

GLOBAL DEVELOPMENT GOALS: IF AT ALL, WHY, WHEN AND HOW?

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ABSTRACT

We raise some basic conceptual questions regarding global development goals: Why have them at all? What function, if any, might they serve, and under what conditions could they do so successfully? Based on our answers to these questions, we identify serious inadequacies in the contemporary approach to development goals and relate these to weaknesses in how the goals were conceived and formulated. Despite these failings, higher-level goals may play a useful role if the practical approach to them is embedded in a holistic and integrated vision of a better world. Focusing on goals rather than targets opens needed space for flexibility, innovation, and fuller democratic accountability.

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I. Introduction

As the period of the Millennium Development Goals (MDGs) comes to an end and that of the Sustainable Development Goals begins, overarching global goals appear to have become the very business of development, referred to continuously, if addressed inconsistently. Although we live in an 'era of goals' it seems that there have been few if any systematic efforts to answer the most elementary conceptual questions that should be asked in order to make sense of this enterprise: Why have global development goals at all? What function, if any, might they serve, and under what conditions could they do so successfully? What might a theory of development goals tell us about how such goals, if they exist, should be formulated and approached? Can such reasoning help us to assess and to approach the global development goals of our time? Our aim is to sketch some answers to these questions.

II. Theory of Goals

a. What are goals for?

An old joke involves an economist asking: "It works in practice, but does it work in theory?". Our question is slightly different: "How would we know if it works in practice, or how to make it work, given that we have no theory?".

What is a goal? A goal is defined by the Oxford English Dictionary as an "object to which effort or ambition is directed". Why is such an object needed? Inspection of the role of goals in individual lives as well as in collective endeavors suggests at least the following three possibilities:

1. Epistemic role: A goal may provide a cognitive reference point and thereby also a framework for organizing information in relation to that reference point. For instance, the goal of 'learning to swim' draws attention to the need to 'learn' (a process involving stages) to 'swim' (a complex task involving different aspects, which can be specified in more or less demanding ways). The still more specific goal of 'learning to swim by next summer' entails that the timing of the process of learning is also relevant to the description of whether or not the goal is attained. The specification of a goal requires the identification of objects in the form of processes desirable to adhere to or states desirable to attain, which in turn can carry implications regarding necessary or inadmissible actions. Such descriptions can be crucial not only for individual agents to define and interpret their actions but for agents to compare their actions to one another and to identify what has enabled, or will enable, specific actions to be more or less successful in promoting a goal.³
2. Motivational role: A goal may play a role in motivation of agents. The very specification of a goal may give rise to a motivation to attain it because it is viewed as intrinsically desirable to

³ For an apposite discussion of how varying conceptions of goals and rules define distinct frameworks for understandings and actions see the discussion of Jean Piaget's observations concerning children's games (the marbles of Neuchâtel) in Piore (1995).

attain a goal once specified (especially if that goal is arrived at through a particular process which gives it such significance). In a social context the fact that the same goal is held by others may help to motivate the actions of individual agents, for instance because they wish to act in consonance with others or to do better. Alternatively, specific extrinsic rewards may be tied to its attainment in order to create “incentives”. In this case, the motivation is provided by the conditioning of substantive rewards upon goal attainment rather than by the specification of the goal in itself.

3. Coordination role: A goal may become the focus of coordination between persons. Decentralized efforts may result in poorer outcomes without such coordination. For example, in some situations of interdependence the specification of a goal may help to align expectations and efforts in a manner that leads to fuller success. For instance, in the development context the avoidance of duplication and waste in aid efforts may be thought to provide such a case. The idea of coordination around a ‘focal point’ in game theory provides one illustration of this general idea.

These different roles played by goals may of course be combined. For example, a goal possessed by multiple agents participating in a ‘benchmarking’ exercise may involve all three roles⁴. The goal may provide a way to organize information relevant to the comparison of actions and their efficacy, provide a comparative framework within which to identify more and less successful agents (which may in turn provide the basis of either intrinsic or extrinsic rewards), and provide a focus for coordination between agents that may influence their actions (ranging from the sharing of relevant knowledge to pooling efforts at innovation or at creating shared inputs). It is an empirical question whether any one of these reasons for specifying a goal is likely to influence actions and to provide a rationale for the goal in practice.

b. What is a Properly Formulated Goal?

In order to formulate a goal properly attention must be paid to the following distinctions:

1. Means vs. Ends

Goals must be distinguished from the means of attaining them. Not every goal is an ultimate goal. Some goals are causally intermediate toward other goals. Nevertheless every goal, including an intermediate goal, can be distinguished from the means of attaining it. The distinction is crucial in that to focus on means as if they were ends may have costs, in particular by leading to lesser attainment of the ends that are ultimately valued by directing efforts in directions that do not promote those ends.⁵ To distinguish means from ends is not only a matter for causal analysis but it is also a matter for evaluative judgment as a means can also be an end (and therefore an end can also be a means, although not all ends are means nor are all means ends). Thus, there is no generally mutually exclusive way of

⁴ On such cases see Sabel (1994) and subsequent literature. For some conceptual context, see also Sabel (2012).

⁵ On the contrast between intrinsically and instrumentally valuable goals in development see e.g. Sen 1999.

categorizing states or objects as means or ends, as they must be identified according to the purpose at hand. (We use the word end here in a manner that is permissive in one respect and restrictive in another: An end can be identified either with an intermediate or an ultimate goal. However, an end must be deemed valuable in itself to attain. Thus, placing a human being on the moon could be a goal as well as an end but building a launch-pad is likely best viewed as a mere means to an end, even if it is an intermediate goal. Not every goal must be an end but there are deep-seated reasons, inherent in the very idea of an end, to view every end as a goal.)

While being an end, a goal may still not exhaust the ends that there are, and indeed may gain its status as an end from the fact that it contributes to or is constitutive of a still larger end. For example, good health is a constituent element of 'flourishing'. It would be wholly reasonable to abjure the view that good health is simply a means to the end of flourishing and rather to view good health and flourishing as both ends even if the latter is a higher-level end to which the former contributes (and indeed of which it is constitutive.⁶ The relationship between health and flourishing is not that health is a causal way station on the road to flourishing but that it is a constitutive, for human beings (although not exhaustive) of what flourishing is. Not only can individual goals can be embraced as end-goals without rejecting a still more capacious understanding of the end-goal of which they are constitutive, but indeed these very often must be embraced together in order to make sense of either.

A rather different point is that an important precondition for the formulation of "sensible" goals is an adequate understanding of the causal links between the goal one wishes to attain and the means with which one intends to attain it. For example, if one's goal is to live a long and healthy life, one must have some basic understanding of what lifestyle would be more likely to lead to this, e.g. what food is healthy and not, and the extent to which one would need to exercise. Proper formulation of a goal must therefore attend both to valuational considerations and to determining that there is "sufficient" prospect that there exists a causal pathway to the realization of the goals, without which they could not plausibly be deemed attainable. There is some room for fuzziness here. It may not be clear that a goal is attainable without it being clear that the goal is unattainable either: even if the goal is not fully attainable it may be partially attainable, and as such it may be reasonable to adopt the goal. The goal of "putting a human being on the moon before 1970" might *ex ante* have been of such a type as might be the goal of "ending poverty in all its forms everywhere by 2030". The motivational impetus provided (or not) by the specification and acceptance of goals is itself one of the relevant causal facts to be recognized in making such an assessment.

2. Intermediate vs. Final Goals and Means-Goals vs. End Goals

Goals can be, as already mentioned, either ultimate goals or intermediate goals that are 'way stations' to an ultimate goal. A goal may be intermediate in the sense that it is seen as being desirable (or indeed necessary) to achieve en route to achieving the ultimate goal, for either evaluative or for causal reasons. For instance, to halve poverty may be causally necessary en route to eliminating poverty, as well as

⁶ See Barry and Reddy (2008) for a discussion, in a different context, of the concept of goals and master-goals, drawing on Pogge (2000) and Tinbergen (1952).

being evaluatively desirable, although less desirable than eliminating it. In contrast, building a launch-pad has causal rather than evaluative significance as an intermediate goal en route to putting a human being on the moon.

Thus, an intermediate goal may gain its significance from being an end rather than a means, from being merely a means or from both roles. To explore this point further, consider a person who has the goal of 'participating in the triathlon' (which demands swimming, cycling and running). This goal may require 'learning to swim' as an intermediate goal to 'participating in the triathlon'. In this case, 'learning to swim' may be an end in itself even if it is one that is *also* subsumed by 'participating in the triathlon'. In contrast, 'acquiring a good pair of running shoes' may be an intermediate goal to 'participating in the triathlon' which is stated in terms of means rather than ends. We might distinguish between means-goals (intermediate goals specified in terms of means) from end-goals (intermediate or final goals specified in terms of ends). An 'intermediate end goal' refers to something deemed desirable in itself but also not sufficient in itself to constitute a final (or cumulative) end goal. For instance, the goal of living a long and healthy life certainly includes within it the idea of having a healthy childhood. Some intermediate goals may be both means-goals and ends-goals. Indeed, having a healthy childhood is not only an end in itself (and partially conceptually constitutive of the larger end of living a long and healthy life) but is also a means toward that end (for example because the failure to have a healthy childhood may make it empirically less likely that one will have a healthy adulthood).

3. Goals vs. Constraints

A goal must also be distinguished from the constraints that may have to be satisfied when attempting to attain that goal. In some measure, this is a matter of linguistic convention. For instance, on one description the goal of being as snappy a dresser as possible may be subject to the constraint of spending no more than one's available resources, whereas on another description the goal may be 'to be as snappy a dresser as possible without spending more than one's available resources'.⁷ It seems most natural to adopt the first formulation in recognition of the possibility of making a distinction between aims and impediments. However, the second formulation does have the benefit of providing an encompassing view of the problem. There is also a subtle relationship between constraints and means. An important form of constraint is to stay within the available means and the expansion of these means over time can be a means of alleviating constraints. Yet, not all constraints take the form of a limit on the means available to solve a problem, as some constraints are constituted by facts of other kinds. Newton's laws, for example, present constraints that affect the possible trajectories of a rocket. Similarly, social, political, economic or geographical facts may influence what is possible to achieve in a period of time in human societies.

A specific kind of constraint is presented by 'initial conditions'. Since what is initial is contextual, in an inter-temporal context these can be viewed as the conditions present in each moment and perhaps shaped by prior actions. Such dependence must be recognized when a sequence of goals (which could

⁷ Such a shift in perspective is precisely what is entailed in the mechanics of constrained (e.g. Lagrangian) maximization, which involves the construction of a modified maxim and incorporating into a new objective function both the original goal and a penalty for violation of a constraint.

be intermediate and ultimate goals or goals of different degrees of intermediateness) is considered.⁸ That there is a certain number of persons present in the world at the moment, needing to be fed, housed or provided sufficient water, and potentially growing in number according to the social or economic conditions influencing fertility and mortality, provides one example.

That many ostensible economic and social constraints are in fact potentially changeable and therefore not constraints in the true sense but rather the conditional consequence of a particular narrative 'framing' of a problem is yet another important issue to consider. For example, a government budget may be changeable to a degree.⁹

c. How should goals be pursued?

What does the specification of a goal imply as far as what actions should be taken to achieve it? It seems to be attendant in the very idea of having a goal that one ought to take at least weak efforts to attain it. Anything else would appear to constitute a form of incoherence (see e.g. Cantor and Blanton 1996).¹⁰ On the other hand, it is wholly plausible that the appropriate effort to attain a certain goal may have to be determined on the basis of balancing against other considerations, including what other goals and what non-goal objectives (e.g. procedural demands which may or may not straightforwardly

⁸ The inter-temporal utility maximization problem of neoclassical growth theory in economics (see e.g. Blanchard and Fischer (1989)) provides an interesting and in respects paradigmatic illustration of this ensemble of ideas. In it, there is only one ultimate end ('utility'), which is generated in a stream extending from moment to moment. Capital is formed through the repression of consumption and thus of current utility and is the means through which goods that may be consumed are ultimately generated. The constraints that are relevant are the initial capital stock, the production function governing the transformation of resources into outputs, and other descriptive facts (such as those governing population growth or technological change). Interestingly, there is no scope here for an intermediate goal (understood for instance as a level capital stock attained at a specific time) unless it is redundant, in the sense that it constitutes a level of capital which it would be optimal to possess at a future point as a result of the optimal program of savings. The 'terminal problem' of neoclassical capital theory, in which it is desired to attain a specific goal (i.e. an 'intermediate goal') at a point in time constitutes an operational problem for planners operating with a finite planning horizon but loses its significance when it is viewed as being nested within a larger (extended or infinite horizon) problem. The ultimate goal (e.g. the maximization of a discounted sum of 'utility') that must be referred to in order to make sense of the trajectory to be pursued at all 'intermediate' points. If an intermediate goal is specified it must be done with reference to the ultimate goal, in which case it also loses its relevance, unless there are auxiliary arguments that are brought to bear (e.g. limits on the planner's ability to foresee conditions beyond a point, which give reason to aim for a certain terminal capital stock at the end of a planning period as an operational goal). One must, however, pay attention to possibilities for linguistic confusion. Over a finite time horizon, a desired fixed end point (or goal) such as a terminal capital stock can also be viewed as a constraint of the problem with the requirement of optimization being to get to that end point at least cost.

⁹ See Reddy (2005).

¹⁰ Propounding a goal and accepting it for oneself are distinct activities. One can define a goal or it can be defined by others. While some studies find that participation in goal setting at an individual level improves individual and group performance at attaining the goal (e.g. Erez and Arad 1986), others find that it makes little difference (e.g. Locke 1996). In the context of global development, it is often thought that acceptance of an aim or a method of achieving it by stakeholders (frequently rendered by the term "ownership") is secured by "participation" (see e.g. Cornwall and Brock 2005) but whether and when this is so is an empirical question.

be defined in terms of goal-fulfillment – including the aim of not being the sort of agent whose every action is determined by goals) are present.¹¹

If the having a goal implies at least weak effort to attain the goal then in any temporally extended context it would seem to also entail a consequent role for a plan - an envisioned sequence of actions that is anticipated to bring about the goal (or at least to increase the likelihood of its being attained). Having a goal would seem to suggest a role for anticipated actions to achieve the goal and thus for *some* degree of planning, even if the appropriate extent of specificity of such plans and their role in guiding or constraining the actions of different actors would seem to depend on empirical considerations of diverse sorts including the extent and nature of uncertainty and the epistemic limitations of the agents. (See Heuty and Reddy, 2008a and 2008b). A highly abstract ‘master goal’ such as ‘flourishing’ has fewer particular implications in relation to planning than does a more specific goal (such as ‘living a long and healthy life’, which may for example entail recommendations in relation to medical care, exercise or nutrition) let alone a still more specific one (such as ‘undertaking the triathlon’). Even if there is an appropriate role for plans in guiding or constraining actions, for functional reasons it may be greater for certain actors than for others. ‘Invisible hand’ arguments, for example, may suggest limits on what it is appropriate to place in the domain of ‘dirigiste’ planning even if some role is accepted for it (see e.g. Lal (1985), Hausman (2009)). For example, it may be thought that actors such as individuals and firms ought to plan but that in contrast national economies should not be subject to such planning or that its should be contained (as in historical arguments for ‘indicative planning’ (see e.g. Landauer 1944).

d. Are goals always of use?

We have identified above some roles that may be played by goals. It does not follow that goals are always justified by these roles. Identifying and pursuing goals may have undesirable effects or otherwise prove an unattractive way of organizing activities. It is straightforward to recognize that even reasonable human beings often give a limited role to goals in their lives. There must be reasons for this, some of which may also apply to collective endeavours. One of the reasons why this might be the case is what one might call the paradox of specification: on the one hand highly abstract goals (such as to pursue ‘flourishing’ or for that matter ‘development’) which are typically closer to being end-goals lack sufficient directive implication. In contrast, highly specific goals with great directive implication such as to ‘eat spinach once a week’ or for that matter to raise official development assistance to a specified level, which are typically much closer to being means-goals (indeed it is rather implausible that they are end-goals) may be initially adopted because they seem sensible but may end up appearing less so. This may be either because of unanticipated events or new knowledge that changes their perceived causal sufficiency or salience, or because of how changes in circumstances affect the evaluative importance that it is deemed reasonable to attach to one goal as against another. For instance, we may learn something that causes us freshly to doubt the efficacy of spinach or aid, or we may because of a change in circumstances revise the weight we have reason to give to eating well as opposed to looking after an ailing mother, or to raising aid allocations as opposed to mitigating climate emissions (We might refer to the latter instances as shifts within the evaluative ‘container’). The comprehensive goals that are

¹¹ On the first, see Sen (1985) and on the second see Slote (1989).

conceptually best-founded are empirically least directive and the contentful goals that are empirically most directive are often conceptually least well-founded, or may end up being so, and this may create a real cost in terms of the attainment of the comprehensive goals that are ultimately valued. Thus for example, goals that generate ‘accountability’ because they are highly specific may from this point of view serve us rather less well.

Goals that are more comprehensive, such as development itself, allow a perspective of holism¹², which provides for flexibility for both empirical and evaluative reasons, even if this comes at the price of being seemingly less directive. The role of goals in this context may be highly specific, responding for instance to specific behavioral or motivational demands. To fix ideas we may think of the case of an individual who has specific goals for improving health. The goal of improving health may be too vague and the goal of swimming regularly may be too specific but the goal of incorporating exercise into daily life allows for some shifts in the specification of the goal from time to time (e.g. from swimming to running) for various reasons that may be appropriate, including the resolution of uncertainties (e.g. whether one will like swimming or running regularly more), new causal knowledge (e.g. concerning which exercise is better for health) or shifts in contexts and constraints that change the costs and benefits attached to different means of achieving the comprehensive goals (e.g. whether a swimming pool opens or closes in the vicinity). In a shifting environment, flexibility in both the conception of what appropriate goals are and of how they could be best attained is invaluable (see Reddy and Heuty (2008a and 2008b)). A related issue, arising in implementation, is that to advance goals simultaneously will often require taking note of causal interdependencies in the way in which specific instruments affect various targets or goals. Pursuing goals separately can lead to inefficiencies or even conflicts. A holistic vision in conception as well as implementation draws attention to the need to take note of such interdependencies. An example may be that having a rewarding personal life and a rewarding professional life may require not merely an appropriate “balance” but to choose means of pursuing the individual goals that diminish the conflict (e.g. to live near to one’s workplace, or to place one’s children in a crèche at or near one’s workplace so that one can see them more often (In the global development context we may think of the conflict between maximizing growth and increasing sustainability, for instance, which can be alleviated through developing clean technologies).

The focus on specific goals can also lead to the neglect of others. This can be a particular concern when certain aims, even if plainly important, are difficult to formulate in a manner that is observable or verifiable but the available monitoring methods lead to a focus on those things that are. This is an issue that has been of great interest in economic theory in the last thirty years, in particular in the literature on incomplete contracting (e.g., Hart and Moore (1988), Hart (1995)) which takes as its starting point such difficulties, and explores the consequences for formal contracting (which in general is expected to lead to inefficient outcomes in such a setting, even if this can be mitigated through specific adaptations). The idea that if something cannot be counted than it does not count or more generally that if it cannot

¹² Contrast the description in Rist (2014) of the era of global development goals as one in which Development is ‘in shreds’.

be straightforwardly observed or verified¹³ that it does not count, can have rather serious costs by leading to inattention to those desirable actions or consequences that cannot be subject to such monitoring and must therefore be promoted in other ways, if they are to be promoted at all. (Because something is unobservable or unverifiable doesn't mean that nothing is known about how to promote it. Indeed, the premise of the incomplete contracting literature is quite the opposite). Consider for instance the idea that raising children well, in the school or the home, requires treating them in a loving manner. Such treatment is necessarily imperfectly observable and verifiable. To the extent that a regime of teachers; or caregivers' supervision focused on measurable indicators of the quality of child raising would succeed in modifying their behavior it might also lead to neglect of this important idea. At a bare minimum it would be unable to promote it. Such a regime, by crowding out concern for the intangible due to the fetishism of the tangible, would very likely come at some (difficult to enumerate) cost. In contrast, personal or indeed institutional attention to the climate of "values" evinced in caregiving, teaching and learning, however, immeasurable this is, might well have a positive effect on children. In the international context, the development of norms, rules, shared culture and institutional orders may provide a similar example.

Although they do not have to be, goals are most often formulated in terms of narrowly conceived 'outcome' consequences. However, both individuals and groups may have reason to embrace procedural aims that cannot be adequately encompassed by such formulations. For example, an individual may have reason to adopt ideas of personal integrity or virtue which either encourage (or mandate) or discourage (or prohibit) specific actions, or help her develop qualities in herself which will make it possible for her to respond in certain ways to challenging situations. A society may have reason to adopt specific procedural values, for example related to respect for human rights or assigning a role to democratic decision-making, which may compete with or even override outcome considerations. It is possible to phrase such procedural concerns as goals that should be respected or promoted, placing them alongside goals defined purely in terms of outcomes. Doing so would capture something that is not when describing these procedural aims as constraints (an idea without inherent normative content). On the other hand, doing so might fail to recognize the sense in which to be effective and meaningful such concerns must have the character of deep-seated commitments, continuously present in persons, contexts and in institutions, and creating a demand for a certain priority, rather than of ambitions that can be satisfactorily achieved to lesser or greater degree (for a related contrast, between sympathy and commitment, see Sen (1977)). Such procedural concerns might better be advanced in terms of procedural criteria for the assessment of interpersonal relations or of societal norms or political culture (see e.g. Forst (2002)).

Inattention to procedural values is intrinsically undesirable but also very often gives rise to undesirable outcomes. In the collective context, the procedural value of democratic decision-making implies leaving goals and plans open to revision and is thus in tension with a target-centric perspective. Such openness to revision is *also* needed to produce desirable outcomes because the world and our knowledge of it change over time and because to implement policies effectively requires ongoing public perception that

¹³ The distinction between the two concepts is that observability has to do with seeing or knowing, verifiability has to do with demonstrating to the satisfaction of a third party (e.g. a court).

they are legitimate. Democracy must involve some freedom to revise and even repudiate goals or the more specific interpretations attached to them, as time passes or as the issues considered by one group are considered by another, for both procedural and consequentialist reasons.

Whether there are risks attached to embracing goals (especially if one fails to attain them) in terms of discouragement or disillusionment, is an interesting question to consider. Self-knowledge in this regard may be part of what leads people to be cautious in adopting goals.

e. How should we assess success?

How should whether goals made a useful contribution be assessed? This could be done in various ways, which could in some instances lead to rather different conclusions. Let us consider conventional outcome goals (as opposed to procedural ones) according to some of these criteria. We may describe the different possibilities formally as follows.

Let $\emptyset(t)$ represent the actual level of attainment at time t of a measure that is subject to a goal, to be known at all times. The starting time is assumed to be 0 and higher levels of \emptyset are assumed to be more desirable. Let $\emptyset^*(T) (> \emptyset(0))$ represent the goal that is sought to be attained by time T . Among those assessment criteria, which either have been or might be entertained in the context of development goals are the following:

1. *Shortfall Assessment* - Outcomes Attained vs. Outcomes Specified: The most frequently employed method is to compare the outcomes actually attained with the goals, i.e. $\emptyset(t)$ is compared with $\emptyset^*(T)$. For example, success may be declared if the former is sufficiently close to or indeed exceeds the latter, i.e. $\emptyset(t) \geq \emptyset^*(T) - \delta$ where $\delta \geq 0$ is a "sufficiently small" parameter defined by the evaluator's judgment.
3. *Progress Assessment* - Outcomes Attained vs. Starting Points: Another approach (which has been widely used in the MDG context) has been to compare the outcomes attained with the starting point, i.e. $\emptyset(T)$ is compared with $\emptyset(0)$. For example, sufficient success may be declared if the former is sufficiently greater than the latter, i.e. $\emptyset(T) \geq \emptyset(0) + \Delta$ where $\Delta \gg 0$ is a parameter defined by judgment.
4. *Counterfactual Assessment* - Outcomes Attained vs. Counterfactuals: Still another approach would be to compare the outcomes actually realized with those that would have been realized under some other specification of the goal or indeed if no goal had been specified, i.e. $\emptyset(t)$ is compared with $\emptyset^C(t)$ where the latter refers to the outcome thought most likely to arise under some counterfactual (for example, continuance of the trend *ex ante* of adoption of the goal).

It is clear that the first two criteria can coincide operationally (if $\emptyset^*(T) - \delta = \emptyset(0) + \Delta$) but their motivational underpinnings are different. Although there is an exercise of judgment involved in all three criteria, it is in the first two cases confined to determining the evaluative criteria for the determination of success (i.e. the size of the parameters δ and Δ). In contrast, counterfactual assessment involves an exercise of *causal* judgment, concerning what would have happened in the absence of the adoption of

the goal. The first two criteria relate to whether and to what extent the distance between the starting point and the goal have been attained. In contrast, the third, counterfactual, criterion relates to the entirely different question of whether the existence of the goal has made any difference to its attainment. As this is our question in this paper, counterfactual assessment is our focus.

It is surprising that studies of the MDGs have tended to focus on the first two criteria despite their lack of conceptual relevance to assessing whether the existence of the goals has had any effect. Progress assessment is the approach taken in the most recent UN report assessing progress towards the MDGs (UN 2015). What's more, the Secretary General Ban Ki-moon's statement in the report that the "...MDGs helped to lift more than one billion people out of extreme poverty..." (UN 2015:3) indicates that the UN is attributing poverty reduction in the world to the MDGs. Unfortunately, this attribution implicitly draws upon a counterfactual comparison that is not in fact undertaken.

In practice, the identification of counterfactuals often relies on empirical aids to judgment. For example, in the MDG context data on trends in outcomes even before the MDGs were announced or adopted are pertinent to identifying what might have taken place even in the absence of the goals. Studies by Friedman (2013) and Fukuda-Parr et al. (2013) are the only studies to our knowledge that employ a method of counterfactual assessment to systematically assess the impact of the MDGs on trends in poverty reduction.

f. Determining Contributions and Responsibilities

The question of how to determine whose actions can promote (or have promoted) a goal is a crucial one for those who believe that instituting goals can aid in "accountability" and raises different issues discussed so far. Even if goals are viewed as a collective responsibility, it may be of great help in attaining them (or in determining why they have failed to be attained) to be able to identify whose efforts, or what combination of efforts by different actors, can best ensure that they are achieved. There may of course be many alternate combinations of such efforts that could potentially suffice to attain the goals, which compounds the prescriptive problem of assigning roles and responsibilities, even if the descriptive problem is solved. Unfortunately, the attribution of prospective or retrospective contributions to a particular outcome is typically a very difficult exercise, because of empirical uncertainties and interdependencies of various kinds (Reddy and Heuty 2008a and 2008b). The shortfall may have arisen due to the failures of one or another actor, or of more than one actor or for that matter due to factors in actor's control (such as "nature"). Even if it is possible to determine that a particular set of actors was responsible for an outcome, or the failure to achieve it, identifying fractional contributions to that success or failure is an exercise that is altogether more complex and indeed very often conceptually infeasible. We may think, for instance of such cases of determining 'where a child's upbringing went wrong or even of 'why the crime rate is so high', or even of 'why was the impact of the hurricane so great'? These difficulties of attribution exist for purely inferential reasons¹⁴, quite apart from the evaluative difficulties involved in determining relative moral responsibility even if causal

¹⁴ See Pearl (2000).

responsibility is resolved¹⁵, and the political economy reasons that may cause such responsibilities to be claimed or rejected by specific actors (treated further below). When multiple actors are involved in bringing about an outcome, determining who is responsible for a shortfall may be difficult, due to the combination of these three kinds of reasons.

The idea that development goals lead to ‘accountability’ must be accordingly treated with considerable skepticism. It is hard to see in the record of development goals so far (and in particular of the MDGs) many cases in which they have helped to encourage the existence of a culture of determining responsibility or indeed has led to concrete assignments of responsibility for shortfalls (as opposed to identifying the occurrence of shortfalls). Presumably part of the reason is that difficulties of causal inference are present and part is that difficulties of attribution of responsibilities. There may be specific cases in which egregious failings on the part of some party (we might think, for instance, about undernutrition in North Korea as a possible empirical case) can be attributed to a particular party, but it is far from obvious how development goals have helped in this attribution. Correspondingly, it is not at all obvious that they have helped to mobilize action on the part of specific parties either (with possible particular exceptions, in the form of specific targets or indicators of considerable importance which had not previously received much attention, such as maternal mortality).

g. Application to Global Goals: Some Aspects

We have presented an account of what role we might expect goals to perform. Having done so, we can now take up the question of what role goals we might expect them to serve in the context of global development.

All of the considerations we have laid out until this point are relevant. If goals are to be justified it must be possible to make sense of them in terms of ultimate goals, of which they are a part constitutively or to which they contribute causally. Moreover, in defining them attention must be given to diverse practical considerations such as that they have sufficient (and the appropriate type) of directive usefulness without becoming confining impediments. However, even the most perfect definition of goals cannot suffice to ensure their usefulness in implementation for which a range of additional considerations -- for instance related to the likelihood that empirical actors will respond in particular ways to norms, resource availability or incentives -- must be brought in. The epistemic, motivational and coordinational concerns relevant to justifying and formulating goals in general must be paid attention here, in determining not only what goals to adopt but how more specifically to interpret and implement them.

What is the overarching goal that should be seen as making sense of individual goals in the global context? This is a question that must be attended to carefully as so much else (the specific goals chosen and how they are interpreted and approached) is inevitably shaped by this consideration, which has largely not been explicitly addressed. For example, it has been common to see the MDGs as involving an ‘agenda’ of reducing poverty and deprivations and to see the SDGs as involving a more expansive

¹⁵ See e.g. Glover (1970), Hart and Honoré (1985) and related literature on moral and legal responsibility.

agenda for a ‘better world’, encompassing but not confined to reduction of poverty and deprivations.¹⁶ Which such portmanteau is seen as being most descriptive and evaluatively relevant will also shape perceptions of how sensible are the individual goals as well as concerning how they should be approached practically (e.g. when trade-offs or interdependencies are involved) in light of the guidance provided by the ultimate reference.

In the specific case of global goals, the need for the goals to be effective in mobilizing a very wide range of distributed actors if they are to have a noteworthy effect at all accentuates the case for a participatory if not democratic approach not only to their formulation but also to their interpretation and their execution. It remains very much an open question whether existing goals can be seen as possessing his property. To enjoy legitimacy, it is also necessary that goals should be seen as requiring something of all actors (which it has been widely argued the SDGs do to larger extent than the MDGs).

If a global goals initiative is to be seen not merely as a marketing construction but as something with real power to change the world, it is important that it be seen as providing not merely a ‘wishlist’ of desired outcomes but as attending to the conditions of their realization, either by including means-goals (especially those requiring structural revisions) in the specification of the goals or by attending separately to the means of their realization. An approach that is balanced in this respect will also be seen as giving due regard to the need to address the constraints faced by specific actors (in particular the developing countries) in the international system.

An interesting issue that has been raised is that too detailed an approach to the specification of global goals, while permitting diverse evaluative concerns to be recognized as present within the global goals framework, leads to a burden of monitoring and measurement that is untenably high (see e.g. Jerven (2014) and Venkat (2015)). To the extent that this burden of measurement is especially imposed upon developing countries with poor statistical infrastructure, it is an issue of major concern. Certainly, there is little evidence that the MDGs led to much greater attention to the development of higher quality statistics. Despite this, there appears to have been a propensity to take global goals in the direction of a “baroque” approach of specifying ever longer lists of goals, targets, indicators. However, as we have argued above, “as detailed as possible” is not in general the right approach to the specification of goals and their realization – if there must be goals at all.

III. Political Economy of Goals

In practice, the process by which goals are formulated and approached is likely to depart very greatly from being steered by the conceptual criteria and normative ideals that we might think ought to guide it, and a very large part of the reason for such a departure is likely to be the “political economy” of goals, involving especially the play of interests and resulting political, social and institutional dynamics. It would be surprising indeed if the processes of goal definition and execution were immune from such factors.

¹⁶ In principle, there can of course be a hierarchy of such end-goals, with ‘a better world’ encompassing ‘the reduction of poverty’ as a constituent part.

For example, we may imagine that goals should emerge from broadly consultative if not democratic processes involving the general public as well as national representatives and experts. In practice, however, goals are likely to be shaped by narrower constituencies, whether inside or outside the official institutions charged with defining them. This narrowness can in turn be expected to lead to formulations of goals that would cause them to promote the purposes that the actors in question have, highlighting certain concerns and obscuring others. This may be for a number of possible reasons including bureaucratic, institutional and national interests in directing resources to certain ends, making it more possible to make claims of success, and so forth. Discursive considerations may be as important as material ones, and the two may be complexly related. The role of the “accountability” discourse in relation to goals may be as much to shift the onus of responsibility onto others (e.g. from donors to recipients) as to generate real relations of accountability. (In the case of both the MDGs and the SDGs the donors are assigned responsibilities although these have been decidedly both less subject to quantification specifically, and less the focus of accountability concerns generally, despite the fact that they have clearly fallen short of their assigned responsibilities during the MDG period, for instance in relation to the quantity of aid flows.¹⁷ This raises an interesting paradox. How is it that the donors have escaped accountability in the very era of supposed accountability for achieving development goals?).

a. Global Goals: Of Whom? By Whom?

Global goals do not come about in isolation from historical, economic, and political processes. On the contrary, global goals reflect the political and economic context in which they were formulated.

Although the most desirable way for global goals to be formulated would be through a process through which all relevant stakeholders’ interests are heard and considered, this may be understandably difficult to attain in the contemporary world, where there are no bodies for direct representation of those concerned. In real life, there are powerful vested interests that dominate such global processes, lobbying, framing, and limiting the debate. Notably, the process by which the MDGs were formulated was substantially different from how the SDGs were formulated, though both processes were shaped to a degree behind closed doors. While the donor countries and the UN bureaucracy played the crucial role in defining goals, indicators and targets in the case of the former, other actors (including, some suggest, corporations¹⁸) played an important role in framing or limiting the debate in the case of the latter. In both cases, the processes involved, however open to formal input from diverse stakeholders and citizens, contrasted sharply with the “democratic moments” of the large UN conferences of the 1990s (for instance those on education, women, human rights, or population and development).¹⁹ The MDGs

¹⁷ The OECD reports (on the basis of preliminary statistics for 2014) a fall of aid as a proportion of GNI for member countries from a total of 0.32% of GNI in 1990 to 0.22% in 2000, returning to a still low 0.29% in 2014. These numbers are not adjusted to take note of changes to OECD DAC aid definitions which are thought to have led to higher aid totals simply as a result of reclassification (e.g. because refugee resettlement and other expenditures are newly classified as aid, although on the other hand loans are now considered to be aid only to the extent that they are concessional).

¹⁸ See e.g. Pingeot (2014).

¹⁹ The World Summit for Children in New York, the International Conference on Population and Development (ICPD) in Cairo in 1994, the World Summit on Social Development in Copenhagen in 1995, the UN Fourth World

arrived on the global stage after this decade of UN meetings on various aspects of poverty and development (Hulme 2007) and, one might be so far as to argue, involved an attempt to bureaucratize and contain the resulting “unruly” discourse.

In the mid-1990s the OECD’s Development Assistance Committee (DAC) started pulling UN summit declarations together into a list of targets, which came to be called the International Development Targets (IDTs). When the MDGs were being debated, the IFIs and the OECD wanted the OECD’s IDTs to serve as the new global goals, and the MDGs ended up largely building on the IDTs (Hulme 2007). “Ownership” among OECD countries was considered to be a crucial goal among the MDG architects at the UN (Weiss 2004).

Since the MDGs were formulated, and in part as a result of the adoption of the MDGs, a new model, in which governments, businesses, investors, and civil society groups form “multi-stakeholder” partnerships to solve global problems²⁰ has gained currency, both discursively and materially. One aspect of this shift is a growing reliance on corporate-led proposals and initiatives to address global problems (Adam and Martens 2015). Over the past two decades, the UN has invested heavily in these partnerships to bring in big corporations and philanthropic foundations. It has had as a budgetary counterpart a decrease in core funding of the UN system and an increasing reliance on trust funds financed by individual donors (ibid), often tied to specific goals. The apparent interest of the UN bureaucracy itself in a new set of development goals may be explained in part by this shift.

At the UN Millennium Development Goals Summit in 2010, member states requested that UN Secretary-General Ban Ki-Moon initiate the process of creating a post-2015 agenda (UN General Assembly 2010). In 2012, the outcome document of the Rio+20 Conference called for Sustainable Development Goals to succeed the MDGs (UN General Assembly 2012). This outcome document mandated the creation of an inter-governmental Open Working Group (OWG) to work on a proposal for new global goals and the creation of an inter-governmental High-Level Political Forum (HLPF) to provide political leadership and recommendations. Notably, the SDG process mobilized a diverse set of groups to ensure that their concerns are included in the next agenda and competition was fierce between governments and regional groups for seats on the OWG (Langford 2012). In addition to OWG and HLPF, there were also other groups working on the post-2015 agenda, such as the UN System Task Team on the Post-2015 UN Development Agenda, the High-level Panel on Post-2015 Development Agenda (HLP), the UN Global Compact, the Sustainable Development Solutions Network (SDSN), and the Expert Committee on Financing for Development.

The UN undertook wide-ranging consultations with “stakeholders,” and the Post-2015 process was and is high on the agenda of many governments, CSOs businesses, and academics (Pingeot 2014). As a part of the Post-2015 process, the UN organized consultations in nearly 100 countries and global thematic consultations on 11 issue areas, as well as global online consultations. While civil society organizations

Conference on Women in Beijing in 1995. The Social Development Summit was crucial for the MDGs, as it culminated in a global consensus that poverty reduction was the priority goal for development. See www.un.org/en/development/desa/what-we-do/conferences.html

²⁰ See UN DESA (2014) and Dodds (2015), for instance.

were seemingly well organized through efforts such as the “Beyond2015” network, the corporate sector was, as already noted, also active in several processes and initiatives influencing the post-2015 agenda, including the HLP, the Global Compact, the SDSN, and to some extent also the OWG and HLPF²¹. In addition, the multilateral development banks (MDBs) fought hard to position themselves at the center of the discussion (Adams and Luchsinger 2015).

The SDGs contrast with the MDGs in terms of the range of issues included in their framework, with their being a move away from the basic requirements-focused approach of the MDGs to attention to a more variegated set of concerns of interest to more countries (including in particular newly influential middle income countries that have grown fast in the intervening 15 years, for reasons very likely having little or nothing to do with the adoption of the MDGs). These concerns include growth, infrastructure investment, job creation and environmental sustainability. At the same time, the SDGs do not depart from the discourse of accountability through enumeration established in the MDGs but rather intensify it. The number of targets has increased from 21 to 169 and the indicators are likely to proliferate accordingly. Meanwhile, those referring to the specific responsibilities of powerful actors, in particular the advanced economies and most especially large corporations, let alone mechanisms to hold them “accountable”, are notably few and weak.

This is despite the fact that the globalization of the world economy coupled with deregulation and privatization have dramatically increased the power of corporations and their role in development (Pingeot 2014, World Economic Forum (2010)), evinced in such forms as the share of private sector investment in total investment in developing countries.

b. Global Goals: For Whom?

While the goals are explicitly meant to serve the poor, vulnerable, and disenfranchised, it is questionable whether these are the groups that are really being served by development goals. The very concept of global development goals arrived on the global scene at a time when national planning was going out of fashion, but it was by all appearances the ‘national’ that was rejected by the development community, more than the ‘planning’ (certainly if the emphasis of the UN and various donors as well as the global media on such initiatives as Jeffrey Sachs’s expensive but inconclusive Millennium Project,

²¹ See Pingeot (2014:8-9) for detailed description of how corporations participated in the various UN processes. According to Adam and Martens (2015:116), private sector involvement in UN efforts has accentuated a shift from somewhat democratic global governance to a “pay-to-play” system. The private sector was perceived as so dominant in the Third International Conference on Financing for Development (FfD3) conference, which was meant to determine how the SDGs would be financed, that some government representatives referred to FfD3 as being outsourced to businesses (Adams and Luchisinger 2015). Some of the key channels that allowed the corporate sector to influence the Post-2015 agenda were not established through inter-governmental processes but rather through initiatives of the Secretary General (Pingeot 2014). While the corporate sector has enjoyed formal channels to influence the report of the Secretary-General and the post-2015 process, there is no similar channel of influence for the views of trade unions or workers’ representatives, or indeed of many other groups.

promising a ‘blueprint’ for achieving the MDGs, was any indication²²). The MDGs brought authority on development issues back to the UN, after the power shift towards the IFIs that took place in the 1980s but this masked an inattention to the bigger policy debates (especially those involving macroeconomics, trade, finance and related issues) in favour of the ‘pianissimo’ of the choice of interventions (to use an insecticide-dipped bednet or not to use an insecticide-dipped bednet: that is the question!) often aided by the methodology of randomized controlled trials. Although some important issues were attended to as a result, many more were neglected. The resulting structural silences shaped the development discourse of the MDG era.²³

As noted above, the MDGs were to an extent seen as serving donors, and with a degree of justification, as they implicitly emphasize developing countries’ accountability to donors and to supervening global goals (translated into targets and indicators at the UN through technical rather than political processes) rather than to their people. The MDGs were thought of as an instrument to ‘harmonize reporting’ (UN 2001) and at best meant to provide a tool with which to hold both donor agencies and governments accountable (Antrobus 2005). However, the goal of holding donors accountable lacked sufficiently meaningful and quantifiable targets (Caliari 2015) and these were (as noted above in relation to aid flows) paid little attention in practice or even in rhetoric. Donors were assumed to be well intentioned despite the demonstrably poor record of historical and immediately prior donor efforts (e.g. in terms of level and composition of aid²⁴, let alone other aspects of the ‘development compatibility’ of donor policies). The claim that the MDGs have been substantially achieved pays no heed to the evident failure to achieve the most important elements of Goal 8.

The accountability discourse has ignored the insight that successful transformations must be driven by endogenous or internal impulses for change (Vandermoortele 2011). Nelson (2007) finds that while many Northern NGOs embraced the MDGs, those in the South continued to prefer rights-based norms and standards. The focus on pre-defined indicators may lead to narrowing of the concerns of institutions, resulting in limitations on the space for broader democratic discussions that might enable fuller accountability, e.g. of governments to people, unless such space is expressly maintained or defended against the presumed priority of target and indicator talk.²⁵

Whereas the “multi-stakeholder” partnerships given great importance in the development of the SDG agenda seemingly promote a governance model in which all stakeholders work together to achieve a

²² A prominent development economist described it orally soon after its first reports were issued as ‘reminiscent of Gosplan’ (i.e. the Soviet planning agency). For a telling if highly incomplete discussion, see e.g. Munk (2014).

²³ Saith (2006) points out that the MDG agenda was not in conflict with the mainstream “neoliberal” macro-policy framework, as it underscored the responsibility of the poor countries themselves in addressing their development agendas and emphasized the role of the private sector in the development process.

²⁴ The 20/20 initiative of the 1990s (see

www.unicef.org/about/history/files/implementing_the_2020_initiative.pdf), which sought to steer twenty percent of aid (and developing country government budgets) to basic social services from a level much beneath that is one indication of how low was the level of commitment to the very social services highlighted by the same donors a very few years later when pushing for the MDGs. It was evidently not only developing country governments that ought to have been held “accountable” for insufficient attention to human priorities.

²⁵ For an argument in this connection regarding the role of indicators in the field of human rights law, see Rosga and Satterthwaite 2009.

common goal, labeling participants as stakeholders as if all are equal and have the same interests can obscure the power imbalances between sectors and the differences between their agendas (Pingeot 2014). Garsten and Jacobsson (2007) describe the idea that “win-win” solutions can be found if only all stakeholders come to the table and voice their concerns, as an illusion, as it fails to address the power structures of the global economic system. This can lead to a partial analysis of the issues to address and a lack of historical perspective on what caused the problems that goals (the SDGs at present) are meant to tackle, and in particular on the role that such actors as transnational corporations themselves play (Pingeot 2014).²⁶ Notwithstanding the urgency of coming together to address pressing global problems, such as climate change, in which business does indeed have a necessary and important role to play, the idea that common goals permit a happy coalescence around a common agenda without conflict persisting, whether in relation to means or ends, can be not only false but dangerously obscurantist. The public policies that are needed to resolve these problems can rather involve finding ways to balance interests and in some cases to reign them in, even if “win-win” options do also exist. To the extent that goals talk prevents straight talk, it can be a hindrance to addressing the problems before us.

IV. In Retrospect: Taking Stock of the MDGs

Although a complete rationale for the MDGs was never officially provided, it is plausible that they could have had epistemic, motivational, *and* coordination roles.²⁷ In this section, we will briefly discuss to what extent the goals were sensibly formulated according to the perspective on goals outlined above, and assess their impact on development.

Seen in light of the arguments we have presented, there are significant shortfalls associated with how the MDGs were formulated. Perhaps the biggest problem with the MDGs was the simplistic view of development, and of how durable change takes place, that underlies the goals. The aspects of human development taken notice of were limited to narrow, if important, problems. Moreover, the MDGs focused on specific targets, often linked to service delivery, with no direct attention to alleviating the structural constraints impeding development achievements, including to durable and effective financing²⁸ and delivery of the very goods and services highlighted by the MDGs.²⁹ As many of the case studies in Fukuda-Parr and Yamin’s (2015) study find, the way the goals and targets were formulated encouraged (through elective affinity if not logical necessity) implementation approaches that were conceptually narrow, vertically structured and relied heavily on ‘rolling out’ putative technical solutions

²⁶ The growing role of corporations in this global governance structure, formal and informal, might be thought to recall, although also to raise questions concerning, the argument of Hardt’s and Negri (2000) that power does not manifest itself through the visible projection of national military, political or economic power in the first instance, but rather often operates indirectly through the functional and often indiscernible coalescence of various seemingly distinct actors.

²⁷ For more on the stated and supposed historical motivations behind the MDGs, see e.g. Vandermoortele (2011), Manning (2009), and Fukuda-Parr and Yamin (2015).

²⁸ On this see absence and its significant consequences see Roy, Heuty, and Letouzé (2007).

²⁹ For example, there are goals to reduce child mortality and combat a range of diseases, but there is no mention of the need to strengthen health systems in low-income countries, which is crucial for improvements in all the health goals (Langford 2012).

from above, resulting in neglect of the need for the development and strengthening of the national institutions ultimately charged with these tasks, let alone with the need to experiment and share lessons within and across nations in order to learn about what works in development. The prevailing view is that ‘we know what works’ (Vandermoortele 2011) although that is patently untrue³⁰.

There appears to have been considerable confusion in the MDG framework between means and ends, which were never even attempted to be distinguished. While seven of the goals appear to be framed at the highest level as ends, the eight and final goal is framed entirely as a means. At the level of targets and indicators, the confusion became more comprehensive (consider for instance the relation between the indicator of “GDP growth per employed person” and the goal of “Eradication of extreme poverty and hunger”). The targets focus on getting halfway there (e.g. halving poverty and halving the proportion of people who suffer from hunger) while using the language of “eradication” (a signal contribution to the English language) and there is no reference to the presumed ultimate goal (e.g. truly eradicating poverty). Additionally, there was an excessive focus on data availability and measurability among the MDG architects, placing a significant burden to collect data and measure progress on developing countries. As the goals and targets needed to be simple and measurable, many non-measured and non-measurable priorities were sidelined, such as institutional change and social and political rights (Fukuda-Parr and Yamin 2015) while others, such as the “improvement” of the lives of slum dwellers was so vague as to be useless as a tool for monitoring let alone accountability (How the “Proportion of the urban population living in slums” is an indicator for the target of “improvement in the lives of at least 100 million slum-dwellers” also requires considerable head scratching, if only for the arithmetically minded).

Arguably, the MDGs did play a useful “epistemic” role in pushing poverty reduction closer to the center of the development discourse, although the discursive shift in focus from economic growth had begun earlier with the growing prominence of the human development approach (Langford 2012, Fukuda-Parr and Hulme 2009). However, the MDGs also reflect a shift in development thinking towards a more basic services centered understanding of development in which people are viewed as “patients” rather than “agents”, despite the shift in UN development discourse in the 1990s which led to a stronger focus on people as active agents rather than passive beneficiaries (Fukuda-Parr *et al.* 2014). In this respect, it might appear counter-revolutionary. Even the focus on poverty alleviation involves a constricted view. For example, the “\$1 a day” measure of income poverty was legitimized for the first time by the use of the MDGs by the UN as a reference point, despite its many pitfalls (as highlighted by many authors, some more acerbically than others (see e.g. Saith 2005, Kakwani and Son 2006, Reddy 2008, Reddy and Pogge (2010), Deaton 2010, Subramanian 2012, Klasen *et al.* 2015).

The MDGs are often heralded for the amount of support for global poverty reduction that they mobilized and maintained³¹. There is however, a significant difference among goal in the extent to which such a claim could be plausibly made, with the basic needs focused goals garnering significantly

³⁰ See e.g. Reddy (2013).

³¹ See Waage *et al.* (2010), Langford (2012) and UN System Task Team on the Post-2015 UN Development Agenda (2012), for instance.

more attention than the more structural goals aimed at increasing the productive capacity of developing countries, as pointed out by Fukuda-Parr *et al.* 2014). For example, the goal for global diseases was particularly successful in drawing support for HIV treatment. However, this is very possible because the movement against HIV-AIDS had already engaged people at local, national and global levels even before the Millennium Declaration. Caliri (2015) argues that the goal on improving the global partnership for development, including on aid, debt, trade and technology transfer, has had little impact, and although the MDGs have been institutionalized as a reference in statements of international and national policy, they have led to behavioral change in a very limited number of cases and concrete action has generally lagged far behind rhetoric (Fukuda-Parr and Hulme 2009)³². However, there appears to have been a general increase in donor funding for the social sectors to meet basic needs, particularly for health spending since 2000 (Fukuda-Parr *et al.* 2014). It is important to note, though, that by far the most significant increases in development funding have been to address post-conflict situations such as in Iraq and Afghanistan (Langford 2012). Finally, the significant increases in ODA in 2004-2006 were associated with one-off debt forgiveness, reconstruction in Iraq and Afghanistan and the Asian tsunami. Debt forgiveness in particular owes its origins almost entirely to other factors considerably preceding the MDGs including the Jubilee 2000 movement and the resulting HIPC initiative: most countries reached the “completion point” for debt relief only in the early to mid- 2000s due to the lags involved, after initiating the process in the late 1990s. Since 2006, ODA has declined.

When it comes to the empirical effects of the MDGs, it is worth noting that it is close to impossible to assess the impact of the MDGs on poverty reduction with clarity, as we do not have a counterfactual scenario we can compare the MDG period with. Furthermore, the quality and availability of data is dire. Vandermoortele (2011) argues that statistics have been abused to fabricate evidence of success. What’s more, many of the most important MDGs, including those to reduce malaria, maternal mortality, or tuberculosis (TB) (quite apart from the case of poverty, already signaled) suffer from a worrying lack of scientifically valid data (see e.g. Attaran 2005). Despite difficulties of attribution and lack of data, donors, multilateral organizations, major media outlets and think tanks have presented the MDGs as a resounding success, if not always in just so many words. There have been few counterfactual assessments of the MDGs. Instead, shortfall and progress assessment has been the norm, as a lot of scholars have investigated if the targets were likely to be reached or not in different countries and regions (e.g. Lozano *et al.* 2011 and Sahn *et al.* 2011). The shortfall approach has been criticized for ‘unfairness’ as having the same thresholds for all countries sets the least developed countries up for failure (Langford 2012, Easterly 2009, Fukuda-Parr and Greenstein 2010). Meanwhile the progress assessment approach ignores what would have happened in absence of the MDGs, which would seem to be the more pertinent question in determining whether and where the goals have made any difference. Studies by Friedman (2013) and Fukuda-Parr *et al.* (2013) are the only studies to our knowledge that employ a method of counterfactual assessment to systematically assess the impact of the MDGs on trends in poverty reduction. Furthermore, there have been several more limited studies of effects, such as Rajaratnam *et al.* (2010) who examine the rates of decline of child mortality in 187

³² For example, there is substantial amount of rhetorical support for selected aspects of the MDGs agenda in the Poverty Reduction Strategy Papers, but that translation into actual resources appears to be weak in many cases (Manning 2009).

countries and You *et al.* (2009) who study the rate of decline in under-five mortality rates. Friedman (2013) tries to identify whether acceleration or deceleration has taken place for the various indicators since 2001. Strikingly, he finds no statistically significant accelerations in the MDG indicators after 2000 for developing countries as a whole, except for the MDG indicator covering debt relief (which as we noted was already in the process of being implemented for unrelated reasons). Notably, half of the MDG indicators exhibited no accelerations or deceleration in trend of improvement during the time period from 1992 to 2008 and one third of the indicators exhibited accelerations before 2001. However, Friedman does find that there were accelerations post-2000 in certain sub-categories of countries (e.g. sub Saharan African countries and aid-dependent countries).

Similarly, Fukuda Parr and Greenstein (2010) find that overall, in most indicators and in most countries; the rates of progress of the MDG indicators have not accelerated since 2000. They compare rate of progress (annualized rate of change) between three distinct years for all countries— one around 1990, one middle year between 2000 and 2003 and the most recent available year. Notably, they do find that Africa countries have to a larger extent experienced accelerated progress than have other countries.

An entirely different but crucial question concerns causality and attribution. Even if the rate of poverty reduction has accelerated in certain countries or regions, this does not mean that this is *because of* the MDGs. Low-income countries also experienced unprecedented growth since 2000 (and in particular between 2000 and 2009). The commodities and inward investment boom after 2000 resulting in part from robust Chinese development, are likely to have played a much larger role in global income poverty reduction than did the MDGs. In any event, the available imperfect income poverty statistics suggest that if there has been a decline in poverty globally this can largely be attributed to poverty reduction in China (and to a much lesser extent, India) in neither of which MDG related discourse or resource allocation played a very significant role.

V. In Prospect: Appraising the SDGs

According to the perspective outlined above, global goals can play a constructive epistemic, motivational, and/or coordination role if formulated properly and if built on a realistic understanding of causal relationships.

The SDGs go further than the MDGs in separating means from ends, although there appears to be plentiful such confusion in the SDGs too. In fact, the MDGs were generally focused on ends and did not pay much attention to means. Upon demand of developing countries, ‘Means of Implementation’ (MoI) were defined (and included in Goal 17). However, the means vary greatly in their specificity, and in some cases they are so vague that they are practically meaningless³³. In others, they seem overly specific. Here again a paradox of specification is faced. Neither is satisfactory as a practical policy, and between these two there remains the vast empty chamber of all that is not discussed.

³³ Consider for instance the requirement to “Mobilize additional financial resources for developing countries from multiple sources”, which has a sort of faux specificity to it.

Furthermore, many of the targets could in themselves be considered ‘means.’³⁴ In any event, the distinction between means and ends, not to mention the appropriate role for tradeoffs and prioritization if any, could only coherently be discussed in light of a more explicit scheme of values and aims, which does not accompany the goals.

It appears that the SDGs are more focused on ultimate goals rather than on intermediate goals, in contrast to the MDGs. For example, while the targets associated with the MDG on poverty and hunger seek to halve poverty and hunger; the targets associated with the SDG goal on poverty seek to *eradicate* extreme poverty for all people everywhere by 2030. The different type of goal-setting may call for different strategies. (It has been argued by some, although it is of questionable empirical relevance, that the ‘halfway’ targets of the MDG in some cases could lead to perverse incentives, such as helping those it is easiest to help first. The SDG goal would evidently not encourage this same type of picking of low hanging fruit). While the end goals of the SDG framework are to a great extent made explicit, this is not consistently done throughout³⁵. What’s more, despite the SDG framework having ultimate *goals*, the *targets* are in many cases intermediate, as was the case with the MDGs³⁶.

The SDGs incorporate a marked move away from the basic needs approach of the MDGs, towards a stronger focus on structural issues³⁷. Generally, the SDGs place a greater emphasis on environmental, economic, and social sustainability than the MDGs do. Through goals 8, 9 and 17 of the SDGs, means of development such as economic growth, infrastructure investment, job creation and global partnerships for development are addressed. This perspective makes the SDGs more transformative and potentially less depoliticizing than the MDGs. This is also reflected in the greater breadth of the SDGs encompassing issues of peace, stability, human rights and good governance. The SDGs offer a view of what is desirable to achieve in each dimension on a global scale and they are universal in intended application.

However, as we have discussed above, the goals ambition for comprehensiveness comes into potential conflict with good sense. Unfortunately, with 169 highly specific targets, the SDGs appear too specific to fit into a global framework that could also claim to accommodate contextual conditions.

While there are 169 targets, the current proposal is to have at least 100 global indicators. Although it would seem necessary to have more indicators than targets, this proposal seems a nonsensical accommodation to circumstances: even rich countries would struggle to keep up with data collection

³⁴ E.g. Target 16.5 “Substantially reduce corruption and bribery in all their forms”, among a number of possible examples.

³⁵ E.g. Target 3.6 ‘by 2020 halve global deaths and injuries from road traffic accidents’ or Target 17.11: ‘Significantly increase the exports of developing countries, in particular with a view to doubling the least developed countries’ share of global exports by 2020’

³⁶ For example, although Goal 3 is to ‘Ensure healthy lives and promote well-being for all at all ages,’ many of the accompanying targets are either intermediate targets (reduce global maternal mortality ratio to a specific rate, reduce pre-mature mortality from non-communicable diseases by one thirds, halve global deaths and injuries from road traffic accidents by 2020) or vague targets about improvement (‘strengthen’ is used in four targets; the terms ‘increase’ and ‘support’ are also used).

³⁷ For example, whereas the MDG focused on quantitative aspects of education (enrollment rates), the SDGs also address the quality of the education.

and monitoring for so many global indicators, in addition to national indicators. It is clear that one cannot adequately measure success for certain targets with just one indicator³⁸. So far, the SDGs are not faring well when it comes to providing targets and indicators that would be affordable to measure and monitor by the developing countries.³⁹ Furthermore, the obsession with counting may distract us from important concerns that are less susceptible to measurement, although they may be monitored. For example, focusing on eliminating specific diseases without strengthening health systems can result in failure to achieve even the desired health goals (the Ebola crisis provides a case in point of the toll of such neglect).

It is questionable, to say the least, whether the world can achieve universal health coverage or eradicate poverty within the next 15 years. According to Woodward (2015), if existing economic trends continue as they have between 1993 and 2008, it will take 100 years to eliminate absolute and extreme poverty (defined as people living on less than \$1.25 a day (2005 PPP), a statistic which we in any event view with a jaundiced eye). Furthermore, it would take 207 years to eliminate poverty if it is defined at \$5 a day, which may be a more realistic measure of how much it really takes to cover elementary requirements of a human being. Similarly, Edward and Sumner (2015) calculate that while extreme poverty (“\$2 a day”) could theoretically have been eliminated through sufficient redistribution, that is not true at higher poverty lines. They suggest that insufficient aggregate economic growth is not the reason poverty has not yet been eliminated, but rather that the pattern of growth has not been conducive to eliminating poverty. To the extent that deep-seated structural features of economies and societies have given rise to this weak linkage between growth and poverty-reduction, a focus on growth than does not attend to the need for fundamental structural reforms will be quite insufficient.

The weakest point in the SDG framework is its lack of attention to the dynamics of development and the constraints that it faces. The framework fails to give attention to the question of how wealth and power is produced and reproduced in the global economic system or within national economies. In effect, the SDG view of poverty appears to be one that abstracts from economic processes and systemic features that determine national growth prospects or individual circumstances. There is a degree of recognition in the goals that structures matter insofar as there is a call to reduce inequality, strengthen labor rights, and eliminate agricultural subsidies in the North, but these are mere hints of a larger vista. The specific targets suggest an eviscerated causal analysis that shies away from challenging, or even identifying, the wider range of economic structures that may systematically favor the wealthy and even impoverish the poor. Instead, both the SDG framework and the Outcome Document of the Third Financing for

³⁸ The target on education provides an example, as the aim, ‘By 2030 ensure that all girls and boys complete free, equitable and quality primary and secondary education leading to relevant and effective learning outcomes’ clearly includes requires several indicators to monitor.

³⁹ Jerven (2014) estimates that carrying out minimal data collection for all 169 targets would cost at least \$254 billion – almost twice the entire annual global development budget! He claims that this is a low estimate, that for example does not include national governments’ costs from gathering basic administrative data or of the costs of all recommended household surveys. The inference would seem to be not to collect no data but to do so selectively on the basis of a conception of the most important indicators, but this would involve a very large departure from the SDG philosophy.

Development (FfD3) Conference⁴⁰ attribute a significant role for the private sector in development, without providing any mechanisms by which corporations can be held accountable. In the FfD3 document there is some reference to mobilizing domestic resources as well as “aid”, but the document generally relies heavily on so-called public-private partnerships for development, which are in effect profit-making opportunities in development.

For example, although the issue of structural inequality might be thought to be addressed through Goal 10 (“Reduce inequality within and among countries”), none of the 7 targets listed under it refer in any substantial manner to the need to change class relation or economic processes that may perpetuate or even generate deprivation inequality. The targets are defined in terms of generalities (“To empower and promote inclusion”) or in terms of very minor adjustments to the existing order (to reduce the “transactions costs of migrant remittances”). The targets appear to involve little by way of rebalancing institutional arrangements that have produced historically unprecedented levels of inequality, in particular of income and wealth, in the era of financialized globalization.

Similarly, although it is laudable that there is a goal to “ensure sustainable consumption and production patterns” (Goal 12), the targets do not offer any way to actually ensure this. Instead, companies are “encouraged” to adopt sustainable practices (Target 12.6) and governments are asked to remove “market distortions” that encourage wasteful consumption, such as inefficient fossil fuel subsidies (there is no mention of providing encouragement to the development of renewable energy technologies) (12c). By and large, the identified targets do *not* correspond in any realist sense with the seventeen transformative and ambitious goals, thereby casting doubt not only over the goals’ potential to be truly transformative but also over their seriousness.

If the goals are taken not as so many potatoes in a sack of potatoes⁴¹ but as providing a holistic vision of a better world, they can play an important epistemic role by expanding our understanding of development as concerned not only with poverty alleviation (as important as it is) but to development as a range of interlinked concerns gaining its ultimate purpose from a supervening normative vision and carrying a perspective of necessary structural transformations in the international system as well as in countries. This may, however, be rather optimistic. What motivational and coordinating role the SDGs will play is difficult to say and will depend almost entirely on how they are approached in practice. We will comment briefly in the concluding section on how that might best be done.

When global goals are perceived as being achievable through technical fixes, the fact that development requires fundamental transformations in society is lost. Insofar as the SDG framework taken as a whole presents both a more comprehensive and a more structural perspective than did the MDGs, we may hope against hope that this will lead to a shift towards a more expressly holistic and a more intentionally structurally transformative approach to development at the global level.

⁴⁰ www.un.org/ga/search/view_doc.asp?symbol=A/CONF.227/L.1

⁴¹ To echo Karl Marx in the 18th *Brumaire of Louis Bonaparte*.

VI. Conclusion: Implications for Development Policy and Politics

This paper identifies several weaknesses in the SDG framework, and relates these to weaknesses in how global goals have been conceived, formulated, and generally approached in the “era of global goals”. Despite coming about through an imperfect political process, the higher-level goals do have some motivational force and may each individually possess a rationale. If the goals are taken as together providing a holistic vision of development, they could play a useful role by presenting a vision of a better world (even if not the best attainable). Achieving goals requires going beyond lists of targets and indicators to recognize a perspective of which they are a part, and which gives them force (and to which they in turn give content and specificity). This point of view would, for example, direct us to focus on all the things that we know to promote good health, and not merely on the eradication of targeted diseases, important as they may be to address. Far from accepting that development as a concept is “in shreds” our goal should be to “put Humpty Dumpty back together again”.

A dual standpoint is needed, in which such a vision of a better world accompanies and makes sense of specific goals, providing flexibility for differing emphases and priorities across and within them. A perspective of this kind, allowing us to shift flexibly between the ‘monistic’ value of a better world serving all the world’s people, and the pluralistic values embodied by specific goals, while leaving room for changing emphases across and within them as determined by circumstances, is attractive for both empirical and evaluative reasons, even if it means a less directive approach to development, and superficially diminished “arithmetical” accountability..

To make use of the role for judgment that such freedom provides requires empirical knowledge, insight and intentionality. Take for instance the potential tradeoff between growth and sustainability. There need be no such tradeoff if sufficient attention is given to developing and disseminating green technologies and otherwise bringing about an environmentally sustainable pathway of development. The holistic vision of development must be made real for very practical reasons of implementation.

Development strategy concerns how efforts of different kinds, which have effects on different time scales, should play a role in achieving larger goals, in the presence of uncertainty. It thus necessarily requires such openness, in regard to how to conceptualize and prioritize aims and in regard to how to attain them. Development strategies should be chosen through democratic decision making, drawing on causal experience and practical judgment and making reference to shared values. In contrast, the interpretation of global goals in a technocratic modality rigidly specifies what must be attained and equally rigidly conceives of how best to attain it (while leaving plentiful room for escape from accountability where that is convenient). If global goals are to be adopted at all (and we have raised some rather skeptical questions in that regard) they should be advanced through national plans that might not involve quantitative targets but that would specify revisable strategies. Focusing on goals rather than targets opens space for flexibility, innovation, and enhanced democratic accountability. Learning what works and what doesn’t in development requires experimentation, and the conscious sharing of experiences. National approaches should be the subject of discussion and review by the

public within and outside countries, drawing on relevant expertise to improve their conception, execution and coordination (see Reddy and Heuty, 2005). Such a direction would open more room for experimentation with innovative development strategies. At the same time, it is essential to develop a robust analysis and public discussion of what are the features of the international as well as national order that require revision in order to enhance the prospects of countries and of persons.

It has been claimed that the SDGs are a formidable diplomatic achievement, and beyond that a fact on the ground. Shall we then make the best of them?

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