

We Need Millennium Development RIGHTS, Not Just Goals

Millennium Development Rights would transform the global struggle against poverty and provide accountability for governments, corporations, and others who deny those rights.

by Phyllis Bennis
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President Obama's speech at the UN's summit on development acknowledged the "progress that has been made toward achieving certain Millennium Development Goals," but cautioned that "we must also face the fact that progress towards other goals that were set has not come nearly fast enough. Not for the hundreds of thousands of women who lose their lives every year simply giving birth. Not for the millions of children who die from the agony of malnutrition. Not for the nearly one billion people who endure the misery of chronic hunger."

The Millennium Development Goals, or MDGs, were part of the UN's ambitious yet profoundly insufficient fifteen-year anti-poverty plan of 2000. The MDGs set out the goals of **eradicating extreme poverty and hunger**, achieving universal primary education, promoting gender equality, reducing child mortality, improving maternal mortality, **combating HIV/AIDS, malaria and other diseases**, ensuring environmental sustainability, and creating a global partnership for development—all by 2015.

But except for some anecdotal improvements in a few countries, the MDGs as a global effort to end extreme poverty by 2015 have so far failed. President Obama was, however understated, absolutely right when he said that the goals have not been met "nearly fast enough." UN Secretary General Ban ki-Moon sounded a note of desperation, telling the summit that it was essential that "promises made become promises kept," because the "consequences of doing otherwise are profound: death, illness and despair, needless suffering, lost opportunities for millions upon millions of people."

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Those consequences of failure are indeed endemic throughout the Global South—impacting the most vulnerable in every impoverished country, most especially women and children. But ultimately, among the governments and officials and agencies who crafted and embraced the MDGs, there is no one to blame, no one is held accountable. And that's not surprising. When you define something as a goal to be reached, or an aspiration to be achieved, or a hope or an ambition or a target, there is no real blame when the goal is not met. Oh sorry, we missed the goal. We'll try harder. We'll do things differently. It's no one's fault.

The high-profile MDG summit didn't change the failure. According to Joanna Kerr, head of the advocacy group ActionAid, it was "an avalanche of warm sentiment that cleverly concealed the fact that no fully funded plans of action for tackling poverty were actually announced." It was, she said, "an expensive side-show that offered everything to everyone and nothing to no one."

Ban ki-Moon said "we must hold each other accountable," and promised that the UN system would do its best to hold all sides accountable. But the very definition of the MDGs—these are development GOALS, after all—limits that accountability. The MDGs should have been identified from the beginning as 'MDRs'—Millennium Development RIGHTS. When rights are violated, someone, or some government, or some corporation, can be held accountable. Someone can go to court, or demand redress in some other way. That's why the U.S. has refused to ratify things like the International Covenant on Economic, Social and Cultural Rights—if that Covenant were the law of this land, things like jobs and health care and a decent standard of living would be RIGHTS in this country, not just goals and aspirations.

President Obama announced a new U.S. global development policy, and claimed that the U.S. is "changing the way we do business." He said "aid alone is not development." And he's right. And he said "our focus on assistance has saved lives in the short term, but it hasn't always improved those societies over the long term.... We have to offer nations and peoples **a path out of poverty**." He's right about that too. But then he goes on to identify "the most powerful force the world has ever known for eradicating poverty and creating opportunity"—and it wasn't **debt relief**, the one sure method that works to improve people's lives. No, President Obama's goal is free markets and untrammled economic growth. And that's not likely to bring the MDGs any closer to success.

In 2015, President Obama might still be president. He, or his successor, will very likely face a world in which extreme poverty still destroys lives in the billions—a world in which extreme poverty and hunger still rule the day, where children continue to die too early and too many women die in childbirth, a world in which HIV/AIDS still ravages too many populations and in which environmental sustainability, universal education and gender equality remain out of reach.

The only way to change that reality is through building a new internationalist movement, involving civil society AND governments AND the United Nations. And a movement based on rights—with accountability when those rights are violated. The MDGs have failed. We don't need new strategies for the MDGs, we need MDRs. We need Millennium Development RIGHTS to change the world.

Phyllis Bennis wrote this article for YES! Magazine, a national, nonprofit media organization that fuses powerful ideas with practical actions. Phyllis is a Fellow of the [Institute for Policy Studies](#) and the Transnational Institute in Amsterdam. She is co-author of [Ending the U.S. War in Afghanistan: A Primer](#).