



IIS Discussion Paper

No.202 / January 2007

## The Popular Appeal of the Millennium Development Goals in Wealthy Countries: the Australian case

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# **The Popular Appeal of the Millennium Development Goals in Wealthy Countries: the Australian case \***

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IIIS Discussion Paper Series

Institute for International Integration Studies, Trinity College Dublin

November, 2006

*Abstract* The Millennium Development Goals were announced to the world in the year 2000. Handed down by the United Nations, the Millennium Development Goals promised a new way forward for addressing global poverty on an international scale. A key ingredient for the achievement of the Millennium Development Goals was an across-the-board increase of modest scale in the level of development aid contributed by wealthy countries. Yet, while having signed up for as much, there has been a strong tendency among the rich countries towards non-compliance, accompanied by a generalised failure to offer accounts for as much (i.e. provide reassurances). It is my concern here to look at an important factor that might help in going some way towards explaining the apparent ‘bad faith’ of rich countries: the state of public sentiment around global poverty. A key line of inquiry I wish to explore here is the condition of ambivalence among the citizens and residents of wealthy countries to social problems beyond national borders. It is my contention that the active indifference of the rich nation-state towards global poverty occurs under conditions where there exists a complementary blasé attitudinal structure amongst its peoples. Using data from a 2005 national sample survey, this study provides information from Australia about the state of public dispositions around the Millennium Development Goals and global social problems.

In September 2000 the member states of the United Nations embraced the Millennium Declaration. The Millennium Declaration was a United Nations resolution, representing a shared commitment among the member states to address global poverty. The Millennium Declaration was held to be distinguished by its provision of a human development plan that was based on setting quantified targets and an associated period for their attainment. Eight human development targets were designated. These were formulated as a response to what were understood to be the key dimensions comprising global poverty. These aims came to be known as the Millennium Development Goals. They are: (i) Eradicate extreme poverty and hunger (ii) Achieve universal primary education (iii) Promote gender equality and empower women (iv) Reduce child mortality (v) Improve maternal health (vi) Combat HIV/AIDS, malaria, and other diseases (vii) Ensure environmental sustainability, and (viii) Develop a global partnership for development (UN Millennium Project 2005). The date set for the targets to be attained was 2015.

A critical ingredient in official equations of what it will take to achieve the Millennium Development Goals is an increase in the level of development aid contributed by wealthy countries. It has been projected that if the goals are to be attained, rich countries will need to boost the proportion of gross national income allocated to development aid up to an across-the-board figure of 0.7 per cent (HM Treasury 2004; Sachs 2005b). While wealthy countries have agreed to this target (Sachs and McArthur 2005), the promised increases have proven slow to materialise (Sachs 2005a). Since the announcement of the Millennium Development Goals, there

has been evidence of a gradual increase in contributions across developed countries (OECD 2006). Yet, with the exception of the Nordic countries (Gates and Hoeffler 2004), the rich nations as a group remain well below the designated figure. However, what is perhaps most remarkable about this non-compliance is that the quantitative increase at stake has been overwhelmingly viewed as small and light in the extreme – as easily within scope for wealthy countries. One well known commentator has recently gone so far as to suggest, ‘Measured against our capacity, the Millennium Development Goals are indecently, shockingly modest’ (Singer 2006).

Beyond not meeting a moderate pledge they undertook to help redress world poverty, it is also the manner in which the wealthy nations have chosen not to do this that is noteworthy. The United Nations and supporters of the Goals have publicly levelled defaulting accusations against the rich countries (Sachs 2005b; Shetty 2005). In response to these indictments, the wealthy countries have been unresponsive *both materially and culturally*. In the face of the incriminating claims, they have neither upped their financial contributions nor sought to provide publicly visible justifications or excuses for as much (Orbuch 1997). The latter course of action is significant, because it effectively represents a form of symbolic rebuff. So what is going on here? How might we make sense of the non-compliance, and failure to account for as much, among wealthy signatory countries to the Millennium Development Goals?

### **Context, data and analytic strategy**

It is my concern here to look at an important factor that might help us go some way towards explaining the lackadaisical response of rich countries to the Millennium Development Goals: the state of public attitudes around global poverty. A key line of

inquiry I wish to explore here is the condition of ambivalence among the citizens and residents of wealthy countries to social problems beyond national borders. It is my contention that the active indifference of the rich nation-state towards global problems occurs under conditions where there exists a complementary blasé attitudinal structure amongst its peoples.

To assess the empirical evidence around this claim, I will scrutinise results from a module of questions on attitudes to the Millennium Development Goals (in particular) and foreign aid (more generally) that were developed for inclusion in the latest round of the World Values Survey (2005/6). In Australia, the entire survey questionnaire (which included this discrete subset of questions) was completed by a representative national sample of 1421 respondents. The strategy for analysing the available data concentrates on the specific matter of public support for Australian involvement in achieving the Millennium Development Goals? The analysis is designed to describe emergent patterns of endorsement, and to then consider the role of more established attitudes to global poverty in giving rise to them.

The analysis takes a particular interest in examining the comparative influence of two dimensions of attitudes to global poverty: public issue and personal problem (Wright Mills 1959). Apprehended as a public issue, foreign aid is viewed at a distance, as the business of states, markets and organizations (Rosenau 1999). Yet, conceived as a personal problem, foreign aid comes to be experienced close-up, as a direct and tangible matter for the concerned individual. Using this two dimensional conception, the analysis explores how general attitudes to global poverty work to

shape more specific opinions about how far the country should go in helping the United Nations to meet the Millennium Development Goals.

### **The Millennium Development Goals: what should Australia do?**

Since the inauguration of the Millennium Development Goals, Australia has been one of the countries seen by the United Nations as having failed to contribute its fair share to foreign development aid. Furthermore, by not accounting for or explain this course of action, Australia has effectively represented itself as ‘not answerable’ to the United Nations. How do these national actions align with the views of Australian peoples?

Turning to Table 1, the first question provides data on popular perceptions of the appropriate proportion of national income that should be contributed to foreign aid. Around half of respondents felt that the government allocation for development aid was about right (48 per cent) (see Table 1). Among the remaining respondents there was a majority view that more needed to be done (43 per cent). Only a small minority of respondents felt that the amount the government contributed to foreign aid was too high (9 per cent). In sum, the weight of opinion amongst respondents as a whole was that the national government could spend more on development aid.

How much more? Focussing in on the sub-sample of respondents who thought Australia was not doing enough (N=602), there is quite marked diversity about precisely how much greater the national contribution should be. The modal view was that the country should boost its contribution three-fold. Around one in four (24 per cent) thought funding should be augmented by the highest amount pro-offered to respondents in the question - (at the very least) by a multiple of four.

Table 1: Appropriateness of the Proportion of National Income Allocated to Foreign Aid in 2003

Question (a): In 2003, the country's government allocated <b>less than a tenth of one percent</b> of the national income to foreign aid – that is, <b>\$16.96</b> per person. Do you think this amount is too low, too high, or about right?					
Too low	43.3%				
About right	47.8%				
Too high	8.8%				
Total	100.0% (N=1388)				
Question (b): If you think \$16.96 per person a year is too low, how much more do you think Australia should contribute?					
About one and a half times as much	11.0%				
About twice as much	35.2%				
About three times as much	20.9%				
About four times as much	9.1%				
More than four times as much	23.8%				
Total	100% (N=602)				
Question (c): Some people believe that certain kinds of problems could be better handled by the United Nations or regional organisations rather than by each national government separately. Others think that these problems should be left entirely to the national governments. Please indicate for each of the problems listed below whether you think that policies in this area should be decided by the national governments, by regional organisations, or by the United Nations:					
	National Governments (%)	Regional governments (%)	United nations (%)	Total (%)	N
a. Peacekeeping	21.2	9.5	69.3	100.0	1364
b. Protection of the environment	47.2	30.7	22.2	100.0	1344
c. Aid to developing countries	32.2	15.7	52.0	100.0	1348
d. Refugees	39.8	14.5	45.7	100.0	1353
e. Human Rights	30.4	9.8	60.0	100.0	1348

Source: World Values Survey 2005, Australia (N=1421)

How much legitimacy did the respondents cede to the United Nations as the leading body for addressing global problems? Of five key global issues presented at the bottom of Table 1, three were seen by a majority of respondents to be best handled by the United Nations. Peacekeeping (69 per cent), human rights (60 per cent), and (of particular relevance here) foreign aid. About one in two respondents felt that responsibility for overseas development aid should be vested in the United Nations



(52 per cent), while around one in three opined that national governments should be the leading agency here (32 per cent). Of the issues presented, only one was viewed by respondents as optimally dealt with by national governments: protection of the environment (47 per cent). With respect to the matter of refugees, respondents were fairly evenly divided between the United Nations (46 per cent) and national government (40 per cent) as the locus of primary responsibility.

### **Global poverty as a public issue**

Apart from the more concrete questions of how far Australia should go in terms of providing increased financial support for overseas aid, and lending greater endorsement to the policies of the United Nations in this area, there is the more general background matter of how much importance do Australians feel the national government should attribute to addressing global social problems at all. We look at this question from two angles. How much significance do respondents feel the country should accord to global social issues in absolute terms? Furthermore, what level of importance is it felt they should be assigned when considered relative to the familiar raft of established domestic social problems?

Table 2 presents data on the degree of significance respondents believe their national leaders should attribute to reducing social deprivation in poor countries. Respondents were asked to consider five areas of global social inequity (lived experience of poverty, inadequate education, child mortality, the spread of HIV & AIDS, and the living conditions of slum dwellers), and to indicate how high a priority they felt national leaders should accord to redressing each. In sum, what the results show is that the large majority of respondents believed their country should assign a

Table 2: The Felt-Significance of Global Problems for Australia

Question: Below is a list of global problems, and goals that world leaders have set to reduce them. For each of the goals indicate how high a priority your own country's leaders should give to it:					
	Top priority (%)	High priority (%)	Medium priority (%)	Low priority (%)	Total (%)
i. About 25 percent of the world's population lives in extreme poverty – that is on less than one dollar per day. The goal is to cut this percentage in half by 2015 ... (N=699)	46.1	40.3	12.0	1.6	100.0
ii. More than 130 million primary school-age children around the world are not in school. The goal is to ensure by 2015, all children will be able to finish primary school ... (N=702)	44.2	44.7	10.1	1.0	100.0
iii. About eight out of every 100 children who are born around the world die before their fifth birthday. The goal is to reduce this proportion by two-thirds, by 2015 ... (N=701)	48.5	37.4	12.6	1.6	100.0
iv. About five million people become infected with HIV/AIDS each year. The goal is to stop the spread of HIV/AIDS ... (N=702)	53.6	34.9	9.4	2.1	100.0
v. About 840 million people around the world live in slums. The goal is to make a significant improvement in the housing of at least 100 million people ... (N=701)	40.9	43.2	13.8	2.0	100.0

Source: World Values Survey 2005, Australia (N=718)

top/high priority to the rectification of all five global social problems presented to them. Each goal was accorded this heightened level of national salience by between 84 per cent and 89 per cent of respondents. There was little observable variation among respondents with respect to the importance they accorded each problem. The data suggest they were all seen as equally deserving of attention.

On the face of it, respondents would seem to have accorded great importance to the national government being involved in helping to remedy global social problems? However, would their enthusiasm be as vociferous were they to be advised that any increased prioritisation by national government to redressing global social problems would be at the cost of attention to solving the country's domestic problems? When presented with this new scenario, what the results show is that respondents overwhelmingly felt their country's leaders should prioritise solving the country's problems above and over global social problems. Turning to Table 3, three in four respondents tended to nominate solving Australia's problems as the top priority for the nation's leaders (74.8 per cent), whereas one in four were more prone to accord precedence to reducing global social problems (25.5 per cent).

**Table 3: The Felt-Importance of Global versus National Problems for Australia**

Question: Thinking of our own country's problems, should your country's leaders give top priority to helping reduce poverty in the world or should they give top priority to solve your own country's problems? To indicate your position, use the scale below where 1 means 'top priority to help reducing poverty in the world' and 10 means 'top priority to solve my own country's problems':	
1. Top priority to help reducing poverty in the world	4.7%
2.	0.6%
3.	4.2%
4.	4.4%
5.	11.3%
6.	9.5%
7.	12.8%
8.	17.6%
9.	10.5%
10. Top priority to solve my own country's problems	24.7%
Total	100.0%

Source: World Values Survey 2005, Australia (N=1395)

Note: no answer (N=26)

Furthermore, the data shows that the tendency to prioritise one or the other two kinds of social issue sets took on a harder form among respondents who viewed national problems as the main concern. Among these respondents, one in three saw global problems as irrelevant (24.7 per cent/74.8 per cent = 0.33 per cent). Yet, in the case of respondents who attributed precedence to global problems, the smaller proportion of one in five perceived national problems as a peripheral matter (4.7 per cent/25.5 per cent = 0.19 per cent).

### **Global poverty as a personal problem**

The findings suggest that respondents on a whole view global social problems as deserving of attention by national government, unless that consideration is to come at a cost to national social issues. Under these conditions, the level of felt commitment to redressing global issues falls away markedly, displaced by the view that the national government should attribute greater importance to domestic social problems. Yet, how does this attitude pattern about what respondents think the national government should do about global social problems compare with what they would be prepared to do as individuals?

The results suggest broadly similar levels of support, with a large minority of respondents appearing to experience global poverty and inequality as a personally-felt problem. To this end, the data in Table 4 show around one in three represents (33 per cent) indicated a preparedness to pay more tax if this meant an increase in Australia's foreign aid to poor countries. On the more specific question of personal knowledge of the Millennium Development Goals, the findings clearly show how remarkably few



Table 4: The Felt-Salience of the Global Poverty as a Personal Problem

Question (a): Would you be willing to pay higher taxes in order to increase your country's foreign aid to poor countries?	
Yes	33.5%
No	66.5%
Total	100.0% (N=1373)
Question (b): Have you heard about the Millennium Development Goals?	
Yes	12.8%
No	87.2%
Total	100.0% (N=1393)

Source: World Values Survey 2005, Australia (N=1421)

Australians have heard of them. Rather than being broadly recognised and familiar, the results revealed that some five years after they were pronounced to the world, only around one in eight participants (13 per cent) reported any awareness of their existence.

What of the relationship between willingness to pay higher taxes to the end of boosting Australia's contribution to foreign aid, and specific knowledge of the Millennium Development Goals? Does recognition and awareness of the Millennium Development Goals work to boost the preparedness of individual people to personally want to do more to encourage their country to address global poverty? The data suggest yes (see Table 5). While it is not an overly strong association, the evidence shows that participants who had a familiarity with the Millennium Development Goals were eight per cent more likely than participants who had not heard of them to report a willingness to bear the personal cost of higher taxation if it meant their country would enhance its commitment to helping alleviate global indigence.

Table 5: Willingness to pay higher taxes by Knowledge of the Millennium Development Goals

Pay higher taxes for foreign aid	Knowledge of MDGs	
	Yes (%)	No (%)
- Yes	40	32
- No	60	68
Total (%)	100	100
N	177	1196

Source: World Values Survey 2005, Australia (N=1421)

### **Public support for national involvement in achieving the Millennium**

#### **Development Goals: the influence of established attitudes to global poverty**

A key result from the analysis reported thus far is that respondents varied markedly with respect to how far they felt Australia should go in helping alleviate global poverty and inequality. On the question of financial aid, respondents were fairly evenly split between whether they thought Australia was currently doing enough or could do more. With respect to the question of the authority of the United Nations to deal with global social problems, majority endorsement was apparent on most of the issues canvassed - yet national and regional governments were also lent solid levels of support by subgroups of respondents. Against this backdrop, I now bring together the different aspects of the descriptive analysis to the end of considering if and how far do established attitudes towards global poverty account for this particular patterning of mass sentiment.

A series of regression analyses were undertaken to the end of specifying the aspects of background attitudes to global poverty that matter in shaping mass support for Australia contributing to the achievement of the Millennium Development Goals. The findings are reported in Table 6. Results are displayed from three regression analyses,

Table 6: The influence of established attitudes to foreign aid on perceptions of what Australia should do to help alleviate global poverty and inequality

Established attitudes to global poverty	Current state of national contribution to foreign aid	Present quantity of national contribution to foreign aid	Responsible party for policy formation on global poverty and inequality
	(beta)	(beta)	(beta)
<u>Public issue</u>			
- Significance of global problems for Australia	0.03	0.01	0.07
- Importance of global poverty vs. national problems for Australia	0.23***	0.25***	0.08*
<u>Personal problem</u>			
- Preparedness to personally pay more tax to boost foreign aid	0.36***	0.18**	0.01
- Personal knowledge of Millennium Development Goals	0.01	0.02	0.03
Constant	1.91	1.89	1.69
R-squared	0.26	0.13	0.02
N	700	315	661

Source: World Values Survey 2005, Australia (N=1421)  
P value thresholds:  $p < .05 = *$ ,  $p < .01 = **$ ,  $p < .001 = ***$

examining in turn the influence of extant attitudes to global social problems on respondent perceptions of (1.i) what should be done about the current state of national contribution to foreign aid & (1.ii) the present quantity of such assistance, and (2) who should be responsible for policy formation and responsiveness on questions of global poverty and inequality. A common set of independent variables were included in each equation. These are based on the variables introduced in the preceding section of the article to measure the ‘public issue’ and ‘personal problem’ dimensions of establishing attitudes to global social problems. Measurement details for all dependent and independent variables included in the multivariate analysis are reported in Appendix Table A.<sup>1</sup>

The findings show perceptions of whether Australia should do more, or less, to contribute to the attainment of the Millennium Development Goals is shaped by both 'public issue' and 'personal problem' dimensions of established attitudes to global poverty. Feeling Australia's current contribution to foreign aid is too low and favouring boosting the amount is strongly associated with a more general proneness to view global poverty as a more important issue for Australia (as against national problems) (beta = 0.23 & 0.25) and personal willingness to pay more income tax to boost national foreign aid (rather than not) (beta = 0.36 & 0.18). Yet, these existing kinds of background attitudes were found to be of little relevance with respect to accounting for the proclivity to endorse the United Nations as the party responsible for policy formation on global poverty and inequality. While support for the role of the United Nations was found to be related to a background belief in the greater salience of global problems over domestic issues for Australia, this association was relatively weak (beta = 0.08).

## **Discussion**

The analysis undertaken in this paper has shown that the citizens and residents of Australia in aggregate would like to see their country do more to help address problems of global poverty and inequality. To reiterate, they were disposed to view the national government as not contributing enough to the issue financially, and lent clear endorsement to the legitimacy of the United Nation, over and above the nation-state, to oversee the rectification of global problems. These views were forged against a complex background of established attitudes. As a public issue, they overwhelmingly viewed global problems as a top priority for Australia's leaders. Yet, when the scenario was presented to them, they ranked the country's domestic



problems as a more pressing matter than global poverty. As a personal problem, a solid majority indicated they weren't open to paying more income tax to help out with the resolution of global problems. An even larger majority had not heard of the Millennium Development Goals. Yet, in the minority of cases where they were known, there was a greater readiness to endorse the increased income tax option.

In terms of the sources of public support for national involvement in redressing global problems, two elements within background attitudes to foreign aid were found to matter the most: seeing global poverty as a more pressing question for Australia than domestic problems, and preparedness to enhance one's personal monetary contribution to help the country address problems abroad. Yet, while these aspects of established attitudes were important in accounting for variation in public thinking about how far the government should go financially to help alleviate global poverty, they were much less consequential in terms of explaining whether or not the public endorsed the United Nations over the nation-state as the agent responsible for handling globally based problems. This finding is consistent with a more general lack of knowledge at the present time about the sources of public support for the United Nations in modern countries (Norris 2006).

In sum the results here would seem to suggest that Australians accord national engagement with problems of global poverty a higher priority than their government. In effect, there is some disjuncture between the concerns of citizens and government. Yet, to date this pattern of civic interest has had little political effect. It has found minimal articulation in national political life. The current reality might simply be that there is a deep fragility to this attitudinal formation. While global poverty is of some

concern to citizens in an absolute sense, it may be the case that it starts to press less strongly upon our consciences when located against the more familiar array of national political issues. As the results suggested, national problems were felt to trump global poverty in terms of their salience for the nation.

Before it can find solid expression on the national political stage, it may be the case that public sentiment about global problems will need hardening. What will this take? It might well require a fundamental reconfiguration of the ways in which we imagine who we are. It could be that an over-time displacement of national by global identification in the minds of citizens and residents might create the conditions within nation-states for non-domestic issues like global poverty to carry greater weight within the political life of the nation. In fact, the findings from the analyses undertaken here suggest as much, showing that according greater priority to global poverty over national problems results in the strengthening of the call for greater government action on foreign aid and granting legitimacy to the authority of the United Nations. Yet, notwithstanding the ongoing changes being wrought by globalisation (Holton 2005), we continue to live in a time where people remain overwhelmingly disposed to think of themselves in national rather than global terms (Phillips 2002). The prospects for the growth of global self-identification occurring would thus seem to clearly remain at an early stage. Furthermore, in an era where nation-states continue to remain the predominant form of political community, it is perhaps unlikely that any rapid transformation in self-attachment in this direction is on the cards.

One potential prospect for consolidating civic resolve on issues of off-shore poverty may involve the intersection of new kinds of global attachments with existing national identifications. Here I am referring in particular to the possibility of felt-bonds to the plight of poor (rather than rich) peoples and places from across the planet (Bauman 2004) being located and viewed from within existing and widely available national frames. Looked at through the lens of powerfully resonant and established national signs and symbols (i.e. in Australia, examples are the ideas of ‘mateship’, ‘fair go’ and ‘supporting the underdog’) (Day 2006), it may well be that the social problems of global Others can come to suddenly take on a greater and more pressing urgency for citizens and residents of modern nation-states. Understanding emergent empirical manifestations of such links could prove to be an important new research agenda.

## Notes

\* This paper was written while I was a long-term visitor in IIS in late 2006. The piece was presented as part of the IIS 2006/2007 seminar series, on 15 November 2006. I thank Philip Lane, Robert Holton and Graeme Thompson for their thoughts and ideas about different elements of the paper.

1. The reader will also note that each regression analysis was based on a markedly different N. This is a result of two questions of analytic interest being administered to subgroups with the larger sample (Present quantity of national contribution is the dependent variable in equation two, whereas significance of global problems is an independent variable in all three analyses. As reported in Tables 1 and 2, the number of cases corresponding to each of these questions is 602 and 718 respectively). How this decision of research design reconfigures the number of cases available when different variables are correlated is reported in Appendix Table B.

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Appendix Table A: Measurement details and descriptive statistics for variables in the multivariate analysis

Variable	number of items	Scoring	mean	s.d.	N
(1) current state of national contribution	1	1. (too high) – 3. (too low)	2.35	0.63	1388
(2) present quantity of national contribution	1	1. (1.5 times as much) – 5. (more than 4 times as much)	2.99	1.35	594
(3) responsible party for policy formation	5	Number of times United Nations selected (0 – 5).	2.50	1.50	5
(4) significance of global problems	5	5. (low priority) – 20. (top priority)	16.59	2.82	718
(5) global poverty versus national problems	1	1. (national problems as top priority) – 10. (global poverty as top priority)	3.80	2.47	1421
(6) willingness to pay more income tax for foreign aid ends	1	0. (no) – 1. (yes)	0.32	0.47	1421
(7) knowledge of Millennium Development Goals	1	0. (no) – 1. (yes)	0.13	0.33	1421

Source: World Values Survey 2005, Australia (N=1421)

P value thresholds:  $p < .05 = *$ ,  $p < .01 = **$

Appendix Table B: Correlation coefficients and N's for variables in the multivariate analysis

	(1)	(2)	(3)	(4)	(5)	(6)	(7)
(1) current state of national Contribution	1 1388	-	-	-	-	-	-
(2) present quantity of national contribution	.00 <sup>a</sup> 593	1 594	-	-	-	-	-
(3) responsible party for policy formation	.04 1302	.16** 571	1 1310	-	-	-	-
(4) significance of global problems	.16** 700	.09 315	.08* 661	1 718	-	-	-
(5) global poverty versus national problems	.39** 1388	.28** 594	.08** 1310	.20** 718	1 1421	-	-
(6) willingness to pay more income tax for foreign aid ends	.02 1388	.05 594	.05 1310	-.02 718	.05 1412	1 1421	-
(7) knowledge of Millennium Development Goals	.48** 1388	.25** 594	.09** 1310	.25** 718	.40** 1412	.05* 1412	1 1421

Source: World Values Survey 2005, Australia (N=1421)

P value thresholds:  $p < .05 = *$ ,  $p < .01 = **$

<sup>a</sup> Due to one variable holding a constant value it is not possible to calculate a coefficient.



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