

# Compatibility between the Millennium Development Goals and the Global Development Discourse:

## *PERSPECTIVES FROM ZIMBABWE*

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### Abstract

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The Millennium Development Goals were a rather a bold initiative meant to curtail rising levels of poverty in developing countries. While the intention of the MDGs has been roundly praised, what has been questioned is the capacity of the respective governments to implement and achieve the stated goals. Conceptually, there were also questions about a program with uniform indicators that did not take cognisance of disparities within countries. However, the design of the MDGs did not raise as much questions as the execution of them. In recent, there have also been questions on the possibility and efficacy of achieving the

MDG. While there were always doubts about the capacity of the international community to raise the requisite resources to achieve the MDGs, there were always undercurrents of the capacity of beneficiary countries to implement the goals. Further, the study argues that the prevailing development discourse in Zimbabwe entrenched in the use and dependence of donor agencies and their respective implementing NGOs further reduced the chances of the MDGs, and consequently, sustainable development ever being achieved in the country.

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**Keywords:** MDG, SDG, Zimbabwe, development discourse

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## **Introduction**

This study provides a theoretical explanation on why several countries, especially low income countries, failed to reach the Millennium Development Goals (MDGs) formulated in the year 2000 by 191 UN member states. This paper attempts to explain how mismatch between the Millennium Development Goals and the prevailing global development discourse, and the eventual triumph of the later contributed to most countries failing to reach their stated goals. The paper advances the argument that most countries did not meet their MDG targets because the goals were conceptualised in such a way that was inconsistent with the broad development discourse at the time. In order to broaden the argument and anchor it in an empirical context, Zimbabwe is used as a case study. This is because Zimbabwe falls within the realm of a typical developing country, the type that was supposed to be developed through the MDGs; with its location in sub-Sahara Africa, a negative balance of payments and a development framework largely dependent on donor funding and international support from both donor and multilateral organisations.

In the Millennium Development Goals debate, most authors have concentrated on assessing the extent to which countries reached their goals, with most of them in the agreement that several countries failed to reach their intended targets (Khalema, Andrews & N'Dri, 2015; Kararach, Besada & Shaw, 2015; Ilcan & Lacey, 2015). This paper attends to extend the debate by providing an alternative reason on why most countries did not manage to reach their development goals. Specifically, while appreciating the different variables in individual countries that either prevented the achievement of the development goals or slowed them down, the paper provides causality between the Millennium Development Goals and global development discourse. The paper does this by arguing that in most low income countries, where Millennium Development Goals are going to make the most positive impact, the development agenda is set and executed by development agencies like donors, Non-Governmental Organisations and development at the grassroots. Because of limited resources, low income states rarely have the power to implement their development policies because of low budgetary capacity and as a result depend on these development agencies to complement state efforts in such areas as education, health, gender, and water access. The Millennium Development Goals were an agreement by nation states and development agencies who do the actual development work were not bound or obliged by the Millennium Development Goals and expectantly were not expected to prioritise these over their mainstream work. As a result, the

Millennium Development Goals development was an agreement between states but without the mechanism or strategy to persuade or compel other development states to work towards the same goals or priorities.

To advance the above argument, the paper first starts by giving an overview of the MDGs in the context of the global development agenda. With that contextual outlook, the paper then goes on to look at individual strands of the development discourse and how these correlated with the Millennium Development Goals. This is done so as to show the disjuncture between what the global nation states agreed were development priorities and what the most powerful and resourced agencies think are the development priorities. In other words, the paper attempts to explain why, despite the availability of (financial) resources that could have led to the achievement of the MDGs, their stated targets were not met.

## **Background**

Immediately after the Millennium Declaration was presented at the UN Millennium Summit in 2000, member states of the United Nations agreed to commit themselves to doing everything in their power to alleviate the worst forms of poverty amongst their individual citizens. The broad agenda of the Millennium Declaration which was a precursor to the Millennium Development Goals was to advance a comprehensive and coordinated approach to the many common problems facing the United Nations member states. At the Summit, six values comprising freedom, solidarity, equality, respect for nature, tolerance and shared responsibility were agreed to be partially important for improved international relations in the 21st century. Poverty was given particular focus and importance (Rehfuess, Mehta & Prüss-Üstün, 2006). Priority objectives were formulated to transform the stated values into action. These objectives composed of: security, protection of our common environment, development and poverty eradication, peace, disarmament, democracy, and good governance, human rights, protection of vulnerable people, strengthening of the UN and meeting the special needs of African people (Waage *et al.*, 2010). To this end the member states committed themselves to mutually common and time bound goals which they committed themselves to have reached by 2015 (Loewe, 2012; Vandemoortele, 2002).

Having the endorsement of 191 UN member nations, the MDGs represent an unprecedented consensus on key development issues and priorities. Comparatively, this

gave the Millennium Development Goals more credence than earlier global efforts spearheaded by the United Nations such as the Development Decades of the 1960–90s, resolution to promote Least Developed Countries or the series of Poverty Reduction Series Papers (Waage *et al*, 2010).

The eight Millennium Development Goals aimed to achieve the following:

- a) developing a global partnership for development
- b) ensuring environmental sustainability
- c) combating malaria, HIV/AIDS and similar diseases
- d) reducing child mortality
- e) improving maternal health
- f) promoting gender equity and empowering women
- g) achieving universal primary education; and
- h) eradicating extreme poverty and hunger.

In order to make these goals more precise and their achievement more measurable they have been accompanied by eighteen targets and forty-eight indicators.

Despite Millennium Development Goals having a high priority and their high visibility on the United Nations development agenda, key weaknesses were identified at the conceptualisation stage before they were even implemented. For example Loewe (2012) indicated that Millennium Development Goals constituted an incomplete agenda. This was because for the goals to be achieved, a certain environment and context was needed and this necessitated including more goals like peace and security, good governance and human rights. Although these were mentioned at the Millennium Declaration and were identified as key objectives, they were not explicitly specified in the MDGs as goal with targets and timelines. This made it difficult to achieve the MDGs because the favourable and in some cases necessary contextual environment was non-existent.

Some authors have criticised the MDGs focus and dependency on time-bound universal targets. Clemens *et al* (2007) for instance warned how the Millennium Development Goals could end up overemphasising the importance of aid over actual effective development policies (Clemens *et al*, 2007). Their argument is predicated on several valid concerns. To begin with, several countries failed to meet the goals because in their formulation the MDGs were rather ambitious and as a result some governments could be regarded as 'failures' if they do not meet the (relatively) high and ambitious targets despite their efforts.

This would put a negative connotation over the whole development effort by regarding the inability to meet targets as 'failure' regardless of the environment prevailing in the individual member countries (Clemens *et al.*, 2007). A second concern is that not all the countries could receive the minimum aid required to achieve the goals and have the failure of their individual policies attributed to inadequate aid. The authors came to the conclusion that the Millennium Development Goals should not be regarded as rigid time bound goals but simply a way to keep poverty alleviation a priority. This is all compounded by the fact that national and global MDG targets are continually updated and recalibrated by the UN-IGME as new data comes in. This makes them moving targets and it is difficult to measure with accuracy and certainty a state's achievement at any given point or even at the end as the end result is not measured against the initial benchmark. The argument of Clemens *et al.* (2007) makes sense in the case of Zimbabwe where the government has consistently blamed the smart sanctions on its leadership for the increasing poverty levels rather than taking an introverted look and assessing its policies (Chingono, 2010).

Some other actors have criticised the MDGs for having far too much focus on social sector while neglecting economic factors which are invariably intertwined with social issues (Loewe, 2012). While economic growth has largely been dismissed in recent scholarship as a measure of development, it still plays a vital role in measuring the extent to which citizens in a specific country determine the economy by their consumption of goods and services inclusive of those specific on the MDGs such as water, health and education. Furthermore, there is need for some investment in some of these key sectors like health and education if the goals were to be met, and such investments are intrinsically tied to economic development which is largely silent in the MDGs. In the absence of economic indicators, or precursors to poverty alleviation such as infrastructural development, foreign direct investment or minimum economy growth, the MDGs are little more than a global definition of the multidimensional nature of poverty. Looking at the case of Zimbabwe, the decline in the country at the time when the MDGs were supposed to be improving livelihoods in the country could have presented a visual representation of the country's wellbeing at the time but this was not something the MDGs were designed to do. Similarly, the MDGs could not capture the hyperinflation in Zimbabwe during the period 2002-2008 when the country was in the middle of implementing the MDGs.

Besides some relative flaws in the conceptualisation of the MDGs, there have been also reported failures on the part of nation states to meet their targets. For example,

Vandemoortele (2002) reports how child mortality rates increased in countries such as Zambia, Malawi, Kenya and Cambodia and this was an unprecedented trajectory coming on the back of steady declines in decades. In other cases, primary school enrolment decreased in Tanzania, Mozambique, Lesotho and Cameroon. Looking at other variables, the gender gap in primary school enrolment increased in Namibia, Ethiopia and Eritrea. Malnutrition is indicated to have risen in Yemen and Burkina Faso. Even in some areas that showed progress, a closer scrutiny showed a different reality. For example, the World Bank (cited by Vandemoortele, *op cit*) indicated that the percentage of people living on less than one dollar a day decreased to 25% from 32%; this was more because of the strong economic growth in China whose sheer population size proved to be an outlier and distorted the percentages. In the case of Zimbabwe, with the exception of primary education enrolment, most of the goals like hunger, child mortality, maternal health and HIV/AIDS were not met. In the case of HIV/AIDS, although there was a slight decline, Zimbabwe still ranks fourth highest in HIV/AIDS prevalence in the world (O'Brien & Broom, 2011).

Writing from a different perspective, Cornwall and Brock (2005) have argued that the MDGs are no more than a current iteration of the long list of 'buzz words' in the development discourse couched in techno-jargon some with more resilience in development colloquialism and policy document than others. These include words and phrases such as 'empowerment,' 'capacity building,' 'institutional framework,' 'sustainable development,' 'rural development,' 'gender equity,' 'gender mainstreaming' and currently, 'Millennium Development Goals.' The authors argue that the vagueness of these terms and their propensity to evolve with time and meaning different things to different things make them politically expedient as they constantly and perpetually give the impression that the state and the global community at large is working towards improving the livelihoods of poor people. The fact that there has been talk of the MDGs being followed up by Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs) and Vision 2020 shows that the United Nations is ready to move past the MDGs and embrace the next incoming 'buzz' phrase.

Having established the limited success of the MDGs across several fronts from their very conceptual framework to the indicators that the MDGs self-imposed to keep track of progress, there is evidence that most countries did not manage to meet most of the targets. It is important to find a causal link between these goals and the apparent failure in many countries with vastly different policies and socio-economic environments.

### **Development Discourse and MDGs**

Before establishing the causal link between development discourse and MDGs, it is important to give a brief overview of development discourse and its relevance and context to the present study. At its barest definition, a discourse is the outward or public expression of usually implied and unstated ideological leanings. They connote knowledge, experience and values and they are usually assumed to reflect the endorsement of an idea or concept by a certain group, institution or agency. By nature, and because of their self-assuredness, they tend to oppose and pre-empt any alternative line of thinking. (Anttiroiko, 2006:289). On the other hand Peet (2002) defines economic discourses as constructs built around persuasive political ideas and concepts. These constructs are usually based on interpreted historical events and experiences and the ideas and formulas postulated by individuals considered to be experts in their fields.

With the above definition of the 'discourse' in mind, the development discourse constitutes all forms of knowledge allegedly confirmed through regularity of institutional practice. The generation of knowledge is important because it is from this knowledge and the application of that knowledge over time (experience) that creates the self-truths and self-assuredness that constitute the basis of the discourse theory. Through repeated application and self-conviction that the path of application is the optimum one, the discourse is further buttressed by power usually in the form of (economic) influence leading the discourse to impose itself on other institutions on other organisations. For example, a discourse can be spread through requirements to be met when applying for funding from a donor organisation, or the use of a template project document which restricts the application to the boundaries and restrictions which are within the discourse of the donor organisation which uses its power (funding) to put across its own preferences as the standard rather than letting applicants express themselves in the best way they see fit. As Lie (2007) points out, the development discourse continuously evolves and reinforces its convictions and hegemony while minimising the influence of alternative or deviating knowledge and practice.

Arce and Long (2003) contend that development both as a discourse and a field of study arose after 1945. This was after 'experts' in the Western world were concerned with the slow or stagnating modernisation that was happening in their overseas colonies. Then, the concept of modernity was built around attitudes and notions of superiority by those countries in Europe and northern America who had developed themselves through

industrialisation. Faced with the ideals and moral obligations to modernise the 'barbarian' colonies so that they could emulate and possibly reach the standards and modernity levels of the colonisers, the concept of development was born. With the development of the backward, underdeveloped and (later) Third World gaining traction as policy in Western governments, the discourse of development was conceived because then there was no clear-cut way on how the colonies could reach the levels of the 'First World' especially after the realisation that they could not follow the same path of industrialisation as the colonial masters. The above desire had the implication that the 'modernisation project' could offer the colonies the help they needed to 'catch up'. This representation expressed more than the desire for change in these countries. The power of the discourse theory and its subsequent evolution into hegemony has been explored by William (1977) in what he calls the Hegemonic Discursive Formations. According to William (1977), the development discourse originates in centres of power, backed by significant research and other knowledge generating instruments and backed by inexhaustible funds to subdue and recruit dissenting discourses, constructs and ideas.

Currently, the global development discourse is driven by the sub-discourse of neoliberalism. This works at multiple strata. For example, on the international stage, there is an argument that countries need to open up their economies to liberalise trade. Within countries, there is pressure on government to retreat from service provision such as water and electricity provision and let these be privatised and run like business units. It is this neoliberal discourse which led to the structural adjustment in many countries. At the lowest level, together with other 'buzz words' like participation, empowerment, and income generating projects' there is a drive to turn the entire population into entrepreneurs operation in the '(neo)liberalised' space either as women coming together to form a cooperative or a private company giving away inputs so that communities can 'grow cash crops and sell these to get income for use in other household requirements'. With this neoliberal discourse at play, predicated on poor communities working to generate income so that they can afford and access (privatised) services like education, health and energy, it becomes easy to see the disjuncture between the MDGs seeking to provide access and services to as many people as possible and the global discourse whose ultimate success puts these services beyond the reach of many people by putting a price tag on them. In Zimbabwe the neoliberal discourse was introduced through the adoption of the Economic Structural Adjustment Programme (ESAP) which the government argued was a homegrown



version of the structural adjustment programmes that were being implemented elsewhere in the world (Marquette, 1997). This was accompanied by privatizing some of the parastatals on which the majority of the population relied for their livelihoods like the Dairy Marketing Board (DMB), Cotton Marketing Board and the Post Office Savings Bank (Bond & Manyanya, 2003).

Cornwall and Brock (2005) argue that dissenting and competing ideologies exist within the same discourse among development agencies despite the apparent similarity of goals towards the development agenda. In other words, while agencies such as donors, nation states and multilateral organisations like the African Development Bank might tentatively agree on the need to achieve 'poverty alleviation', on the surface there are lots of competing ideologies, ideas and discourses on how this can be achieved. In the current context, while the nation states were confined that the MDGs were the priority and imperative to achieve development, other development agencies, through years of development knowledge, experience and 'know-how' synthesised and crystallised through years of manuals and development proposal and reports templates and a general feeling of 'how things are done' it was improbable that development agencies would abandon all that hegemonic notion and fall in line behind the MDGs. Put in other words, the MDGs would have stood a good chance of support and buy in from the generic development agencies had they been conceptualised within the existing development discourse rather than being imposed on them by nation states and a United Nations organisation both with no resources to achieve their stated goals.

The very mismatch between MDGs and the development discourse are seen in the way these two are constituted. By their very nature, development discourses upon which current global development efforts are based are elastic, vague and open to different interpretations while the MDGs are rather specific and time bound which means they can be evaluated and consulted as achieved or failed. To understand this point clearly, it is important to review the synthesis of development by Gatsheni-Ndlovu below:

*Development can be interrogated from the perspective of a discourse, an idea, a practice or a policy. This is why modernity promised progress and development. Imperialism and colonialism were justified on the grounds of bringing development and civilization to Africa. The anti-imperialist and anti-colonial struggles were also ranged against*

*underdevelopment. Most of the Francophone Africa opted for neo-colonialism (maintenance of links with France) so as to develop faster. Apartheid was justified and articulated as separate development. The impositions of Structural Adjustment Programmes (SAPs) by the World Bank (WB) and International Monetary Fund (IMF) were justified on the grounds of development. One-party state regimes and military juntas that dominated western, eastern and central Africa in the late 1960s and 1970s were justified on basis of failure of civilian government to deliver development. The adoption of socialism as an alternative to capitalism was justified on the basis of development. Pan-Africanism and nationalism promised to deliver development. Those African presidents who struggled to amend constitutions so as to gain 'third term' in office often claimed that their unfinished development plans needed them in office. The new wave of military interventions by the powerful Euro-American powers in countries like Cote D'Ivoire and Libya are justified on development grounds. Democracy, peace and human rights have been identified as essential prerequisites for development (Ndlovu-Gatsheni, 2013).*

Having seen how 'development' is defined and interpreted in practice as exemplified by the quote above, it becomes easy to see why development agencies who are used to the liberal and malleable definition of 'development' would find themselves bound by a time restricted concept beyond their power and knowledge discourse. This may also partly explain why there was a dearth of funding towards the MDGs from the donor community while considerable resources were allocated to works parallel to those of the MDGs.

Development discourses are resilient, surviving bureaucrats, leadership changes and political ideologies. The apparent propensity by the United Nations to adopt the Sustainable Development Goals succeeding the Millennium Development Goals rather than an excuse to extend the 2015 time frame shows another disjuncture between global development discourse and MDGs. Sachs (2012:4) representing the broad and loose coalition of authors and practitioners in favour of SDGs has described them as important concepts and ideas capable of moving the world towards a sustainable path. SDGs represent the propensity of nation states to embrace new terminology, new ideologies

and new priorities as shown by the apparent leap from MDGs to SDGs as the new global consensus. This is different from global discourse which is largely static and entrenched through years of learning, knowledge generation through surveys and summarised reports and self-conviction by the agencies that they are acting in good faith and pursuing noble intentions despite the disproof in objectives and implementation between and among the agencies. It thus becomes problematic when a static and largely conservative and monolithic organisation like the USAID with all its assured knowledge and self-righteousness is asked to adopt and commit resources to fleeting.

Waage *et al.*, (2010) have drawn attention to the ways in which several bilateral and multilateral agencies such as the OECD and UN were involved in the earlier conceptualisation of the Millennium Development Goals framework. This significantly weakened the MDG project as it was inclusive from the very beginning as it alienated many agencies that were already working in the same areas as the MDGs like nutrition and education. Similarly, many nation states were also left out of the initial phase, with no convincing reasons given, leading the collective ownership of the MDG project being mixed and often weak. Waage *et al.*, (*op cit*) further argue how the disjuncture between the agendas of civil society organisations and those signatories to the MDGs determined how the civil society reacted, mobilised and sought resources for the MDGs and is key in governments failing to raise the requisite finances to reach their MDG targets. Where the priorities of the MDGs and the civil society did not intersect, which was frequent, the MDGs were sacrificed for the internal programs and projects prioritised by the individual organisations (*op cit*). This argument by Wage et al further confirms the standpoint of this paper that the MDGs missed their target because they did not have the support and buy in of other global agencies with enough resources to have seen the realisation of these targets. Instead of hardening the work already being done by these agencies, in most cases working in tandem with individual governments, the MDGs created a parallel process which these agencies were not obliged to endorse or contribute towards.

Most importantly, Bryceson and Bank (2001) show how economic growth, which itself is a sub discourse of development has driven discourse and served as the barometer of modernity and improvement, as shown by how national economies are still measured by GDPs (Bryceson & Bank, 2001). Therefore, the absence of economic indices, as indicators of 'development' to further convince various constituencies that there is development since it will be weird for social indicators to grow and improve in the absence of corresponding

economic indicators, this has largely marginalised the MDG project. Often there has been the excuse that the goals will not be met because there are no funds to carry through. This is largely accounted for by the absence of the economic indication, with the further argument being that the absence of indicators means the growth in indicators is a reflection of aid absorption rather than internally-invoked change. In other words, the absence of economic indicators as benchmarks of poverty alleviation and 'development' in both development literature and conventional development discourse can account for the MDGs failing to meet their targets.

## **Conclusion**

The Millennium Development Goals are constructed around the key issues of education, gender, nutrition, the environment and health. However, experiences in both developing and developed states show that realising these targets is predicated on other factors and variables such as economic growth, rule of law, good governance, basic infrastructure as well as peace and security. In the absence of these preconditions, it was going to be difficult to achieve the MDGs. This also means besides the incompatibility with development discourse, there are other factors that contribute towards the MDGs failing to achieve most of their targets. In Zimbabwe, this has been a combination of uninformed government policy and a hostile macroeconomic climate where most of the MDG programme was implemented under a hyperinflationary condition characterised by a contracting economy under international sanctions and debilitating brain drain as skilled people left the country to pursue their careers elsewhere. Since the same hostile macroeconomic condition persists, it is unlikely that the Sustainable Development Goals will make much of an impact as they will be curtailed by the same factors which militated against Zimbabwe failing to achieve its MDG targets.

While the success of the MDGs can be categorised as having limited success, there is however academic and practical value in building on the success of the MDGs as it managed to bring about consensus amongst 191 countries which; is a remarkable achievement. Building on that platform, the development can plan more initiatives which are inclusive and which might have buy in from other development agencies outside of nation states.

The study further concludes that the adoption by the UN member states of the Sustainable Development Goals is an admission of failure of the MDGs. Although the

Sustainable Development Goals are being packaged as an extension of the MDGs in a clearer, more expanded form (Lu *et al.*, 2015), they constitute more of a repackaging of the same MDG targets in different terminology so as to buy time in the hope that countries that did not meet their targets will be able to do so by 2030 (Waage *et al.*, 2015). From inception, the Sustainable Development have to face that they were not based upon an exhaustive assessment of the MDGs and learning what went wrong but are based on the later, adopting all the challenges that the MDGs faced like limited funding and failure to convince other global development agencies to come on board.

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