‘The MDGs as an Institution of Hope’

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Introduction

The MDGs are contentious. There are many opinions strung out along a continuum from ardent support to strong criticism and outright rejection. Controversy over the MDGs has tended to focus on issues such as the efficacy of planning or the value of setting quantitative targets. While these debates are necessary, in this paper we turn attention to how the MDGs have served another important, symbolic, function in development discourse. They have injected ‘hope’ into poverty eradication discourse. We argue that the MDGs, regardless of the conflicting claims surrounding their implementation, have reinvigorated ethical interest in development issues. Drawing on a series of interconnected articles by the US philosopher Richard Rorty during the 1990s, we emphasise the loss of ‘hope’ that prevailed in competing discourses of development during that era. We then suggest, using Braithwaite’s concept of ‘institutions of hope’, that the MDGs have performed an important symbolic role in generating support for programs and projects associated with poverty eradication.

The paper begins with an outline of the hope generated by earlier developmental decades in the 1960s and the 1970s. It then introduces the context in which Rorty’s concerns over neo-liberalism and postdevelopment discourses on poverty eradication emerged and his fear of hope abandoned. The MDGs are then defined as an example of what Braithwaite (2004, 7) terms an authentic ‘institute of hope’: a set of ‘rules, norms and practices that ensure that we have some room not only to dream of the extraordinary but also do the extraordinary’. The value of this symbolic and institutional role is then explored through reinterpreting some of the debates between the supporters and critics of the MDGs.

We conclude that the MDGs are conceivably – but still provisionally - the ‘global policy’ that Rorty (1999c) hoped would act as a ‘plausible narrative of progress’ through which both the rich and poor world could imagine a future where the elimination of poverty could be achieved.
The UN ‘Development Decades’

With the advent of peace at the end of the Second World War and the United Nations apparently working well, a global sense of optimism prevailed. This was especially manifested in the procession of former colonies that were achieving political independence and confidently setting their sights on rapid socio-economic development. The success of the Marshall Plan in quickly raising Europe from the ashes and a faith in the scientific efficacy of modern planning promoted the belief that Third World development could be engineered. Western nations had the technology to bring about the transformation of ‘pre-modern’ societies into the types of technology and associated social organisation that characterise the “advanced” economically prosperous, and relatively politically stable nations of the Western World’ (Moore 1963, 93). Economists were in the vanguard, setting out the steps along the path to economic growth and prosperity. They acknowledged the huge and appalling problems besetting developing countries but believed that the application of science would bring about the transition to modernity (Lewis 1966; Myint 1964; Bhagwati 1966). The most influential economist was Walt Rostow (1960) who constructed a five-stage model of economic growth through which all countries had to pass if they were to become modern and rich. He used the compelling imagery of aeroplanes taxiing along a runway, taking off and climbing to attain the cruising altitude of ‘high mass consumption’ to sell his ‘non-communist manifesto’. Others provided complementary perspectives from sociology and psychology, identifying the changes required if traditional societies were to embrace modernity (Parsons 1951 and 1966; Lerner 1958; McClelland 1961).

No-one was under the illusion that the societal transformations would be easy. Social scientists recognised that severe problems of poverty and underdevelopment afflicted developing countries and that the process of modernisation was an enormous challenge. Thus, Bhagwati (1966, 9) reported that ‘economic progress is certainly not easy to engineer’ while Myint (1964, 85) wrote of ‘interlocking vicious circles’ which were holding down people in developing countries. Gill (1973: 93) noted ‘how very low’ were outputs per capita but also observed that what was new in developing countries was ‘not the fact that they are poor but the fact that they have become aware of being poor, and have grown increasingly determined to do something about it’ (italics in original). The ushering in of the UN’s First Development Decade in the 1960s gave additional impetus to the awakened hopes of millions in the developing world that they could escape poverty and look forward to enhanced welfare and respect for their human rights. There was confidence that with the UN’s backing such achievements were possible.

The First Development Decade did not turn out quite as planned. The hoped for 5 percent annual growth in per capita income did not materialise. The figure was only 2 percent, and the economic gaps separating rich and poor countries were widening. But a few countries had done well and, based on this, the UN Secretary-General U Thant offered the opinion that ‘given a favourable constellation of circumstances and policies, an adequate and sustained pace of development can be achieved’ (Encyclopedia of the Nations). Thus, the Second Development Decade was announced and steps were taken to accelerate developmental progress and narrow the gap between rich and poor countries.
An International Commission reiterated the Secretary-General’s stance and declared that despite the widening gap, ‘economic development is feasible, given adequate effort and sound policies’ (Pearson 1969, 26). The Commission had no doubt that the technology was available and that success was largely ‘a question of will’ (Pearson, 1969, 3).

Despite the hopes espoused at the beginning of the Second Development Decade (1971-1980), the mood started to change. By mid-decade, the gap between rich and poor countries had widened and the flow of development assistance had declined in real terms. Growing debt, political instability, rapacious or incompetent authoritarian regimes, and self-serving elites had become all too common in developing countries. Development was certainly not ‘soaring’ as promised in the images of Rostow (1960) and in the subsequent actions of his technocratic followers: ‘The miraculous transformation of traditional societies into modern ones had not taken place’ (Hulme and Turner 1990, 42).

Hope abandoned

The Impasse of the 1980s

The optimism of the 1960s and 1970s had largely evaporated by the 1980s, a period sometimes referred to as the ‘lost decades in development’ for many parts of the developing world (Easterly 2001; Hulme and Fukudu-Parr 2009). This section presents an overview of the confluence of three influences that generated this malaise before introducing Richard Rorty’s appraisal of development discourse in the early 1990s. His call for a reinvigorated ‘narrative of progress’ gestured at the institutional role that the Millennium Development Goals later performed in maintaining hope in development.

In the most general sense, the 1980s were considered a ‘lost decade’ for development because rates of economic growth slowed down considerably in regions such as Africa and Latin America. In terms of overseas assistance, many developing countries found it increasingly more difficult to gain developmental concessions through playing the superpowers off against each other, as the Soviet Union faced internal economic collapse and became mired in the Afghanistan conflict. Furthermore, a ‘debt crisis’ enveloping many developing nations made it more difficult for governments to borrow on the same scale as previous decades. The market principles of Reaganomics and Thatcherism, which were rhetorically hailed within some leading affluent nations, were recommended to or imposed upon many developing nations. Civil disorder and political unrest also acted as a disincentive to foreign private investment. However, the 1980s did witness a growing but more highly concentrated movement of global capital through the emergence of ‘the new international division of labour’. This global shift of manufacturing from the affluent countries towards developing countries, especially those in East and South-East Asia occurred at the expense of most African and Latin American countries. There were exceptions in these regions, such as Mauritius and Brazil, but on the whole, poor growth rates in these areas justified the label of the lost decade economically.
The rise of the Asian Tigers also presents another sense in which the 1980s are considered a ‘lost decade’. The rise of market-oriented policies undermined the more state-centric models of development that had prevailed through the previous decades of development. This new policy paradigm accused the prevailing developmental statism and import substitution of crowding out private entrepreneurs, encouraging inefficiencies, lacking transparency, distorting markets and rewarding cronyism. Given the venal nature of some developing-country governments, there was some validity in these charges. Furthermore, the crisis of the Soviet model, acknowledged by Mikhail Gorbachev, gave additional impetus to the claim that ‘there was no alternative’ but to deregulate economies. Institutions such as the World Bank and the IMF used the Asian Miracle to illustrate the advantages of liberalisation and export-oriented industrialisation (World Bank 1993). The new consensus - the Washington Consensus – dismantled the prevailing orthodoxies of post-war developmentalism, and the hidden hand of the market rather than the state, planning and targets became the arbiter of developmental potential. From this perspective, there was nothing unique about developmental issues; they were best tackled through the universally-applicable market mechanism. Encouraged by the IMF and World Bank, indebted nations liberalised their economies, although the developmental results remained discouraging into the 1990s. Furthermore, it remained contentious whether those countries hailed as neo-liberal success stories had actually followed the neo-liberal script, or whether they had raised themselves through judicious use of the interventionist state (Weiss 1998).

The sense of a lost decade during the 1980s was amplified by a growing disillusionment within intellectual circles of development discourse more generally. Modernization and dependency theories, and market-oriented and state-centred development models, were all criticised for imposing modernist, teleological projects onto developing countries (Escobar 1995). Deconstructionist critiques of the hopes inspired by such modernist models abandoned grand narratives that assumed a universal logic to social change.

The lost decade is best understood as an amalgam of events, processes and discourses that tempered earlier hopes that purposive action could alleviate the prevailing conditions of poverty and inequality in the developing world. This was the impasse that the US philosopher Richard Rorty confronted in the early 1990s in a series of articles intended to explain the loss of hope and to reinsert it back into developmental discourse. Rorty’s approach to the problem of development was to move through three phases: from despair, to analysis and then to action.

Rorty and social hope

Drawing an analogy with E.M. Forster’s novel, *Howard’s End*, Rorty (1999b) was concerned that, by the early 1990s, the way in which the problems of development were being conceptualised was making the poor of the South ‘increasingly unthinkable’. As a consequence of this lack of imagination or compassion, there was a temptation to vacate the field to neo-liberalism or post-developmentalism, what he labelled – again paraphrasing E.M. Forster - ‘statisticians, and to the sort of poet whom we call the “ethnologist”’ (Rorty 1999b, 226).
Rorty dismissed neo-liberalism, pointing out that the statistics on poverty made it difficult to generate any optimism for the poor of the South (1999b, 227). While acknowledging the loss of feasible ‘scenarios which cross the North-South border’ (1999b, 226), he also rejected the post-developmental idea that the ‘linguistic turn’ in the social sciences could re-energise a vision for the South:

All the talk in the world about the need to abandon ‘technological rationality’ and to stop ‘commodifying’, about the need for ‘new values’ or for ‘non-Western ways of thinking’ is not going to bring more money to the Indian villages. As long as the villagers have enough means-ends rationality to see that they need eight children, such talk is not to any point. All the love in the world, all the attempts to abandon ‘Eurocentricism’, or ‘liberal individualism’, all the ‘politics of diversity’, all the talk about cuddling up to the natural environment, will not help. (Rorty 1999b, 227)

The dominance of neo-liberal and postdevelopmental discourses, according to Rorty, was the outcome of a loss of faith in the universalist and cosmopolitan belief in equality of opportunity and fairer outcomes. This approach to social philosophy had inspired post-war development thought and action. Yet, from the 1970s onwards, there had emerged:

…an increasing inability to believe that some day we shall ever have a classless global society: one in which there are no vast differences between the opportunities open to children in one nation and in another, or between those open to children in one section of a city and those in another section of the same city’ (Rorty 1999c, 230).

In effect, the prevailing discourses had lost the ability to imagine an alternative future; ‘the belief that things could ever get much better than they are now’ (Rorty 1999c, 230).

The future-oriented discourses that had dominated development after World War Two reflected two imagined futures. The first was the Marxist vision of proletarian revolution followed by the collective ownership of the means of production. However, the second and dominant post-war developmental scenario could be labelled the ‘Scandinavian model’, involving the less apocalyptic vision of the diffusion of peaceful technological progress and democracy which would realise ‘hitherto undreamt-of economic prosperity within the framework of the free market’ (Rorty 1999c, 230-1). This description of the developmental project initiated by UN programs would universalise the welfare state and institutionalise intergenerational equality of opportunity.

However, Rorty (1999c, 231) lamented that ‘intellectuals and statesmen of today have little faith in either of these two scenarios’. The critical faculty employed by these scenarios, which found fault with existing institutions through ‘a story about what had happened and what we might reasonably hope could happen in the future’ had been forsaken for a narrative of despair:
Nowadays, however, we are getting a lot of political and social philosophy which takes its starting point not from a historical narrative but rather from a philosophy of language, or from psychoanalysis, or from discussion of such traditional philosophical *topoi* as ‘identity’ and ‘difference’, ‘self’ and ‘subject’, ‘truth’ and ‘reason’. This seems to me to be the result of a loss of hope – or more specifically, of an inability to construct a plausible narrative of progress. A turn away from narration and utopian dreams towards philosophy seems to me a gesture of despair. (Rorty 1999c, 232)

Rorty’s explanation for the temper of the times lamented such loss of hope. He was concerned that ‘hopelessness has become fashionable on the Left – principled, theorised, philosophical hopelessness’ (Rorty, 1998, 37). In its place, he sought an alternative vision based on a pragmatic acceptance of the reality of late-twentieth century developmental trends. The ‘central fact’ in this reality was a globalisation where ‘the economic situation of the citizens of a nation state has passed beyond the control of the laws of that state’ (Rorty 1999c, 233). The post-war social democracy that had inspired earlier developmental efforts had been undermined by the ability of business to draw on ‘a global pool of capital’. This limited the ability of a nation to regulate and control ‘to an important and socially useful extent, the movement of that nation’s money’. There was no return to earlier post-war developmental projects under such circumstances where a ‘global overclass’ dictated ‘all the major economic decisions, and makes them in entire independence of the legislatures, and a fortiori of the will of the voters, of any given country.’

Rorty’s remedy was to globalise the regulation of capital. This would begin through mobilising ‘the educated publics’ of the powerful countries under the ‘need for a global policy’ that would act as a ‘countervailing power’ to the ‘super-rich.’ He remained convinced that ‘money’ and material interest were the keys to rethinking the poor of the South. He avoided outlining anything other than persevering with the development project, while dismissing idealist transformations and post-developmental language games:

Maybe technology and centralised planning will not work. But they are all we have got. We should not try to pull the blanket over our heads by saying that technology was a big mistake, and that planning, top-down initiatives, and “Western ways of thinking”, must be abandoned. That is just another, much less honest, way of saying what Forster said: that the very poor are unthinkable. (Rorty 1999b, 228)

The only viable solution that could ‘connect’ - to return to *Howard’s End* – the material needs of the poor with the universal principle of environmental sustainability was ‘some as yet unimagined bureaucratic-technological initiative, not of a revolution of “values”’ (Rorty 1999b, 228). This unimagined bureaucratic-technological initiative foreshadowed the Millennium Development Goals. Rorty’s social hope involved banishing the passivity generated by despair and impasse and reinstalling hope in the development discourse. As Pettit (2004, 165) argues, hope ‘helps the subject to escape the grip of beliefs that are so bleak or so unstable that they reduce the subject to a helpless state’, providing people
‘with direction and control and makes success in the face of adversity much more probable than it would otherwise have been’. In effect, Rorty was gesturing at the need for what Braithwaite has called ‘institutions of hope’.

**Institutions of hope**

Hope, as Grayling (2008) notes, is a strong ‘motivating’ emotion, as well as a ‘psychological necessity’ (see also Courville and Piper 2004, 58). McGeer (2004, 100) refers it as a ‘grounding force of human agency’ (see also Gravlee 2000). While it is inherently future-oriented, ‘its real effect lies in the present; it is what motivates and encourages now’ (Grayling 2008). Krygier (1997, 137) has likewise described hope as a ‘powerful fuel of political achievement’ which can ‘galvanise and sustain’ the will, even in adverse circumstances, such as those faced by many development practitioners in the 1990s. Yet, to galvanise Rorty’s social hope, the agency it inspired needed to be institutionalised.

Braithwaite (2004, 7) defines such ‘institutions of hope’ as ‘sets of rules, norms and practices that ensure that we have some room not only to dream of the extraordinary but also to do the extraordinary.’ Their goal is to ‘offset, loosen, or challenge the constraints imposed by regulatory institutions’, while imagining a more just future.

Grayling (2008) has also argued that change is the ‘necessary correlative’ to hope. Courville and Piper (2004) expand on this relationship, claiming that hope springs from a sense of injustice and inequity, which inspires the desire for social transition. Social hope, or ‘collective hope’ (McGeer 2004, 125-6), emerges through communities sharing such feelings about social conditions, which in turn can nurture a sense of empowerment expressed through collective action. As Braithwaite (2004, 9) argues, when ‘action is seen as being the companion of hope, social movements gain momentum’. Institutions of hope therefore can be considered as ‘carriers of social change for a better world’ (Braithwaite 2004, 12). As Braithwaite (2004, 14) concludes, ‘individuals always have had, and always will have, images of how their futures might be different and better (hope), and they practice their futures almost always imperfectly but are nevertheless capable of constructing a better world for themselves and for others when they are enmeshed in social institutions of hope’.

A similar relationship between emotion and agency has been developed by Hamilton (2010, 226) in his reflections on climate change:

> These are the three stages we must pass through. Despair is a natural human response to the new reality we face and to resist it is to deny the truth. Although the duration and intensity of despair will vary among us, it is unhealthy and unhelpful to stop there. Emerging from despair means accepting the situation and resuming our equanimity; but if we go no further we risk becoming mired in passivity and fatalism. Only by acting, and acting ethically, can we redeem our humanity.
This socio-psychological movement from despair to acceptance to action outlined by Hamilton bears a strong resemblance to Braithwaite’s reflections on institutions of hope and helps place Rorty’s comments on the despair within development discourse in the 1990s. The first step towards what Raymond Williams (1983, 268) called ‘gathering our resources for a journey of hope’ is to challenge fatalism and the mind-set of inevitability. The issue now can be raised whether the MDGs were an authentic initiative that helped generate social hope, displace despair and conceive a better world.

In September 2000, at the United Nations’ Millennium Summit in New York, the world’s leaders committed themselves to the Millennium Development Goals. The UN Millennium Declaration (2000) declared that the world community would ‘spare no effort to free our fellow men, women and children from the abject and dehumanising conditions of extreme poverty. We are committed to freeing the entire human race from want’.

There are eight overall goals with associated interim targets for 2015 and final targets for 2025. These goals are: to eradicate extreme poverty and hunger; to achieve universal primary education; to promote gender equity and empower women; to reduce child mortality; to improve maternal health; to combat HIV/AIDS, malaria and other diseases; to ensure environmental sustainability; and to develop a global partnership for development.

The MDGs are an ambitious, and tightly specified, goal-oriented approach to development with an explicit focus on poverty reduction as a means as well as an end of development. Considering the ignominious fate of previous developmental visions, developmental plans and developmental decades (White 2006, 388), it may at first appear surprising that the world’s leaders could unanimously put their signatures to yet another set of developmental goals.

However, as noted earlier, during the 1980s and 1990s, development planning had fallen from favour and was replaced with approaches to development that emphasised marketisation. Challenging this prevailing trend, a series of high-profile global summits on the environment, gender, social development and population among others were held during the 1990s that cross-cut market-oriented developmental efforts. These summits drew world attention to a series of global challenges and threats that could only be prosecuted with concerted inter-governmental efforts. Increasingly, the individual components of the development process were seen to be interconnected and in need of alignment. The MDGs brought together the sentiment of these summits and it is possible to conceive of the MDGs as a return of some earlier developmental shoots that were burnt by the frost of neo-liberalism, without rejecting the efficacy of the market.

Jeffrey Sachs (2005, 289) stated that, due to the successful developmental efforts of the advanced market economies, the world had an unprecedented opportunity to fulfill the goal of eradicating world poverty: ‘An effort to end extreme poverty that would have seemed out of reach even a generation or two ago is now well within reach because the costs are now such a small fraction of the vastly expanded income of the rich world’. This hope was also based on the extraordinary experiences of economic growth and
social development in various regions of the world over the previous few decades, lifting hundreds of millions of people out of poverty, raising average life expectancies, improving educational opportunities and encouraging greater gender equity. Despite the doom and gloom, examination of the statistics of development revealed some major achievements, some glimmers of hope.

The challenge of the MDGs involves recognising that these gains have not been evenly distributed, geographically or socially. Past successes and failures can provide lessons for those countries that the Millennium Project refers to as being stuck on the ‘lower rungs’ of the development ‘ladder’. Given the present capacity to change the plight of the poor, the challenge becomes an ethical issue. According to Sachs, in his address to the General Assembly of the United Nations, we have a choice:

Millions of people die every year for the stupid reason they are too poor to stay alive … The basic truth is that for less than a per cent of the income of the rich world nobody has to die of poverty on the planet … Either you do decide to leave people to die or you decide to do something about it. (quoted in Munk 2007)

In this sense, the MDGs also signal a return of development discourse. Where neo-liberal principles dominated, there was less recognition that ‘development economics’ was a specific field of endeavour. The answer was a universal global imperative that encouraged unrestricted markets. Now, however, in the opening decade of the twenty-first century, thanks to the MDGs, development has become almost synonymous with a concerted global assault on poverty rather than an outcome of liberalisation and economic growth. It galvanised agency through hope.

It remains our task to assess whether the MDGs are an authentic or false institution of hope. Their supporters argue the former and the detractors argue the latter. This is a crucial issue because while hope can be empowering, without the capability to act it is likely to promote ‘frustration and despair’ (Braithwaite 2004, 10), and ‘intense disappointment’ (Drahos 2004, 30), precisely the emotions that gave rise to reflexive hope in the first place. What critics can point to, with the weight of historical evidence behind them, is that hope ‘can be spooned out to mass publics by those who command our institutions - as a sedative to injustice and abuse and as a means of delaying, even circumventing, calls for social change’ (Braithwaite 2004, 8; Drahos 2004). Therefore, as Krygier (1997, 138) notes, ‘not any hope will do’ and it is necessary to discriminate between hopes to assess the authentic from the false.

This ‘hope as emotional sharing’ therefore must be ‘tempered by ideas, deliberation, experimentation, and cold analysis’ (Braithwaite 2004, 11; Drahos 2004). Dialogue between protagonists and sceptics alike is a crucial component of authentic hope, claims Braithwaite (2004, 9-10), because ‘the issue is not how it is constructed but how it is contested’. Such open and transparent contestation of hope is an ‘ally’ of ‘empowerment and action’ (Braithwaite 2004, 11). This facilitates the possibility, even probability, of realigning hopes, empowerment and action when problems emerge in the best laid plans.
The voice of sceptics and openness to scepticism help to keep hope measured and balanced between the hoped-for vision, the assessment of what is likely to happen and the worst-case scenario (Pettit 2004).

Given this functional role of the sceptic in strengthening institutions of hope, criticism of the MDGs will be described in the following section, followed by a reassessment of the MDGs as an authentic institution of hope.

Hope against hope: The MDGs and their critics

It is now possible, after nearly a decade, to review the practical progress of the MDGs. As this section will argue, while this is a fundamental element of any ends-oriented program, there are problems associated with measuring success and failure in this manner. These relate to both the causal linkages between action and result as well the need to consider the broader historical context outlined in the previous three sections of this paper.

Even those who are sympathetic to the MDG project have recently acknowledged that some countries will fall short of the targets developed in 2001. On 4 March 2010, the Deputy Secretary-General of the UN admitted: ‘If we continue on our current trajectory, we will fall short’. Hulme (forthcoming) has listed a range of areas where progress towards the goals has been less than satisfactory, both in terms of specific goals and in terms of specific country regional development. At the same time, he also stresses that significant progress has occurred in poverty reduction since 1990, although quantitative data is open to interpretation. A recent study by Rajaratnum et al (2010) suggests that in some areas of concern there is room for hope. They found greater progress than had been anticipated in MDG4, with an accelerating decline in child mortality in many low-income countries in their sample. However, statistical interpretation in itself might not be sufficient to evaluate the success or otherwise of the MDGs. As Hulme notes (Forthcoming Ch. 7), ‘should we assume that anything less than 100 percent achievement for all eight MDGs is failure or does partial achievement represent significant progress?’

Since their inception, the goals have been criticised from a number of angles. They have been considered too ambitious, not ambitious enough, following the wrong goals, the folly of setting goals, adopting the wrong means, applying faulty measurement, and failure to learn from the mistakes of the past. Some commentators are cynical of the motivations of global leaders, who they suspect of offering a millennium message of ‘false hope’. Relatedly, others have interpreted the MDGs as a form of securitisation of development - an attempt to maintain the safety of the affluent world - rather than motivated by fundamental human rights.

Many of these criticisms have received deserved attention. The fundamental issue of setting targets is a case in point. Critics and sympathisers alike have commented on the potential unintended consequences of goal setting. For instance, it might be possible to reach MDG2 through universalizing primary education enrolment, without increasing
expenditure on educational infrastructure and staff. Under these circumstances, the goal would appear to have been met while educational quality would in all likelihood decline. Under such circumstances, the MDGs would represent false hope. A related problem with targets concerns the relationship between inputs and outputs. As the Soviet command economy demonstrated, top-down setting and administration of targets can often result in the use of inefficient means to achieve desired ends. Furthermore, targets demand robust statistical information, while data for poor countries often remain unreliable.

Under these circumstances, Easterly (2002; 2006; 2009) has consistently argued that the architects of the MDGs set themselves up for failure. The project relied on economic growth, and the redistribution of economic growth, and held governments of rich and poor countries alike accountable along with multilateral institutions such as the UN. However, Easterly’s main point is that it is impossible to hold people accountable for circumstances that are out of their control. The grand plan that the MDGs generated, along with the targets, assumes a degree of control over the global socio-economic environment that cannot exist. He claims:

… the point of the MDG campaign was that it precisely defined success and failure using specific goals. So on its own terms, it is a failure … What a tragedy for all of those who contributed such effort and enthusiasm to the MDG campaign. And a much larger tragedy for the world's poor. Why waste any more effort on the MDGs, now that we know they will not be met?

This is a valid point in any social scientific investigation of the influence of the MGDs on reducing global poverty. As Hulme (forthcoming, Ch. 7) also acknowledges, any calculation of cause and effect ‘would require isolating the contribution of each mechanism from that of other factors (such as economic growth in Asia, global warming, the war in DRC, patterns of rainfall in Asia and Africa or the global financial collapse of 2008’). Given this difficulty, there is a danger that quantifying the success of the MDGs could become a growth industry in itself.

On these grounds, Easterly’s critics might argue that he has miscalculated the value of the MDGs. However, despite his claim that ‘the MDGs are dead’, he does acknowledge that they have performed a valuable norm-transforming role:

The inspirational enthusiasm and increased efforts surrounding the MDGs probably did contribute to progress on specific efforts and some partial success stories (mainly in health and education), as pointed out in the UN MDG 2009 report. That can give some hope for the future and some solace to the hard-working and deeply committed participants … The MDGs will go down in history as a success in global consciousness-raising, but a failure in using that consciousness for its stated objectives. (Easterly 2009)

This mass mobilisation that Easterly acknowledges has been a significant global phenomenon, affecting both the affluent and the poor world in the opening decade of the twenty-first century. The Deputy Secretary-General of the UN (2010) recently
commented on how the MDG ‘promise inspired great hope, led to a truly impressive mobilisation of people around the world, and generated real and important gains in standards of living throughout the world’. However, the fear that Easterly and other critics voice is that the failure to reach unattainable goals will turn an opportunity into a liability, erode the credibility of the UN, and generate deeper cynicism and fatalism towards attacking global poverty within the world community (Attaran 2005). Antrobus (quoted in Bunwaree 2010, 65) considers the MDGs to be ‘Major Distraction Gimmicks’, while Bunwaree (2010, 66), had questioned the ‘sincerity’ of the leaders who voted for them. Amin (2006) has also raised this issue of intent:

When the expression of these pious hopes is accompanied by conditions that essentially eliminate the possibility of their becoming reality, the question must be asked: Are not the authors of the document actually pursuing other priorities that have nothing to do with ‘poverty reduction’ and all the rest?

However, as the following section will suggest, it remains a politically valid and ethically-appropriate task to aim for goals that might appear out of reach at the moment. This might superficially appear at odds with Rorty’s pragmatist philosophy, but it does correspond with his ‘pragmatist meliorism’ (Koopman 2006, 106), ‘which emphasises the utility of narratives and vocabularies rather than the objectivity of laws and theories’ (Rorty 1981, 573). As Grayling (2008) argues: ‘The answer lies not in whether the hopes will materialise in future, but in the catharsis of having hope in the present’ (see also Grayling 2001). Or, as Rorty (1999a, 205) recommends: ‘Skip lightly past the predictions, and concentrate on the expressions of hope’. Authentic institutions of hope would follow Romain Rolland’s and Antonio Gramsci’s (1971, 175) dictum: ‘Pessimism of the intelligence, optimism of the will’.

Easterly’s critique dampens the optimism of the will through casting doubt on the possibility of reaching targets and emphasising the dangers of disappointment when hopes are dashed. Yet, in a complex global world, all action and all plans run the risk of non-fulfilment and disappointment. The very nature of ‘risk society’ (Beck 1986) involves the inability to control the forces that lead to desired outcomes. Risk society further reinforces James’ (1975, 124) suggestion that we adopt a ‘certain willingness to live without assurances and guarantees’. To avoid any plan simply because of the probability of this outcome would mean succumbing to that curse of modernity, paralysis brought on by reflexivity; we would become the contemporary embodiment of Goncharev’s Oblomov, or Dostoyevsky’s Underground Man.

If analysis suggests that market-led development is sub-optimal in overcoming poverty, then the path towards poverty eradication lies not in superficial hope (dreaming) or false hope (misleading the public) but substantial, rational and orienting hope (building the capacity for individual action on the basis of agreed-on targets). As Galbraith (1983, 82) wrote: ‘It would be easy for us to surrender to pessimism; as always, that has an aspect of hard-headed practicality. We must not. We must keep alive the thought that salvation is possible.’
This section suggests that, while the criticisms of the MDGs need to be addressed, it is important to look beyond the motivation of world leaders, or technical measurement or the possibility of goal-attainment. Institutions of hope such as the MDGs set frameworks for action. This is consistent with Hulme’s (forthcoming, Ch. 8) argument that the MDGs are part of a renewed ‘norm dynamic’ that centres global poverty as an ethical concern for the world community:

One cannot predict the future but one can have hope. My hope about the efforts of the late twentieth and early twenty-first centuries to tackle global poverty is that, over the longue durée, they will be seen as one significant element in a longer term process of international norm change that led to the existence of extreme poverty, in an affluent world, being seen as morally unacceptable. (see also Hulme and Fukudu-Parr 2009)

**The MDGs as substantial, rational and orienting hope**

The concept of hope and institutions of hope help place some of the criticisms of the MDGs in perspective. By reappraising the function of the MDGs as institutions of hope, it is possible to challenge some of the scepticism and retain the MDGs as an action plan. In this way, the MDGs can be viewed as institutions that ‘secure hope’ (Krygier 1997, 110) through establishing norms that inspire collective action towards meeting agreed targets. They supply the elements of what Pettit (2004, 165) calls substantial, rational and orienting hope that allows agents to escape the grip of ‘bleak’ emotions and beliefs and to face challenges that might otherwise appear overwhelming.

The claim that the MDGs are too ambitious and therefore will ultimately amplify cynicism and passivity towards poverty reduction and poverty eradication can be challenged using a range of analogies from the recent past. The debate over achieving sustainability and mitigating climate change presents one such analogy, especially in the light of MDG7 to ensure environmental sustainability. Both poverty eradication and sustainability are complex global issues that can lead to the overwhelming sense that individuals are powerless to bring about change. Furthermore, climate sceptics, like MDG sceptics, have attacked planning and regulation as a means to mitigate climate change and have argued that the market mechanism offers a better solution. Like the MDG sceptics, many climate-change sceptics have criticised the unrealistic targets set at multilateral forums such as the Kyoto Protocol (Lomborg 2007).

However, others have defended the practice of setting ambitious targets as an effective means for overcoming barriers to large-scale ecological restoration. Manning et al (2006) suggest setting ‘stretch goals’ and applying ‘back-casting techniques’ to galvanise purposive action. They define stretch goals as ‘ambitious targets used to inspire creativity and innovation to achieve outcomes that currently seem impossible’, while back-casting refers to a technique ‘specifically designed to achieve such ambitious targets’. Once stretch goals are identified, back-casting and the action needed to reach the goals can be determined retrospectively. This explanation for dealing with climate change mitigation
and sustainability bears a very close resemblance to the MDG targets, which set value-laden goals before working out means to achieve them. However, Easterly and others’ distaste for stretch goals might be understandable when considering that they appear to resemble what Soviet economists of the 1920s labeled ‘teleological’ planning, which was contrasted with more organic, slower ‘genetical’ planning and Stalin’s ‘phantasmagorical’ planning (Lewin 1975). For Easterly, the MDGs present a return to the failed attempt to create a better world through large-scale central planning.

Yet, even if Sachs was mistaken over the current capacity of the world to meet the MDGs, stretch goals and back-casting suggest that they would nevertheless remain worthwhile objectives. If this claim is valid, then the centre of gravity in the Sachs-Easterly debate shifts away from calculating the capacity of those ‘with the ability to pay’ (what exists) towards ‘those according to their needs’ (what we want). In the sustainability debate, supporters of stretch goals have responded to sceptics who decry the irresponsibility of setting goals that currently cannot be met by pointing out:

President Kennedy’s decision to put a man on the moon is an example of stretch goals and back-casting. Articulation of this ambitious goal drove the innovation which ultimately led to an achievement that did not seem technologically feasible when the goal was set. (Fischer et al 2007, 624)

Fischer et al (2007, 622) emphasise the importance of identifying ‘meaningful sustainability targets’ and then explicitly recognising and quantifying the ‘sustainability gap’ between current practices and sustainable practices. The MDGs pursued the same technique with respect to global inequality. Indeed, Fischer et al explicitly acknowledge the MDGs as an example of the efficacy of targets:

Targets are vital because they provide the means for evaluating the success of the actions taken. Some targets are a matter of debate (e.g. what level of healthcare should be universally available?) whereas others might relate more directly to scientific expert knowledge (e.g. life-support systems are likely to be seriously compromised if global warming exceeds 4-5 degrees Celsius). Examples of targets are the Millennium Development Goals, or the Kyoto Protocol on reducing greenhouse gas emissions. (Fischer et al 2007, 622)

Another way of expressing this argument is to view targets as a means of cutting through Hamilton’s (2010) dilemma of moving from despair (passivity in the face of large-scale problems) to acceptance (identification of the problem) to action (tackling the problem collectively). Targets are the wellspring of hope in this scenario. Drahos (2004, 30) argues that this hope ‘triggers in individuals an instrumental rationality that leads them to a desired goal and, at times, to overcome the seemingly impossible odds dealt by the forces of nature or by the forces of man’.

Krygier (1997, 155) also reflected on the value of such practical ideals, when he argued that they ‘don’t cease to be worthy, simply because we find it hard to reach them’. They establish and advertise norms that inspire social hope; in the case of the MDGs this is the
hope ‘that some day we shall be willing and able to treat the needs of all human beings with the respect and consideration with which we treat the needs of those closest to us, those whom we love’ (Rorty 1999a, 202-3). This norm might even go part way to appeasing the postdevelopmental critique through reinventing a ‘plausible narrative of progress’. While acknowledging that hope was often founded on ‘false prediction’ (an element of what Braithwaite labels ‘inauthentic hope’), Rorty (1999a, 204) nevertheless believed that ‘the hope for social justice is nevertheless the only basis for a worthwhile human life.’ Standing on this normative ground, Rorty (1999a, 206) was able to reconstruct his narrative of progress: the moral spectacle of history involves breaking the monopoly of those who have their hands on money and power.

In this light, the MDGs inevitably invited resistance, because no matter how loudly the project offered reassurances that its attention was fixed on poverty reduction by 2015 and poverty eradication by 2025, the project involves a redistribution of money and power. That this redistribution is too much for some critics and too little for others is not necessary a flaw of the MDGs, but represents the measured hope that must power and guide the project. As its 2007 State of the Future Report reflected: ‘… ridiculing idealism is shortsighted, but idealism without the rigours of pessimism is misleading’ (Millennium Project 2007, 9).

Conclusion

Critics and defenders will continue to debate the value and efficacy of the MDG measurements and targets. However, in this paper we have suggested that the MDGs have performed an important historical role as an ‘institution of hope’, reinvigorating and marshalling collective effort towards global poverty alleviation and eradication. This role is significant in itself, in the wake of the neo-liberal and postdevelopmental discourses that previously prevailed in what was labelled ‘the impasse in development’.

Drawing on the work of Richard Rorty, this paper has emphasised the importance of social hope in political discourse. Rorty’s contribution to political theory emerged precisely at a time when hope in development was at a low ebb. It would appear that such expressions of hope are periodically reborn in specific circumstances that have generated despair. Bertrand Russell (quoted in Coulson, 1955) lived through and commented on this political void during the years after the First World War:

There are things that our age needs, and certain things it should avoid. It needs compassion and a wish that mankind should be happy: it needs the desire for knowledge and the determination to eschew pleasant myths; it needs, above all, courageous hope and the impulse to creativeness.’

Another more recent historical example was the 2008 Democratic campaign against the G.W. Bush administration in the USA, where Obama (2006) drew on the ‘audacity of hope’. The global political economy of the 1990s inspired a similar movement within
development discourse. The Millennium Declaration was the culmination of such hopes, institutionalising the MDGs.

Regardless of the criticisms of the targets, and the process itself, the MDGs have placed poverty eradication back onto the global political agenda through providing a basis for asking why the world community has not and cannot accomplish this task. It has moved development discourse from despair to analysis to hope, and to hope’s radical corollary, action. As Raymond Williams (quoted in Baird 2010, 24) stated, ‘To be truly radical is to make hope possible, not despair convincing’. To return to Rorty (and Forster), eradicating poverty remains one of the most difficult challenges of our time, but hope abandoned is ‘unthinkable’.

References


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