Towards Genuine Universalism within Contemporary Development Policy

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Introduction:
It is very difficult to know the impact of the MDG paradigm on poverty reduction. On one hand, international and even national measurements of poverty are ambiguous, arbitrary and contested, even in the best of cases such as China and India. Despite the façade of precise estimates, we do not really know what has been happening to global poverty all things considered, particularly when measured against rising costs for education and health care, which are mostly not factored into poverty measures for technical reasons. On the other hand, the mechanisms by which the MDG paradigm might have effected poverty reduction are not at all clear. The recent literature on the impact of aid on growth offers little useful insight given that it largely ignores the major global structural processes that condition the impact of aid flows, such as those reflected by global balance of payments asymmetries. Moreover, the emphasis in the MDGs on absolute measures and the implicit bias towards targeting quite possibly undermine poverty reduction in many contexts, particularly if poverty is primarily considered as an outcome of dynamic processes of social stratification and subordination.

This paper argues that the MDGs should be replaced by a re-politicisation of the mainstream development agenda, together with a genuine revival of emphasis on universalistic modes of social policy as viable policy options for dealing simultaneously with poverty and inequality. Serious consideration of the erosion of decent employment and wages and the increasing segmentation of social security systems throughout the developing world is particularly needed if we are to truly embrace a pro-poor agenda, i.e. not one that merely reduces absolute poverty regardless of inequality, but one that actually promotes equitable sharing without double standards.

I

At the outset, the impact of the MDG paradigm on poverty reduction, here defined as income poverty as per Goal One of the MDGs, is very difficult to assess because poverty reduction itself is very difficult to measure. The international estimates provided by the World Bank are highly contested even though they are the main data relied upon by the leading international organisations spearheading the promotion of the MDGs. This received much attention through the debate between Pogge and Reddy (2002; 2005; 2006) and Ravallion (2002; 2003), which was further articulated by Wade (2004) among others. Much of the contention relates to the way that the purchasing-power-parity (PPP) poverty line has been calculated and standardised. Together with other considerations,

Pogge and Reddy (2005) conclude that the World Bank’s estimates of the magnitude, distribution or trend of global income poverty are neither meaningful nor reliable.

This is just one example of the contention underlying the façade of precision in the field of poverty studies. Given the wide variety of fairly arbitrary assumptions and choices that are required in order to first choose a line and then to apply this line to presumably-accurate survey data in ways that are broadly consistent, accurate and comparable across time and regions, it is no surprise nor exaggeration that poverty estimates themselves are quite arbitrary, even before considering World Bank PPP adjustments. Saith (2005) eloquently synthesises the perils, although practitioners of poverty measurement have acknowledged the pitfalls for decades. Indeed, in the opening pages of his poverty measurement manual, Ravallion (1992: 2-3) admits that poverty lines are arbitrary, albeit he argues that even arbitrarily-chosen lines nonetheless allow for comparison and evaluation so long as they can be accurately adjusted over time.

However, the issue of adjustment leads to the classic quandary that we simply do not know whether poverty trends over time reflect actual changes or else errors of adjustment. The quandary is all the more problematic given that the incomes of populations in poor countries tend to be densely clustered around a typical line, resulting in an extreme sensitivity of poverty estimates to small adjustment to the line, whether or not these are accurate. For example, Székely et al (2000) apply sensitivity analysis to household survey data from 17 Latin American countries in the 1990s. By varying the poverty line parameters within reasonable boundaries, they estimated poverty rates as lying anywhere from 12.7 percent to 65.8 percent of the total population. Moreover, the ranking of countries with respect to poverty rates was also highly sensitive to their exercise. Hussain (2003) demonstrates a similar point with respect to urban poverty in China regarding both sensitivity and rank orderings across Chinese provinces. Helwege and Birch (2007: 6) note that, ironically, ‘the institutions that generate poverty data are well aware of how methodological choices affect poverty estimates. They simply have not established standardized approaches to measuring poverty.’

Moreover, poverty trends can differ depending on where or how a line is drawn. For instance, poverty was decreasing in China from 1998 to 2000 according to the unreasonably-low official poverty line (i.e. the one often cited in World Bank publications in the early 2000s), but it was rising according to the more reasonable absolute poverty line calculated by the Chinese National Bureau of Statistics (Hussain 2001, cited in Fischer 2005: 96-99). Similarly, based on their efforts to correct inconsistencies in Indian survey data from 1999-2000, Himanshu and Sen (2004a; 2004b) conclude that there had been little poverty reduction in India in the 1990s, contrary to the dominant consensus. Deaton and Kozel (2005: 117) contend that such claims are ‘frankly political’ and that there is good evidence that poverty fell. However, further findings presented by Himanshu (2007), based on new data from 2004-2005, confirmed his earlier results for the 1990s. Likewise, in their assessment of alternative poverty estimates from the World Bank and the United Nations for Latin America, Helwege and Birch (2007) advise caution in interpreting trends from any of these data.

Our ability to track poverty trends over time is critically based on our presumption that we can accurately measure all of the changing cost factors faced by poor households together with their changing patterns of livelihood and consumption, in contexts of often rapid social and economic change. Notably, the World Bank recently revised upwards its

estimates for global PPP poverty rates, including an upward adjustment of about 40 percent for China. This was based on new and improved cost of living data from 2005, which revealed a substantially higher cost of living for the poor in developing countries than was previously estimated from older data. However, Chen and Ravallion (2008) stress that, although poorer than previously thought, the world was no less successful in poverty reduction. They reach this conclusion simply by deflating the new PPP poverty lines by the official consumer price indices of each country back to 1981 (ibid: 14-15). In other words, the fact that the resultant trends were the same as before is merely an artefact of their assumption that the source of error was the same in 1981 as it was 2005. In so doing, they completely sidestep the question of whether the poor faced greater cost of living increases than suggested by the general consumer prices indices, which is quite possible given the notable increases in inequality in many countries over the same period.[1] Thus, while Chen and Ravallion provide a politically-convenient narrative, many intractable problems remain lost in past surveys.

Perhaps the most fundamental Achilles Heel of the income poverty approach is that education and health costs are mostly not included into the calculation of poverty lines. The exclusion is for technical reasons, given that they constitute large and highly irregular expenditure items across households and across time. However, they are included in the expenditures of surveyed households. This renders the comparison of poverty rates very difficult even across households, let alone across regions with different provisioning systems or else across time when the costing and supply of education or health care changes. Notably, increasing costs of education or health care, or else increasing school enrolments in schools that charge fees, would be invisible to most conventional poverty measures even though they effectively raise the poverty line for a large proportion of households, leading to an important source of underestimation of poverty rates in such contexts. This weakness is recognised in some of the literature, but it is also generally sidestepped in the same literature (e.g. see Ravallion 1992: 12, 28).

The innovative work by van Doorslaer et al (2005) is one exception in this regard. Merely by deducting catastrophic out-of-pocket payments for health care from the expenditures of households surveyed in eleven low and middle-income countries in Asia (most surveys taken around 2000), they show that poverty rates across Asia increased from 19.3 percent to 22 percent, or an increase of 78 million people. Notably, this does not take into account the repressed expenditure of poor people who would have otherwise spent more on necessary health care were it not for lack of funds, which is a problem that the authors consider but cannot measure.

As insightful as this work is, it is nonetheless based on insights from single surveys taken at one particular point in time. The results therefore offer no indication on how these considerations might alter our perception of trends over time, particularly in cases where education and health care costs have gone through substantial increase. For instance, falling income poverty rates in China since the beginning of the reform period do not factor into consideration the parallel shift from free to very expensive health care. More specifically, while general consumer prices in China remained more or less unchanged between 1997 and 2004, tuition fees and health care services were extremely inflationary, especially in some of the poorest western provinces such as Qinghai, where prices for health care services more than quadrupled (Fischer 2007: 128). By ignoring

[1] See Günther and Grimm (2007) for a discussion of this point in the case of Burkina Faso.

such dramatically changing price structures (as do Chen and Ravallion 2008), we simply do not know to what degree the appearance of improving poverty rates simply represents increasing relative prices for these essential services not included in the poverty line.

It is in this sense that the exclusive focus on conventional absolute income poverty measures in Goal One of the MDGs can be said to be biased against universalistic modes of social policy. A movement towards free education or health care financed through progressive taxation would not necessarily appear as decreasing income poverty even though it would lower the effective poverty line for households previously paying user fees. Similarly, it is difficult to calibrate poverty rates in any meaningful way across countries with very different provisioning systems, such as between Cuba with its free health care and education, and Vietnam, which had the greatest reliance on out-of-pocket payments among the Asian cases studied by van Doorslaer et al (2005). Indeed, in the latter case, much of the appearance of rising incomes might actually signify deteriorating social wealth.

II

The other side of the question on the poverty impact of the MDG paradigm is that the mechanisms by which MDGs might have effected poverty reduction are simply not clear. Notably, the major episodes that account for a large part of the commonly-cited absolute income poverty reduction over the last several decades had little to do with MDGs, e.g. China in the 1980s or the financially-driven global economic bubble from 2002 to 2008. Similarly, the mechanisms that could continue to drive poverty reduction now that this bubble has burst are even less clear and the MDGs provide little guidance. Hope is placed on the aid system. However, much of the recent literature on the impact of aid on growth and poverty offers little useful insight given that attention is rarely given to the major global structural processes that condition the impact of aid flows, such as the position of aid within global balance of payments asymmetries or the relationship of aid to national industrialisation strategies, as argued in Fischer (2009).

On this last point, there is no sense in discussing whether aid is good or bad for development, or whether more or less aid is required for development, outside of a much broader understanding of what has been required for development to happen, namely industrialisation and large sunk investments in urban and other infrastructure. These in turn usually require that developing countries run trade deficits rather than surpluses. In an earlier developmental epoch, aid was understood as enabling poor countries to cover such trade deficits, as best represented by the critical role of aid in the balance of payments of South Korea well into the 1970s. The recent exceptionality of China might seem to counter this rule, although its replication or sustainability is questionable if only because the world economy has probably already reached its limits of disequilibria.

The role of aid must be considered in this light, because aid will have very different macroeconomic implications depending on whether a receiving country is in current account deficit or surplus. Moreover, even if a country is in deficit, aid would presumably have very different effects on growth depending on whether the deficit (or surplus) is due to productive investment and accumulation, or simply due to terms of trade and other contractionary shocks, or to austerity and structural adjustment programmes. Indeed, many of the arguments on aid and growth are rendered trivial by their lack of consideration of these broader structural considerations.

Similarly, it is meaningless to argue that large increases in aid would produce better development (i.e. Sachs 2005) without examining the international mechanisms set in place to deliver aid, which for much of the last three decades have encouraged a haemorrhaging of human, physical and financial resources from poor to rich countries. The same can be said of arguments that aid effectiveness could be improved by improving incentive mechanisms within poor countries (i.e. Easterly 2006), irrespective of the globalised incentive mechanisms that play a strong role in disorienting local incentives. The frivolity of these arguments is best highlighted by the massive US current account deficit, many times the size of the annual aid budget of the OECD countries and largely financed by the developing world.

More pertinent is the fact that, in the midst of a crushing depression in the 1980s and into much of the 1990s, Africa was experiencing net outflows of capital that far exceeded any inflows of aid. Collier (2007: 91-93) discusses this point to some extent but does not place it within the context of the systemic shifts in global economic structures and ideologies that produced these outcomes, in particular the 1982 debt crisis and subsequent structural adjustments. Similar obfuscations are committed throughout the cross-country regression literature on aid; data from two entirely different epochs of development are usually merged together without differentiating the radically different structured settings in which aid might or might not work.

It is in this sense that the MDG paradigm has lost sight of the major global structural processes that have been shaping development up to the present. A critical shift occurred in the late 1970s, after which the US economy decidedly became the world's greatest debtor and aid flows became a trickle in comparison to successive waves of capital flows from poor to rich countries. Aid has since been futile in producing any significant degree of net global redistribution.

III

In terms of what should replace the MDGs after 2015, it is important to recall three main criticisms of the MDGs; that they do not pay attention to employment or inequality, and that they depoliticise development debates.[2] Of these three, de-politicisation underlies the weakness of the MDGs with respect to employment and inequality.

The reasons for this might seem semantic, but they are not. They are rooted in the fact that policy choices are very political, even though they are often couched in seductively technocratic terms. De-politicisation therefore often serves to hide underlying agendas. Moreover, the emphasis in the MDGs on absolute measures and the implicit bias towards targeting predisposes the MDG agenda to be co-opted by a particular orthodox policy paradigm. Underlying this has been a subtle shift in the implied meaning of universalism, from integrated and de-commoditised forms of social security and service provisioning financed indirectly and progressively, to universal coverage regardless of how such coverage provided or financed. De-politicisation renders such shifts hegemonic by stifling debate on alternatives.

Social policy is paramount in this regard. As argued by Mkandawire (2005), social policies are fundamentally political exercises given that they are the basis of instituting citizenship rights and articulating the main mechanisms of integration and segregation within societies. Moreover, social policies comprise some of the most

[2] For elaboration on these three and many other critiques, see Saith (2006).

powerful tools for addressing poverty, vulnerability and inequality. Nonetheless, Mkandawire highlights the irony that, historically, poverty alleviation was most successful when it was not necessarily the primary focus of social policies, as opposed to other priorities such as late industrialisation, state consolidation, demand stabilisation, or political cohesion.

Within social policy, the choice of provisioning modes is critical given that targeted modes can lead to a variety of perverse outcomes. The errors of under-coverage and leakage are the most commonly discussed. Indeed, precision in poverty measurement becomes ever more crucial precisely when social policy regimes shift towards greater selectivity, such as under the social safety net approach of the World Bank. However, as argued by Mkandawire (2005), poor countries also have among the least administrative capacity to be able to target precisely.

Other perverse outcomes of targeting reside in its political and social implications. Targeting usually entrenches segmentation in provisioning systems, which in turn reinforces social and economic stratification by removing middle classes and their political voice from the services that are supplied to and accessed by the poor. The resulting political economy paradox was best expressed by Richard Titmuss (although often attributed to Amartya Sen), that the targeting of services to the poor usually results in poor services. Insofar as we view poverty as fundamentally rooted in dynamic social processes of stratification, differentiation and subordination, these implications are potentially very counterproductive for any long term strategy of poverty reduction.

Nonetheless, the MDG paradigm is well served by targeting given its focus on absolute indicators (whether in income, health or education) rather than relative (i.e. inequality) indicators. For instance, it is relatively easy to raise school enrolments, but much more difficult to raise the quality of schooling, particularly in ways that would significantly alter the employment trajectories of students. The last objective is especially difficult to induce when increased enrolments are achieved in stigmatized and lower quality schools designated for poor people within a segmented education system. Indeed, if the quantity and quality of employment and the level of wages faced by the poor are not addressed by poverty reduction strategies, the expectations raised by educational improvements might lead to frustration and alienation in the medium term.

This has precisely been the dilemma of the much-lauded Progresa/Oportunidades conditional cash transfer programme in Mexico. The programme has shown some degree of success in raising consumption levels, certain health outcomes, and school attendance and enrolment rates (Skoufias 2005). These results were obtained with relatively low operational expenses, in large part because the programme was implemented through an already well-established network of clinics and schools servicing the targeted rural populations (distinct from the subsidised network servicing the urban middle classes). However, even its proponents, such as Levy (2006), admit that increased coverage was achieved at the cost of lower quality within this overstretched and segmented network. Notably, the programme had no impact on the academic performance of students or on their later local employment prospects. Thus, while it had a positive impact on absolute human development indicators, it did so at the cost of entrenching the segmentation of provisioning systems and possibly accentuated social stratification as a result.

The obvious rejoinder is that, in the short or even medium term, universalistic modes of social policy would be impossible to achieve within the starkly unequal social

context of Mexico or most other developing countries. Hence, we must do what we can now. However, we must also ask why universalistic social policy is not even on the agenda as an explicit long term goal. For instance, the recent *World Development Report 2004* on services makes no explicit reference to universalism. Instead, it offers a strong endorsement of New Public Management approaches to social policy, promoting choice and client power through various mixtures of decentralisation, marketisation, user fees and vouchers, in most cases implicitly based on targeting. Yet, as argued by Dunleavy et al (2006), even in rich countries with well-developed administrative capacities, the policy complexity introduced by such approaches generally led to a reduction in citizen competence and the tide has since turned in ‘leading-edge’ countries. More importantly, insofar as we recognise high levels of inequality as problematic, the censor of universalistic social policy from mainstream agendas implies abandoning at the outset one of our most powerful tools for dealing with inequality.

Conclusion

In sum, the challenge of the MDG paradigm does not lie in measuring the impact of poverty reduction, but in seriously re-engaging with development debates about how to create genuinely redistributive structures and institutions at national and global levels. This is a political exercise given that it cannot be resolved through technocratic solutions, but requires choices to be made about the types of societies we wish to inhabit and how we wish to treat each other within and across these societies. These choices are being made in any case under the depoliticising guise of the MDGs, which reinforce tendencies towards targeting and segmentation in the name of urgency and expediency. These choices need to be re-politicised, ideally within the domestic sphere of developing countries themselves, as a means to break out of the TINA hangover (i.e. ‘There Is No Alternative’). Moreover, there is also a case to be made that such re-politicisation needs to be backed up by a genuine revival, in research and in practice, of universalistic modes of social policy as viable means of dealing simultaneously with processes of poverty and inequality. This is because real political choice is very difficult to cultivate within a context of starkly unequal and segregated societies.

In other words, we should not fool ourselves into thinking à la Martin Wolf that we are Keynesian simply because we support aid or expansionary spending. More fundamentally, we need to address the erosion of decent employment and wages and the increasing segmentation of social security systems throughout the developing world if we are to truly embrace a pro-poor agenda, i.e. not one that merely reduces absolute poverty regardless of inequality (as per the definition of pro-poor growth by Besley and Cord 2005), but one that actually promotes equitable sharing without double standards. This has been a struggle in both North and South alike, although it is important to recognise that rich countries benefit from a certain degree of hypocrisy at the international level. In good times and especially in bad, they allow themselves a range of macroeconomic and social policies that have been generally ostracised by the leading international financial institutions from the range of permissible development options that poor countries can choose from. Hence, perhaps the guiding dictum for the next incarnation of the MDGs should not be ‘Make Poverty History (Part Two),’ but rather, ‘Do unto others as you would have them do unto you.’

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