Perspectives from the Global South on Post-2015

Andrea Ordóñez

Perspectives from the Global South on Post-2015

Andrea Ordóñez

One of the most recurring critiques of the original Millennium Development Goals (MDGs) is that they were prepared without wide consultation. As a result, the MDGs are sometimes considered donor driven, pushed by developed countries onto developing ones. As we approach the 2015 mark, the process to define a new development agenda has so far been different. Southern thinkers have contributed to the debate both by critically reviewing the original MDGs and by bringing their own perspective to the future goals and targets.

As the target date for the Millennium Development Goals (MDGs) approaches, the new development agenda is already beginning to take shape. Discussions thus far reflect the wider changes the world has seen in the fifteen years since the MDGs were originally developed. The growing presence of the Global South on the international stage is one of the most outstanding changes during this time. In the last five years, the developing world has contributed to 65 percent of the economic growth and now represents 49 percent of the world's GDP.[1] The Global South, traditionally fragmented both socially and economically, is experiencing a growing interconnectedness. Commerce between southern economies has expanded by more than the world's average, and now there are fewer barriers to trade than twenty years ago.[2] As the developing world gains economic momentum, it also gains political space. The process to design a new development agenda is now unthinkable without the debate and participation of the Global South. After all, by 2050, Brazil, China, and India will together account for 40 percent of global output, compared to 1950 when they represented only 10 percent.[3] Furthermore, this also brings social changes; in twenty-five years, it is expected that 80 percent of the world's middle class will reside in the Global South.[4]

> The process to design a new development agenda is now unthinkable without the debate and participation of the Global South.

So far, the process for designing a new development agenda has been slightly chaotic, with parallel inputs, panels, and debates occurring at many

Andrea Ordóñez is the research coordinator for Southern Voices on the Post-MDG Agenda, a network of forty-eight think tanks in the Global South. She promotes the use of research to inspire new ideas both locally and internationally. Her main areas of interest are transparency and accountability in global development, the use of research in policy, and the promotion of southern-led initiatives.

levels within the United Nations System as well as in other relevant spaces. The UN Secretary General convened the twenty-seven-member, High Level Panel of Eminent Persons, to advise him on the next development agenda. The panel was chaired by two representatives from the developing world and one from the developed world: President Susilo Bambang Yudhoyono of Indonesia, President Ellen Johnson Sirleaf of Liberia, and Prime Minister David Cameron of the United Kingdom. Early developments like these reflect the relevance of the Global South in the creation of the post-2015 agenda. Nonetheless, it is worth noting that northern scholars and researchers from the United Nations System were largely responsible for creating the executive summary produced by the Panel. In the technical debate within the Panel, southern scholars did not participate as actively as their political representatives.

After the global meeting of Rio+20, the Open Working Group (OWG) initiated the development of the new Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs). There are thirty seats in the OWG, twenty of which are occupied by developing countries in Africa, Asia, and Latin America. Over the course of seventeen months, the OWG created a proposal of 17 goals and 169 targets that make up the SDGs, and presented their draft in July 2014. At the same time, other forums to discuss political negotiations and finance strategies for the agenda are also running. As a means to engage a wider audience, the regional and national offices of the United Nations System have been consulting broadly, seeking input from public officials, civil society, and academia throughout the world. Furthermore, the World We Want Initiative has been put forward to ensure that as many individuals as possible help shape the next development agenda.[5]

It is clear that this process is significantly different from the process fifteen years ago when northern countries had disproportionate influence over the final development agenda. The process now is more participatory and more voices are being heard. Nonetheless, it remains to be seen as to whether these changes will translate into a different development agenda. Although new venues for expressing the needs and visions of stakeholders from the Global South exist, power structures have not changed. This paper will explore the extent to which southern perspectives can and should be a part of the next development agenda. To do this, this paper will first explore what the southern perspectives are. Next this paper will analyze the degree to which these perspectives can become influential in the post-2015 debate. Lastly, this paper will consider what can be expected in regards to the implementation of the new SDGs.

Is There a Southern Perspective on the Post-2015 Agenda?

The object of this essay is not to present a singular developing world perspective on the post-2015 agenda. This is not possible. Trying to do so would be an oversimplification of the realities, perspectives, and ideologies that exist in the developing world. At the same time, the Global South is fragmented. There are few spaces where thinkers and scholars from Africa,

Latin America and Asia can share their perspectives, and as a result there is little knowledge sharing about their realities, concerns, and priorities. Furthermore, practitioners, policy makers, and researchers from developing countries have focused their attention on the complexities of their own countries during the last fifteen years. A growing number of social scientists from the South focus on *individual* countries in the Global South, and far too few have reflected on the *global* agenda. This becomes especially clear when compared with scholars from northern universities and institutes that traditionally have a more global perspective and venture more comfortably in the international development scene.[6]

In this context, it is a significant challenge to draft a unified southern agenda. There are, however, efforts being carried out by regional offices within the UN System and other regional bodies that aim at regional positions. Some key documents include the positions by the UN Economic Commission for Latin America and the Caribbean, the UN Economic and Social Commission for Asia and the Pacific, the UN Economic Commission for Africa, the UN Economic and Social Commission for Western Asia, and the African Union.

Furthermore, many initiatives have focused on creating spaces for more voices to participate in the global debate. Among those, the Southern Voice of Post-MDG International Development Goals and the Least Developed Countries (LDC) IV Monitor take a global approach that complements these regional bodies. They have produced research and resources that offer insights to help form the post-2015 agenda.

Within the Global South, a variety of economies and societies co-exist. This diversity is one asset that is usually not taken into account, and is reflected in the broad spectrum of perspectives on the post-2015 agenda. This spectrum of perspectives from the developing world offers both critiques of the MDGs and proposals for the new agenda, which this paper will now examine.

Assessment of the Original MDGs

Over the last fifteen years, practitioners and scholars active in the implementation of the MDGs have found the simplicity of these goals to be one of their strengths. The goals effectively communicate the abstract concept of global responsibility to a broad audience.[7] However, in terms of both content and achievements, the agenda is incomplete.

A common concern that developing countries and many international NGOs voice is that the preferences of developed countries exerted a disproportionate influence on the framing of international development priorities. In crafting the MDGs, the more complex development priorities at both national and regional levels were given less attention in international discussions. In this critique, the original MDGs are said to reflect an agenda molded to donors' needs and priorities.

> In this critique, the original MDGs are said to reflect an agenda molded to donors' needs and priorities.

Interestingly, Goal 8 of the MDGs, which focuses on building global partnerships, is commonly regarded as the weakest link in the agenda.[8] Compliance with its stated target for developed countries to allocate 0.7 percent of their gross national income (GNI) to official development assistance (ODA) is low.[9] Currently, donor countries allocate only 0.3 percent of their combined GNI to ODA.[10] Furthermore, other changes in the trade system have not occurred.[11] Largely as a result of the donor driven nature of the agenda, the MDGs were not truly global. Although the agenda was set by donor countries, developing countries' governments held the greatest share of responsibility for achieving the goals. Furthermore, besides Goal 8, developed economies did not have specific targets that they were expected to meet.

During the implementation of the MDGs, practitioners and policymakers have noted the need for flexibility to customize the goals and targets in accordance with each country's reality. For some countries, some goals were easily achievable. Such is the case of the education goal (Goal 2) for Latin American countries. The region has already achieved this goal and enrolls nearly all children in primary education. However, putting children in school is different from providing a quality education, and this latter achievement is necessary to advance education the region.[12] On the other hand, some countries have faced almost impossible targets given the precarious circumstances they faced in the 2000.[13] Such is the case in a number of African countries that, despite the great progress made in many respects, seem to have broadly failed to achieve the MDGs. Nonetheless, their progress over the last fifteen years can still be viewed as a success given the level at which they began when the MDGs started. For example, the region has enrolled children in primary school at a much faster rate than developed countries did in their own history.[14] Burkina Faso provides an interesting example of this point: despite its rapid educational expansion over the last couple decades, it was still considered to be "off-track" in achieving Goal 2.[15]

Insights from Global South Scholars and Thinkers

For the next development agenda, thinkers from the Global South bring some valuable insights. It is impossible to say that they all share the same perspective, however, together their perspectives add a necessary layer of complexity to the global debate. Here, this paper will focus on some of the crosscutting issues that can enrich the post-2015 agenda.

Ownership
Ownership is probably the most persistent and clearly articulated concept coming from the Global South for the post-2015 agenda. This conceptual priority has been expressed in debates on the next development agenda internationally and internally, in designing development plans and policies, and among policymakers, scholars and practitioners. In many cases, countries have already decided on their own development goals and plans within their national agendas for the upcoming year, and they are now sharing these

proposals more globally. As a result it is likely that the new agenda, although global in nature, will in practice be tailored to local contexts.

Local Perspective

Similarly, researchers from the Global South bring a local perspective into the debate. These experts constantly point out in the global debate that development is local. The issues that families and communities face in different places are not the same, and priorities and strategies to solve them vary widely. For instance, poverty itself is very different phenomena in the rural areas of Africa compared to the largest cities in Brazil. Therefore, the policies and programs to tackle them must vary significantly. Furthermore, a local perspective and local implementation show that the new agenda's goals are not isolated. In reality, issues are interconnected to the point where the "ticking of indicators boxes" is not enough, and could even be counterproductive.[16]

Politics in Development

Just as all politics is local, similarly, all development involves politics. This is the reality that practitioners and researchers in the Global South face. Unlike more exogenous perspectives that seek to find what works in development from a purely technical approach, southern perspectives place greater value on political factors. The implementation of the original MDGs has shown that policies and programs put in place to achieve the goals require political will, power, and leadership. After all, prioritizing certain programs and policies in favor of the poor or other marginalized groups limits the available resources for other policies. In the short term, these decisions may be perceived as a struggle between different actors. The allocation of resources is political and the achievement of the goals depends on political maneuvers as much as technical capacity.

Inequality and Justice

A common and recurring issue that emerges from the Global South is the need to tackle inequality and justice. Latin America nations have consistently stressed that equality refers not only to improving the distribution of resources, but also to recognizing the intrinsic value of all human lives.[17] Equality is seen as more than convergence, or leaving no one behind, but rather as a goal that entails significant changes in how policies are created both for those that have access opportunities and those who do not.[18] Furthermore, there is a clear understanding that aiming at universal targets may leave many excluded if specific policies are not put in place to tackle specific needs.

New Economic Models

While also tackling inequality, new models of economic growth are critical for all developing regions. For many countries in the Global South, this entails reducing the dependence on natural resource revenue. The models for this alternate economic growth vary across countries and regions. While in

many African and Asian countries, industrialization is the key to economic transformation, Latin America is exploring alternatives with knowledge intensive industries and creative uses of its natural biodiversity. Nonetheless, although paths to economic growth may differ, all nations, especially in the Global South, face the challenge of creating jobs. Therefore, whatever economic model a country espouses, it is essential that they tackle unemployment and underemployment, which are principal causes of inequality.

Greater Independence from ODA

Economic growth is also a key step towards greater independence from ODA. Many stakeholders, especially in a number of African countries, seek mechanisms by which countries can self-finance their development, and thus gain more control over their agendas. As economist John Kwakye writes, "Over reliance on aid may indeed undermine the continent's long-term development, given the numerous pitfalls associated with it. As African countries attain middle-income status, and given volatility of aid attendant to global financial crises, Africa's access to aid, especially the concessional component, is going to diminish and become less certain. It is therefore imperative that Africa looks beyond aid to explore alternative resources to accelerate the continent's development and its path to self-sufficiency."[19] As the challenges for development become more complex, aid must become less relevant. Despite the empowerment given by self-financing strategies, the responsibility of the donor countries in the first round of MDGs must not be forgotten. Aid will continue to be a mechanism to finance development, especially in the LDCs.

South-South Cooperation

While there is still a need for ODA, the concept of South-South Cooperation (SSC) is emerging as a compelling concept among southern perspectives. In the Global South, this model of cooperation is not seen as a substitute for ODA. SSC is needed as a tool to consolidate gains, reduce fragmentation, and build more connections among developing countries.[20] Although it is unlikely that SSC will foster as strict commitments as those established by donor countries, SSC must continue to strengthen as development finance strategies continue to be discussed.

Conclusion

Many perspectives seeking to both evaluate the MDGs and shape the SDGs have informed the process of crafting a new development agenda. In this essay, I have not focused on the specific goals proposed since there are many general similarities among regions but widely varying, country-specific contexts. Given its diversity and plurality, there is no common agenda in the Global South. As has been discussed, thinkers from

Given its diversity and plurality, there is no common agenda in the Global South.

the Global South emphasize that there are significant differences among countries and underline the relevance of local solutions for the different contexts where the post-2015 agenda will be implemented.

Thinkers have different perspectives on which are the most critical goals, how the targets should be stated, and what policies should be put forward to achieve them. Given this diversity, will it be possible for these positions to influence the future agenda? To a certain extent, the process that is being carried out, and the openness of the United Nations System to receiving inputs from various stakeholders is a response to the critique of the MDGs that emerged from the Global South. It is important, however, to be skeptical about which of the insights on the future agenda will be reflected in the final documents after negotiations take place over the next year. International power structures have not significantly changed in the last fifteen years. As a result, the agenda might not fully reflect the ideas that are evolving in the Global South and that have been discussed in this essay.

No matter the outcome of the current process to form the post-2015 development agenda, stakeholders from the Global South will have a visible role in the implementation of the agenda. The success of a global post-2015 development agenda will thus ultimately depend primarily on the success of regional and national efforts to adapt global goals and priorities to local realities.

It is very likely that during the implementation phase, countries will customize the agenda to fit their needs. Although a global agenda is desirable, it is nonetheless necessary that countries consider a diversity of policy approaches in the implementation phase. A wide range of policy ideas have been developed in the South as concrete responses to specific needs. This diversity of policy options should be promoted.

It is important, however, for thinkers of the Global South to not only focus on their specific countries' agendas but to promote the consolidation of stronger southern positions in other international arenas. Beyond 2015, discussions on climate change and the international trade system are concrete areas where a stronger participation of the Global South could be influential at the global scale. Although the new development agenda might not include all the perspectives emerging in the Global South, their ideas, are gaining momentum and space. As a result, these perspectives will influence not only the current agenda-setting process, but more importantly, its implementation in the years to come.

Notes

[1] OECD, "Perspectives on Global Development 2010: Shifting Wealth," (2010), http://www.oecd.org/development/pgd/45451514.pdf.
[2] Ibid.
[3] UNDP, "The Rise of the South: Human Progress in a Diverse World," *Human Development Report* (2013), http://hdr.undp.org/sites/default/files/reports/14/hdr2013_en_complete.pdf.
[4] Ibid.
[5] The initiative's website is: http://www.worldwewant2015.org/.
[6] Some of the institutes in the northern hemisphere that have developed their own global post-2015 agenda include the Center for Global Development, Brookings Institute, the

Center for International Cooperation at New York University, and the Centre for International Governance Innovation.

[7] Dhaka Expert Group, "First Approximations on Post-MDG International Development Goals," *Southern Voices of Post-2015 International Development Goals Special Issue* (2013).

[8] For some of the commentary on this issue, see: Fahmida Khatun, "Review of Post-2015 Reports: Views from the Global South," *Centre for Policy Dialogue* (2013); Joy Hyvarinen, "Goal Driven," *The World Today* (August/September 2005); Kushum Shakya, "Achievements of Millennium Development Goals (MDGs) in South Asian Association of Regional Corporations (SAARC) Countries: A Case of Nepal," *Journal of Pro Poor Growth* (2013): 19-28.

[9] Dhaka Expert Group, "First Approximations on Post-MDG International Development Goals."

[10] United Nations, "The State of the Global Partnership for Development: Millennium Development Goal 8," *MDG Gap Task Force Report* (2014), http://www.un.org/millenniumgoals/2014_Gap_Report/MDG%20Gap%20Task%20Force%20Report%202014_full%20report_English.pdf

[11] Ibid.

[12] Martín Benavides, "The Unfinished Agenda: Notes from Latin America," *Southern Voices of Post-2015 International Development Goals Occasional Paper* no. 4 (2013).

[13] William Easterly, "How the Millennium Development Goals are Unfair to Africa," *World Development* 37, no. 1 (2009): 26-35.

[14] Michael Clemens, "The Long Walk to School: International Education Goals in Historical Perspective," *Center for Global Development Working Paper* no. 37 (March 2004).

[15] Michael Clemens and Todd Moss, "What's Wrong with the Millennium Development Goals?" *Center for Global Development Brief* (September 2005).

[16] Ajaya Dixit and Shuvechha Khadka, "The Changing Intersection of Society and Development Goals: An Examination Aimed at Improving Policy-Making," *Southern Voices of Post-2015 International Development Goals Occasional Paper* no. 10 (2013).

[17] CEPAL, "América Latina y el Caribe en la Agenda para el Desarrollo Después de 2015: Reflexiones Preliminares Basadas en la Trilogía de la Igualdad," (2014), http://www.cepal.org/publicaciones/xml/4/53214/ReflexionespreliminaresdelatrilogiaIgualdad.pdf.

[18] Rehman Sobhan, "Designing MDGs for a More Just World," *Southern Voices of Post-2015 International Development Goals Occasional Paper* no. 1 (2013).

[19] John Kwakye, "Looking Beyond Aid to Fund Africa's Development," *Southern Voices of Post-2015 International Development Goals Occasional Paper* no. 7 (2013).

[20] Rehman Sobhan, "Designing MDGs for a More Just World."