

After 2015: Development and its alternatives

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The convenor of a British Academy Conference held in September 2014 reports on a timely discussion of the effectiveness of global development targets.

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The Millennium Development Goals

September 2015 will mark the end of a hugely resourced 15-year experiment in global consensus-building otherwise known as the Millennium Development Goals (MDGs). The MDGs emerged from a concerted effort on the part of United Nations, other donor agencies and Western governments at the turn of the century to devise a universal set of international development goals and targets which would reboot the aid industry in an effort to address some (although not all) of the major issues affecting developing countries at that time. At a UN summit in 2000, every UN member state signed up to the *Millennium Declaration*, a document committing in quite vague terms to concepts of universal social justice and human rights. Eighteen months later the MDGs emerged, a result of a set of negotiations between a relatively small group of people from the major international organisations (the World Bank, UN Development Programme, International Monetary Fund) and Western aid donors. The MDGs consist of eight goals, 21 targets, and 60 measurable indicators. At the top level, the eight goals commit to: eradicating extreme hunger and poverty; achieving universal primary education; promoting gender equality; reducing child mortality; improving maternal health; combating HIV/AIDS, TB and malaria; ensuring environmental sustainability; and establishing a global partnership for development.

As 2015 begins, there is much debate on how successful the goals have been, which depends in itself on whether one takes the whole world as the unit of analysis (in which case, not very successful), or particular regions, countries or sub-regions (in which case, very mixed). However,

quite apart from the success or failure of the MDGs, there has been a clear momentum in the past couple of years to build a new, post-MDG development settlement. This has brought to the fore questions of politics, influence and control. The original goals were highly technocratic, marginalising a great number of issues central to life and livelihoods in many parts of the world, ranging from land rights to gender-based violence. Furthermore, the MDGs did not make any reference whatsoever to the structural conditions that underpin poverty in much of the world. There was no sense of *how* poverty was to be eradicated. There are perhaps obvious reasons for this, including the lack of input from groups living in poverty or even their governments, and the impossibility of proposing any developmental compact which might challenge the hegemony of economic interests that held sway in that pre-9/11, pre-financial crisis world.

Much has now changed. The policy prescriptions of neo-classical, small-state economics which dominated development industry thinking in the 1990s and 2000s have been discredited for many. Related ideas still persist, as we saw with the UN Secretary General's High Level Panel on the post-2015 agenda, chaired by UK Prime Minister David Cameron, who is on record as favouring market-oriented solutions to development. However, we do seem to be at a critical juncture where a number of more or less potentially radical alternatives seem to be open for discussion. One example of this would be the discussion around truly *global* development goals. A post-2015 goal that targeted, say, obesity, would clearly represent a challenge to food policy and potentially a radical challenge to the food industry around the globe.

Conference

Issues like these were the subject of a British Academy Conference – *After 2015: Development and its Alternatives* – held in September 2014. The conference brought together experts ranging from internationally renowned scholars, to activists working with indigenous groups resisting mainstream 'development' solutions that take little account of local interests. The subject of the conference itself was designed to open up questions about:



The British Academy Conference, 'After 2015', was held in September 2014.

how the MDGs and mainstream development thinking have evolved up to 2015; alternatives to that mainstream thinking; and finally alternatives to the whole concept of 'development' itself.

One of the major debates to emerge concerned the whole efficacy of setting targets for development. Participants in the opening roundtable, such as Jan Vandemoortele – the former director of the Poverty Group at the UN Development Programme, and key protagonist in shaping the MDGs – argued that, even though the causes of poverty were multiple and complex, reducing poverty and development to a set of targets that even his 'grandmother could understand' made progress possible. Others felt that reducing these complex issues to a set of technocratic targets depoliticised development, and drew attention away from important structural factors (like inequality) which underpin poverty and social exclusion.

This debate fed into an 'in conversation' session with James C. Scott, Professor of Anthropology and Political Science at Yale University. Professor Scott has authored some of the most influential works in his field over a period of 40 years, much of which have centred on how state efforts to make human and non-human environments 'legible' for ease of census-taking, taxation, land planning, etc. have simultaneously destroyed human and non-human diversity and depoliticised human relationships with each other and their environment. Professor Scott argued that 'universal' goals like the MDGs, or the good governance agenda promoted by institutions like the World Bank, represent vernacular elements of 19th-century North Atlantic capitalism, and as such they erase other vernacular ways of doing development, government, property relations and so on.

Alternatives

The conference also considered the issue of where alternatives to mainstream efforts may be coming from, the challenges those alternatives are facing, and how support for them may be nurtured. The co-chair of the Global Call to Action against Poverty, the world's largest anti-poverty civil society coalition, detailed the difficulties GCAP has faced in having its voice heard within UN forums, and how NGOs based in the Global North have also been guilty of overlooking the political demands of their Southern counterparts. This raised the issue of whether alternative forms of development

should be enacted within established global forums such as the UN, or instead at a much more local scale – perhaps out of the 'limelight' of big international development agreements and their associated monitoring structures and agents.

Of course, one might well ask whether big, headline development programmes and targets should be dropped altogether, and that was certainly the view of many present at the conference. However, another question to emerge was whether it might be desirable to manufacture a global moment that is supportive of local alternative practices. And if the answer to that question is yes, then we obviously have to consider how we would go about supporting local, 'from below' mobilisations to make that happen.

One way of doing this would be to stop treating development as 'our' (i.e. privileged) solution for 'them' (i.e. the poor, excluded, dispossessed). Devising development strategies along such lines inevitably ends up treating the subjects of development as passive recipients of rich-world largesse and/or expertise. Similarly, people living in poverty should not simply be encouraged to 'participate' in programmes where the broad parameters of what is possible have already been defined in the air-conditioned offices of donor agencies. Ultimately, the people who often know most about, and are hence expert in the conditions which perpetuate their social and economic exclusion, are those people being excluded. This was best articulated by Carlos Zorilla, representative of Defensa y Conservacion Ecologica de Intag (DECOIN), a movement of indigenous peoples in the Intag (Cloud-forest) region of Ecuador. For two decades the Intag region has been targeted by mining companies who want to explore for minerals. Promises of local infrastructure development have gone hand-in-hand with violence targeted against those who have argued against the vision of industrial development, deforestation and loss of biodiversity and livelihood which the mining projects would deliver. DECOIN is one example of a group which knows what it wants, and to whom policy-makers at every level should listen if they want to think seriously about meeting the demands of people living in poverty.

Ultimately, what comes after 2015 will likely be some version of 'development' rather than any of its alternatives. Nonetheless, for the first time in a very long time alternative voices are being heard and have built impressive momentum around issues of economic rights, socio-economic exclusion and global structural inequality. Should such voices be ignored this time around, they will not go quietly into the night.

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