‘Minimum’ or ‘Maximum’ Development Goals? The agency of the MDGs amongst civil society actors in India and Malawi.

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Introduction

International donors have long viewed the promotion of civil society as key to achieving a variety of multilateral development agendas, from democracy promotion in Eastern Europe and Latin America to combating communicable diseases in sub-Saharan Africa and Asia. Donor agencies have been particularly keen to engage with and promote civil society, and often have wide ranging sections of their websites dedicated to this purpose.

This paper addresses the intersection between global development agendas, best represented by the Millennium Development Goals, and civil society formations in developing countries. Drawing on the work of David Hulme (2007) and others, I argue that the Millennium Development Goals represent hegemonic articulations of development, and thus contribute to the construction of both consenting and contesting civil society subjects in developing countries. It is important to understand these processes in order to understand how the MDGs impact upon civil society formations in developing countries, which are often invested by donors and commentators alike with so much potential for grounding and mainstreaming democracy in these countries (see for example, Kaldor, 2003; Keane, 2009). Indeed, this paper represents an important insight with regards to civil society formations in developing countries. Too often, the question asked of these formations is what they are doing for the MDGs (Foster, 2003). This paper inverts the question, asking instead what the MDGs are doing to civil society.

In particular my argument develops through an exploration of the discourses and practices of two nodes of the Global Call to Action against Poverty (GCAP), the global civil society network behind the 2005 UK Make Poverty History campaign. The paper explores GCAP in Malawi and in India. The paper finds the MDGs to be an extension of global governance processes which act in Malawi to produce the imaginations and practices of the network. In India the MDGs also act in the production of the GCAP network, but here provides for sites of counter-hegemonic contestation to arise. This has implications for how civil society formations in developing countries are incorporated into post-2015 debates on global development agendas. I intentionally deploy the notion of ‘action’ here, as the paper’s theoretical framework emerges from the Foucauldian governmentality literature (1969/2002; 1982/1994; 2000) as well as the post-governmentality literature of actor network theory (ANT), particularly the latter’s focus on the politics of episteme production and maintenance (Callon and Latour, 1981; Callon, 1986; Clegg, 1989; Law, 1992; Latour, 2005).

1 See, for example ‘The World Bank and Civil Society’ at http://web.worldbank.org/WSITE/EXTERNAL/TOPICS/CSO/0,,pagePK:220469~theSitePK:228717,00.html
The paper proceeds with a brief discussion of various literatures concerning global civil society and its relationship to processes of global governance, particularly where these processes intersect with/produce post-colonial societies. It then continues by exploring the emergence of the MDGs as an actor of neo-liberal global governance, which interacts, shapes and clashes with civil society formations in India and Malawi. The paper illustrates this through data drawn from semi-structured and ethnographic interviewing carried out with GCAP Malawi and GCAP India participants. Before all of this though I will introduce GCAP in slightly more detail.

GCAP

The Global Call to Action against Poverty (GCAP) is, according to its website, “the world’s largest civil society alliance fighting against poverty and inequality” (www.whiteband.org). It is constituted by over 100 country level national civil society coalitions and campaigns.

GCAP was negotiated into existence at a series of international conferences between 2003 and 2007, attended by a large range of national and international civil society actors. During this time, GCAP acted as a network hub, coordinating the campaigns for debt justice, fair trade and international aid held across the world in 2005 at the time of the G8 summit in Scotland. GCAP provided the global umbrella for initiatives such as Make Poverty History in the UK and the One Campaign in the US. By 2008, GCAP was focusing its activities around large scale mobilization events such as its Stand Up against Poverty campaign held annually on the International Day for the Eradication of World Poverty. In 2009, GCAP claims to have mobilised 173 million people to ‘stand up’ worldwide on this day (GCAPb).

GCAP’s relationship with the United Nations Millennium Campaign (UNMC) is a key one. The initial brainstorming meeting which heralded the inception of GCAP in 2003 was organised by the civil society organisation CIVICUS and the UNMC (CIVICUS/UNMC, 2003). The report from the meeting reveals that there were initial concerns amongst the participating civil society actors regarding this relationship. However, when GCAP was eventually operationalised in 2005, the UNMC was given observer status on what was then called the International Facilitation Team, and what is now known as the Global Council (GCAP’s highest decision making body). The UNMC is also one of GCAP’s main funders. From 2006 to 2008 the UNMC gave GCAP between $70,000 and $120,000 a year for secretariat support (GCAP, 2008: 13). In addition, in 2009 alone the UNMC gave GCAP national coalition members 40 grants in at least 20 countries at a total of nearly $600,000.

It is difficult initially to identify exactly where the UNMC comes from. Even though its name suggests it is a United Nations initiative, its website (www.endpoverty2015.org) and its various proclamations make no mention of this. The UNMC merely “…supports

and inspires people from around the world to take action in support of the Millennium Development Goals” (4). I do not intend here to provide a genealogy of the UNMC, but a cursory glance at its contacts page confirms that whilst it claims to involve “...a wide network of partners, including civil society organizations, faith-based groups, NGOs, youth, parliamentarians and local governments” (5), nearly all of its offices are based in UN agency buildings, and key staff are employed by the UNDP. Indeed, on the United Nations website (www.un.org) the UNMC is also listed as a key member of the UN family for achieving the MDGs. The point here is not to suggest anything necessarily malign, but only that the UNMC is squarely an initiative of the United Nations, which lends its relationship with GCAP a potentially hegemonic dimension.

Nonetheless, in many respects GCAP has attempted to establish itself on a global scale as an oppositional network, dissenting from governmental prescriptions for social and economic development. On its website, it is claimed that GCAP “...is calling for action from the world’s leaders to meet their promises to end poverty and inequality” (GCAPa). GCAP is a call against poverty, “demanding solutions” (Op Cit) from world leaders. Already here we can see a slight ambiguity about how GCAP might be understood. On the one hand it could be argued that GCAP appears to be oppositional. It is against poverty, and demands action on issues where not enough action has taken place. GCAP recognises that such action has not taken place for political reasons and out of the self interest of powerful actors. For example, on trade injustice, the GCAP website has the following to say:

“...trade rules and policies, and the imposition of harmful economic policy conditions, have become the vehicle for the indiscriminate liberalization of developing country economies undermining sustainable development, increasing poverty and inequality.” (GCAPb)

This suggests an understanding that in making demands on political leaders they are making demands of individual and institutional actors who have been, and in some cases still are, opposed to GCAP’s own analysis of political economy. However, it is simultaneously engaged in what is essentially an accountability exercise, which suggests that GCAP is not simply opposed to political leaders and institutions, but also seeking to lobby, advocate and work with such actors. This is evidenced by its relationship with the UNMC, as well as its cooperative relationship with the Club of Madrid, the organisation of pro-democracy ex-heads of state (www.clubofmadrid.org). This narrows GCAP’s field of oppositionality by framing it as an accountability relationship, tied to the actions of particular actors deemed as central to the eradication of poverty. In maintaining relationships like these GCAP may not merely govern and influence but be governed and influenced back. This suggests the distinction between dissent and consent is a murky one, with no clear delineation. The degree to which these two contradictory yet intrinsically related processes work through GCAP in its national nodes is the subject of this paper.

**Global Civil Society and post-colonial societies**

The GCAP-UNMC relationship is unproblematic if we consider it in light of a great deal of ‘global civil society’ literature, which draws on a benign and liberal imagination of the
state. For example, global civil society theorists tend to look towards the sustenance and evolution of existing institutions of global governance as the bedrock of a new global democracy (Beck: 129-155; Kaldor, 2005: 107; Falk, 1999: 133).

Chandhoke however illustrates how the space of civil society is one which is often disciplined and abnormalizing. Codes of ‘polite’ behaviour and etiquette discipline civil society formations (1995: 186), whilst the space of civil society becomes “…a neutralized space, it neutralizes those forms of politics which are outside stipulated limits, or those which question the composition of the sphere.” (Ibid: 187). In the post colonial context, where this paper situates itself, Chatterjee proclaims the entirely idealized or ‘fictive’ notion of civil society. According to Chatterjee, civil society describes the relationship between the birth of the nation state in the West, which required engaged citizens to monitor and participate in it, and its people, who fulfilled this function. The birth of the nation state in most of the world however occurred in the context of colonial rule, which had already instituted a system of governmentality which segmented people into administrable population groups along lines of ethnicity and tribe. These people were not citizens, but subjects, and were not required to participate in the state. Whilst the early anti-colonial struggles were initially energized by republican ideals of the citizen, the notion of the developmental state, encouraged by international donors and NGOs, re-instituted colonial methods of governmentality, creating population groups along lines of health, wealth and education (Chatterjee, 2004: 36-38), ostensibly so they could be ‘cared’ for and thus be administered by the state.

Some of the empirical material considered in this paper reinforces the view that civil society in post-colonial contexts can reflect the imposition of neo-imperial modes of governance on post-colonial societies. Whilst I would not entirely share Chatterjee’s view that civil society is a fictive and irrelevant notion everywhere in the post-colonial world, his redefinition of civil society (Ibid: 36-38) does problematize the degree to which global civil society networks, particularly in post colonial contexts, are able to monitor global institutions, rather than merely legitimate and be ordered by them. Indeed, this also shares an affinity with the work of post-development scholars such as Ferguson (1990) and Escobar (1995) who have argued that international development apparatuses represent extensions of historical and imperial forms of governance and domination, albeit that their affects can be unpredictable (see particularly Ferguson, 1990).

In the face of these critiques global civil society theorists have continued to celebrate the new forms of power which they claim are represented and enacted by the NGOs, social movements and other non-state networks which constitute global civil society. It is particularly relevant here to engage with the work of John Keane (2008; 2009), whose ideas regarding the powers of global civil society I interrogate through the rest of the paper. Keane has argued for the recognition of a new form of ‘monitory’ democracy. He argues that since 1945 there has been a proliferation of non traditional democratic forms, (for example participatory budgeting, truth and reconciliation commissions and social forums) whose common feature appears to be their ‘monitory’ capacity i.e. their capacity to monitor traditional (the nation-state) and newer (systems of global governance) sites of power. Keane argues that democracy has always been based on representation, and that
these new monitory institutions embody new forms of representation. The multiplication of sites of representivity to monitor the exercise of power is therefore positive, even if they are not necessarily representative in a traditional manner (2009: 585-873).

The problem with this though is that for the majority of marginalised people such traditional forms of representivity are still incredibly important, and have not been satisfactorily replaced by the proliferation of NGOs who follow and ‘monitor’ the agendas of multilateral donors at the UN and elsewhere. Indeed, in a Foucauldian sense one could query whether the multiplication of sites of monitory institutions merely represents a form of advanced governmentality which disciplines these networks and their imaginations of what is politically possible (Foucault, 1982/1994, Danaher, Schirato and Webb, 2000). ‘Monitory’ institutions therefore may not simply monitor, but take on a whole range of other, sometimes contradictory roles. Keane argues that when monitory institutions work well they contest and break down power (2008), but while this may indeed be the case, this is a partial picture, as it ignores entirely the potential creation and re-creation of new elites, oligarchies and hierarchies.

The ‘monitory’ institutions of global civil society then are always being worked through by other actors (such as the agents and discourses of global systems of governance) as well as working on them. Kasfir (1998), Tembo (2003), and Mohan and Stokke (2007) have all challenged these rather benign and liberal interpretations of global civil society, and drawn attention to how donor civil society programmes and international NGO support can often be harmful to indigenous democratic formations. It is interesting to note how this same critique is articulated by members of the Indian GCAP coalition.

This resonates with Kamat’s (2002; 2004) contention that NGOs in post-colonial societies are deeply implicated in the neo-liberal hegemonic project of which the international development agenda is one part. NGOs and ‘new social movements’, both of which fit into Keane’s notion of ‘monitory democracy’ (2008; 2009), do not represent a devolution of power from the state as Keane would hold, but embody a reproduction of the state and capital in public spaces, what Kamat calls the ‘NGO-ization’ of public space i.e. increasing professionalization, fiscal responsibility and accountability (2002: 615).

The literature considered above calls into question the ontological claims made by global civil society theorists that global civil society is characteristically progressive, or works in an uncomplicated sense for or on behalf of marginalised people in post-colonial contexts. It appears that global civil society networks are an assemblage of contradictory and complex characteristics, rather than uncomplicated forbearers of a new global democracy. They are not merely the historical and teleological subjects of socio-economic transformation, as global civil society theorists would have it, but also reproduce structural domination and historical imperial projects. This is not to suggest an overly deterministic perspective on global civil society networks, but this discussion does frame the research I carried out with the Global Call to Action against Poverty (GCAP). Whilst in India GCAP members were found to be creatively engaging with global systems of governance, in Malawi, GCAP participants appeared to be distinctly
monitored by, rather than monitory of, global systems of governance, in this case the Millennium Development Goals (MDGs) and their agents. Both the contestation of Indian GCAP members and the consenting of Malawian GCAP members were in part enabled by the close global working relationship which GCAP has established with the United Nations Millennium Campaign (UNMC). I will now illustrate the emergence of the MDGs as an actor of global governance, and their role in disciplining and creating consenting subjects amongst the members of GCAP Malawi. The UNMC’s role in this process will become clear as the section progresses. The consent exhibited by GCAP Malawi will then be contrasted with the contestation exhibited by GCAP India in the following section.

**The Millennium Development Goals as an actor of Global Governance**

The MDG’s first came to the fore in my research of GCAP Malawi when I received the following email. The email I sent to this GCAP Malawi participant made no mention of the MDGs, merely explaining the background to my project, and requesting his time for an interview:

<xxx@yahoo.com> writes:

Dear Clive,

I hope you are fine. I would like to confirm that I will participate in your research project. Our organisation is called xxx and I am the Executive Director/Founder…I will be ready to participate in July. *We are mainly focusing on MDG goal 1, 3 and 6.*

Thanks

xxx

[Personal correspondence with research participant, 13th April 2008: Italics added]

The GCAP coalition in Malawi is also called the National Civil Society Taskforce for the MDGs, and so in many respects it shouldn’t be surprising if participants raise the MDGs in their talk about the coalition. Nonetheless, this response struck me as particularly unusual; so direct and seemingly automatic. What I would come to encounter in Malawi was a very problematic relationship between civil society and the particular ‘development hegemony’ (Kamat, 2002) of the MDGs, which challenged any claim of GCAP being an entirely monitory or oppositional force. However, before investigating this further I will introduce the MDGs more comprehensively, in order to illustrate the manner in which they can be considered as not just a set of benign or progressive development goals, but also fused with articulations of neo-liberal global governance.

*What are the MDGs and where do they come from?*

The MDGs consist of eight targets each with their own subset of targets:

Table One: The Millennium Development Goals

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>MDG Number</th>
<th>Main Target</th>
<th>Sub-targets</th>
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<tbody>
<tr>
<td>One</td>
<td>End Extreme Poverty</td>
<td>Halve, between 1990 and 2015,</td>
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<tr>
<td>One</td>
<td></td>
<td>Achieve full and productive employment and decent work for all, including women and young people</td>
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<tr>
<td>Two</td>
<td>Achieve Universal Primary Education</td>
<td>Ensure that, by 2015, children everywhere, boys and girls alike, will be able to complete a full course of primary schooling</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Three</td>
<td>Promote Gender Equality and Empower Women</td>
<td>Eliminate gender disparity in primary and secondary education, preferably by 2005, and in all levels of education no later than 2015</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Four</td>
<td>Reduce Child Mortality</td>
<td>Reduce by two thirds, between 1990 and 2015, the under-five mortality rate</td>
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<tr>
<td>Five</td>
<td>Improve Maternal Health</td>
<td>Reduce by three quarters the maternal mortality ratio</td>
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<tr>
<td>Six</td>
<td>Combat HIV/AIDS, Malaria, and other Diseases</td>
<td>Have halted by 2015 and begun to reverse the spread of HIV/AIDS</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Seven</td>
<td>Ensure Environmental Sustainability</td>
<td>Integrate the principles of sustainable development into country policies and programmes and reverse the loss of environmental resources</td>
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<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>Halve, by 2015, the proportion of the population without sustainable access to safe drinking water and basic sanitation</td>
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<td></td>
<td>By 2020, to have achieved a significant improvement in the</td>
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<tr>
<td>Eight</td>
<td>Develop a Global Partnership for Development</td>
<td>Address the special needs of least developed countries, landlocked countries and small island developing states</td>
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<tr>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>Develop further an open, rule-based, predictable, non-discriminatory trading and financial system</td>
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<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>Deal comprehensively with developing countries’ debt</td>
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<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>In cooperation with pharmaceutical companies, provide access to affordable essential drugs in developing countries</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>In cooperation with the private sector, make available benefits of new technologies, especially information and communications</td>
</tr>
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</table>

The following excerpt from the United Nations’ MDGs website provides an account of their development:

“In September 2000, building upon a decade of major United Nations conferences and summits, world leaders came together …committing their nations to a new global partnership to reduce extreme poverty and setting out a series of time-bound targets - with a deadline of 2015 …The eight Millennium Development Goals (MDGs) – which range from halving extreme poverty to halting the spread of HIV/AIDS and providing universal primary education – form a blueprint agreed to by all the world’s countries and all the world’s leading development institutions.” (6)

This narrative presents a particular history of the MDGs. They were the result of UN summits and were developed and adopted unanimously by the whole host of world nations at the General Assembly. However, other accounts of the MDGs’ development problematize this narrative, and provide the context in which GCAP Malawi is subjectified by the MDGs and the discourse of development they represent.

Accounts of those involved in the development of the MDGs help to reinforce this claim. Colin Bradford was the United States representative to the Organisation of Economic Co-operation and Development-Development Assistance Committee (OECD-DAC) during the 1990’s. In an unpublished account of his time at the DAC, he relates the process by which the OECD’s International Development Targets (IDTs) were formed. According to Bradford (and secondary accounts also – see Hulme, 2007), the IDTs were important pre-cursors to the MDGs and formed the basis of those goals and targets (Bradford, 2006: 1). Indeed, a 1996 document produced by the DAC, ‘Shaping the 21st Century:
The Contribution of Development Co-operation’, lists these IDTs, and claims to be the first attempt at synthesizing targets set at sector-specific summits and meetings from the previous decade (OECD-DAC, 1996: 9). A glance at these targets does indeed reveal their resemblance to the eventual MDGs (I have added the relevant MDG numbers):

**Economic well-being:**
- A reduction by one-half in the proportion of people living in extreme poverty by 2015 (*MDG 1*).

**Social development:**
- Universal primary education in all countries by 2015 (*MDG 2*);
- Demonstrated progress toward gender equality and the empowerment of women by eliminating gender disparity in primary and secondary education by 2005 (*MDG 3*);
- A reduction by two-thirds in the mortality rates for infants and children under age 5 and a reduction by three-fourths in maternal mortality, all by 2015 (*MDG 4*);
- Access through the primary health-care system to reproductive health services for all individuals of appropriate ages as soon as possible and no later than the year 2015 (*MDG 5*).

**Environmental sustainability and regeneration:**
- The current implementation of national strategies for sustainable development in all countries by 2005, so as to ensure that current trends in the loss of environmental resources are effectively reversed at both global and national levels by 2015 (*MDG 7*). (OECD-DAC, 1996: 2)

Bradford relates that finding an alternative ideological narrative with which to “…sell development” to development actors (including developing countries) in the aftermath of the Cold War was a major motivation in the drafting of the IDTs (2006: 2). One can already detect issues of contention here for actors who might have different notions of development to that of the DAC. Indeed, the IDTs, which predated and defined the MDGs, were formulated by a “groupe de reflexion” which consisted of all and only the major bilateral donors at that time (Ibid: 3). This account clearly problematizes the idea of the MDGs as an automatically benign and apolitical set of goals and targets.

Whilst it is not the assertion here that the MDGs are necessarily malign (and indeed, who could argue with eradicating half of extreme poverty?), it seems clear that they represent a hegemonic and therefore exclusionary definition of development. The MDGs do not, for instance, deploy social exclusion, violence against women, or land rights as subjects of development, all of which have provided sites of state-civil society contention. Indeed, in excluding these areas and affecting a “…unilateral narrowing down of the development agenda” (Saith, 2006: 1168) the MDGs represent the culmination of neoliber al efforts to subjectify developing countries into a hegemonic project of market-led development. For example, the MDGs implicitly prioritize absolute poverty over relative poverty. This therefore furthers “…some of the most dramatic and explosive dimensions of the era of market liberalization and neoliberal globalization — that of spectacularly rising inequalities that are as visible as the worsening forms of social and service exclusion in large parts of the third world. Given the wonderful sentiments on shared human values that preface the MDG statement, such an omission could not have been due
to forgetfulness” (Ibid: 1185). Furthermore, the MDGs explicitly position the private sector, and in particular large pharmaceutical companies, as the key to improved development outcomes. This is a view of development, and how it should be achieved, which differs significantly from dissenting definitions of development (see for example, Bello, 2002; Broad and Cavanagh, 2008).

None of this is necessarily problematic if civil society discourses of poverty eradication are drawing from a number of discursive sources. However, in GCAP Malawi at least, they are not. How the MDGs are understood discursively, and the material practices this creates in a self-referential and reinforcing process, provides a useful way in which to judge the claims of global civil society theorists that networks such as GCAP universally enact forms of monitory representivity and oppositionality, thus embodying contesting political subjects. As I will now illustrate, I found that what participants in GCAP Malawi imagined was possible when they talked about ‘development’ was conditioned by both assemblages of knowledge contained within and deployed through the MDGs, and individual agents of that knowledge.

**The ‘Maximum’ Development Goals**

Repeatedly during conversations with GCAP Malawi participants, the MDGs were deployed without invite. The MDGs appeared to be active, both in shaping the discourses being employed by the research participants, but also in shaping their activities as a coalition and my own research. In this way they served as an ‘actor’ (Latour, 2005) in the NCSTM network. For example, the following exchange took place during the first interview I undertook in Malawi:

“Joseph: But who are you meeting? Your list…

CG: Ok, so I’ve got, [pause, papers taken out of bag] these are the people who have so far agreed to be interviewed…

Joseph: Ok…this one I think you should meet [‘This one’ refers to a UNDP programme officer not on the list being discussed]… Because she will give you another perspective

CG: OK … what’s her relationship to the taskforce?

…I think they are supporting the taskforce…UNDP are also :JosephBut they are into the Millennium Development Goals, so if you want to hear some stories in terms of what progress government is making in the eyes of the UN system so you can get that perspective.”

Like the email I had received earlier from another GCAP Malawi participant, the MDGs and the UN had appeared in my research completely uninvited. This signaled what I subsequently discovered was the almost complete acquiescence of GCAP Malawi participants to the UNDP’s involvement in the network. Later on in the conversation, Joseph said the following:
“…for me, there is the GCAP movement, and there is the MDGs…not everyone who is doing the MDG work is in the GCAP…that’s why I was mentioning these people so you can meet them, and just get progress on the MDGs for Malawi…”

It appeared that Joseph felt compelled to direct my research to actors who were not obviously part of GCAP. Here then were the MDGs acting, not simply to shape GCAP Malawi’s materialities, but also my own, drawing me to research participants (the UNDP) who I would not have initially considered to be a part of GCAP Malawi.

The MDGs discursively oriented GCAP Malawi participants’ imaginings of their campaign’s objectives, and poverty eradication in Malawi more broadly. GCAP Malawi participants invoked the MDGs as the defining frame of their campaign. They understood their subjectivity as a monitory one, of ensuring that the Malawian government was held to account over its MDG commitments. Furthermore, many of the GCAP Malawi participants imagined that achieving the MDGs would result in the eradication of poverty. For example, Mary told me that GCAP Malawi was “…a coalition of civil society, you know, who want to see poverty gone, ok? But they want to see poverty gone by using the framework of the eight MDGs ok?”

Similarly, Thandike commented that “…meeting the MDGs, they are put in a way that they should actually eradicate poverty and hunger…so for Malawi, a third world country, I mean, that would cure everything, the economy, that would be the day we are looking forward to…I think meeting the MDGs in Malawi…I guess…it’s…it would be like…being in heaven I guess”

However, the MDGs only promise to reduce extreme poverty by 50% by 2015. Even if the 65.4% of people living below the nationally defined poverty line in Malawi (UNDP, 2008) are all living in extreme poverty, rather than ‘regular’ poverty, then that still leaves nearly a third of the population living in extreme poverty. So whilst the members of GCAP Malawi are trying to enrol the MDGs to their problematizations of poverty eradication in Malawi, the MDGs are in fact acting in ways which contradict this⁴. Nonetheless, an MDG shadow report produced by GCAP Malawi claims that “…the MDGs … look at all people” (GCAP Malawi, 2007: 19). This significantly problematizes any claims that GCAP is oppositional or dissenting in any universal sense. Indeed, the discourses of poverty eradication amongst GCAP Malawi participants appear to be more of the ‘monitored’ variety than the monitory (Keane, 2009), taking on and consenting to the vision of poverty eradication represented by the MDGs.

The ‘monitored’ discursive constructions of the GCAP Malawi participants were also intertwined with the material locations and practices of the GCAP Malawi constituent organisations, particularly with regard to their relationships with the Malawian government. Many of these organisations are situated in the more modern district of the capital city, Lilongwe. This area features the national parliament building, other

⁴ Callon’s (1986) study of scallop fisherman in St. Brieuc Bay, France, is an interesting and comprehensive example of these processes of enrolment and re-problematization at work.
government agencies, as well as many multilateral and bilateral donors. This creates an elite topography of regular and mutually reinforcing NGO-government interaction with little basis in the daily lives of struggle of many ordinary Malawians. Overseeing these civil society-government relations is the United Nations Development Programme (UNDP), with local offices in Lilongwe, together with the UNMC which has offices in Nairobi. These agencies are empowered by the mandate and legitimacy of the MDGs, (and in the UNMC’s case by its relationship with GCAP at a global level) and thus play significant roles in devising the work-programmes of the coalition. I was able to observe an example of this, the significance of which I will now illustrate.

Please DO attend!

A few pages ago I presented an excerpt of a conversation I had with one of the GCAP Malawi participants, Joseph. In it he recommended that I go and speak to a UNDP employee (Ethel) based in Lilongwe to discuss the government’s performance on the MDG targets. For me, this was already an example of the MDGs acting in a very ontological sense, intruding directly on my research in unexpected ways. I was though initially resistant to the idea of getting distracted by government performance targets and UN measurements. However, here was an actor which had been introduced to the network (Latour, 2005), and so I felt obliged to give Ethel a call. Ethel told me that there was a meeting being held that afternoon at the UNDP offices which I should come along to. It was going to be addressed by someone visiting from the UN in Nairobi to talk about the MDGs. I expressed my concerns to her that I might be a bit of an intruder, but she insisted I come along. I was soon to find out why.

When I entered the room where the meeting was being held I saw a round table with people sitting around it, like a committee meeting. The meeting had already got underway so I focused first on locating an empty seat and quickly made my way to it trying to cause as little disturbance as possible. But as I sat down and looked around me I realized that I knew every single person sitting around the table, apart from about four people, who, it transpired, were UNDP employees and the person from the UN in Nairobi, who, I soon discovered, was actually from the UNMC. The reason why I knew everybody else was because I had interviewed them. They were all GCAP Malawi participants. This was, it seemed, a coalition meeting being addressed by the UNMC representative.

The meeting provided an example of the MDGs acting and embodied through their UN representatives to discipline the GCAP Malawi network – its understandings of poverty and its actions to alleviate it – and to stamp down on any potentially dissenting opinions. The UNDP representatives talked of how much they supported public mobilisation events because of their “take action” approach. This, they said, was important in avoiding “dependency syndrome” and encouraging “the poor to take ownership”. Malawian society, another UNDP representative said, “loves to suffer in silence”, and should be more critical of the government. Setting the context like this meant that any anti-poverty campaign had to be constructed in a certain way. For example, this implicitly ruled out a critique of global governance systems and economic structures, and placed the responsibility for poverty in Malawi equally on government policy, civil society
organisations and people living in poverty. This is a discourse of responsibilization which ultimately individualizes poverty, and ignores and leaves unaddressed its underlying structural causes, and which is promulgated through the MDGs and the neo-liberal development hegemony (Kamat, 2002) which they have constructed and embedded. It is also a discourse which was repeatedly articulated to me throughout the interviews and conversations I conducted with GCAP Malawi participants, despite the explicit rejection of this discourse in reports and statements produced by other GCAP nodes. GCAP Malawi participants spoke of “sensitizing” people to their poverty (Thandike), and getting them to take “responsibility towards themselves” (Andrew). “Sometimes” I was told, “ignorance [the ignorance of those living in poverty] is what has always been the problem, ok?” (Emily). This reveals the degree to which GCAP Malawi participants consent to dominant codes of the individual’s role in alleviating poverty and social injustice. Whilst this is a discourse of individualized and responsibilized poverty which in all probability predates the MDGs, it is one which is being maintained and monitored by them. The comments of GCAP Malawi participants make problematic any claim that GCAP is wholly oppositional, and not constituted in part by the very power global civil society theorists would claim it dissents from, or monitors.

The role of the MDGs and UN system in ordering GCAP Malawi’s epistemology and ontology at the coalition meeting I attended was not so much a single process, but consisted of a series of different moments which served to discipline GCAP Malawi participants into consenting to certain agreements and outcomes. For example, the coalition secretariat representative was admonished by the UNDP representatives for not attending enough government consultations – “Please do attend!” he was very publicly scolded. The UNMC representative asserted the importance of concentrating on formal government engagement, arguing that this was how policy makers could be bound to decisions and pressure could be brought publicly. This was despite an earlier call by one of the GCAP Malawi participants at the meeting for less reliance on more formal political avenues, and the success of civil society demonstrations outside the parliament building in Lilongwe to break a deadlock in negotiations over the government budget a year earlier. Furthermore, as the meeting progressed, it became apparent that the UNDP and UNMC representatives were at first translating discussions into ‘actionable’ points, and then simply taking some decisions themselves, addressing each other in the process rather than the GCAP Malawi members present. However, simultaneously, the UNDP and UNMC representatives responsibilized the GCAP Malawi members, particularly the secretariat. The coalition, they were told, were in a position the UN agencies could not occupy, that of being able to critique government, a role they must take on with greater vigor (although, again, this should only be done through ‘formal’ channels). Similarly, when the secretariat tried to give the UNDP representative responsibility for a task, she refused, responding “You lead this, the UNDP only supports”.

In this discussion of GCAP Malawi I have attempted to illustrate the ways in which the MDGs represent a particular and hegemonic articulation of ‘development’, producing the imaginations and political possibilities of the GCAP Malawi coalition. In other parts of the GCAP network the presence of the MDGs have provoked counter-hegemonic
articulations of the meaning of development and a subsequent politics of dissent and contestation.

The ‘Minimum’ Development Goals

In this section I will illustrate the ways in which the MDGs are drawn upon by GCAP India participants counter-hegemonically, and the kinds of monitory oppositionality these understandings engender. This will serve to contextualize the ambiguity and inconsistency of this oppositionality within the GCAP network more broadly, contrasting with the relationship between the MDGs and GCAP participants in Malawi.

Despite GCAP’s close relationship with the UNMC, many of GCAP’s strategic documents and official statements do hint at an undercurrent of doubt or even cynicism towards the promises of the MDGs. Meeting the MDGs is considered as a “first step” towards eradicating poverty (GCAP, 2004a: 5), which governments are called upon not simply to achieve but to “surpass” (GCAP, 2007a: 7). Whilst this language may not appear particularly dramatic or oppositional, it does match more anecdotal evidence which appears in GCAP evaluation and strategic documents. For example, at the 2003 meeting at which civil society organisations and representatives discussed formally for the first time the formation of something like GCAP, the meeting report suggests that “…there was a great deal of scepticism voiced by the participants about the Millennium Goals and the UN system’s seriousness in pursuing the Goals.” (CIVICUS/UNMC 2003: 2). Despite this scepticism the meeting participants agreed to work within the framework of the MDGs, although on the understanding that the UNMC would not retreat from addressing what participants understood as the structural causes of poverty (Op Cit). It remained the case though that an evaluation study conducted in 2008 found that many national coalitions felt that the link between GCAP and the MDGs was “…driving the strategic decision making within GCAP rather than issues being thought through independently” (GCAP, 2008d: 20).

An interesting discussion reflecting this tension occurred at the face-to-face GCAP Learning and Accountability Group (LAG) meeting which I was invited to participate in. The LAG was established to construct more formal lines of accountability throughout the GCAP network. In response to the complaints of several participants from GCAP coalitions in countries with high levels of poverty, a representative of a large INGO, who was also chairing the meeting, acknowledged that the MDGs were “terribly reductionist” and had previously alienated some groups, particularly feminist groups, from GCAP. However, she went on to dismiss the discussion as one that kept on repeating itself, saying that the MDGs were not just going to disappear and had to be worked with (LAG Fieldnotes). This reveals the ongoing tension over the MDGs within one of GCAP’s more central advisory bodies.

This tension appears to be much more keenly felt within some of the national coalitions, particularly those who have the UNMC in-country as a funding partner (roughly 30 out of the 115 GCAP coalitions, including GCAP India). When the 2007 Global Assembly took the decision to continue GCAP on to 2015 (thus shadowing the MDGs), a GCAP
evaluation report noted one participant who claimed that such a relationship had been ambiguous:

“On the one side the MDGs have more or less determined the activities of GCAP, particularly Stand Up events, while at same time you have GCAP members who go much beyond the MDGs and are in fact critical of the MDGs and see it as a restrictive framework.” (GCAP, 2008d: 20)

This was a sentiment explicitly expressed a great deal amongst the members of the WNTA. Some criticised the MDGs for only focussing on macro quantitative targets, which they claimed fail to take into account the huge demographic differentials of poverty in India. Rishi summarised the situation thusly:

“…many of us, and continue to do so, are sceptical of the MDGs, and…often we call it ‘minimum development goals’, so there has, various groups have also had issues with MDGs – it doesn’t talk about violence against women, there are quite a few issues” (Rishi)

Talking about the campaign strategy in terms which transcended the MDGs also served to illuminate the monitory oppositionality of GCAP India, the way in which it sought to invoke a counter-hegemonic, or hegemonically expansionist/transformative discourse and practice. By focussing on the rights of excluded groups (such as Dalits, Adivasis and Muslims) in a MDGs context, GCAP India simultaneously affirm the MDGs as a framework but also expand its narrow parameters to groups which carry the possibility of transforming the content of that framework.

This kind of perspective was best articulated by a member of the GCAP Global Secretariat who has spent a great deal of time working with the WNTA campaign:

“…with the MDGs to use it as a tool for groups in the North and South to really hold their governments to account on their promises. To push their governments to say, even these promises you’re making you’re not gonna meet the MDGs, even if you meet the MDGs you’re not gonna make much difference in our country because halving poverty, so what? You’re gonna increase inequality so on and so forth. Basing it on that, so that the point that civil society is, is credible enough, powerful enough, that we can really dictate the post 2015 agenda, to create an agenda which is radical, which takes into account climate change, inequality, so on and so forth, that’s, very personally, that’s what I’d like to see GCAP doing”

This discussion serves to illuminate one example of how discourses of monitory oppositionality are articulated within GCAP’s network nodes. As I have previously asserted this is an ambiguous oppositionality, not only because it operates within the framework of a hegemonic discourse of development, but also because it operates alongside other discourses or schemas which complicate any sense in which one could talk of GCAP embodying a monitory oppositionality per se.

Conclusions

5 This assertion is derived from Laclau’s (1996) argument that particularistic demands are successful not when they overthrow the universal which oppresses them, but when they expand that universal to include them, thus transforming its content.
This paper has aimed to illustrate the ambiguous nature of hegemonic power (in this case articulated through international development policy), and how it works through, is internalised and then consented to or resisted by civil society formations in structurally disadvantaged countries. In many respects, the narratives expressed by GCAP Malawi participants suggests a resonance with Chatterjee’s assertion that civil society in post-colonial and structurally disadvantaged societies is ‘fictive’, maintaining colonial methods of population control (2004: 36-38). In this context the MDGs represent a mechanism of neo-liberal and imperial control, subjectifying civil society formations as purveyors of externally imposed programmes and ideologies about the role of the state and individual responsibility for poverty eradication. The experience of GCAP India however problematises such universal assertions about civil society formations in structurally disadvantaged countries, illustrating the manner by which civil society can be the site of hegemonic contestation and transformation. There are of course historical and spatial elements to the contrasting experiences of civil society formations in both countries, and it is these diverse elements with which the MDGs fuse to produce either consenting or contesting subjects. For example, the Indian constitution provides a range of strong pledges on socio-economic development which civil society groups in India find far more promising than the MDGs. Additionally, rules regarding foreign funding make it very difficult for international and multilateral donors to mainstream their agendas amongst Indian civil society organisations. In Malawi on the other hand, civil society (in the formalized sense of funded organisations with paid employees) has only really proliferated in the past fifteen years, since the fall of the Banda dictatorship. In this context it is easy to see how the MDGs, with their associated funding streams and support from international and multilateral donor agencies, have taken such an epistemic and material hold on civil society formations in Malawi.

What is clear however is that in the coming years, as the post-2015 agenda is drawn up, the role of civil society in delivering this agenda cannot be taken for granted. Civil society is not homogeneous, nor is it a singular entity. Drafters of international development policies must be mindful of the debilitating effects such policies can sometimes have on those very actors in whom the empowerment of the most marginalised is traditionally held to be promised. Dissenting voices must be listened too, and the surely unintentional (or as James Fergusson might have it, ‘authorless’ (1990)) power of the MDGs to constrain civil society groups must be taken into account before prescribing the next round of universal development goals.

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