

Civil Society and the MDGs

by Roberto Bissio¹

CSOs pose five basic questions about the MDGs: Why should the public mobilise behind them when so many earlier UN goals remain unfulfilled? Do the MDGs apply to everyone in the global street? Do the Goals concern only aid? What trade-offs took place in reaching the “Monterrey Consensus” and how fair are they? Do the MDGs represent a new global bargain or the old-style impositions?

After the end of the Cold War, a series of major conferences and summits updated the UN social agenda. Civil society organisations were encouraged to participate, and did so by the thousands, bringing unusual enthusiasm into the diplomatic negotiating processes, attracting media coverage and advocating for a variety of proposals about issues such as development and human rights, many of which found their way into the final texts. A frequent demand during those conferences was that the lofty principles of the resolutions and plans of actions — which are not legally binding documents — be reinforced with concrete, measurable, time-bound commitments, and that follow-up processes be established to monitor them. As a result, the establishment of concrete measurable goals and targets was mainstreamed through the conference process.

The Millennium Declaration was adopted by the UN General Assembly in September 2000 and was strengthened politically by the presence of an unprecedented number of Heads of State. It updates many of the development goals originally set (and not met) for the year 2000 and reformulates them for the year 2015. It also gives UN endorsement to the goal of “halving extreme poverty,” originally formulated by the OECD, by that date.

In fact, development goals had been set by the UN since the first “Development Decade” in the 1960s. The public at large might have assumed that somebody was monitoring progress in achieving these goals. But the mechanisms of accountability are weak and scattered into different commissions and bodies that do not communicate with each other.

In May 1998 the United Nations Economic and Social Council (ECOSOC) held a session on the Integrated Follow-up of Major UN Conferences and Summits. The President of the Council, Ambassador Juan Somavía, reported that “... in order to

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effectively monitor progress in the implementation of conferences at the country level, there is an urgent need for the multilateral system to develop a coherent set of basic indicators, as well as the need to strengthen the capacity of the UN system and of countries to collect and analyse statistics.”

He also emphasised that “involvement of civil society in an effective way in the inter-governmental conference follow-up process is essential in view of the significant role members of civil society have played in the conferences themselves as well as in their follow-up and implementation, particularly at the country level.”

Four years later, a final resolution on how to follow up the conferences is still pending. In December 2002, the Second Committee of the UN General Assembly decided “to create a working group that will submit proposals, by mid-2003, on how best to address the review of the implementation of the outcomes of the major United Nations conferences and summits in the economic, social and related fields, ... bearing in mind the need to recognise the active role of all relevant stakeholders.”²

Civil society organisations have not waited for a follow-up mechanism to be put in place. In the area of human rights, the records of governments in fulfilling their obligations and commitments have been systematically evaluated and reported over the years by well-respected independent international organisations, like Amnesty International and many others. A similar surveillance effort started to be mobilised on behalf of economic and social rights or the social development agenda in the mid-1990s.

The Social Watch network was created in 1995 during the World Summit on Social Development to do precisely that, and has since grown into an active presence in some 60 countries in all regions of the world. It has been described as “an effort to do what obviously needed to be done, rather than an original idea”.

Every year since 1996, Social Watch has published global reports on what has and has not been achieved, particularly with regard to the Social Summit and the Beijing Conference on Women. As the prologue of one of these reports put it: “to report internationally on what happens nationally improves transparency and accountability. Providing numerical indicators is a rough attempt to capture complex realities in a simplified way. Yet, as the Olympic Games and beauty contests show, international comparisons are a powerful motivator.”³ Social Watch follows indicators for each of the key international commitments in detail and summarises them in tables showing

² UN General Assembly, A/C.2/57/L.70, December 9, 2002, Fifty-seventh session, Second Committee, Agenda item 92, Integrated and coordinated implementation of and follow-up to the outcomes of the major United Nations conferences and summits in the economic and social fields.

³ *Social Watch Report 1999*.

the current situation, progress and “political will”. According to its assessments, lack of progress towards the internationally agreed goals “...is not due to the lack of resources, but rather due to a deficit in political will.”⁴

Many other groups, whether local or part of international networks and associations, feel empowered by the UN agenda and participate in different ways in the monitoring the implementation of conference resolutions or international human rights obligations. The Social Watch network is far from being the only one, and it does not attempt to represent the enormous diversity and richness of CSOs. But the experiences of the groups that its network comprises clearly demonstrate the kind of energies that civil society monitoring of UN commitments can unleash.⁵

Can Civil Society Campaign for the MDGs?

It seems logical that a civil society monitoring process similar to the one initiated by Social Watch for the Social Summit could be established for the Millennium Declaration and the Development Goals that it promotes. Yet complex experiences do not transfer automatically. The peculiarities of the MDGs have to be taken into account.

The UN conferences of the 1990s emerged from lengthy preparatory processes (usually taking two years and several meetings of intergovernmental preparatory committees) and the implementation of their resolutions has been reviewed every year by commissions of ECOSOC and every five years by large international conferences (the so-called “plus five” or “plus ten” meetings). NGOs have access to all those meetings at the international and regional level and, in many cases, have also interacted with their governments at national levels, commenting on and even helping to draft the national reports about implementation of the conference resolutions.⁶

The Millennium Declaration was a result of a different process, where NGOs were not so deeply involved. Technically, the Declaration is a UN General Assembly resolution, and NGOs then had no participation at all in that body.⁷ There were no open

⁴ *Easier Said than Done: Indicators 2000*, preface by Roberto Bissio.

⁵ The global analyses of Social Watch reports derive from national reports written by independent civil society groups at the country level. Each national team selects one or more commitments of the 1995 World Summit on Social Development; gathers relevant information on its implementation from governmental and non-governmental sources; and promotes national public debate about its findings, starting with a formal launch of its report. The international secretariat of Social Watch provides guidelines and model questionnaires, as well as training, upon request; includes these national reports in its yearly publication; circulates information among network members; and promotes the expansion of their initiatives in conjunction with regional coordinators.

⁶ The “plus 5” process has been criticised by some governments — particularly the United States — as time-consuming and ineffective. In the case of the Social Summit, the “plus five” review meeting (Geneva, 2000) ended without deciding to convene a “plus ten” follow-up in 2005.

⁷ A resolution calling for NGO involvement at all levels of UN work was approved, but the modalities for its implementation are still under discussion.

preparatory committee meetings to negotiate the Declaration and the UN secretariat itself took a leading role in its drafting. Civil society participation in the Millennium Summit was indirect, parallel to the official process and concentrated on a single large meeting that took place months before the actual session at the level of Heads of State. As a result, the MDGs are still largely unknown by civil society organisations at the national level, and there isn't the same feeling of "ownership" as citizen groups have over "Agenda 21" that resulted from the Earth Summit or the Ten Commitments adopted by the governments during the Social Summit.

In terms of assessing implementation and following up on its recommendation, the Millennium Declaration "requests the General Assembly to review on a regular basis the progress made in implementing the provisions of this Declaration, and ask the Secretary-General to issue periodic reports for consideration by the General Assembly and as a basis for further action."

With regard to NGOs or civil society in general, the Declaration commits governments "to develop strong partnerships with the private sector and with civil society organisations in pursuit of development and poverty eradication" and "to give greater opportunities to the private sector, non-governmental organisations and civil society, in general, to contribute to the realization of the Organisation's goals and programmes." That formulation could give ample room for civil society involvement at national and international level, but it is far from being specific. In a worst-case scenario, there would be no country reports, since they are not mandated. The UN Secretary General could produce the reports without any civil society input, and those reports could be considered by the General Assembly without the NGOs even being allowed to observe the proceedings. Chances for NGO involvement would be reduced to helping to implement poverty eradication programmes at the national level, something they are already doing anyhow.

Obstacles to Civil Society Involvement

Obstacle 1: Skepticism

The public is skeptical. So many goals have not been met in the past; why should it be different this time? This is not a question that can be answered at this stage and pessimists and optimists can debate endlessly whether the glass is partly empty or partly full. It is a fact, however, that unless current trends substantially change, the Goals will not be met. That fact could be either an excuse for cynicism or a motivation to do better. The year 2002 stands exactly halfway between the base year of 1990, taken as reference for the indicators that measure achievement of the MDGs and the target year of 2015. In a report called *Halfway there?*, ActionAid states that "At current rates of progress the poorest regions are set to fail to meet the targets. Latin America is

making steady progress, but not fast enough, and improvements in South Asia are uneven. However, it is Sub-Saharan Africa that poses the biggest challenge, where some of the key target indicators are actually getting worse.”

Obstacle 2: Does it apply to me?

During the second World Social Forum, in January 2002, UNDP officials met in Porto Alegre with civil society anti-poverty campaigners from all over the world to discuss ways in which the message of the Millennium Declaration could reach the very people that the MDGs are intended to benefit.

As a Brazilian NGO activist commented, “If we go to a poor community with the message that poverty will be reduced by half, the immediate reaction will be ‘Which half am I in?’ ” A few months later, former metalworker Luis Ignacio da Silva, universally known as “Lula”, won the Brazilian Presidency after a campaign that emphasised “Zero Hunger” as the goal of his government.

It is easy to understand that extreme poverty (frequently defined as the inability to meet basic food requirements) cannot be eradicated instantly, and that any process to eradicate it will be cumulative and gradual, where the number of people under the poverty line will be reduced by half, two thirds, three quarters, etc. But in terms of mobilising support, the commitment “to free our fellow men, women and children from the abject and dehumanising conditions of extreme poverty”⁸ can be inspirational, while the technical formulation of “halving the proportion of people living on less than \$1 a day, by 2015” is not.

In order to capture the hearts and minds of public opinion, and even those of committed campaigners, the MDGs still need to be translated from technical jargon into formulas that, true to their actual meaning, can be readily understood by the men and women in the streets.

Obstacle 3: Is it just about aid?

The Monterrey Summit on Financing for Development (FfD) was the first major UN conference after the approval of the Millennium Declaration. The central issue of how to finance the MDGs became the focus of the debate. Estimates were published as to how much additional development aid was needed to achieve the targets, ranging from \$50 — \$100 billion dollars a year. While the first figure, quoted by Kofi Annan in his address to the last meeting of the FfD Preparatory Committee, would imply a

⁸ Paragraph 11 of the Millennium Declaration.

doubling of the current aid level, it still falls short of meeting the commitment made in the 1970s by developed countries to contribute 0.7% of their GDP to development.

Both the United States and the European Union announced during the Conference unilateral decisions to gradually increase their development aid, promising an additional \$12 billion within a few years. While clearly falling short of the established benchmark, this promise would reverse for the first time in many years the decreasing trend of aid. As such, it was highlighted as a major achievement, even when no substantial progress was made on the other issues of the agenda.

The enthusiasm of the officials from development cooperation ministries in the rich countries and international development agencies about the “success” of FfD contrasted sharply with the mood of the NGOs. Civil society groups dissociated themselves from the so-called “Monterrey Consensus”, which they characterised as a “Washington consensus in a sombrero”. While no spokesperson in the NGO community criticised the MDGs or the increase in official development assistance *per se*, the antagonistic perceptions about the results in Monterrey created a feeling that MDGs were only about aid and ultimately did not address the concerns of middle-income developing countries or transition countries, or poor and vulnerable groups in the developed world.

Obstacle 4: Is the trade-off fair?

The FfD process had actually started several years earlier and the major issues it was originally supposed to address included debt, the volatility of capital flows and the financial crisis this causes, and the overall reform of the international “financial architecture”, including the governance structure of the Bretton Woods institutions. The latter were established more than half a century ago and are deemed obsolete by many, due to the disproportionate voting power of a few developed countries. There was a trade-off in diluting the content of the FfD Summit against the political benefit of having President Bush’s personal attendance and endorsement of its final consensus. Similarly, there is a trade-off between lowering the benchmarks and targets of previous UN conferences and achieving unanimous acceptance of the MDGs by the world leaders. Diplomacy is always about trade-offs, the issue always being that at the end everybody wins something, even if not every aspiration of all participants has been met.

In the case of the MDGs, it is important to confront the trade-off between the need to focus on the poorest of the poor and the need to widen the constituencies to support a campaign or action plan, without which the political will to actually implement the resolutions will be lacking. The World Summit for Social Development in 1995 attempted to address that dilemma by structuring its agen-

da around three issues (poverty, unemployment and social integration) that would address concerns of, respectively, developing countries, developed countries and the public at large everywhere.

Obstacle 5: is it a new bargain or the old-style impositions?

According to Mark Malloch Brown, the Administrator of UNDP, “both the uncontrolled and ultimately mismanaged entitlement culture of aid that characterised the ‘60s and ‘70s and the top-down, destructive conditionality approach of the so-called Washington consensus that dominated development thinking in the ‘80s and ‘90s have been discredited. In their place, what is emerging is a new consensus that demands that we match mutual commitments and mutual accountability: a political bargain being built around a partnership of self-interest between the countries of North and South under which sustained political and economic reform by developing countries will be matched by direct support from the rich world in the form of the trade, aid and investment needed if they are to succeed.”⁹

In a similar vein, World Bank President James Wolfensohn stated during a roundtable at the opening of the annual Bank-IMF meeting in Washington last September, that “we are talking very much about the issue of trade, about the issue of a two-sided bargain, and maybe we’ve been slow in learning, but it is the hymnbook that we’re singing from now.”¹⁰

If the MDGs are to become the reference for a new “Global Compact for Growth and Development” whose terms are still to be defined, a balance needs to be found between the obligations of developed and developing countries. The targets mentioned with measurable precision and a date in the Millennium Declaration all refer to what needs to be achieved in the poorest countries, not what needs to be done in order to achieve desired goals. Significantly, the “to do” list of the richest countries (debt relief, market access, more aid) is not linked in the document to any specific date or performance indicator.

Southern diplomats expressed similar concerns, and the perceived need for balance ultimately led to a reformulation of the MDGs, from an initial list of the development targets formulated in paragraph 19 of the Millennium Declaration, to an eight-goal summary, adding to the initial six bullet-points a Goal 7 (related to the environment, which is a separate section of the Millennium Declaration) and a Goal 8 on “developing a global partnership”, which refers vaguely to all the systemic issues of the world economy.

⁹ Mark Malloch Brown, “Meeting the Millennium Challenge”, Address delivered in Berlin, Germany, 27 June 2002

¹⁰ “Capstone Roundtable”, Friday, September 27, 2002. Transcript available at <http://www.imf.org/external/mmedia/view.asp?eventID=126>

Globalisation has already limited enormously, through binding international trade agreements or the conditionalities imposed by the international financial institutions, the menu of economic policies from which governments (and consequently citizens) can actually choose. And there is a risk that they might be reduced even more, further undermining sovereignty and rendering democracy useless.

Goals 2 to 6 of the MDGs refer quite directly to basic service delivery in the areas of health, education and water provision. Goal 1 on poverty is also to a major extent related to access to services (even when poverty is now recognised as a multidimensional problem, with a variety of internal and external causes).

While everyone agrees that basic services need to be improved and made accessible to the poor, the discussion about how to accomplish this is increasingly controversial: On the one hand, the Bretton Woods institutions and their major shareholder governments tout the benefits of privatising the public sector. On the other hand, civil society organisations across the global North and South are increasingly resisting the adoption of policies that put basic services into private hands. Some privatisation measures have led to spontaneous citizen mobilisation that threatened the survival of national governments.

Where do we go and how do we get there?

While an integrated follow-up mechanism to review all of the major conferences resolutions (including the Millennium Declaration) is being worked out, can the MDGs be an effective rallying point to stimulate civil society participation? The answer is, as with most things in life, "it depends." For international groups, the MDGs can provide an excellent base, both in terms of providing a standard to evaluate implementation, as well as to stimulate analysis (and campaigning!) on the different obstacles that hinder the achievement of the Goals.

At the national level, a local "translation" of the MDGs into national realities is needed. Since the MDGs have been formulated in a way that emphasises the situation of the least developed countries as a priority, the first impression in middle-income and transition countries tends to be "This does not apply to us." In developed countries, only groups directly concerned with aid or solidarity with the poorest countries immediately identified with the MDGs and, in the poorest countries themselves, the civil society organisations wonder what is the difference or the added value of an MDG approach when compared to the PRSP process.¹¹ In all of these cases, civil society could become involved in the national process of "internalisation" of the MDGs,

¹¹ In that process for obtaining debt relief, the Poverty Reduction Strategy Papers themselves are written by the governments of highly indebted poor countries in consultation with civil society.

setting national goals, defining national poverty lines and strategies towards poverty eradication. It could also become highly engaged in the necessary process of creating the national (or even local) indicators and accountability mechanisms.

To link the MDGs with a particular set of policy prescriptions would be the wrong approach, no matter which policies are prescribed, precisely because there is no single “correct” policy for all societies and circumstances. At the same time, the Goals can be a source of legitimacy for the countries to pursue the policies of their choice.

Speaking during a panel discussion organised by the UN General Assembly on “managing globalisation”, Ann Pettifor, Director of the Centre for International Finance and Governance of the New Economic Foundation, said that the proposed international insolvency framework should be overseen by the United Nations instead of the International Monetary Fund (IMF).¹² Such a framework would allow countries to deal with unpayable sovereign debts in a manner similar to that of firms facing bankruptcy. The IMF, where the creditors have a majority, would cease being the only arbiter, perhaps becoming one in a tribunal, in which the debtor country would choose the second member and those two would agree on a neutral third, under UN supervision.

What should the criteria be for such a tribunal to decide how much of the debt is sustainable and has to be paid, and which portion of the country’s income should go to other priorities? The answer promising the best chance for consensus and equity is clear: the MDGs. Only after making sure that the essential services required to meet the MDGs are delivered would debt be serviced. This is similar to provision already in place in the USA for indebted municipalities.

In the same vein, a developing country should be able to demand “special and differential treatment” in meeting the obligations contracted under trade and investment agreements. The MDGs could be the objective standard in the discussion over the establishment of state monopolies, tariff protection for local production, subsidies aimed at specific social sectors, or control over the international flows of capital. As a result, for example, exemptions to the protection of the intellectual property rights of pharmaceutical corporations (resulting in more expensive medicines) would be admitted where those rights are proven to be an obstacle to achieving the goal of curbing the spread of HIV-AIDS. In the case of the General Agreement on Trade in Services (GATS), if liberalisation of a basic service sector is shown to undermine the MDGs after binding offers are made and accepted, an escape clause should enable developing countries to impose regulations that are not consistent with WTO rules without having to pay prohibitively costly compensation.

¹² UN Press Release DEV/2398, of November 1, 2002.

The process of international macroeconomic policy-making known as “globalisation” is currently enforced by the rules set at the WTO (and regional or bilateral trade agreements) and by the conditionalities imposed to indebted countries by the Bretton Woods institutions. The obscure decision-making and disproportionate weight of a handful of developed countries in those institutions, combined with the enormous (and frequently negative) social impact of the policies they have endorsed, has resulted in an unprecedented legitimacy crisis. That crisis is expressed noisily in the streets by a variety of constituencies and more silently, but not less effectively, in negotiations by officials of developing countries. On the other hand, the Human Rights instruments, the ILO conventions and the declarations of the UN conferences of the 1990s are perceived as legitimate, but also ineffective. Mechanisms like those suggested above would help reestablish balance and start building the “Development Compact”, a set of negotiated mutual commitments between developed and developing countries, without which the MDGs cannot be achieved.

In such a perspective, the vibrant mobilisation of civil society around a strategy that is inspirational and viable is an asset that may be too difficult to measure, but essential for real changes.