

Development and the United Nations: Achievements and Challenges for the Future

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ABSTRACT

This article explores the role of the United Nations in development in the context of both the current critiques of the UN and the failure of the 2005 New York summit to reach agreement on a program of reform. While the work of its specialist agencies presents the most visible face of the UN's contribution to global development; the UN through its efforts to influence international debates on development policy, in particular as the convenor of international conferences, also plays a key intellectual leadership role in rethinking approaches to development. It is argued that in spite of the justifiable criticism of many aspects of the UN agencies, on balance the UN has played a positive role in promoting development and has been an alternative voice to the major international powers. Future reform should ensure that the UN can continue to make this contribution.

INTRODUCTION

In recent years, the United Nations has been subject to increased criticism that has encompassed its designated roles, its organisation and its effectiveness. In focusing on the role of the UN in development, this article argues that flawed though the UN system is, it also plays a role in development in its broadest sense that could not be fulfilled by any other international body. It is for this reason that it is important to recognise the achievements of the UN in the past, while at the same time pushing for its reform in the future. The crucial importance of the UN stems from the fact that its role in development is not limited to its work on the ground through its specialist agencies, but that it is also an important forum where international norms on development are generated and debated.

In the public mind, as well as in academic writing, the UN is primarily associated with its key role in international peace and security and with its high profile peacekeeping missions. Even though the original broad objectives of the UN set out in its Charter of establishment reflect this focus, the UN was intended from its beginning to have a role in development. In the aftermath of the Second World War, that agenda was focused on rebuilding the industrialised states devastated by the war. Later, the UN took a leading role in promoting development in the global South as the process of decolonisation was rolled out. It was the UN's response to decolonisation that created a new layer of activity and a new

requirement for specialist agencies. The UN was also a body within which consensus was sought between Cold War political adversaries on the nature of the international community's response to decolonisation, for example as set out in the resolutions on self-determination and the work of the Special Committee on Decolonisation.¹ Furthermore, the UN played a significant role in the integration of the newly emerging post-colonial states into the international system. This post-colonial development role became institutionalised within the UN from the early 1960s onwards, with the creation of the World Food Programme (WFP) in 1963, the United Nations Conference on Trade and Development (UNCTAD) in 1964 and the United Nations Development Programme (UNDP) in 1966. Although the Food and Agriculture Organization (FAO) had been established in 1945, it entered a new phase and re-oriented its goals to respond to this new context with the launch of the 'Freedom from hunger' campaign in 1960.

Currently, the UN system contains a number of key agencies that work in development, and through its programme of global conferences it facilitates an international discourse on development and related issues. Neither of these facets of the UN's work is without problems, but they have also made a lasting contribution to global development. Given growing global inequality and the failure of development in Africa this may not seem like much of a claim. However, flawed though the UN is, things would be worse without it.

CONTRIBUTION OF UN PROGRAMMES AND SPECIALISED AGENCIES

The UN development agenda cuts across a vast array of interlinked issues, ranging from gender equality, social integration, health, employment, education, the environment and population to human rights, finance and governance. The UN Development Programme is the UN's largest provider of grants for sustainable human development worldwide, with an estimated bi-annual budget of \$7.5 billion for 2006–7. Many other UN programmes work for development in partnership with governments and NGOs. The World Food Programme is the world's largest international food aid organisation for both emergency relief and development; it is expected to deliver 9.5 million tons of food aid in 2006–7. The UN Population Fund (UNFPA) is the largest international provider of population assistance. The UN High Commission for Refugees has assisted an estimated 50 million people over a period of more than five decades. As of 2005, it had a staff of around 6,540 people in 116 countries and a budget of \$982 million and continues to help 19.2 million persons. The role of the autonomous specialised agencies, under the auspices of the Economic and Social Council (ECOSOC), also plays a critical part in development cooperation. The FAO has a budget of US\$749.1 million,² and provides technical assistance, cooperation and partnerships—including the Technical Cooperation Programme, information and general policy, direction and administration in the areas of food and agriculture. The World Health Organisation (WHO), with a budget of US\$421 million, carries out essential work in terms of monitoring disease, promoting research and providing essential services through vaccination programs. It is widely regarded as the central actor in the eradication of smallpox—a disease that killed millions until the 1970s. Not only does the UN, through these agencies, focus on long-term development strategies, it also has a key role in responding to emergencies—however, this paper will focus its discussion on the long-term development role of the UN.

Criticisms of the UN's development work focus on the multiplicity of its specialist agencies and the complexity of the UN bureaucracy.³ The manner in which the structure of

¹ For details of the work of this committee, see <http://www.un.org/Depts/dpi/decolonization/index.html> (1 March 2006).

² Annual reports for all the agencies are available at <http://www.un.org> (13 April 2006).

³ See, for example, Isebill V. Gruhn, 'The UN maze confounds Africa's development', *International Organisation* 32 (2) (1978), 547–61; James Rosenau 'Power tendencies, enduring tensions and glaring

the UN developed has meant that there is no strong central coordination to the UN's development role, which can result in conflicting aims, confusion and wasteful duplications in the work of the various agencies. According to the UN's founding Charter, ECOSOC was designed to play this coordinating role in relation to the specialised agencies. In practice, the ECOSOC was not allowed to develop in this way. Instead the structure and mandate of the Bretton Woods institutions meant that it was the World Bank and the International Monetary Fund that came to dominate the international financial system and to play a central role in setting the macro-economic frameworks for the global economy. Since the 1980s this has also meant that these two institutions have played a key role in setting the agenda of domestic economic policy for those developing states reliant on their financial support.

It is widely accepted that the overlapping and sometimes competing work of different UN agencies is a real problem, but structural issues alone are not responsible for weaknesses in the UN development activities. Indeed Kofi Annan in his report to the 2005 UN summit stated:

Over the past few decades, responding to steadily growing demand, the system has seen a welcome expansion in its membership as well as in the scale and scope of its activities. One unfortunate side-effect of this has been that there is now often significant duplication of mandates and actions between different bodies within the system.⁴

But, as he also pointed out, the other major difficulty 'has been significant shortfalls in necessary funding'—a problem that has affected all aspects of the UN's work and has seriously undermined its credibility.

Since the election of Secretary-General Annan in 1997 there has been a significant internal reform programme within the UN. This has been conducted in the adverse circumstances of a budget whose real value is falling, given that the core UN budget has been frozen at approximately \$1.3 billion since 1994. Steps have been taken to improve coordination and efficiency in the UN system: one such effort is the 'Joint UN programme on AIDS', which pools the expertise of eight UN agencies and programmes. At individual country level, Annan has sought to strengthen the role of the 'UN resident coordinator'—who is normally also the UNDP representative—to seek to share resources (including office buildings). He has also sought to plan and coordinate the activities of the various UN agencies in a more integrated manner—through the 'common country programming processes'.⁵ At a central level, the UN Development Group (UNDG) brings together the operational agencies working on development. It aims to develop common planning policies, tools and strategies for cost containment.⁶ In spite of these reforms, Fomerand argues that UN agencies still seek to prioritise their own specialised activities over the coordinated programme.⁷ In doing so, the individual agencies are influenced by their direct relationship with donors and by the competing and uncoordinated approaches of individual donor states in developing countries. Agencies can secure their own ring-fenced funds from donors, which is

contradictions: the UN in a turbulent world', in Albert J. Paolini *et al.* (eds), *Between sovereignty and global governance: the UN, the state and civil society* (New York, 1998), 252-73 .

⁴ Kofi Annan, *In larger freedom: towards development, security and human rights for all* (New York, 2005), paragraph 194, available at <http://www.un.org/largerfreedom/index.html> (19 April 2006).

⁵ Details of these programming tools and procedures and of how they are intended to work are available at <http://www.undg.org/content.cfm?id=4> (1 March 2006).

⁶ Further information on the UNDG is available at www.undg.org (6 April 2006).

⁷ Jacques Fomerand, 'Agents of change? The United Nations and development', in Jean E. Krasno (ed.), *The United Nations: confronting the challenges of a global society*. (Boulder, 2004) 162-91: 180-1.

outside the control of a UN resident coordinator at country level or even of the UNDG coordinating mechanism.

Lack of coordination and multiplicity of agencies within the UN is often driven by the competing demands of donors. Whereas coordination of donor policy has attracted a lot of debate in recent years, this discussion has largely focused on attempts to coordinate bi-lateral spending in-country and on attempts to reduce the administrative reporting overload on recipient states.⁸ There has been little analysis of the negative impact of competing donor agendas (and ring-fenced funding streams) on the ability to coordinate or prioritise the work of UN agencies. Moreover, even those schemes often promoted as the best-practice models of coordination, such as the joint assistance strategy in Tanzania,⁹ are in reality a long way from a model that eliminates wasteful and duplicative reporting requirements by donors or that provide a genuinely coordinated donor support to a recipient state.

Funding shortfalls for UN programmes and the relative decline of the UN's global influence on development issues—compared to that of the IMF and World Bank—has also, in Fomerand's view, led to a weakening of the UN's intellectual leadership in development. He argues that the early UN secretariat had development specialists who were recognised world leaders, including the two Nobel prize winners Arthur Lewis and Gunnar Myrdal, and that the sidelining of the UN secretariat's role in the management of the global economy has resulted in an asymmetrical shift of expertise to the World Bank on the one hand and to the specialist UN agencies such as the UNDP on the other.¹⁰ The sidelining of the UN in this way was an inevitable result of power politics, in that the Washington-based institutions more closely reflected the interests of the US and its engagement with the global economy than did the UN. The institutional arrangements within the IMF and World Bank, in particular the dominance of wealthy states in its shareholder model of governance, meant that these two bodies were not influenced by the needs or views of developing states. Given the UN's own ethos and role in the world and the stronger influence of the General Assembly (and through it the majority of member states) on social and economic issues, including development, the UN agencies were unlikely to become uncritical proponents of a development agenda propagated by the developed states or of a world order constructed in their interests. As a result, powerful interests have promoted the role of the IMF and World Bank at the same time as the role of the UN has been circumscribed.

In some respects the UNDP has provided an alternative analysis to that of the financial institutions, through, for example, the promotion of the concept of human development; and the work of UN specialist agencies has given it a practical knowledge base and an authority that has been hard to dismiss. Kothari argues that the critical reports of the United Nations Research Institute for Social Development (UNRISD) have played a useful role in asserting the 'relatively autonomous character of the UN' from the dominant macroeconomic agendas of the major powers and the Bretton Woods institutions.¹¹ While a multiplicity of agencies does certainly create problems of efficiency and coordination, the major UN agencies such as UNDP have used their operational role effectively to assist in the UN's other development function—that of seeking to establish international norms and to pressurise wealthy states to increase their financial commitments.

⁸ See, for example, the following website on aid harmonisation: <http://www.aidharmonization.org/ah-wh> (6 April 2006).

⁹ Details in relation to this strategy are available at <http://www.tzdac.or.tz/index.html> (6 April 2006).

¹⁰ Fomerand, 'Agents of change?', 178.

¹¹ Smitu Kothari 'Where are the people? The United Nations, global economic institutions and governance', in Albert J. Paolini, Anthony Jarvis and Christian Reus-Smit (eds), *Between sovereignty and global governance: the United Nations, the state and civil society* (Basingstoke, 1998), 186–206: 199.

As a small state, Ireland has maintained a positive view of the role of the UN in international affairs. This is reflected in recent increases in Ireland's funding for UN agencies. The bulk of Irish development aid goes to bilateral programmes in Ireland's priority programme countries, primarily in sub-Saharan Africa, and to supporting the work of Irish development NGOs, and a much smaller proportion has gone to EU and UN development programmes. As the development cooperation budget has grown, the size of Ireland's contribution to the UN agencies has grown both in absolute and in percentage terms, and contributions to these agencies are now larger than the contribution to the EU development programme. In 2004 approximately €66 million was contributed to UN agencies, representing 13.5% of the overall Irish aid budget and a 50% increase since 2002. Following a 'peer review' of Ireland's development cooperation programme by the OECD Development Assistance Committee (DAC) in 1999,¹² and the subsequent Ireland Aid review,¹³ Ireland decided to target contributions to the UN to a much smaller number of agencies. This was a decision that reflected in some ways the debate on multiplicity and coordination within the UN itself. Ireland had funded 39 separate UN agencies in 1999 but decided to focus its contributions on a more limited number thereafter. The criteria for selection included fit with Irish Aid's own programmes and a focus on poverty alleviation. While some small contributions continue, spending is now more focused. Among the larger contributions from Ireland's aid programme in 2004, UNDP received €12.9m, UNICEF €8.5m, the UNHCR €7m, WFP €2.9m, UNFPA €2.5m, WHO €2.9m, UNHCHR €2.5m and UNAIDS €2.3m.¹⁴ These eight agencies therefore receive a total of €41.5m—nearly two-thirds of the overall Irish contribution to the UN. Irish government development policy therefore places considerable importance on support for UN agencies.

SETTING STANDARDS AND NORMS IN DEVELOPMENT

The UN, particularly through its role as convenor of global conferences, has played a key role in building development policy norms and setting universal standards in the area of rights. In the Cold War years the UN was the major forum for the debate on the nature of human rights. The evolution of the human-rights framework, and development as an integral part of that framework, is described by Su Ming Khoo as a process of 'divergence and convergence'.¹⁵ The diverging ideologies of the Cold War rival powers led to the splitting of civil and political rights from economic, social and cultural rights. Deep and enduring disagreement over the proper status of economic and social rights dogged the early history of the human-rights agenda. Prioritising economic and social rights became the justification of the centralised planning and economic policies of socialist states during the Cold War.¹⁶ The result was that the rhetoric of human rights

was reduced to a weapon in the propaganda for geopolitical interests. The West emphasized civil and political rights, pointing the finger at socialist countries for denying those rights. The socialist (and many developing)

¹² OECD/DAC, *Ireland*, Development Cooperation Review Series 35 (Paris, 1999).

¹³ Department of Foreign Affairs, *Report of the Ireland Aid review committee*, (Dublin, 2002).

¹⁴ For further details and a comprehensive annual commentary on Ireland's ODA, see Helen O'Neill, 'Ireland's Foreign Aid in 2004', *Irish Studies in International Affairs* (16) 2005, 279–316 (and see previous volumes for each year back to 1979).

¹⁵ Su Ming Khoo, 'The millennium development goals: a critical discussion', *Trócaire Development Review* (2005), 43–56.

¹⁶ Henry Steiner and Philip Alston, *International human rights in context* (Oxford, 2000), 237.

countries emphasized economic and social rights, criticizing the richest Western countries for their failure to secure these rights for all citizens.¹⁷

The outcome of this ideological battle was that two separate international rights treaties were put in place—the International Covenant on Civil and Political Rights (ICCPR) and the International Covenant on Economic, Social and Cultural Rights (ICESCR).¹⁸ There is convergence between these covenants to the extent that there is general agreement that the two sets of rights are interdependent and interconnected, but there is also enduring disagreement over how to achieve the goal of making such rights a universal reality. Over time the UN has broadened the concept of rights with a growing number of conventions, for example the Convention on the Elimination of all forms of Discrimination against Women (CEDAW), adopted in 1979, and the Convention on the Rights of the Child, adopted in 1989.¹⁹

In spite of their different ideological perspectives on the question of rights, both sides in this debate converged in relation to the style of development policy they favoured. As the superpowers' development programmes emerged in response to the new political situation created by the wave of decolonisation, both sides—from their different perspectives—favoured large-scale projects imbued with modernisation theory. In Africa, the strategic needs of the superpowers outweighed the developmental needs of the population in relation to both the direction of spending that was emphasised and the political regimes the superpowers chose to support.

It was with the declaration of the first UN decade of development in 1962 that the UN took up development in the Global South as one of its priority issues. From the beginning, the work of the UN offered an alternative perspective to that of the major powers and of the international financial institutions. The UN Commission for Latin America (ECLA), through the work of Raúl Prebisch, offered a substantial critique to the international trade and finance models of the 1950s and 1960s. Later, this critique was developed through Prebisch's work as the first general secretary of the UN Conference on Trade and Development (UNCTAD),²⁰ which sought to reform the international trade system so that it could assist the economic development of the 'Third World', and to frame aid as a form of compensation for the way in which the 'Third World' was disadvantaged in international trade.²¹

The international economic crisis of the 1970s led to the financial institutions again taking a lead in development through the structural adjustment programmes of the 1980s, which happened in the context of declining real aid flows. These two trends delineated a move towards 'market' solutions for development and towards the abandonment of the idea of aid as 'compensation'. In the post-oil-crisis world the status of the UN was undermined by antagonism on the part of the US in particular. There was a 'tendency on the part of the US and some other powerful countries to reject the United Nations as a vehicle for international action' and a potential obstacle to economic liberalisation—a response that continued rather than abated during 1990s and that exists even up to the present day.²² The UN responded to

¹⁷ UNDP, *Human development report* (New York, 2000), 3.

¹⁸ The text of these covenants can be accessed at http://www.unhchr.ch/html/menu3/b/a_ccpr.htm and at http://www.unhchr.ch/html/menu3/b/a_cesr.htm, respectively (19 April 2006).

¹⁹ For the texts of these conventions, please see, respectively, <http://www.un.org/womenwatch/daw/cedaw/cedaw.htm> and <http://www.ohchr.org/English/law/pdf/crc.pdf> (19 April 2006).

²⁰ For further information on the work of UNCTAD, see <http://www.unctad.org/> (19 April 2006).

²¹ Walden Bello, 'The Bretton Woods institutions and the demise of the UN development system', in Paolini *et al.*, *Between sovereignty and global governance*, 207-27: 209.

²² Robert Cox, 'Robert W. Cox "Multilateralism and World Order"' in Robert W. Cox with Timothy J Sinclair *Approaches to World Order* (Cambridge, 1996), 494-522: 498-9.

the changing international development situation by instituting debate on the ideas underpinning development policies. The Declaration on the Right to Development, signed in 1986, put inequality at the heart of the development programme: it referred to ‘the growing poverty of most human beings...and the increasing concentration of wealth in the hands of the few’.²³ It shifted attention away from economic growth and profit as the ultimate goal of development—and put the person at the centre. In particular, the participation and empowerment of people in their own development became a key idea. Although influential UN agencies such as UNCTAD and UNRSID offered broad critiques of development practice in the 1980s, a neo-liberal economic developmental solution was imposed by means of structural adjustment programmes using the financial power of the Bretton Woods agencies. The structure of the UN, however, always allowed developing states to organise politically—through the G77 for example—in a manner that is impossible in the IMF and World Bank.²⁴

New thinking on development did, however, become increasingly visible in international politics over the course of the 1990s and the UN was central to this. After a gap of a few years in the late 1980s, 1990 saw the initiation of a new round of conferences, beginning with the United Nations Conference on the Least Developed Countries. The post-Cold War conferences revisited issues dealt with in the early conferences: ‘to assess what had been accomplished and to set new goals and strategies for the future’.²⁵ An enhanced engagement with civil society—in the conferences themselves and also in the proposed conference follow-up—increased the capacity of the conferences to address these problems innovatively.²⁶

The conferences of the 1990s focused on development, linking it with other key issues of international concern; the results included the Conference on Human Environment and Development (*the Earth Summit*) in Rio (1992), the International Conference on Population and Development in Cairo (1994); the World Summit for Social Development in Copenhagen (1995); the Fourth World Conference on Women in Beijing (1995). These conferences sought to elaborate programmes of action around thematic priorities and, although they lacked any ability to compel member states to implement conference recommendations, they did play a role in shifting the public debate on development and, in some cases, in altering development policies and priorities. This was in spite of calls for a moratorium on major global conferences by the Clinton administration in 1995. But as the setting up of the international criminal court demonstrated, even in a unipolar world progress could be made in the international arena without the support of US.

The UN is, however, fundamentally weak when it comes to implementation. The most the UN can do is implement its targets within the programmes and agencies over which it has direct control. The accountability and monitoring systems needed to ensure that member states keep their promises are lacking and there seems little prospect that the member states will be willing to institute such systems in the foreseeable future.

The Millennium Declaration—and the MDGs

The agenda that has emerged within the UN since 2000 has sought to use what authority the UN has to build a global consensus on development issues. The signing of the Millennium

²³ United Nations, *Right to Development* (New York, 1995), 74–5 available at <http://www.unhchr.ch/html/menu3/b/74.htm> (10 April 2006).

²⁴ Further information about this group of developing countries within the UN organisation is available at <http://www.g77.org/> (7 April 2006). The group still retains its historic name but currently has a membership of 132 states.

²⁵ Michael G. Schechter, *United nations global conferences* (New York, 2005), 153.

²⁶ Schechter, *United Nations Global Conferences*, 153.

Declaration at the UN summit in New York in 2000 was a success for the UN, even if it emerged because of the absence of a significant consensus on other issues, such as UN reform. The Millennium Declaration attempts to build a consensus that the eradication of extreme poverty is achievable if the wealthy states make it a priority as part of their foreign policy. The declaration also gives a very visible role to the UN in the promotion of development, which is clearly linked to the agreed outcomes of the UN conferences of the 1990s.

The key targets outlined in the declaration were further elaborated into the millennium development goals (MDGs), which were aimed at highlighting a set of measurable and easily understood development targets that could be used to mobilise support and build global consensus on the most basic objectives of development policy. These goals were agreed as being the eradication of extreme poverty and hunger; the provision of universal primary education; promoting gender equality and empowering women; the reduction of child mortality; improved maternal health; combating HIV/AIDS, malaria and other diseases; and ensuring environmental sustainability and the achievement of a global partnership for development involving a greater commitment from wealthy states. The MDGs crucially elaborated a set of measurable targets to be achieved by the year 2015. Among these targets are: cutting in half the proportion of those who earn less than a dollar a day; achieving universal primary education; eliminating gender disparity at all levels of education; reducing by two-thirds the mortality rate among children; reducing by three-quarters the maternal mortality ratio; halting and reversing the spread of HIV/AIDS, malaria and other major diseases and reducing by half the proportion of people without sustainable access to safe drinking water.

The actual goals originated in a 1996 OECD report,²⁷ but they only came to public prominence when the Millennium summit, held in New York in September 2000, adopted a declaration committing the UN member states to the achievement of the goals by 2015.²⁸ Although they have been criticised for their limited vision, the success of the MDGs has been their capacity to re-engage the governments of the Global North on issues of development and to offer a simple message to the public to mobilise support, thereby ensuring government action.²⁹ Whereas there was nothing new in the MDGs, the UN could present them as a legitimate, universal set of principles around which pressure for reform could be built.

The MDGs are, however, weak in asserting an agreed goal on what is required from wealthy states—with no specific targets or timescale set out on trade, development aid or debt cancellation. Furthermore, there is no agreement on reaching the UN target of 0.7% of GNP for development aid—a goal first adopted by the UN General Assembly in 1970, when wealthy countries were asked to exert their best efforts to reach that target by the mid 1970s. The fate of the 0.7% target for development aid, while by no means the only issue to be resolved, is a good indicator of the failure to build an international consensus. The average ODA for the 22 member states of the OECD's DAC was 0.22% in 2004. This rose to 0.33% in 2005—primarily due to large-scale debt relief for Iraq (\$14 billion) and Nigeria (\$5 billion) and very large expenditures by the USA in Iraq (3.5 billion) and Afghanistan (1.5 billion). Only Sweden, the Netherlands, Denmark, Luxembourg and Norway meet the UN target of 0.7%. Sweden, Luxembourg and Norway have subsequently committed to spending 1% of GNP on aid, with target dates for reaching this level ranging from 2006 to 2009. Even

²⁷ OECD/DAC *Shaping the Twenty-First century: the contribution of development cooperation* (Paris, 1996).

²⁸ Details of the text of the declaration are available at <http://www.un.org/millennium/declaration/ares552e.htm> (1 April 2006).

²⁹ For a supportive but critical review, see Lorna Gold *More than a numbers game? Ensuring that the millennium development goals address structural injustice* (Dublin, 2005).

though aid—expressed in absolute cash terms—is at its highest ever level this year, it is well below the figure of 0.5% of GNP found in the early statistics collected by the OECD, and this year's figure contains significant debt write-offs in Iraq and reconstruction expenditures in Iraq and Afghanistan. The OECD expects the percentage to fall in the future, notwithstanding the increased commitments by some states as the schedule of Iraqi debt relief ends.³⁰ The OECD average, however, contains a very wide divergence between the commitments of individual states. In 2005 Norway reached 0.93% of GNP and Sweden reached 0.92%. The USA—even with a huge boost of Iraqi debt relief and assistance—stood at 0.22%, Japan at 0.28% and Australia at 0.25%.

In addition to the continued failure to agree levels of aid, what the MDGs gained in clarity and consensus meant they lost in terms of a broader and deeper vision of development that addresses global inequality. Many of the goals can be met on paper in formal reports without any measure being taken of the quality of what has actually been achieved; for example, in relation to achieving the goal of universal primary education, school enrolment may be measured rather than the standard of education provided, or even the average attendance. It is the tendency to focus on issues that can be readily quantified that may mean that the MDGs could result in yet more reporting requirements for countries already under pressure from donors. On the positive side, the MDGs have helped galvanise support for development from the publics of industrialised countries. While opinion polls show a low level of awareness on the actual details of the 'goals' themselves,³¹ they also show a very strong level of support for the fundamental development idea the goals contain. McDonnell and Solignac Lecomte suggest that because the campaigning has focused on the broad issues and not on the 'goals' *per se*, the impact of the profile given to the MDGs by the UN is most visible in the high levels of support for increased aid, fair trade and debt cancellation within the EU and Canada.³²

In the period ahead it will be a challenge for the UN to avoid the MDGs becoming a distraction from underlying inequalities—or a step backwards. There is a need to avoid a narrow focus on 'welfarist' approaches to development and to keep the focus on the root causes of poverty, as well as on the symptoms. There is a strong need to give particular attention to the systemic issues underpinning inequality, such as investment in productive sectors, such as agriculture. In this regard it is also necessary to focus on stronger engagement and coordination with the IMF, World Bank and WTO. This could be done through the reform and revitalisation of ECOSOC as a body within international economic governance that can monitor the way in which the other major institutions of international governance work in line with the MDGs and international human-rights obligations. The UN, including ECOSOC, is based on democratic principles, where each country has a voice; the international financial institutions operate on the principle of 'one dollar, one vote'. As a result, key policy decisions are made on the basis of technical specialisation rather than participative consensus. Many of the policy frameworks have served the interests of those with power, and have not taken full account of the political and social context in which the frameworks are being applied. Even with the introduction of 'Poverty reduction strategy programmes', which have tried to be participative, very little has changed in practice.

³⁰ Information on the current levels of aid flows from OECD countries is available at http://www.oecd.org/document/40/0,2340,en_2649_201185_36418344_1_1_1_1,00.html (6 Apr. 2006).

³¹ Ida McDonnell and Henri-Bernard Solignac Lecomte, *MDGs, taxpayers and aid effectiveness*, Policy insights no.13 (Paris, 2005).

³² McDonnell and Solignac Lecomte, *MDGs, taxpayers and aid effectiveness*. Poll figures are taken from a special 'Eurobarometer', Wave 62.2 TNS Opinion and Social, *Attitudes towards development aid* (Brussels, 2005); and from 'Focus Canada', Environics Research Group, *Canadian Attitudes toward Development Assistance* (Ottawa, 2004).

THE US AND THE DEVELOPMENT DEBATE

In the aftermath of the 11 September 2001 attacks, the US also wanted to build an international consensus on development that was outside the framework provided by the MDGs. The new *National Security Strategy*, although focused primarily on a narrow security response to the threats facing the US, also set out the American government's development policy. It argued for promoting global economic growth through free markets and free trade, and it asserted that policies 'that further strengthen market incentives and market institutions are relevant for all economies—industrial countries, emerging markets and the developing world'.³³ The strategy argued that liberal democracy was an essential part of development and that it was necessary to 'expand the circle of development by opening societies and building the infrastructure of democracy'.³⁴

The strategy document justifies the administration's decision to make military action its priority and retrospectively defends the US's comparatively small commitment to development aid by stigmatising 'decades of massive development assistance' as having 'failed to spur economic growth' and having propped up 'failed policies' while 'relieving the pressure for reform and perpetuating misery'.³⁵ From the perspective of the Bush administration, it is the existence of 'failed states' that have been following inappropriate development strategies, rather than the international system, that is to blame for global poverty. The goal of international development aid therefore—from this viewpoint—should be focused on changing governments' objectives and economic strategies towards a neo-liberal model.

A central plank of this new policy on the part of the US was the announcement of a 'New millennium challenge account' that would provide \$5 billion (over 3 years) of new spending specifically targeted at those countries that follow a program of economic and political reform that has the approval of the US.³⁶ The additional aid was linked to what the strategy defined as 'sound policies', and it was stated that the funds 'will be distributed to developing countries that demonstrate a strong commitment towards' three criteria: 'good governance', the 'health and education of their people' and 'sound economic policies that foster enterprise and entrepreneurship'. That final policy area is spelt out clearly as meaning 'more open markets, sustainable budget policies, and strong support for individual entrepreneurship'.³⁷

In the words of President George W. Bush, this is a 'new compact for global development, defined by new accountability for both rich and poor nations alike. Greater contributions from developed nations must be linked to greater responsibility from developing nations. In return for this additional commitment, we expect nations to adopt the reforms and policies that make development effective and lasting'.³⁸ The policies embedded in the *National Security Strategy* and in the US's development aid programme, including the millennium challenge account, reflect what the Bush administration describes as a forging of a 'new consensus'. In opposition to the ideas underpinning the MDGs, Bush described that

³³ White House, *The National Security Strategy of the United States of America*, 17, available at <http://www.whitehouse.gov/nsc/nssall.html> (19 April 2006).

³⁴ *National Security Strategy*, 5.

³⁵ *National Security Strategy*, 21.

³⁶ White House, 'President proposes \$5 billion-plan to help developing nations', press release, 14 March 2002, available at <http://www.whitehouse.gov/news/releases/2002/03/20020314-7.html> (6 April 2006).

³⁷ US Agency for International Development, 'Millennium challenge account update', available at http://www.usaid.gov/press/releases/2002/fs_mca.html (19 April 2006).

³⁸ George W. Bush, 'Speech to Inter-American Development Bank', 14 March 2002, available at <http://www.whitehouse.gov/news/releases/2002/03/20020314-7.html> (19 April 2006).

new consensus as meaning that ‘the objectives of assistance—and the strategies to achieve those objectives—must change’.³⁹

MONITORING THE MDGS

The UN heads of state and government summit held in New York in 2005 was seen by supporters of the MDGs as an opportunity to refocus attention on the attainment of the goals. The agenda was broad and included a five-year review of the MDGs, the place of the UN after the 11 September 2001 terrorist attacks and the invasion of Iraq, the responsibility of the UN to act in the face of genocide or gross violations of human rights and UN reform, including the restructuring of the Security Council. Kofi Annan in his report to the meeting argued that these issues were indivisible, asserting ‘we will not enjoy development without security, we will not enjoy security without development, and we will not enjoy either without respect for human rights’.⁴⁰ The pre-summit energies of key states became consumed, however, by the debate on Security Council reform, and the attempt to use the momentum of the summit to build on the MDGs was lost. In terms of formal outcomes, the 2005 summit failed even to produce any consensus on UN reform, the issue that had been the focus of attention of the most powerful states.

The summit did, however, create a context and focus for a strong civil society campaign on development during the summer of 2005. In addition, the South gained a measure of leverage on development policy, as wealthy states wanted to overcome Southern resistance to the proposed ‘responsibility to protect’ doctrine, which would permit UN Security Council intervention against the wishes of a sovereign government to prevent gross violations of human rights. The ‘Make poverty history’ campaign running throughout 2005, the report of the Commission on Africa and the activity around the Live Eight concerts before the July G8 meeting increased the pressure on OECD states to respond to the core issues of the MDGs. The G8 meeting in July made some progress on debt relief and announced a small increase in previous aid commitments. However, the biggest single policy shift during this period was at the European Council meeting of June 2005, when the EU heads of government committed to a new collective European Union target of an ODA/GNI ratio of 0.56% by 2010, while member states undertook to achieve the target of an ODA/GNI ratio of 0.7% by 2015.⁴¹ However, other than the EU members (and Norway, which is moving towards 1%), no other country has announced a firm date to reach the aid target 0.7% of GNI, and the US, Canada, Australia, Japan and New Zealand remain well below the OECD average.

The impact of the UN as a vehicle to build consensus and pressurise states to agree to implement development norms is mixed. The New York summit of September 2005 was, in most respects, a failure on development; yet the increased profile on development policy and the platform created by the summit is at least associated with significant commitments to increase official development assistance and with some slight progress on debt relief. Engagement by the UN with civil society can improve the downward accountability of governments. Governments should be held to account on the promises they make, and in the era of the Information Society, the role of civil society organisations, including the media, in building this local–global accountability is critical.

³⁹ *National Security Strategy*, 21.

⁴⁰ Annan, *In larger freedom*, paragraph 17, available at <http://www.un.org/largerfreedom/index.html> (4 April 2006).

⁴¹ Council of the European Union. ‘Presidency conclusions, Brussels, 16 and 17 June 2005’, available at http://ue.eu.int/ueDocs/cms_Data/docs/pressData/en/ec/84335.pdf (19 April 2006).

Ireland, the MDGs and development norms

Ireland has been a strong supporter of the UN's millennium development goals. Ireland has given the goals, and in particular Goal 8, which focuses on the responsibilities of developed states, a central place in its development policy. The development cooperation agency of the department of Foreign Affairs, Irish Aid, states:

The overarching objective of Irish Aid is the reduction of poverty, inequality and exclusion in developing countries...The eight Millennium Development Goals, agreed by the UN at a series of international summit meetings, identify some of the main causes of extreme poverty in today's world and underpin the poverty reduction policies and activities of Irish Aid...The Millennium Development Goals, and the specific targets set to enable their achievement to be measured, provide the context in which Irish Aid priority sectors are decided.⁴²

The MDGs in Goal 8 specify a number of areas for action by developed states—chief among them being action on debt cancellation, increases in official aid and progress on reform of the world trade system to make it fairer for poor and developing states. Ireland has supported calls for debt cancellation for many years. Irish aid, however, is given as untied grants, therefore the government was not owed any debts that could be cancelled. This made it easy for the Irish government to be on the side of the angels on this issue and reduced its leverage on those countries who were in a position to cancel debt. The absence of any tied aid in the Irish programme does mean, however, that Irish aid scores highly in terms of effectiveness and this allows Ireland to play a role in attempts to persuade other donors to end the practice of providing tied aid—more than 50% of all OECD aid is still given in the form of tied aid.⁴³ On trade issues, the main policy contradictions for Ireland are on the question of export subsidies for agriculture—such subsidies are strongly supported by Irish agricultural interests but are seen as unfair dumping in developing states. There is a growing acceptance that further cuts in subsidies will inevitably take place, but Ireland has strongly resisted any attempt to reopen the current agreed set of agricultural reforms, which are due to be implemented in stages up to 2013.⁴⁴ One change that is marked in the Irish context is that the policy of agricultural supports, which was considered a domestic/EU issue, is now also discussed in terms of its impact on the developing world. However, given the indirect manner in which Ireland participates in world trade talks, (as the European Commission takes the lead for the entire EU), and the absence of any debts due to Ireland from developing countries, it is the level of development aid that has been the key focus of domestic debate on the MDGs.

The focus on aid was signalled by both Taoiseach Bertie Ahern and Foreign Affairs Minister Brian Cowen speaking at the UN summit and General Assembly in 2000. At the summit, the taoiseach made Ireland's first public commitment to reach an aid level of 0.7% of GNP by 2007 and asserted that 'the specificity of the language and the timescales [in the MDGs] mean that we can and will be held accountable for delivery. If we urge policy coherence and precise targets on the UN, we must be individually prepared to adopt the same

⁴² Department of Foreign Affairs/Irish Aid, 'Overview—millennium development goals (MDGs)', available at <http://www.dci.gov.ie/challenges.asp> (6 Apr. 2006).

⁴³ OECD, 'Untied aid', available at http://www.oecd.org/topic/0,2686,en_2649_18108886_1_1_1_1_37413,00.html (6 Apr. 2006).

⁴⁴ Editorial, "Defending the Cap" *Irish Times* 3 September 2005.

disciplines'.⁴⁵ Minister Cowen in turn stated that 'our aid budget is both a test and a reflection of our commitment to the values and principles set out in the Millennium Summit Declaration'.⁴⁶ That supportive attitude to the goals and the focus on the aid target was confirmed by the taoiseach again in 2003 when he addressed the General Assembly: 'At the Millennium Summit, I committed Ireland to reaching the UN target for Official Development Assistance of 0.7 per cent of GNP by 2007. Since then, Ireland has increased its ODA to 0.41 per cent, and remains committed to reaching the target by 2007'.⁴⁷ When the government later announced that it would not, after all, meet the UN target by the deadline of 2007⁴⁸ it generated a very high level of criticism.⁴⁹ After a period of internal debate, the government used the opportunity of the 2005 UN summit to announce a new commitment to reaching the target by 2012—three years ahead of the deadline adopted by the EU collectively in a decision made earlier in 2005. The taoiseach's speech at the 2005 summit also announced an interim target of 0.5% of GNP by 2007. The opposition parties responded with a promise to underpin the new schedule with legislation—something that Irish NGO's had called for to make a future weakening of this goal more difficult.⁵⁰ While the Irish state would view itself as pro-development, the MDGs have been useful as a tool for holding the government to account, and they have also allowed the government to justify increased levels of development spending to the general public.

CONCLUSION

In spite of the failure of the 2005 summit to advance UN reform, the UN remains at the centre of the international development effort. In some respects the stalled reform process weakens the capacity of the UN to play a leadership role into the future. On the other hand, it has to be considered that some options for reform may be intended to limit the influence of the UN rather than enhance it. So currently, although the UN can present an intellectual alternative to the development policies and ethos of the financial institutions, its role in this regard is weakened by its reliance on the compliance of powerful states to achieve its goals. Its capacity for internal organisational and administrative reform is also limited by the fact that it is essentially an inter-state organisation that requires the negotiated agreement of its members in order to institute change. Such agreement does not look likely to be achieved in the near future given the dramatically opposing views that exist among members with regard to the future of development and the role of the UN. In spite of this uncertainty, the UN has played a critical function in development through its programmes and specialised agencies, and through its role as convenor of global conferences. In fulfilling these roles the UN has had to handle the growing complexity of the thematic policy areas in which it works, and it has had to operate within a political context in which it relies on the power of persuasion, rather than sanctions, in order to encourage governments to implement what they promise. The UN has sought to act as a catalyst for political change and, through the Millennium Declaration and the MDGs, has tried to provide a sharp and focused set of basic goals against

⁴⁵ Department of the Taoiseach, Address by the Taoiseach, Mr Bertie Ahern, TD, to the United Nations millennium summit, New York, 6 September 2000.

⁴⁶ Department of Foreign Affairs, Statement by Mr Brian Cowen, TD, Minister for Foreign Affairs, during the general debate at the fifty-fifth session of the General Assembly of the United Nations, 14 September 2000.

⁴⁷ Department of the Taoiseach, Statement by the Taoiseach, Mr. Bertie Ahern TD, to the General Debate at the 58th General Assembly of the United Nations, New York, 25 Sept 2003.

⁴⁸ Interview with Conor Lenihan, *Irish Times*, 8 October 2004.

⁴⁹ See, for example, *Irish Times*, Michael O'Regan "Aid target still in place" 20 October 2004; Patsy McGarry "Aid figures 'disappointing'" 17 June 2005; "Government not delivering on repeated promises on aid" [NO AUTHOR] 1 July 2005.

⁵⁰ Liam Reid "FG and Labour agree need for aid legislation" *Irish Times* 16 September 2005.

which to measure the commitment of the wealthy states to development and the results being achieved on the ground. Whilst this is welcome, future challenges lie ahead, in terms of ensuring that the critical questions of inequality in the global system remain on the agenda. In the words of one former UN secretary-general, Dag Hammarskjöld: ‘The pursuit of peace and progress cannot end in a few years in either victory or defeat. The pursuit of peace and progress, with its trials and its errors, its successes and its setbacks, can never be relaxed and never abandoned.’⁵¹

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[http://www.unog.ch/unog/website/news_media.nsf/\(httpNewsByYear_en\)/95DC0A888910E103C12570F1004B6232?OpenDocument](http://www.unog.ch/unog/website/news_media.nsf/(httpNewsByYear_en)/95DC0A888910E103C12570F1004B6232?OpenDocument) (4 May 2006).