Post 2015: A New Era of Accountability?

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Introduction

The United Nations Millennium Declaration, adopted by the General Assembly in 2000, begins with a statement of 'Values and principles' of which the second reads:

> 2. We recognize that, in addition to our separate responsibilities to our individual societies, we have a collective responsibility to uphold the principles of human dignity, equality and equity at the global level. …

Notwithstanding their merits, the Millennium Development Goals (MDGs) that derived from this Declaration were criticised by many for failing to address the issue of governance, and the associated notions of responsibility and accountability. It appears probable that the Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs) will address the issue, but will they adequately address the global dimension? Until now the focus has been mainly on national responsibilities; and accountability has mainly taken the form of quantitative measures of performance, based on a long list of indicators. Will the SDGs be better? Or will the 'collective responsibility' recognised in the Millennium Declaration simply be expressed by assigning the rich countries responsibility for providing financial transfers to poor countries, and the poor countries responsibility for improving their internal governance and achieving higher scores on the post-2015 performance indicators? This, we suggest, would not be good enough. The 'aid and exhortation' model of global governance needs to be replaced by one based on a notion of 'global justice'. The old model is inappropriate not only because the world is not clearly divided into rich and poor countries – as has been widely recognised with the rise of China, India, Brazil and other middle-income countries. A major problem is that the model fails to address the structural constraints facing poor countries - the power imbalances in the global economic system that limit the scope for poor countries to promote the prosperity and wellbeing of their people. The Commission on Global Governance for Health, of which we were both members, concluded that the origins of unequal health outcomes reside in uneven power structures that drive the key determinants of health such as environmental pollution, access to medicines and health care, patterns of scientific progress, and more (Ottersen et al. 2014). This is not a matter that can easily be resolved by adding new goals and targets; indeed, in earlier publications, Fukuda-Parr argued that MDGs served to divert attention from the structural problems and power asymmetries that exist (Fukuda-Parr, 2012).

The remainder of this article is divided into three parts. We begin by making the case for a global justice perspective which emphasises the responsibility - and hence also accountability - of international organisations and rule-making bodies. We next demonstrate the limitations

of accountability mechanisms of the type adopted in the MDGs. We conclude by arguing for a new approach to accountability that may be better suited to the post-2015 era.

Response- ability

With a co-author, McNeill earlier suggested that the question 'Who is responsible for global poverty?' could be restated as 'who is response-able?' (McNeill & St Clair, 2009) In other words, 'who is capable of responding in such a way as to remedy the harm?' The answer is international organizations. Here, we summarise the argument, then adapt it slightly to our new purpose.

There is no doubt that weak social arrangements in poor countries are a major cause of poverty as John Rawls notes (Rawls, 1993). But, as Pogge argues, the global system and its institutions are also to blame (Pogge, 2002, 2005). Pogge invites us to adopt a global justice perspective which views events, actions and institutions 'as effects of how our social world is structured—of our laws and conventions, practices and social institutions' (Pogge, 2005).

Another important contributor to this debate is Iris Young, who identifies the central dilemma of what she calls 'structural social injustice'.

> Structural injustice occurs as a consequence of many individuals and institutions acting in pursuit of their particular goals and interests, within given institutional rules and accepted norms. All the persons who participate by their actions in the ongoing schemes of cooperation that constitute these structures are responsible for them, in the sense that they are part of the process that causes them. They are not responsible, however, in the sense of having directed the process or intended its outcomes. (2006: 114)

The key question therefore becomes: 'how should moral agents, both individual and collective, think about our responsibilities in relation to structural social injustice?' (Young 2006:102). She proposes a 'social connection model', on the basis that "all those who contribute by their actions to the structural processes producing injustice share responsibility for such injustice' (2006: 122).

This is a useful approach for understanding our responsibilities in an age of globalisation. The current international economic and political system is indeed one in which the outcomes are unjust; and we, the rich, who benefit from the system, contribute to the structural social processes which sustain it. Within this system, international organisations – created and maintained by ourselves acting collectively – play an important role in making and applying the rules. Some, the development organisations, are explicitly mandated to promote the wellbeing of the poor. Others, such as the World Trade Organization, are at least nominally mandated to create a level playing field for negotiating a potential 'win-win' outcome for all parties involved. This gives these organisations a special responsibility; but this responsibility

is unlikely to be realized under present circumstances. Their governance and operations are marked by major power asymmetries amongst countries, whose negotiating positions in turn reflect power structures within countries. What is the responsibility of individuals in rich countries in this situation?

Most of us, most of the time, distance ourselves from a sense of personal responsibility in relation to structural injustice, because we believe that we operate within acceptable norms. We cannot see a determinate path between our actions and the structurally caused limitations on the lives of others which would imply that we ourselves have obligations to remedy such injustices. But what may be broadly called 'social structures' operate on a global scale. Under these circumstances, any conception of responsibility needs to be not individual, but collective (French 1991, 1992). We need a conception of responsibility that is able to account for the new situation, of a highly globalised world.

As Samuel Scheffler has noted, standard accounts of responsibility, moral sensibility and moral theory lag behind the many rapid changes in all types of relationships, and thus the structures that provide the grounds of people's lives and people's choices are also changed. The concepts of responsibility with which we operate are simply outdated. They are a reflection of issues that derive from, and are most suited to, issues of smaller scale interaction. 'We continue to rely on a "phenomenology of agency", what used to be actual experience of people interacting "personally" with other people that gives primacy to near effects over remote effects, to individual effects over group effects, and to people's positive actions more than what they have failed to do.' (Young 2004: 373). Such a conception of agency, and the concept of responsibility derived from it, is not appropriate for understanding and taking responsibility for the large-scale social structural processes that are sources of many problems today.

What we need, says Young, is a social connection model of responsibility, that, following Hannah Arendt, she sees as a form of political responsibility.

> Political responsibility… is necessarily a shared responsibility both because the injustices that call for redress are the product of the mediated actions of many, and thus because they can only be rectified through collective action. For most such injustices, the goal is to change structural processes by reforming institutions or creating new ones that will better regulate the process to prevent harmful outcomes (Young 2004:387).

One has obligations of justice to others not in general because morality requires alleviating suffering, but on the more restricted grounds that one participates in social structures that make others vulnerable to harm. In today's world of globalized social structures, this can – with regard to some issues - include everyone in the world. Responsibilities grounded in social connection, Young insists, can normally be discharged only by organized collective action. Thus political responsibility with respect to structural injustice often requires transforming of institutions and the tasks they assign. This is everyone's task and no one's in

particular, and, furthermore, it is a shared task; it implies that individuals reconsider their own responsibilities (Young 2004, 2006).

Michael Green proposes that commonsense morality is, 'the rough moral code that most of us follow, (which) embodies what Samuel Scheffler calls a restrictive conception of responsibility.' This is more limited than that implied by consequentialist moral theories which, according to Scheffler, differ in that they have no fundamental place for the distinction between action and omission, or for special duties. But he recognizes that 'While the restrictive common sense conception has considerable intuitive appeal, it faces important limitations.' There are global problems such as climate change and global justice that should be regulated by morality, but 'our restrictive conception of responsibility impedes this regulation.' Green proposes institutional responsibility as an alternative. 'Since institutions have different capacities as agents than individuals, there is less reason to apply the restrictive conception of responsibility to them.'
Institutions have the capacities necessary, are 'able', to bridge the responsibility gap – both moral and practical – which is apparent to those who see extreme poverty as grossly unjust, but are unconvinced by the claim that they, as individuals, are responsible for the situation.

The existence of international development institutions such as the World Bank renders it possible for individuals to respond to the intuitive demands of global poverty (McNeill & St Clair 2009). This applies also to other international institutions, especially rule-making bodies, such as the World Trade Organization (and to 'plurilateral' as well as multilateral bodies). Even if these organisations do not have an explicit purpose to ameliorate poverty, they do have a moral responsibility not to exacerbate poverty. And we, in rich countries, have a responsibility as individuals to hold them to account. How is this to be done? Would the SDGs provide an appropriate framework?

Count-ability

The MDG experience

One reason for the appeal of the MDGs was their 'count-ability', and their potential, thereby, to strengthen accountability. In adopting the Millennium Declaration, world leaders not only committed to do their utmost to end poverty, they also set concrete, time bound and quantitative targets. These make possible systematic monitoring of implementation with indicators that can be compared across countries and time. Performance of countries can be evaluated on the basis of objectively verifiable data, compared over time to reveal improvement or deterioration. These targets overcome a major limitation of conventional UN declarations, their lack of a hard framework for implementation of the commitments they make, leaving them open to criticism that they are mere words. While the Declaration spoke of ending poverty as a global priority, it also defined what this meant in concrete terms that were clear and unambiguous to all, such as putting all children in primary school. Time bound, quantitative goals that speak directly to concrete outcomes that could be monitored create a

framework for holding governments accountable for the commitments they make in adopting the Declaration.

The leadership of the international community set out to organize a monitoring process. As soon as the Millennium Declaration was launched, Mark Malloch Brown, the then Administrator of the UN Development Programme, saw the exceptional potential of the Declaration and published an Opinion Editorial piece in the International Herald Tribune heralding a new era in international development cooperation (Fukuda-Parr & Hulme, 2011). The UN, the World Bank, the OECD Development Assistance Committee, and bilateral development agencies set out to develop a more rigorous monitoring framework for the Declaration. The targets included in the Declaration were elaborated into eight goals, 18 targets and 52 indicators[1] – named the Millennium Development Goals (MDGs) – as a framework to facilitate monitoring and harmonization of reporting, and were introduced a year later in the Secretary General's 'Road Map' document (United Nations Secretary General, 2001). But using the MDGs to monitor poverty reduction, and to hold governments accountable for their Millennium Declaration commitments, is highly problematic for a variety of reasons identified by both activists and researchers, Fukuda-Parr amongst them.

First, as a development agenda, the framework was too narrow. (See for example UN CDP 2013, Fukuda-Parr, 2013, Nayyar, 2013, UN Task Team on the Post 2015 Development Agenda, 2013). While there was widespread support for the issues that were included, the goals were limited to eight and left out major development challenges like employment and decent work, climate change, peace and security, democratic governance, and inequality. In some cases broad goals were translated into targets so limited in number that they effectively redefined the goal. For example, the thirteen point Agenda for Action for gender equality adopted at the Beijing conference on Women was reduced to one target of parity in primary and secondary schooling. And education was reduced to primary education, leaving out technical education, adult education, literacy, and much more.

Second, the MDGs as a framework of international development priorities does not do justice to the transformative vision of the Millennium Declaration and the agendas for action adopted by the UN, particularly at the numerous development conferences of the preceding decade that covered the entire gamut of development priorities from social development to population to women to habitat. A common element of these declarations and agendas was an emphasis on equality and participation as both ends and means. They viewed development as a process of empowering people and recognized the need to address the structural causes of poverty. During the 1990s practitioners and researchers proposed new approaches to understanding poverty and development, focusing on people as both beneficiaries and agents of change. These debates moved on from the idea of 'meeting basic needs' to capability expansion and human development, based on the work of Amartya Sen on development as freedom (Sen,

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[1] Expanded to 21 targets and 60 indicators in 2005.
The original goals (United Nations Secretary General, 2001) may be found pp. 55 forward at http://www.un.org/documents/ga/docs/56/a56326.pdf; revisions were introduced following the UN Summit session of 2005.

1999). The title of Saith's 2006 article encapsulates the problem with the MDGs: 'From Universal Values to Millennium Development Goals: Lost in Translation' (Saith, 2006). The list of goals, targets and indicators does not do justice to the Millennium Declaration's vision and its commitments to equality, respect for nature, participation, and human rights including the Right to Development (Fukuda-Parr, 2013).   While overlapping with many economic and social rights, the MDGs also do not adequately reflect the core principles of human rights, and in some places even contradict standards of international human rights law (OHCHR, 2008).

Third, the MDGs were particularly weak in the area of global governance. Developed as goal eight on 'partnerships', the targets were limited in scope, did not have quantitative targets, and did not align with human rights commitments (Caliari, 2014) (Fukuda-Parr, 2006).

Fourth, the MDGs did not address disparities within and between countries, although the revised list of MDG targets and indicators in 2005 encouraged reporting to include disaggregated data to show trends in disparities between groups. Economic development is a process of improvement in the average condition of human beings, but there are always losers along with winners from this process, and the MDGs do not capture the problem of losers whose rights need to be protected.

Finally, the MDG framework can distort both priorities and concepts. A research project, "The Power of Numbers", co-led by Fukuda-Parr and Yamin and involving case studies of 11 targets, found that some goals placed excessive emphasis on the chosen targets, leading to neglect of other important priorities that were left out. Goals and targets shine a spotlight on important and neglected priorities – such as maternal mortality – yet they can also cast a shadow on those priorities that were not selected (Fukuda-Parr, Yamin, & Greenstein, 2014). The project also highlights a much broader problem; that the emphasis on quantitative results creates incentives for siloed approaches and technical interventions, such as the 'vertical' approach to global health focusing on specific diseases rather than building national and international health systems.

As a metric for evaluating performance, the MDGs are biased against the poorest countries, based on a methodology that has been vigorously criticized as arbitrary and flawed (Easterly, 2009) (Saith, 2006). They are unrealistic for the countries with the lowest starting points, requiring growth rates and human development progress far exceeding historical experience (Clemens, Kenny, & Moss, 2007). At the same time, they are irrelevant for many countries where the targets have already been reached, or are close to it, leading them to be dubbed 'Minimum Development Goals'. With co-authors, Fukuda-Parr has argued that the MDGs success should not be judged by whether the targets are on track to being met but by the pace of progress, and showed that many countries judged 'off target' by the UN monitoring are in fact those making the fastest progress (Fukuda-Parr, Greenstein, & Stewart, 2013).   These problems arise from interpreting the goals as national targets (Vandemoortele, 2009). The international community has been – and continues to be – divided and inconsistent on whether global goals are to be met globally or nationally.   UN field staff and national governments advocated adaptation to national realities while other such as Sachs charged that allowing

adaptation would render goals meaningless as commitments to rid the world of poverty. As we shall discuss later in this paper, the Rio + 5 outcome documents calls for goals to be both universal and also recognize diverse national realities. Despite all these warnings, the MDGs are widely used to judge performance of countries without adaptation. For example, the 2014 report on LDCs issued by UNCTAD concludes that the LDCs development performance has been a 'failure' since they did not achieve the MDGs in spite of a record pace of economic growth in the 2000's. Ironically, they admit that the pace of progress has been more rapid in the LDCs than in other country groupings. Yet they disparage the fact that the African LDCs reduced the income poverty rate from 65% to 51% over the period 1990-2010, because this is off track to reach the 33% target by 2015. Under-five mortality rates declined from 156 to 83 per 1,000 live births between 1991/95 and 2011/12, but fall short of the targeted reduction by two thirds, to 52 per 1000. These significant improvements in lives of people in African countries are dubbed a 'failure' and the efforts of countries are found inadequate simply because they did not reach the uniform numerical targets that were set.

Global goals and count-ability of the Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs)

Will these lessons of the MDGs be heeded in the SDGs to be adopted by the 2015 General Assembly? Some of the mis-specifications in the MDGs can be corrected with a more careful approach to selecting targets and indicators. The inclusion of the goal to reduce inequality, not only within, but also *between countries,* is important. And the target of increasing the voice of developing countries in decision making is very welcome, opening the way to incorporating responsibility of global institutions. Yet the goals and targets presented to the 2014 General Assembly by the Open Working Group are still overwhelmingly focused on the responsibility of national governments, and on outcomes at the national level. Issues of global commons and global institutions are only indirectly relevant to most of the goals and targets.

Conclusion: a new era of accountability?

Although they will no doubt be an improvement over the MDGs, the SDGs are unlikely to be an important instrument for addressing structural, systemic factors that contribute to global poverty. The logic of simplicity, concreteness and quantification will tend to squeeze out issues like stabilizing financial markets and strengthening regulation for money laundering. Global goals neglect inequality between countries, imposing one size fits all targets to countries with vastly different starting points and resources. To address such issues requires activism for policy reform and a discourse on development that recognizes the structural causes of poverty rooted in unequal power structures within and between countries. The process of defining the SDGs has generated unprecedented participation and contestation. This is not by accident; the stakeholders in international development – national governments, private sector, academics, and civil society groups all recognize the importance of these global goals in framing debate. But the SDGs, like the MDGs, may even close off democratic space, not because their 'accountability' mechanisms are weak, but because they promote a

dominant language that frames development debates in a technical, depoliticised way. Issues of global governance may be left out in response to the imperatives of simplification, quantification and concreteness.

How can we establish a global goal for accountability, based on the simple premise of global justice? Perhaps we need look no further than the Universal Declaration of Human Rights. While simple, it carries none of the problems and distortions of global goals. We can start a global effort to secure reforms in global governance and state accountability on the basis of Article 28, which states "Everyone is entitled to a social and international order in which the rights and freedoms set forth in this Declaration can be fully realized".

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