Political Economy of Millennium Development Goals: A Critical Assessment of Achievement and Strategies

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Abstract

The Millennium Development Goals (MDGs) are a noble initiative to deal with certain chronic socioeconomic problems of the backward countries. Targeted to achieve eight major goals by 2015, the initiative deserves critical assessment of its achievement and strategies as its time frame is approaching to an end. Based on data on the goals' achievement from relevant countries, this article argues that while significant achievements are noticeable, these are far less than satisfactory in real terms, secondly, nonachievements of the goals are due to three large factors; first, uncertain international political economic structure and market functioning; second, international power-politics which intentionally affects regime sustainability in the countries concerned; and third, domestic dynamics of political power-play which influence allocation of resources for short-term political gains. The research makes a cross-country comparative analysis adopting an approach of institutional analysis in comparative politics.

Key terms: MDGs, Developing countries, International Politics, International Development.

INTRODUCTION

The global economic, political and social structure indicate that the vast majority of the people worldwide and the vast number of countries around the world lag behind much compared to a tiny minority of the global population and countries in terms of economic development and affluence, political opportunities and rights, and social equalities and entitlements (Global Risks 2014). The world estimates suggest that only five percent of global population live in affluence controlling ninety percent of global wealth. This reflects on the scenario among the countries that out of 193 UN recognized states and territories only 34 countries (17.6 per cent) are listed as most advanced. This means about 85 per cent of the countries around the world are categorized as developing, least developed, and Heavily Indebted Poor Countries (HIPC). Obviously, the vast majority of the global populations living in these countries are seriously at disadvantageous position economically, socially and politically. This global disparity increasingly has been emerging as a global threat attracting global attention to address the related concerns.

The current era of globalization has transformed such global threats into a common global responsibility to address global inequalities and disparities. Out of this emerged the Millennium Development Goals (MDGs) initiated by the United Nations in the 1990s. The initiative adopted a noble mission to achieve eight major objectives around the world, especially in the less developed countries by the year 2015. The world bodies such as the UN, World Bank, IMF, UNDP and governments of the countries made the MDGs an immediate and priority development concerns. An internationally coordinated approach made the necessary monetary and logistics supports available to the needy governments in addition to the budgetary allocation of the respective countries to achieve the targeted goals. The achievement of the eight goals was to be measured by carefully selected indicators that can offer statistical picture of progress.

This article offers a critical assessment of the achievements and strategies of the MDGs. Since the targeted time period of MDGs is going to end by the year 2015, it is a timely endeavor to make a rigorous evaluation of the initiative. Even though related international agencies such as the UN, WB, IMF, and UNDP have been publishing annual reports on progress not much comprehensive studies have been conducted across the countries. These reports have usually painted a rosy picture of progress but generally neglected global structural factors that might have negative impacts on MDGs. However, many goal specific studies have been conducted on the progress of MDGs, but these are country specific. Furthermore, these studies too lack insight into larger structural factors that negatively influence the MDGs. Going beyond these limitations this article makes a cross-country analysis of the overall state of achievements of the MDGs, and the issues are assessed from global as well as domestic political and economic structural perspectives. Based on data on a selected number of countries this article argues that despite significant progress the overall level of achievement of MDGs is seriously off target. The article puts forward three factors responsible for the low level of performance in achieving the goals. First, uncertain international political economic structure and market functioning has suppressed the progress; second, international power-politics which intentionally affect regime sustainability in the countries concerned has disfavored progress; and finally, domestic dynamics of political power-play which influences allocation of resources for short-term political gains has destabilized the road to achievement of the goals.

THE MDGs

The MDGs concern eight major socio-economic and political issues relating to poverty, education, gender rights, health and environment. The following section offers a description of the eight goals (MDG Report, 2014). Each of the eight goals has a number of targets and measurement indicators.

G1: Eradicate extreme poverty and hunger

- Halve, between 1990 and 2015, the proportion of people whose income is less than $1 a day.
- Achieve full and productive employment and decent work for all, including women and young people.
- Halve, between 1990 and 2015, the proportion of people who suffer from hunger.

G2: Achieve universal primary education

- Ensure that, by 2015, children everywhere, boys and girls alike, will be able to complete a full course of primary schooling.

G3: Promote gender equality and empower women

- Eliminate gender disparity in primary and secondary education, preferably by 2005, and in all levels of education, no later than 2015.

G4: Reduce child mortality

- Reduce by two-thirds, between 1990 and 2015, the mortality rate of children under five.

G5: Improve maternal health

- Reduce by three-quarters, between 1990 and 2015, the maternal mortality ratio.
- Achieve, by 2015, universal access to reproductive health.

G6: Combat HIV/AIDS, malaria and other diseases

- Halt and begin to reverse, by 2015, the spread of HIV/AIDS.
- Achieve universal access to treatment for HIV/AIDS for all those who need it.
- Halt and begin to reverse, by 2015, the incidence of malaria and other major diseases.

G7: Ensure environmental sustainability

- Integrate the principles of sustainable development into country policies and programmes and reverse the loss of environmental resources.
- Reduce biodiversity loss, achieving, by 2010, a significant reduction in the rate of loss.
- Halve, by 2015, the proportion of the population without sustainable access to safe drinking water and basic sanitation.
- Achieve, by 2020, a significant improvement in the lives of at least 100 million slum dwellers.

G8: Develop a global partnership for development

- Develop further an open, rules-based, predictable, non-discriminatory trading and financial system.
- Address the special needs of least developed countries, landlocked countries and small island developing states.
- Deal comprehensively with developing countries' debt.

- In cooperation with pharmaceutical companies, provide access to affordable, essential drugs in developing countries.
- In cooperation with the private sector, make available benefits of new technologies, especially ICTs.

METHOD AND DATA

This article looks into the MDGs of a selected number of countries officially categorized as Heavily Indebted Poor Countries (HIPCs). There are 35 countries in this category. The countries are Afghanistan, Benin, Bolivia Burkina Faso, Burundi, Cameroon, Central African Republic, Chad, Côte d'Ivoire, Comoros, Congo, Democratic Rep. of Congo, Ethiopia, Gambia, Ghana, Guinea, Guinea-Bissau, Guyana, Haiti, Honduras, Liberia, Mali, Malawi, Madagascar, Mauritania, Mozambique, Nicaragua, Niger, Rwanda, Senegal, Sierra Leone, Tanzania, Togo, Uganda, and Zambia. These countries are purposively selected because they are at the bottom end of development parameter. By looking at their level of achievemnts a clear idea can be developed about success and obstacles at the global level. Secondly, due to shortage or unaviability of data on all the eight goals for all countries only partial analysis of the achievemnts can be offered here.

The data on these eight goals are sourced from the IMF compilation. IMF has published quaterly data sets on the level of progress on the goals over the past ten years. Furthermore, IMF has developed six systematic schema to measure the overall progress which are called- target met, seriously off target, moderately off target, sufficient progress, insufficient progress, and insifficent data. This research has adopted the same schema as well.

MDGs: LEVEL OF OVERALL ACHIEVEMENT

The available data shows that there is a mixed result in terms of achievements. Certain countries have done pretty well in certain areas whereas some other countries have lagged behind. However, the overall pic is pretty disappointing. Table 1 indicates that in terms of Goal One (poverty and hunger) only eight countries have met the target, 15 are seriously off target, two moderately off target, theree and five countries have made sufficient and infiicient progress repspectively. On Goal Two (universal primary education) only four countries have met the target, 10 are seriously off target and seven are moderately off target, while another seven countries have made insufficient progress. On Goal Three (gender equality and women empowerment) the level of achievement is rather more satisfactory comparatively. Ten out of 35 countries have met the target while four to five countries maintained the record of seriously off target, moderately off target, sufficient and insufficient progress. On Goal Four (child and infant mortality) only seven countries have met the target while 11 countries are seriouslly off target and seventeen countries are either moderately off target or insufficient progress. A second aspect of this goal is infant mortality in which no country had achieved the target, 21 coutries are seriously and another eight countries are moderately off target. On Goal Five (maternal health) 14 and 15 countries are seriously and moderately off targets respectively, and none has met the target. On Goal Six (HIV/AIDS and other dieseases) 33 countries are seriously off target with none meeting the target. On Goal Seven (environment) 11 countries met the target while another 11 are seriously off target. Another aspect of this goal is improved sanitation in which only one country met the target while 28 are seriously off target. And finally, on Goal Eight (global partnership) only 4 countries are on target, while 20 are seriosuly off target, and 11 countries have no data available.

Table 1: MDGs Level of Achievement (by 2014)

	Achievement level (35 HIPC only)					
	Target met	Seriously off target	Moderately off target	Sufficient progress	Insufficient progress	Insifficent data
Goal 1	**Eradicate extreme poverty and hunger**					
Countries	8	15	2	3	3	4
Goal 2	**Achieve universal primary education**					
Countries	4	10	7	2	7	5
Goal 3	**Promote gender equality (boy/girl enrolment at school)**					
Countries	10	3	4	3	4	11
Goal 4	**Reduce child mortality (under five)**					
Countries	7	11	7	4	4	4
	Reduce child mortality (infant)					
	0	21	8	1	3	2
Goal 5	**Improve maternal health**					
Countries	0	14	15	3	3	0
Goal 6	**Combat HIV/AIDS, malaria and other diseases**					
Countries	0	33	0	0	0	2
Goal 7	**Ensure environmental sustainability (safe drinking water)**					
Countries	11	11	3	4	1	5
	Access to improved sanitation					
	1	28	0	1	0	5
Goal 8	**Develop a global partnership for development**					
Countries	4(on track)	20	0	0	0	11

Source: Compiled by the author from *IMF Global Monitoring Report 2013*, IMF, Washington DC.

Table 2 offers a more comprehensive summery. It shows that countries that are seriously and moderately off target, and have made only insufficient progress are much higher in number than the countries that have met the targets or have made sufficient progress towards achievement of the goals.

Table 2: Summary of Achievement (by 2014)

	Targets Met (countries)	**Sufficient Progress** (countries)	**Non-achievement** (Serious and Moderately off Target, Insufficient Progress) (countries)	
G1 (poverty)	8	3	20	Insufficient data 4
G2 (Primary education)	4	2	24	Insufficient data 5
G3 (Gender)	10	3	11	Insufficient data 11
G4 (Under 5 mortality)	7	4	22	Insufficient data 2
(Infant mortality)	0	1	34	
G5 (Maternal Health)	0	3	32	
G6 (HIV/AIDS)	0	0	33	Insufficient data 2
G7 (Safe drinking water)	11	4	15	Insufficient data 5
(Improved sanitation)	1	1	28	Insufficient data 5
G8 (Partnership)	4	0	20	Insufficient data 11

Source: Prepared by the author based on Compiled by the author from *IMF Global Monitoring Report 2013*, IMF, Washington DC.

So, based on this data what is clear is that in most of the goals the achievment level is very poor (MDGR, 2014). About 94 percent of 35 post completion-point HIPCs are “seriously off target” in halting HIV/AIDS and other diseases. Countries are also struggling to meet MDGs in areas of increased access to improved sanitation facilities and on reducing infant mortality. In these areas 80 percent and 60 percent of HIPCs were assessed as “seriously off target,” respectively. HIPCs performance has been better in the areas of increased access to improved water sources and on girls’ enrollment in primary and secondary education. Approximately one-third of HIPCs have already met these MDGs, with an additional 10 percent making “sufficient progress” in meeting the MDGs in these areas. The most disappointing is in the area of global partnership for development (UN, 2014).

ANALYSIS: FACORS FOR NON-PERFORMANCE

The data presented in the foregoing section begs a ligitimate question- despite continuous efforts for one and a half decade and huge investment why the MDGs' achievement level is very poor? What are the factors that can be held accountable for the failure? This article mentioned earlier that there are three large factors which can be considered responsible for the failure. This section will analyze the factors which are basically political and economic instanity and structural issues, locally and globally. To analyze the factors, this section draws upon data taken from two sources. The first source is Fragile State Index (FSI) and the second source is Peace and Conflict Instability Ledger (PCIL) data bank (FSI 2006, 2014; PCIL, 2008, 2012). These two sources record as well as assess global political and economic instability using various indicators. The FSI index includes 12 indicators: *Demographic Pressure*, *Internally Displaced Persons*, *Group Grievance*, *Human Flight and Brain Drain*, *Uneven Economic Development*, *Poverty and Economic Decline*, *State Legitimacy*, *Public Services*, *Human Rights and Rule of Law*, *Security Apparatus*, *Factionalized Elites*, and *External Intervention*. The PCIL ledger indicators include *Regime Consistency*, *Infant Mortality*, *Economic Openness*, *Militarization*, and *Neighbourhood War*. These indicators can suggest how local, regional and international political, economic and market structures directly and indirectly shape as well as influence development projects of individual countries.

Table 3: FSI and PCIL Ranking of Countries' Risk

	Country	**Fragile States Index score**		**Peace and Conflict Instability Ledger score**	
		2006	**2014**	**2008**	**2012**
1	Afghanistan	99.8	106.5	39.3	36.4
2	Benin	70.9	78.2	13.0	12.2
3	Bolivia	82.9	78.9	7.6	10.2
4	Burkina Faso	89.7	89.0	8.3	10.5
5	Burundi	96.7	97.1	11.1	24.5
6	Cameroon	88.4	93.1	6.8	11.1
7	Central African Rep	97.5	110.6	18.4	15.5
8	Chad	105.5	108.7	11.2	13.4
9	Cote d'Ivoire	109.2	101.7	17.0	7.7
10	Comoros	NA	85.1	4.0	8.7
11	Congo, Rep of	93.0	89.6	2.7	2.7
12	Congo, DR	110.1	110.2	6.9	29.8
13	Ethiopia	91.9	97.9	25.7	21.2
14	Gambia	74.0	83.1	2.8	2.5
15	Ghana	60.5	70.7	7.5	6.5
16	Guinea	99.0	102.7	8.1	7.9
17	Guinea-Bissau	85.4	100.6	9.3	23.9
18	Guyana	NA	70.0	6.0	5.6
19	Haiti	89.2	76.8	11.7	11.6

20	Hondourus	76.7	77.9	6.6	4.1
21	Liberia	99.0	94.3	21.1	9.9
22	Mali	74.6	89.8	20.7	19.3
23	Malawi	89.8	89.1	13.1	11.1
24	Madagascar	NA	83.1	9.1	4.2
25	Mauritania	87.8	93.0	5.1	4.2
26	Mozambique	74.8	85.9	12.7	15.2
27	Nicaragua	82.4	78.4	5.9	2.9
28	Niger	87.0	97.9	29.7	5.3
29	Rwanda	92.2	90.5	7.5	4.6
30	Senegal	66.1	82.8	8.8	8.0
31	Sierra Leone	96.6	91.0	20.9	17.8
32	Tanzania	78.3	80.8	18.9	9.5
33	Togo	88.3	87.8	5.9	5.4
34	Uganda	94.5	96.0	4.9	10.7
35	Zambia	79.6	86.2	14.8	12.3

Source: compiled by the author from *Fragile States Index 2006, 2014* at Fund For Peace online http://ffp.statesindex.org, and Peace and Conflict Instabilty Ledger 2008, 2012 at Center for International Development and Conflict Management, online http://www.cidcm.umd.edu/pc/

The first argument is that uncertain international political economic structure and market functioning has suppressed the progress of MDG goals. Over the past one and a half decade two major international political and economic catastrophes have influenced domestic political and economic policies. One is the so-called ‘global war on terror,’ and the other one is the 2008 global financial crisis. The global war on terror was initiated by the United States but its impacts fell on each country. One particular policy related impact was for every state to draft new or strengthen anti-terrorism laws (Moss et al., 2005). These laws carried similar policies and strategies across different countries. The leading powerful countries remained aggressive and uncompromising in war on terror, and other nations remained under pressure from these countries to extend political and military support and accept policies prescribed by the powerful countries (Woods, 2005; Oxfam, 2005). This created social and political tension among the people in countries where they felt they are collectively criminalized. The resultant consequence was radicalization of a certain quarter of the people. This created political instability locally which affected government’s concentration on resource allocation and proper implementation of MDGs programs. Both FSI and PCIL data shows that domestic political instability has increased over the past one and a half decade. Table 3 shows that 23 out of 35 countries have experienced increase in domestic political risk from 2006 to 2014 on FSI index, and 13 countries experienced increased on PCIL index from 2008 to 2012. Disregarding increase or decrease in risk the fact that is important is that the HIPC countries studied here are mostly at the top level of risk at global scale.

The second element of the first argument is the global financial crisis that unfolded in 2008. International financial structure and institutions play the defining role in development approach. Therefore, collapse of the global structure directly affects domestic development initiatives of national economies (Nsouli, 2000). The global financial crisis that started in 2008 destabilized the global market structure. It affected MDGs in a number of ways. Firstly, it drastically cut the external money flow to the poor countries from the rich which created budget constraints to implement MDGs. For instance, the global commitment for global partnership for development was US$315 billion of which only US$135 billion was delivered leaving a gap of US$180 billion. Similarly, the commitment for the previous year was US$ 68-90 billion of which only US$ 40 billion was delivered (UN, 2014). Secondly, the HIPC countries are heavily reliant on external funding for developmental as well and national regular budgetary expenditure (Knack, 2000). But the cut in money flow directly affected government's financial capability. And finally, the global recession cut the export market for the HIPC countries leading to tumbling of export earnings. This in turn led to domestic inflation raising cost of living. So, eventually what people achieved in poverty elimination, education, and health has backslided (WB, 2012-13; UNDP, 2014).

The second factor that might have affected MDGs negatively is international power-politics which intentionally affect regime sustainability in the countries concerned has disfavored progress in MDGs. It has been an established pattern since the beginning of the Cold War that political regimes of poor countries are determined by the strong and rich countries (Bonafati, 2011; Aidt & Albornoz, 2011; Dube et al., 2011). This is due to maintaining political and economic hegemony in global competition. During the past one and a half decade many of the HIPC countries have experienced regime change preferred by the strong states (Kinzer, 2006). Such regime change has affected continuity of government policies, budgetary allocations and priority of projects (Easterly et al., 2008). Obviously, the foreign powers interfering with such circumstances put less importance to MDG issues compared with their political and strategic gains (Padro-i-Miquel, 2007).

And finally, domestic dynamics of political power-play which influences allocation of resources for short-term political gains has destabilized the road to achievement of the goals. An inevitable consequence is political and corporate corruption (Klappar & Inessa, 2002; Dixit, 2006). This is a possible third factor that has contributed negetively towards non-performance in achieving the MDG goals. According to both FSI and PCIL data, most of the HIPC countries have become more politically unstable during the past one and a half decade. The 'war on terror' initiative has made it imparative on the poor countries to be more politically democratic which led to further intensification of party politics and electoral competition. Political violence originated in party politics and electoral competition made the ruling parties allocate or diverse state funds to areas and projects that garnered short term political benefits for political survival (Rodan & Kanishka, 2006; Porter et al. 2011; Besley & Torsten, 2011). In such situations, MDGs turned into secondary priority. Besides, political violence often resulted in civil war, destruction of properties, establishments and institutions that are directly associated with hosting and implementation of MDG projects (Collier, et al. 2003). Political instability in the HIPC countries has consistently negetively affected governments' economic performance due to allocation or diversion of governement funds for short term political gains.

A second impact of domestic political instability is transfer of fund and capital to foreign destinations by business groups and politicians (Collier et al., 2001, 2004). While the government procures foreign fund for domestic budgetary allcoation, private business groups and politicians transfer money and capital to other safe foreign destiantions (Ajayi, 1997; Boyce & Ndikumana, 2001; Ndikumana & Boyce, 2003). This is a phenomenon rightly called the rivolving door syndrome (Ndikumana & Boyce, 2008). Such transfer of capitals creates shortage in domestic savings leading to state incapacity to invest on its own to address the issues of MDGs (Levy & Sahr, 2004). Arguably the MDGs are not issues that foreign actors and funds can address properly and effectively as these are primarily domestic national development concerns of the respective nations. The well known 'east asian miracle' has shown explicitly that unless the government has its own domestic capital savings, it cannot improve its human resources effectively (Stiglitz, 1996). By being categorized as HIPC countries, thier domestic financial incapability is clearly beyound doubt.

CONCLUSIONS

The Millenium Development Goals adopted by the UN in the 1990s to be achieved during 2000 - 2015 warrant serious analysis as the stipulated time is ending soon. The eight noble goals regarding poverty, education, gender rights, helth and environment are global concerns due to their global impacts. This article has looked into the achievement level of the MDGs in 35 countries that are categorized as Highly Indebted Poor Countries (HIPCs). The available data show that these countries have largely failed to achieve the goals. Only about one-third or less of the countries have met few targets, but most countries are either seriously off targets or achieved insufficient progress. The non-achievement is largely due to dependency on foreign capital; inability of the countries to allocate higher percentage from domestic GDP due to low savings; and due to international political and financial systemic influence. The 'global war on terror' created more political instability in the countries, while the global financial crisis of 2008 cut the aid flow to those countries and destabilized domestic economy. Eventhough the HIPC countries are politically independent they cannot act in isolation from the global political and economic structural influence.

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