least 100 million slum dwellers*”. Indicator 32 illustrates that this will be measured against the “*Proportion of households with access to secure tenure*”, where secure tenure is defined as “...*households that own or are purchasing their homes, are renting privately or are in social housing or sub-tenancy*”. By the same logic, households without secure tenure are defined as “...*squatters (whether or not they pay rent), the homeless and households with no formal agreement*”.<sup>37</sup>

The initial MDG documents (i.e. the Millennium Declaration and the subsequent list of goals, targets and indicators) are completely absent of any prescription for how the lives of slum dwellers should be improved. Such prescriptive content is furnished by later reports such as the Sachs Report. The Sachs Report firstly establishes cities as engines for economic productivity. However, in order to fulfil their potential in this regard the urban space must facilitate social

---

<sup>32</sup> Tabulawa, R. (2003) 'International aid agencies, learner centred pedagogy, and political democratisation: A critique' *Comparative Education*, 39 (1): 22

<sup>33</sup> Bayart, J-F. 2009. *The State in Africa: The Politics of the Belly*. 2<sup>nd</sup> ed., London: Polity, p. 108

<sup>34</sup> Sefa Dei, G. J. 2002. 'Learning Culture, Spirituality and Local Knowledge: Implications for African Schooling' *International Review of Education*. 48 (5): 341-342

<sup>35</sup> Ilcan, S. and L. Phillips. 2010. 'Developmentalities and Calculative Practices: The Millennium Development Goals' *Antipode*, 42 (4): 848-849

<sup>36</sup> Brenner, N. and N. Theodore (eds.) 2002. *Spaces of Neoliberalism: Urban Restructuring in North America and Western Europe*, London: Wiley-Blackwell, p. vii

<sup>37</sup> UNDG (2003) p. 68



relations which support capitalist modes of production and surplus extraction. So, for example, the urban space is necessary to provide *“the face-to-face contact vital for a sophisticated division of labor”*.<sup>38</sup> However, this ideal-type urban space is challenged by migrant workers that come to the cities searching for jobs that do not normally exist, and thus *“live in extreme poverty under slum-like conditions...swell[ing] the ranks of the informal economy”*.<sup>39</sup> It is this informal economy (and the slum structures which are produced by and sustain it) which must be abolished for cities to achieve their true potential as capitalist drivers of economic growth. The correlation between slums, the informal economy and capitalist economic growth are made explicit when the Sachs Report states that *“Improving the lives of slum dwellers, as called for in the Millennium Development Goals, are essential goods in themselves and necessary for raising urban productivity”*.<sup>40</sup>

Again though, the nature of this ‘life improvement’ has specific parameters. Rather than, for example, providing sanitation, schools, or other social services in the slums themselves, the Sachs Report argues that affordable land should be made available at the *fringes* of cities.<sup>41</sup> This removal of the poor from city centres has two implications. Firstly in what might be thought of as a straightforward process of what David Harvey calls accumulation by dispossession, it opens up prime real estate for private development.<sup>42</sup> Secondly however, and in ways which challenge the notion that the urban poor are simply treated as unwanted detritus by the capitalisation of urban space, it creates the conditions at the edges of cities where the urban poor can be compartmentalised, monitored, and ‘re-skilled’ in far more economically productive ways conducive to the gentrification and maintenance of urban space. This includes the reordering of family space and relations from the large extended family networks one finds in many slums, to the more formally economically productive nuclear family, the only possible family form which can physically fit into the apartment units being built on the edges of cities to house former slum dwellers.

In this way the urban poor are more easily removed from the now gentrified city centre whilst still fulfilling their function as the occupiers of low paid, low skilled ‘formal’ economy jobs. When, as the Sachs Report recommends, new transport services are developed to link the fringes of the city to the city centre, this is done with no recognition of how modern transport systems re-order the city-space, altering the location of industry and residential areas, and disrupting traditional social structures.<sup>43</sup> And of course, if we understand the aim of neo-liberal socio-spatial engineering as the production of the city-space as *“an arena both for market-oriented economic growth and for elite consumption practices”*<sup>44</sup> and to *“reclaim public spaces for the use of proper citizens”*<sup>45</sup> as opposed to informal slum dwellers, then the urban poor can be quite literally whisked away from this space (once they have fulfilled their role in cleaning, serving and supporting the newly engineered city-space) by virtue of, for instance, irregular or early-finishing train services to outlying sub-urban areas.

---

<sup>38</sup> ‘Sachs Report’ (2005) p. 72-73

<sup>39</sup> Ibid

<sup>40</sup> Ibid

<sup>41</sup> Ibid p. 76

<sup>42</sup> Harvey, D. 2007. *A Brief History of Neoliberalism*, Oxford: Oxford University Press.

<sup>43</sup> Potter, R. B., and S. Lloyd-Evans. 1998. *The City in the Developing World*, London: Prentice-Hall, p. 119

<sup>44</sup> Brenner, N. and N. Theodore ‘Cities and the geographies of “actually existing neoliberalism”’ in Brenner and Theodore (2002), p. 21

<sup>45</sup> Chatterjee, P. 2004. *The Politics of the Governed: Reflections on Popular Politics in Most of the World*. New York: Columbia University Press, p. 131

## Conclusion: A barrier reef of resistance

This paper has analysed some crucial MDG texts to explore how they seek to define certain kinds of behaviour and function. However, these do not necessarily result in expected outcomes or materialise without meeting some form of resistance. So whilst there is a logic, and indeed an implicit design, underpinning these discourses, there is also the potential for their effects to be if not always resisted, then certainly reworked with mitigating results for the neoliberal developmental project. This may include outright resistance to interventions, but may more often resemble something more unintentional, a 'barrier reef' of minor acts. These may not seem to be taken in opposition to grand developmental projects, but they nonetheless serve to slow or subvert the progress of such programmes – a case, if you will, of developmental over-reach.

Ignoring the structural causes of poverty means that we end up with a development project that requires a mass re-engineering of societies in order to make them more resilient to the kinds of crises and shocks thrown up by a global economy based on neo-liberal ideals. This is what gives the themes discussed above a certain logic. People must live in smaller family units so that they can be more economically productive within the constraints of an increasingly urbanised economy resulting from the expansion of corporate land ownership. It is this degree of large scale social, cultural and urban engineering which results in developmental over-reach.

Examples of the kind of resistance produced by this over-reach include the ways in which subjects of Voluntary Counselling and Testing increase risky sexual behaviour when found to be clear of the HIV virus, or simply lie about their sexual partners for their own personal agendas.<sup>46</sup> Another example may be the tenants of newly-built tower blocks in Mumbai, built to re-house the city's slum-dwelling population (as proposed by Indicator 32 of the MDGs), throwing their defecated waste out of the window due to an unfamiliarity with plumbed toilet systems. This, combined with an increase in youth criminality due to the breaking up of extended families to fit into small apartments, resulted in a reassessment of the re-housing programme.<sup>47</sup> These acts are thus not always necessarily political, but do act as resistant blockages on the project of development outlined here. When thinking about a post-2015 agenda then we need to pay far more attention to both the structural causes of poverty, as well as the ways in which 'development' intersects with the already-existing traditions, histories and values of developmental subjects. Whether it is realistic to think that current inter-governmental deliberations will take this course is another matter. However, for those working outside government the message must be that 'people-centred' development is all well and good, but not when people-centred means changing development-recipient societies as a pre-cursor to development (with all the micro-resistant practices implied by that), rather than changing development-recipient societies more organically and unpredictably as a result of development.

In practice of course, after 2015 nothing radical is likely to happen which fundamentally alters the nature of the global economy, whether there is an agenda as all-encompassing as the MDGs or not. The neoliberal imperative to re-engineer societies into more market-friendly forms will be as keenly felt, perhaps more so in this 'age of austerity' in the West. Thus any new agenda, more ambitious or otherwise, will remain largely trapped in a neoliberal paradigm of productivity and market complicity. For instance, even before it was announced that David Cameron would be chairing the new High Level Panel on the post-2015 agenda he publicly

---

<sup>46</sup> Sheon, N. 2004. 'Theory and Practice of Client-Centered Counseling and Testing.' Accessed 30 November 2011. <http://hivinsite.ucsf.edu/InSite?page=kb-07-01-04#S5X>

<sup>47</sup> See the documentary 'Slumming It', Channel 4 (2010). Accessed 9 December 2011. [www.channel4.com/programmes/kevin-mccloud-slumming-it/4od](http://www.channel4.com/programmes/kevin-mccloud-slumming-it/4od)

stated his belief that economic development had to be the pillar around which any new agenda would be built. In this context what can campaigners and practitioners do?

- The main point is to stop buying into a narrative which flies in the face of the values and principles of local, participatory and rights-based development which have been central to the development community in recent decades. The themes covered in this paper reveal how despite all of the rhetoric in this regard, development policy is still about getting people to live certain ways and do certain things.
- Following on from this, the non-governmental development community may have to work inside existing neoliberal frameworks, but that makes the imperative for continuing critical reflection, and where possible subversion, all the more necessary. Indeed, the larger the agenda, the more potential there is for resistance and subversion. This is not subversion for the sake of it, but subversion to place the desires of those living in poverty at the centre of their development. The MDGs, where they have failed, have not done so because they are too narrow, but because in their ambition it is impossible to ensure that everyone is pulling in the same direction. Being subversive is not about blocking development, but putting subjects of development front and centre in defining what that development should look like.
- Finally, as 2015 approaches, more impetus needs to be given to projects such as the World We Want campaign.<sup>48</sup> As imperfect as consultations like these are (i.e. often only reaching those people with the social and economic capital to be online in the first place) they are manifestly more informed and informative than the David Cameron and Ellen Johnson-Sirleaf led UN effort. Consultations such as these must be given a meaningful place in post-2015 discussions. Again, the substantive driving force behind any post-2015 agenda will reflect the dominant forces in the global economy, but the more space given for non-dominant voices, the more those voices can be used to hold all development actors to account over the true participatory and localised nature of their actions.

## References

- Amin, S. 2006. 'The Millennium Development Goals: A Critique from the South' *Monthly Review*, March. Accessed 22 October 2009. [www.monthlyreview.org/0306amin.php](http://www.monthlyreview.org/0306amin.php)
- Antrobus, P. 2005. 'MDGs: Most Distracting Gimmicks?' *Convergence* 38 (3).
- Bayart, J-F. 2009. *The State in Africa: The Politics of the Belly* 2<sup>nd</sup> ed. London: Polity.
- Black, R., and H. White. 2004. *Targeting Development: Critical perspectives on the Millennium Development Goals*. London: Routledge.
- Brenner, N., and N. Theodore (eds.). 2002. *Spaces of Neoliberalism: Urban Restructuring in North America and Western Europe*, London: Wiley-Blackwell.
- Chatterjee, P. 2004. *The Politics of the Governed: Reflections on Popular Politics in Most of the World*. New York: Columbia University Press.
- Cleeve, E., and T. Ndhlova (eds.). 2004. 'Special Issue: Strategies for meeting the Millennium Development Goals in Africa.' *International Journal of Social Economics* 31 (1/2).
- Fantu, C., and C. Bradford. 2005. *The Millennium Development Goals: Raising the Resources to Tackle World Poverty*. London: Zed Books.
- Harvey, D. 2007. *A Brief History of Neoliberalism*. Oxford: Oxford University Press.
- Hettne, B. 2009. *Thinking about development*. London: Zed Books.

---

<sup>48</sup> [www.worldwewant2015.org](http://www.worldwewant2015.org)

- Fukuda-Parr, S. 2012. *Millennium Development Goals: For a People-Centred Development Agenda*. Abingdon: Routledge.
- Greig, A., D. Hulme and M. Turner. 2007. *Challenging Global Inequality: Development Theory and Practice in the 21st Century*. Basingstoke: Palgrave Macmillan.
- Griffin, P. 2011. 'The World Bank, HIV/AIDS and Sex in Sub-Saharan Africa: A Gendered Analysis of Neoliberal Governance.' *Globalizations* 8 (2)
- Harrisson, G. 2010. *Neoliberal Africa: Global Social Engineering*. London: Zed Press.
- Hulme, D. 2007. 'The Making of the Millennium Development Goals: Human Development meets Results-based Management in an Imperfect World' *Brooks World Poverty Institute Working Paper 16*, Manchester: University of Manchester Brooks World Poverty Institute.
- Ilcan, S., and L. Phillips. 2010. 'Developmentalities and Calculative Practices: The Millennium Development Goals.' *Antipode* 42 (4).
- McGillivray, M. 2008. *Achieving the Millennium Development Goals*, London: Palgrave Macmillan.
- Poku, N., and J. Whitman. 2011. 'The Millennium Development Goals and Development after 2015.' *Third World Quarterly* 32 (1): 191-193
- Potter, R.B., and S. Lloyd-Evans. 1998. *The City in the Developing World*. London: Prentice-Hall.
- Ruckert, A. 2010. 'The forgotten dimension of social reproduction: the World Bank and the poverty reduction strategy paradigm.' *Review of International Political Economy* 17 (5).
- Sabatier, R. 1988. *Blaming Others: Prejudice Race and Worldwide AIDS*. London, Panos Institute.
- Saith, A. 2006. 'From Universal Values to Millennium Development Goals: Lost in Translation.' *Development and Change* 37 (6).
- Sefa Dei, G. J. 2002. 'Learning Culture, Spirituality and Local Knowledge: Implications for African Schooling.' *International Review of Education* 48 (5).
- Sheon, N. 2004. 'Theory and Practice of Client-Centered Counseling and Testing.' Accessed 30 November 2012. <http://hivinsite.ucsf.edu/InSite?page=kb-07-01-04#S5X>
2011. 'Special Issue: The Millennium Development Goals: challenges, prospects and opportunities.' *Third World Quarterly* 32 (1).
2010. 'Special Issue: The MDGs and Beyond.' *IDS Bulletin* 41 (1).
2009. 'Special Issue: The Millennium Development Goals and Human Rights.' *International Journal of Human Rights* 13 (1).
- Tabulawa, R. 2003. 'International aid agencies, learner centred pedagogy, and political democratisation: A critique.' *Comparative Education* 39 (1).
- UNAIDS. 2000. 'Condom Social Marketing: Selected Case Studies.' Accessed 11 November 2011. [http://data.unaids.org/publications/IRC-pub02/jc1195-condsocmark\\_en.pdf](http://data.unaids.org/publications/IRC-pub02/jc1195-condsocmark_en.pdf)
- UNFPA. 2003. 'State of World Population: Investing in Adolescents' Health and Rights.' Accessed 11 November 2011. [www.unfpa.org/swp/2003/english/ch1/index.htm](http://www.unfpa.org/swp/2003/english/ch1/index.htm), p. 26.
- United Nations Development Group (UNDG). 2003. *Indicators for Measuring the Millennium Development Goals*. New York: United Nations Development Group/UN Publications.
- Vandemoortele, J. 2011. 'The MDG Story: Intention Denied' *Development and Change* 42 (1).
- Williams, D. 1999. 'Constructing the Economic Space: The World Bank and the Making of Homo Oeconomicus.' *Millennium* 28: 79-99