

Consequential Omission:
How demography shapes development
– lessons from the MDGs for the SDGs

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Abstract

If you were on a mission to improve the plight of humankind, nothing less, would you care about how many people are living, where they are and how old they are? You probably would as it would obviously make it easier for you to estimate the challenge you face; the international community did not. In 2000, the international community formulated the Millennium Development Goals (MDGs), which guided development policies over the last 15 years. Between 1990, the most common base year, and 2015, the common target year, these goals sought to cut the proportion of people living in extreme poverty by half, reduce the number of slum dwellers and ensure universal primary education, among others. The world as whole has achieved most of the associated targets, and even the world's least developed countries have in many cases made remarkable progress.

The recently published “Road to Dignity by 2030”, the Synthesis Report of the Secretary-General on the post-2015 Agenda, quite enthusiastically evaluates the outcomes of the MDG agenda by assuming that “extreme poverty can be eradicated within one more generation.” However, while the share of the poor fell in the group of the least developed countries, their absolute numbers are higher than ever. This is because poverty reduction did not keep pace with population growth. Likewise, while countries were arguably successful in reducing the number of slum dwellers, today many more people live in slums than 25 years before because of rapid urban population growth. And although the poorest countries have succeeded in putting many more million children to school, they are less successful in reaching this target than other countries. This is because their efforts were dwarfed by the large growth in the number of children that are in primary school age. Despite considerable efforts and attested

progress, can we truly say that we are living in a better world today, and that people are better off than before?

If today you embarked on a major effort to develop the sustainable development goals (SDG), which are expected to guide development efforts in the post-2015 era, would you try to learn the lessons from the MDGs? You probably would; many proponents of the new development agenda do not. They are putting forward goals, targets and indicators, which are not informed by the projected changes in the number, geographic location, and age structure of the population.

Yet, without knowledge of how many people there are and how their numbers will change, where they are living and how their geographic distribution will change, and how old they are and how age structures will change, policy makers will not be able to understand and meet the needs of people. Without this knowledge it is not possible to ensure people-centered and evidence-based development strategies, policies and programmes. To make people count, it is necessary to count people.

This study shows not only how demographic change shaped progress towards the MDGs during the past fifteen years, it also shows how projected demographic futures are likely to shape progress towards the SDGs over the next fifteen years. The study fills a gaping hole in the literature on development goals, notably the MDGs, and is a wake-up call for the design of the SDGs.

There are few things social scientists can predict with relative great certainty over the next fifteen years. Demographic change is one of these things. Population data and projections enable countries to anticipate and plan for the demographic changes. Doing so they can proactively address many of the associated challenges before they blow up in their faces, including the unplanned growth of cities, the collapse of rural communities, or the aging of populations which has profound implications for example for the design of pension and health systems. Planning based on population data enables policy makers to be ahead of the curve, instead of running behind managing one crisis after another. The neglect of population data and projections in the design of the MDGs was a “consequential omission”, and not using population data and projections to inform the SDGs would be a heart to justify mistake.

Key words:

MDGs, SDGs, post-2015, population growth, urbanization, aging, sustainable development