Lessons from the MDGs for Implementing the SDGs

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The most important difference between the Millennium Development Goals and the Sustainable Development Goals regarding migration is that migration was absent from the MDGs and is present in the SDGs, especially but not exclusively in SDG 10.7: "orderly, safe, regular and responsible" migration facilitated by well-managed migration policies.

The MDGs focused on development. Migration was seen (and categorized in the Millennium Declaration) as a human rights question. Human rights as a whole were not seen as ready for targeted monitoring at the global level in 2001.

But that was then and this is now. Thanks to the campaigning by key member states from the Global Forum on Migration and Development and the leadership of Peter Sutherland (UN Special Representative for Migration and Development) and William Lacy Swing (Director General of IOM), migration is integral to SDGs.

This afternoon, I invite you to reflect on two questions. Let us look first look backward and then forward:

1. What made the MDGs successful and what were its limitations?

2. Can the successes be replicated and the limitations avoided with SDGs? Or do we need distinctly new tools?

Successes of MDGs

First, the MDGs benefitted from their small number, concentration, and the common theme they shared: a multidimensional approach to cutting by half extreme poverty ($1 a day). Together, these three factors provided a focused and deeply humanitarian coherence. The MDGs' targets, moreover, were SMART: specific, measurable, attainable, relevant, and time bound. On "attainable," for example, experts from the UNDP, DESA, UNICEF, UNFPA, the World Bank, IMF and OECD met in the Spring of 2001 to identify the "roadmap" to implement the Millennium Declaration that the General Assembly had requested of the Secretary-General in A/RES/55/162 (18 December 2000). The experts were quite confident that the international community would be able to cut extreme poverty by half by 2015 at the global level, barring a catastrophe such as a World War III, and provided that a 1990 baseline was the starting point. (Continued economic growth in China and India made meeting this goal highly probable.) Others goals were of course more challenging. The 48 indicators for 18 targets and 8 goals were all readily available, indeed already collected, used Class A statistics, and benchmarked to 1990 so that progress would be measurable for most countries.[1]

Second, the MDGs served as a bright banner to waive and were part of a campaign designed to pressure countries and multilateral institutions to act. As Kofi Annan later remarked: “The MDGs, and their standardized rating system for evaluating progress in development contained in their simple and universally accessible aspirations, have provided a mechanism for civil society in all parts of the world to hold governments to account.”[2] The UN launched a campaign led by Mark Malloch Brown and Eveline Herfkens (with the full support of the famous Utstein Group and her fellow female development ministers Claire Short, Hilde Johnson and others); NGO leaders Amina Mohammed (who later joined the UN to lead Post-2015 Development Planning); Kumi Naidoo and Salil Shetty; and the ONE Campaign led by Jamie Drummond and Bono. The results of this campaign came to be dramatized in a lovely scene from the BBC Film “The Girl in the Café” in which the actress Kelly MacDonald with her charming Scottish brogue badgered a fictional British Chancellor of the Exchequer into supporting the MDGs at a fictional Reykjavík G8 Summit. In real life of course, the MDGs gained pledges of doubling aid to Africa at the Gleneagles Summit in 2005 (and $50 billion total in aid by 2010); though none these pledges were quite fulfilled.

The third driver of success was the support of multilateral development banks (MDBs), the World Bank and IMF. Their support meant that the MDGs incorporated in the Poverty Reduction Strategy Papers (PRSPs) in which developing countries reported progress in their national development plans. It encouraged the adoption of the MDGs by countries dependent on MDBs.

Weaknesses of MDGs

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[1] See the appendix listing and explaining the MDGs in the Report of the Secretary-General, “Road map towards the implementation of the United Nations Millennium Declaration,” UN, A/56/326 (6 September 2001). I should mention that I directed the Secretariat group preparing the Roadmap report and co-chaired the group of inter-agency experts who crystallized the MDGs from the Millennium Declaration and selected the indicators that would best measure those goals and targets.

[2] Kofi Annan, *Interventions: A Life in War and Peace* (New York: Penguin, 2012), p245.

The first weakness was the limited ownership of the MDGs from the start. The entire membership of the UN endorsed the Millennium Declaration in September 2000, and the MDGs were all directly traceable to that Declaration. But, initially, member states were reluctant to adopt full ownership of the Declaration and the MDGs. For example, member states refused to translate the Declaration into national languages (beyond, that is, the five UN official languages) and promulgate the Millennium Declaration (only Finland did so in 2001). At first, member states saw the MDGs as a multilateral responsibility of the UN Secretariat and World Bank, not national responsibilities. And most vociferously, the US Bush Administration lobbied against the MDGs for 4 years, until 2005. A global campaign to implement the MDGs thus faced strong headwinds at its start.

The second weakness was the implementation strategy. MDG implementation did not identify the key drivers of change. Member states did include the MDGs in PRSPs, but not enough changed their national development budgets and spending patterns, neither of which reflected the announced, nationally determined MDGs priorities. Nor was the private sector fully engaged in MDG implementation.

Implications for the SDGs

The first point to note is that, in comparison, there is no problem of initial ownership with the SDGs. A root and branch participatory process among the entire membership led by the able leaders of the Open Working Group ensured that every state had a voice. Indeed, there is an opposite challenge, perhaps one of too much authorship.

There are 17 Goals, 169 Targets and 250 plus indicators (yet to be determined). Every state got to decorate the project with its favorite target. The question now is this: While every state likes something in the SDGs, how many are committed to the whole? This problem reminds Americans of the famous description of a Western river that was said to be "a mile wide and an inch deep."

The targets are the challenge, 18 in MDGs vs 169 in SDGs. God, in the Hebrew Bible, settled for 10 Commandments; the member states have insisted on 169. And 250-plus indicators represent an immense challenge to the data collection capacity of member states, especially in the developing world. Thus the SDGs are a problematic banner under which to mobilize global support. But rather than an excuse for inaction the prolixity of the SDGs should be seen as an opportunity for global innovation and a mandate to develop relevant and more focused national level monitoring.

Implications for Global Assessments

Clearly, the international community will need to disaggregate global monitoring by themes, looking for crosscutting coherences of mutually relevant groups of three or four goals for ECOSOC to monitor each year. Trying to report on all 169 targets each year is a prescription for incoherence. The UN should also develop comprehensive, or composite, indicators, as the IOM is proposing in the Migration Governance Framework. The key is that the components of each composite indicator all need to be monotonic (such that more is better for each sub indicator and all measure relevant dimensions of change).

New Opportunities for Monitoring and Implementation

There is also an opportunity to use the universal authority of the SDGs as a resource to develop campaigns for coherence of particular themes such as migration and development, possibly hosted by the Global Forum on Migration and Development. Other opportunities are:

a. Draw upon and proactively campaign for all 8 of the mentions of migration related targets in the SDGs.

b. Explore and highlight synergies to other SDGs. For example, recent research shows that remittances, totaling $450 billion dollars last year, play a crucial role in social spending in the developing world (for example, by households for food, shelter, education and healthcare), which helps shield many governments from the adverse effects of under-spending by these countries on social welfare. The resulting large social welfare payoff tends to reduce domestic dissension and the potential armed conflicts that generate refugees. In a nontrivial way, migrants substitute for refugees.

c. Monitor not just outcomes according to the indicators, but identify best practice drivers in the success of migration for development. Focus could be on such areas as admission procedures; visa allocations; removals and enforcement (where needed); and, especially, integration of new migrants.

d. Explore how to enhance protection for vulnerable migrants who do not qualify as refugees under the 1951 Refugee Convention or the African Union or Cartagena Principles on armed conflicts.

Conclusion

I conclude by noting that the implementation of the SDGs on migration would be greatly assisted by a more engaged and coherent international institutional architecture. This architecture should include both a set of treaties for mobility that reflected best practices on refugees, forced migrants, vulnerable migrants and economic migrants. It should also include a role for IOM as a member of the UN system that would provide migrants the kind of support and attention that UNHCR offers for refugees, closing the gaps in coverage for people on the move.