

**THE ROLE OF LOCAL AND REGIONAL
AUTHORITIES IN THE UN
DEVELOPMENT AGENDA POST-2015:
Paving the way to Habitat III**

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1. Introduction

Wherever living standards are high, local governments have played, and continue to play, a major role in their achievement – often the primary role. This can be seen in the wide range of responsibilities they have for provision, maintenance and where needed expansion of infrastructure and services that usually includes provision for water, sanitation, drainage, streets, emergency services, parks and public spaces. Their responsibilities often extend to health care services and schools (although usually with national government). They have key roles in ensuring health and safety – for instance through building standards, land-use planning and management and environmental, occupational and public health services.¹ They usually have key roles in disaster prevention and preparedness.² Many times they contribute also to public security issues. Good local governance is also central to democratic participation, civic dialogue, economic success and facilitating outcomes that enrich the quality of life of residents.³

The importance of local governments for development in low- and middle-income nations has long been recognized but rarely acted on. National governments have been reluctant to cede to local governments the funding or revenue-raising powers that are commensurate with their responsibilities. The official aid agencies and multilateral development banks work primarily with and through national governments and have found it difficult to know how to support local government (and local governance). Their interest in local government is evident in current international discussions. The recent Rio+20 Summit formally recognizing the organizations and networks of local and sub-national governments as a “Major Group” in providing feedback to the state-led formal negotiations.⁴ The 2011 Busan Declaration affirms the role of local governments in assuring a broad-based and democratic ownership of countries’ development agenda⁵. The High Level Panel of Eminent Persons, charged with overseeing the preparations for the Post-2015 Development Agenda, now includes in its membership UCLG’s president, the Mayor of Istanbul. But in general, the pivotal involvement of local government in implementing and ‘localizing’ internationally agreed development and environmental agendas remains under-recognized and under-supported. *With regard to the MDG agenda in particular, the degree to which local government must be relied on to achieve most of the goals has received virtually no attention.*

A major question in the preparation for the post 2015 agenda is whether global processes that are still largely dominated by national governments and international agencies will be able to adapt to give sufficient attention to local governments and to their three very critical roles:

- as implementers, funders and managers of so much of what is needed to meet development and environmental goals and targets (including most of the MDG goals and targets)
- as innovators able to shape agendas and define solutions that work within a globalizing world
- as the focal point for engagement with citizens and civil society on understanding and jointly addressing needs

Those who are discussing and determining the post-2015 agenda tend to be very far from local realities. In this context, good governance and the “localizing” of MDGs is focused on national level actions, not the vital relationships between citizens and their local administrations. In the same way progress is most often measured through nationally aggregated datasets, which do not reveal the sub-national realities of who is being left out and where they live. Moving forward, a much sharper focus is needed on the roles and responsibilities of sub-national governments and on the support they need to fulfil their critical responsibilities.

2. The disconnect between the UN task team’s assessment of weaknesses and its initial contributions on future directions

Many of the achievements related to the MDGs have been a product of local government action – as described later in this paper. In addition, in the many instances of very limited progress on the MDGs, it is because of the incapacity of local governments to fulfill their responsibilities in large part because they are denied the funding or capacity to raise funding by national government.

Developing a post 2015 framework that builds on lessons learned will have to acknowledge local government and find better ways to support and encourage its optimal contribution. How likely is this to happen within the preparations for a new agenda? The discussion papers generated by the UN Task Team provide an interesting resource in this regard. The evidence is quite mixed. On the one hand, this body has acknowledged many of the problems discussed in this paper, the solutions to which involve a more integrated and locally rooted development approach. But on the other hand, the initial discussion papers on future directions make little or no reference to the role that must surely be played by local governments and their civil society partners.

In its discussion of concerns and problems with the MDG framework, the UN Task Team does not specifically point to the role of local government as having been overlooked. However, most of the weaknesses it describes relate very specifically to local government, its relevance to this process, and the absence of attention to its role. The following are some of the concerns specifically pointed to by the Task Team in their June 2012 discussion paper,⁶ along with a brief reiteration of the relevance of each to local government:

- *“Limited consideration of the enablers of development”*: Local government and its partners are certainly among the most immediate of these “enablers”. In the context of decentralization this is true in most cases country-wide. Even national programs require the support of local bodies to be effectively implemented. However it is especially the case in urban areas, where local government is most likely to be the responsible party for the widest range of relevant concerns.
- *“Lack of consultations at its conception to build ownership led to the perception of a donor-centric agenda”*: Given the level of responsibility of local government for fulfilling this donor-centric agenda, the importance of ownership at the most local level is clear. Local involvement in initial consultations is essential for this. Much attention has been drawn to the need for bottom-up processes in these consultations. These are being planned in various ways, but with limited inclusion of local governments and local civil society groups. *“Failure to account for differences in initial conditions”*: While this concern is more generally articulated in terms of national conditions and the unfair burden placed on very low income countries, the

problem extends to sub-national differences. In order to determine the most effective and equitable use of resources these differences can most successfully be determined through assessment at local levels.

- *“Imprecise quantitative targets were set for some dimensions, such as for reducing the number of slum dwellers”*: This target failed to take into account the fact that the population living in slum conditions was growing so fast that even successfully meeting the stated objective would barely have made a dent in the overall numbers. Given that up to 70 percent of the inhabitants of some cities live in slums, with their basic needs the responsibility of their local governments, the systematic involvement of these local governments in both clarifying and implementing this target was fundamental.
- *“Lack of clarity on how to tailor global targets to national realities and regional dynamics among others”*: “Among others” here might most reasonably be considered to include the local realities that fall within local government jurisdictions. There has been broad acceptance of the need to translate and adapt targets to the local situation, and this, again, cannot happen effectively without the active engagement of local government and its civil society partners.
- *“The setting of rather rigid national policy agendas, following international benchmarks, rather than local conditions and often ignoring the complexities of the development process”*: Once again, this points to the role of local government in helping to adapt national policies and agendas to the local level.
- *Policies and programmes did not consider the synergies between achieving the different goals and targets*: Synergies are certainly a reality at the highest levels. A strong education system, for instance, is critical for economic growth. But it is at the local level that these synergies are most often apparent and achievable. We live in a sectoral world, and sectoral expertise is essential for many enterprises. But sectoral initiatives, so often in the end directed at the same communities and households, are most effectively implemented when there can be practical convergence on the ground. This can only happen at the most local level.
- *Overemphasizing financial resource gaps to the detriment of attention for institution building*: It has been widely recognized that without political will and strong institutional capacity, additional resources may accomplish little for those most in need. The burdens placed on local governments in the context of decentralization call for strong attention to capacity building, not only for the management challenges they face, but for their ability in turn to help provide the space and support the capacity for local citizens to represent their own needs and collaborate in realizing them.

This list of MDG framework weaknesses identified or acknowledged by the Task Team should in theory be the basis for practical recommendations for including and strengthening local governments as part of the larger global agenda. There is a strange disconnect, however, between the acknowledgement of these concerns and the contributions of the Task Team in the early stages of the new consultation process. In a series of 20 “thematic think pieces” compiled by experts from various of the Task Team members, mostly UN agencies, there has been an attempt to provide support and direction to the post 2015 process. Concern about the weaknesses outlined above, however, is practically invisible in these think pieces.

A review of all 20 documents for their discussion of ‘local,’ of local governments and of governance showed little attention to these essential issues. With rare exception, these terms, when they turned up at all, were most often contained within the titles of works referenced by these papers in footnotes. In some cases, the think piece topics could reasonably enough have

been discussed without specific reference to action at the local level. Papers on macroeconomics, countries with special needs, peace and security, international migration, science and technology for instance, although they have undeniably local implications, can be forgiven for not anchoring their concerns at a local level. But health? Disasters? Employment? Sustainable development? Governance?

For instance, in the disaster risk and resilience paper,⁷ the word “local” does in fact appear once in the paper – in a paragraph affirming the advances in emergency preparedness in several countries “at national to local levels” (p 5). The paper acknowledges that the failure of government is a critical component of disaster risk: “.. *the main drivers of risk,*” state the INISDR and WMO authors, “*are poorly planned and managed urbanization, environmental degradation, poverty and weak governance.*” We are also told that, in the context of growing levels of risk, “*Communities will have to adapt.*” The paper refers to seven detailed case studies of good practice, and draws from them some common principles, which include political recognition, “clear responsibilities” for the “various stakeholders” and adequate resources. It also recommends that better data be collected for better “prediction models”. There is a discussion of the fact that disaster risk reduction is a cross cutting issue that involves more than disaster preparedness – it also requires internationally-agreed development goals. *Nowhere is there a discussion of the very concrete implications of the fact that disasters happen locally and that communities and local government agencies bear the brunt.* There is no discussion of what it might take to avoid the “poorly planned and managed urbanization” that is described as the main driver of risk – nothing about local land use policies and alternatives, the provision of storm drains, all weather roads and other infrastructure capable of withstanding extreme weather, emergency response systems, local capacity building or the resources necessary to manage all of these things and to rebuild where needed. With no attention to the actual responsibilities and the actual stakeholders, this think piece remains detached from any practical agenda for progress.

The think piece on governance provides another interesting example of the direction that the Task Team debate is taking. Although it does of course refer to government, local government is not a distinct presence in the discussion. Generic references to “government” or “national partners” suggest that local governments are somehow subsumed within central government, taken for granted as a component of governance system, rather than having their own very specific and often autonomous roles.

The term governance widens a focus on formal government institutions to include their relationships with civil society. This think piece includes in its definition “*the mechanisms, processes and institutions through which citizens and groups articulate their interests, exercise their legal rights, meet their obligations and mediate their differences.*”⁸ While clearly the principles of good governance extend to all levels of government, the inclusion of the civil society interface makes “governance” from this perspective something that happens most actively at the local level. To make no specific reference to the especially important role of local government in this regard seems limiting. The paper acknowledges that any new framework “*must be based on an understanding of the importance of and a commitment to further promote resilient, legitimate and inclusive national and local institutions, as well as inclusive participation in public processes.*” (p 10) But the most significant recent trend in this regard that the paper identifies are the advances in the use of Information and Communications Technologies. While technology does open up the scope for citizen involvement, it not a replacement for the kinds of strong relationships that are necessary on

the ground between local communities, especially of more excluded citizens, and the local governments that are responsible for helping to meet their basic needs.

The general lack of attention to the local level in these think pieces has a precedent in the stance taken in the Secretary General's 2011 annual report, following on the Millennium Summit.⁹ Outstanding challenges are openly discussed here – especially the fact that the most vulnerable populations continue to miss out. But the approaches discussed here for meeting 2015 goals in inclusive and equitable ways, and then going beyond them, are largely macroeconomic and donor-oriented, and they give little attention to the pragmatics of implementation. This is not to say that strategies should to be spelled out in a report like this – as numerous observers have noted, nations need the flexibility to develop plans and policies relevant to their situations, and in any case, this would not be the place for detailing strategies. But as a key actor in the implementation of development goals local and regional governments must be recognised in these strategies to ensure their role is valorised and supported as strategies are translated into plans and policies.

To return to the UN Task Team think pieces: only two of these gives clear attention to the local level of action, and these are the papers on inequalities produced by six UN agencies and on sustainable urbanization, produced by UN Habitat.¹⁰ In the first document, a at least one paragraph is dedicated to decentralization and participation (p.14), where is recognized that local and municipal governments not only provide essential services and commodities, but they also apply local solutions that bring international goals to local people, fostering their participation, shared responsibility and ability to exercise accountability. In the second document, not only are local authorities are identified as primary players in local development, but they are also seen as having “*transcended narrow local political confines to become prominent players exerting regional and global influence*” (page 10). An interesting feature of this discussion, however, is the relative absence of the local government role. Much of the substance of this discussion is focused on cities themselves as entities capable of spurring global development and transformation – they are written of here as “*the locus for change, and the venue where the human agency can be mobilized*” (page 10).

3. The roles and responsibilities of local and regional government in poverty reduction and sustainable development

Most countries are engaging in decentralization processes that increase the authority and responsibilities of local governments¹¹. This is based both on the economies of scale that local governments have for many aspects of infrastructure and service provision¹² and the principle that proximity to citizens allows local government to be more responsive and more accountable. In many countries this has been associated with the ascendancy of democratic rule,¹³ and it is a principle encouraged by the donor community including the World Bank.¹⁴ Far from being just managers of a limited range of services, local governments are increasingly involved in meeting a wide range of their citizens' basic needs either as primary providers or as regulators and managers of services provided by national government, sometimes through private entities. If “local government” is understood to include all sub-national government levels, the role is that much greater. This decentralization is still a work in progress. New structures, policies, distributions of power, functions and resources continue to evolve at different paces in different countries.¹⁵ There is mixed evidence on the successes of decentralization¹⁶ – largely because responsibilities are seldom matched by resources, and competences can be transferred without realigning within ministries (national level) leading

to overlap and competition – and there are even moves to recentralize in some places.¹⁷ Often the political commitment to decentralization is more rhetorical than practical; in the Republic of Congo, for example, the constitution describes local authorities as the primary agents responsible for the interests and needs of local populations; it also states in its 2010 PRSP that accelerating decentralization is essential for achieving the MDGs; yet in 2009 only 0.16 percent of the budget was allocated to decentralization.¹⁸ But there is no escaping the reality that local and other sub-national governments have long been critical actors in development, and that their responsibilities in this regard are growing.

Structures differ from country to country. Sub-national jurisdictions include everything from villages to large metropolitan areas, boroughs to provinces, and there are usually multiple levels of local government within a single country. The size of jurisdictions varies enormously both between countries (in India, it averages about 3,000 people; in Uganda over 300,000) and within countries (Brazil's municipalities range from 800 people to over 11 million.) Most countries have separate structures for urban areas. Many have specific provisions for large cities that are formed by a range of local government jurisdictions with some functions assigned to a regional or metropolitan authority. For instance, in Kenya, there are three kinds of urban authority, depending on the size of the town or city in question.¹⁹

As the level closest to people, local government is where citizen involvement is most likely to happen, and it is often purposefully structured to promote this engagement. In Nepal, for instance, local VDCs (village development committees) are autonomous elected institutions which serve as an interface between local citizens and centralized government institutions, creating partnerships between community and the public sector and ensuring that villagers have some control over local development. Local wards below the VDC level have elected committees which demand accountability from VDCs. The system in theory allows for the full involvement of citizens in local self-governance; but the lack of capacity and resources, coupled with elite capture, means the promise is often not fulfilled.²⁰ But many local governments have in fact been pioneers and implementers of inclusive development innovations including participatory budgeting and co-production with urban poor organizations and federations²¹. The capacity of local government to encourage and manage collective action on the part of citizens is an important part of this relationship especially in the context of scarce resources.

The degree of autonomy for lower levels of government varies considerably. In a few cases, as in Brazil, they may be equal partners with state government, an arrangement ideal for promoting more citizen-centred governance. More often, local governments are extensions of central or state government, more or less controlled by central government, with considerable variation in the decentralization of responsibilities and resources. Local government members are appointed in some cases, elected in others. But even though local election is critical for accountability, it does not imply autonomy in either function or finance²².

Most local governments have a very large range of responsibilities, even though their range varies considerably between nations (see Table 1). Especially in urban areas, they are traditionally responsible for developing local plans, managing infrastructure and providing such services as sanitation and waste management, water supply, some times police and fire protection. In the context of decentralization, they also have a growing role in education, health care services and social protection. But even where these functions are privatized or run by higher levels of government, local governments usually still have important roles.

Most sectoral functions consist of distinct activities that can be carried out by different levels of government (or other institutions) depending on the advantages each can bring. Policy, standards and oversight are often national responsibilities while actual provision and administration are local. In education, for instance, curriculum, budget and overall policies may be centrally determined, but district or local levels manage routine operations such as building and maintaining schools, enrolling children, handling local data. The need for close cooperation with local governments remains, regardless of how centralized nominal responsibilities are. As Nigeria's 2010 PRSP notes, "*Without state and local governments, federal programmes alone would amount to attempting to clap with one hand.*"²³

Table 1: The different local public infrastructure and services in which city/municipal and regional governments have roles (as providers, supervisors or managers)

NB: The extent to which the roles listed are the responsibilities of city or municipal governments obviously varies; this table is intended to illustrate the wide range of relevant responsibilities that they usually have.

Infrastructure needed for service provision		Role of local and regional governments
Water supply	Piped water supplies and water distribution and treatment; other water sources provided or supervised	In many nations, local government as the provider of these. In some, as the supervisor of private provision.
Sanitation and waste water treatment	Provision for sewers and other services relating to sanitation or liquid waste disposal	In most nations a municipal or city authority responsibility, even if the provision is assured by national or private companies
Drainage	Provision for storm and surface drains	In most nations a municipal or city authority responsibility
Roads, bridges, pavements		Usually divided between local and supra-national authorities (often on the basis of hierarchy of roads)
Ports and airports		Often shared responsibilities between subnational and national governments
Solid waste disposal facilities	Landfills, incinerators, dumps	Solid waste disposal usually responsibility of local government
Electricity supply		Usually private sector provision or national agency. Local government may have role in extending connections
Parks, squares, plazas, other public spaces		Almost always local government responsibility for provision and maintenance
Services		
Fire protection services		Usually local government responsibility
Public order/police/delivery of early warning for disasters		Police usually a national government responsibility although often a responsibility shared with local government.
Solid waste collection for homes and businesses	May be household connections, may be communal bins.	Local government responsibility
Child care, schools, libraries		Local government often with some responsibilities for provision here. Some of this may be under local offices of

		higher levels of government.
Public transport – road, rail		Public road transport - usually under local/regional governments – although much provision is contracted out.
Health care/public health	Provision from health care through different levels	Primary health care services usually under local governments; higher level services often under higher levels of government?
Education		Shared between different levels of government.
Environmental health		Local government responsibility. May include licensing of certain enterprises and markets
Pollution control and management of toxic/hazardous wastes		Usually with standards set by national government, implementation by local government
Public toilets		Usually a local government responsibility
Social welfare (includes provision for child care and old-age care)		Mostly national although local government offices may have in many countries key roles in child and old age care
Cleaning of streets, squares and other public spaces; also markets		Local government responsibility
Disaster response	Range of measures from disaster preparedness to response	Much responsibility for this within regional and local government although often not addressed
Registration of births and deaths		Often a local government responsibility
Responsibilities for housing		
Building regulations		Local government responsibility for enforcement; often some role in defining or adjusting national legislation
Public provision and/or maintenance of housing		In some countries is a local responsibility or shared between different levels of government
Other local government responsibilities that influence service provision or poverty reduction		
Urban / territorial planning		Local and regional government responsibility. Should have major role in defining infrastructure provision for expanding urban area.
Building regulations		Often a local government responsibility
Land-use controls		Local and regional government responsibility
Local economic development		More and more shared between national and subnational governments
Provisions for disabled persons		Local government with responsibilities defined by higher level of government

Local governments may also determine whether citizens have access to entitlements provided by national government. Especially in urban areas, where so many residents live in informal settlements, a lack of documentation may prohibit them from voting, getting basic services, sending their children to school, gaining access to government-supported healthcare, or even for getting a job. Authorities may be reluctant to provide because they feel that this encourages the development of even more informal settlements, or high density and narrow lanes may simply make it inconvenient to provide those in such settlements with services like piped water or waste removal. Access to all these services for urban citizens determines of course whether many of the MDG targets are met.

There is often a critical gap between the mandated functions of local governments and their capacity for fulfilling their role – especially their fiscal capacity. Responsibilities are seldom accompanied by adequate resources, and many towns and cities have huge backlogs in service provision. Rural India provides an example of the disconnect between mandate and reality. Local panchayats have broad responsibility for essential services and functions, 29 in all, including sanitation, drinking water supply, roads, electricity and other infrastructure, housing, schools and local social welfare, agriculture, forestry and land management. But most panchayats are financially and technically ill-equipped to perform even their core functions, which continue to be carried out by line departments of state government.²⁴ The Government of India described the situation in 2004: *[P]anchayats are starved of finances in virtually all states. This has led to a situation where there has been a constitutionally mandated devolution of powers and responsibilities to the local bodies, but with no real means, financial or statutory, with which to implement the plethora of schemes and programmes devolved. This chicken and egg syndrome has led to panchayati raj and municipality administrations almost everywhere being discredited by mainline developmental administration, leaving elected members disillusioned and frustrated by their very powerlessness and impotence.*²⁵ It might be argued that as long as essential functions are performed by some arm of government, it matters little which it is. But it does matter. The accountability and integration that is possible at the local level is critical. The “plethora” of centrally administered schemes described above in India (151 of them in 2006, related to 15 ministries and departments) are characterized, according to Alok, by rigid conditionalities, a lack of transparency, inefficient funding, implementation and monitoring and a consequent lack of progress.²⁶ This can also result in considerable confusion as to roles and responsibilities, resulting in the end in less reliable and more fragmented services.

This has also been documented in Malawi. A review of the decentralisation process undertaken in four Districts noted that the effectiveness of local Councils is further inhibited by an acute deficit of trained staff at point of action. Weak monitoring and evaluation systems, including dysfunctional district data banks and poor record keeping. Consequently, the critical up-to-date information that is needed to inform decision-making is severely lacking. Combined with a lack of strategic leadership skills within often uncoordinated administrative structures, activities and meetings appear to be frequently ad hoc, uncoordinated and unplanned.²⁷ Adequately trained, adequately funded local governments can be an alternative, responding flexibly and efficiently with local solutions that meet people’s requirements and are accountable to them. But their success as instruments of self-governance depends on the devolution of resources.²⁸

The financing of local governments, limited as it tends to be, takes many forms. But in general, decentralized responsibilities for public service delivery are not accompanied by decentralized taxation powers (or at least not the power to control and spend what is raised

locally).²⁹ Uganda depends on central government for over 85 percent of its revenue, and the average in low income countries is about 60 percent.³⁰ In general, urban governments are more likely to be able raise their own revenues. In South Africa, for instance, most larger municipalities are virtually self-sustaining while some smaller ones are almost totally dependent on central transfers.³¹ But even with their generally greater control over their revenues, city governments can face stark limitations. In Brazil, where municipalities have broad autonomy in both raising and spending revenues, the Municipality of Sao Paulo has revenues equal to US \$1266 per person. But in most African cities the figure is well under US \$100 per person. In Bamako, Mali, where local government is responsible for economic development, urban planning, education, health, water and sanitation, land tenure, roads and transport, it is less than US\$ 6 per person.³²

Even given the vast global range of responsibilities, capacities and resources for local government, in a growing number of places the local level provides the best governance framework for developing much needed local responses to agreed national and international goals and targets. MDGs are most likely to be met in places where local governments have the competence and capacity to fulfill their responsibilities, to provide accountability and transparency to their residents, and to draw as effective managers on collective public action. It is difficult to see how the post-2015 development framework, not to mention the SDGs coming out of Rio plus 20, can be implemented without closer consideration to the contribution of local government. The following section will provide some context on the MDGs, before returning to the local level to consider how both MDG strengths and concerns relate to local government and its civil society connections.

4. What has been learned from addressing the MDGs ?

There is no question that the MDGs have been an important and valuable undertaking. They have galvanized political commitment, influenced debate, provided a focus for advocacy and improved the monitoring of development projects.³³ Over 60 countries have integrated the goals into their national strategies.³⁴ They have been widely acknowledged for their success in mobilizing and targeting aid resources; the OECD notes, for instance, that between 2000 and 2006, total development assistance for health more than doubled³⁵ (although the most recent OECD Development Assistance figures suggest that the proportion of bilateral agency commitments to health stopped increasing 2006 to 2010). The goals and targets have provided an incentive in rallying stakeholders and shaping the development agenda within countries, and there have been some impressive success stories. Perhaps the most ringing endorsement of the MDGs is the fact that civil society organizations, governments and academia overwhelmingly agree that there should be some sort of replacement agenda post 2015.³⁶

But there have also been significant challenges and numerous critiques – regarding, among many other issues, ownership, a simplistic vision of development, problems with equity and an emphasis on ends to the exclusion of means. The MDGs are very clear about what they want to achieve but say very little about who needs to act to meet the goals and targets and how they get resourced and supported to do so. While the MDG agenda implies the transformation of society, it has been more accurately described as a set of technical, sectoral, macroeconomic undertakings that overlook the very local and integrated nature of social transformation.³⁷ The problems have often been the flip side of the strengths – for instance,

the simple, easily communicated goals that have been able to strengthen global consensus have also tended to obscure the complexity of the development process; parsimonious goals, realistically premised on continuing the pace of global trends in preceding decades, cannot at the same time be aspirational in any universal sense. In reviewing the successes and concerns around the MDGs, two separate concerns are discussed here – what has actually been achieved in the way of meeting goals and targets, and how appropriate or effective the MDGs have been as a framework for development action. These concerns are then discussed with reference to local government.

What has been achieved in the way of meeting MDG goals and targets?

Although there been impressive achievements around meeting the MDG goals and targets, the world is a long way from being “on track” across the board, and several goals have seen a discouraging lack of headway. Progress has been uneven both between and within regions. Although middle-income countries are largely on track to meet goals, low-income countries are lagging behind overall, especially in sub-Saharan Africa and countries experiencing conflict. Gains have also tended to bypass the poorest and most marginalized within countries. Not surprisingly, progress has been less encouraging in countries where political commitment is limited.

The UN’s summary of progress

The UN’s 2012 MDG report summarizes progress goal by goal.³⁸ It notes that extreme poverty has fallen in every region, and that the goal to halve it will be met globally well before 2015. About 80 percent of these people lifted out of poverty, however, are in China, which calls into question the real global success. Meanwhile, extreme poverty remains widespread, especially in sub-Saharan Africa where, despite rapid economic growth since 2000, many countries lag far behind. At the current rate of progress, it is estimated that about a billion people will still be living on less than \$1.25 a day in 2015, the great majority in South Asia and sub-Saharan Africa. (This does not, of course, raise the question of the validity of this definition of poverty, or the measurement concerns.) There has been little progress in reducing the numbers of hungry people, owing in large part to the global economic crisis and the rise in food prices. Progress has slowed or stalled, with the most serious problems again in sub-Saharan Africa and South Asia. About one child in five in low- and middle-income countries is seriously or moderately underweight, a reality that affects every area of their development, with long term implications. In South Asia the proportion is over one half.

Access to primary school has increased substantially over recent decades and, if sub-Saharan Africa is excluded, 90 percent of primary age children globally were enrolled in school in 2010. Of those entering school, the primary completion rate reached 90 percent. Considerable progress has been made even in countries with the biggest challenges, but this progress has stalled since 2004 and in sub-Saharan Africa almost a quarter of children remain out of school. There are still over 120 million young people who cannot read or write. The gender gap in schools is closing, but girls still account for the majority of those out of school at all levels, especially tertiary. Gender parity problems remain, more generally, a serious concern especially in sub-Saharan Africa, South and West Asia. Women still have less access to secure employment, and worldwide they account for less than 20 percent of parliamentarians.

Progress on the child mortality goal has been considerable – rates are down by a third since 1990. But this is only half way to meeting the 2015 goal. Despite substantial progress in some countries, almost one sub-Saharan African child in eight was still dying before the age of five in 2010. Maternal mortality is half of what it was in 1990, but no region has managed to meet the target of reducing maternal deaths by three quarters. There have been good advances on the goal of combatting HIV, malaria and TB, but only in the case of TB is the target likely to be met (although there are still worrying gaps in the diagnosis and treatment of multi-drug resistant TB.) An impressive increase in the numbers accessing and using treated nets has led to about 45 percent of affected countries reaching the target of halving the number of malaria cases; others are making progress. Access to treatment for HIV has expanded in all but one region, but is still not close to being universal.

By 2010, almost 90 percent of the world's population was estimated to have improved access to drinking water, thereby meeting the global target five years ahead of schedule. Coverage remains low in sub-Saharan Africa and Oceania, however. Nor does the access figure cover water quality, reliability or readiness of access, and so it is greatly overestimating the numbers with safe and reliable sources. The sanitation target is still well out of reach. Coverage has increased by over a third, but more than 15 percent of the global population still defecates in the open, 60 percent of them in India. The target to significantly improve the lives of at least 100 million 'slum' dwellers is said to have been met but the evidence for this is in doubt and the growth in the global numbers of slum dwellers has continued to grow.

Some provisos about the definition of targets and assessment of progress

Vandermoortele reminds us that the overall failure to reach the targets should not cause us to minimize the very respectable progress that has been made in response to these quantifiable time bound targets.³⁹ These targets, he argues, should be seen as servants, not masters. Nonetheless there are some specific concerns with the way various targets have been operationalized, and the way progress has been assessed.

There are problems, first of all, with accuracy, not surprising given the challenges around collecting adequate data. The Republic of Congo's Poverty Reduction Strategy Paper, for example, acknowledges that the government's capacity to monitor is so limited that it actually knows very little about poverty. Yet for the MDGs, it confidently reports its progress on poverty reduction.⁴⁰ Numbers that show discrepancies with other more reliable sources are not unusual. According to official statistics in Malawi, for instance, 96 percent of the urban population has access to potable water and 97 percent to safe sanitation. Yet Manda found in 2009 that over 60 percent of the population of Malawi's three largest cities was living in largely un-serviced informal settlements.⁴¹ (Malawi also uses the definition 'basic' rather than 'improved' for progress in sanitation, and this includes rudimentary pit latrines. This definition ends up inflating and misrepresenting the country's progress.)

Another problem that affects our understanding of success is the definition of targets in relative terms. As in the case of the target for improving the lives of slum dwellers, this can result in apparently good progress while at the same time the increase in absolute numbers means that even more people are actually falling behind. There is also the problem of linearity; there is an implicit assumption, in assessing progress, that getting halfway to a target means that half the investment and effort has been made. In fact, the closer a target becomes, the more likely it is that the most intractable problems remain. The assessment of MDGs has repeatedly shown that the poorest and the most marginalized (whether by age,

gender, ethnicity, disability) are often bypassed. The UN Task Team provides a disturbing example: “*Only one third of those countries that have reduced child mortality rates at the national level, for instance, have succeeded in reducing the gap between child mortality in the richest and poorest households.*”⁴²

The targets also did not take explicit account of the level that different countries were at when they started. It has been frequently pointed out that the MDGs are global goals and targets, and were never intended to serve as a blueprint for achievement in each country without being adapted to country realities.⁴³ But in fact these global targets continue to serve as national reference points. This has its positive side – a low starting point can mean it is easier to make visible progress. But it also puts a greater burden on countries with the greatest problems to tackle. Halving the numbers of people who are hungry, for example, is more of a challenge where a greater proportion of the population is hungry. A country can make significant progress in a given area, but still not come close to meeting the target. Being considered “off track” can be demoralizing in the context of serious effort and progress. “*Going forward,*” notes the UN Task Team, “*recognition of the initial conditions of countries will help to provide adequate global support for the implementation of successful national policies.*”⁴⁴ Within countries, also, the recognition of conditions by locale could help ensure optimally targeted responses.

Achievements in urban areas

An area of concern that crystallizes many of these targeting concerns is the increasing share of deprivation among the world’s growing urban population. There are two related worries here; the use of assessment metrics that are inappropriate in the context of most urban areas; and the relative neglect of urban areas in MDG-related campaigns because of the higher levels of urban well-being and provision suggested by misleading aggregate figures.

On the first point, the standards used to determine progress: for urban areas this is most obviously problematic with the poverty target. Income-based poverty lines are always questionable as the single measure of a multi-dimensional phenomenon; but a poverty line of US\$1.25 per person per day is especially misleading within cash-based urban economies. Given the higher cost of necessities in most urban areas (especially in larger or more prosperous cities), this poverty line is both inaccurate and misleading. It is inaccurate in that it is far below the costs facing low-income groups in paying for (poor quality) accommodation and access to services. Set a poverty line low enough and no-one is poor. The application of this single poverty line across all urban and rural areas in low- and middle-income nations with no adjustment in regard to the costs of non-food needs locates most extreme poverty in rural areas and deflects attention from the extent of urban deprivation.⁴⁵

Reports on progress with water and sanitation in urban areas are also misleading. Access to both water and sanitation is estimated to be far higher in urban than rural areas; but this fails to take account of the ways in which high density and large population concentrations in many urban settlements affects the adequacy of available provision in supporting health and convenience. The existence of a water point does not necessarily mean genuine access for all residents within a given radius. When it serves dozens or even hundreds of households it is likely to mean unreasonably long waits and a reliance on costly vended supplies. The numbers of urban households receiving piped water to their premises is a far better indication of provision that supports health and convenience in densely settled areas. Globally, 130

million urban dwellers lacked “improved” provision in 2010; but more than five times that number lacked piped provision to their premises.⁴⁶ Figures on sanitation can be equally misleading. “Improved” sanitation coverage is higher in urban than in rural areas (79 percent compared to 47 percent in 2010), but a large part of ‘improved sanitation’ is poorly maintained and over-used pit latrines that are inadequate from a health perspective. This calls into question the context-free assumption that urban dwellers are better served, and reflects the broad brush concerns implicit in many targets.

The other concern is the relative neglect of urban areas in MDG-related initiatives, based on such context-free assumptions. A review of African PRSPs, for instance, indicates that they are strongly rural-focused, and that key structural and governance reforms tend to be oriented towards rural areas, despite rapid urbanisation trends. In the Republic of Congo, for example, despite acknowledged concerns about rapid urbanization, the PRSP, in outlining its MDG progress goal by goal, makes no mention of the MDG target for significantly improving the lives of slum dwellers.⁴⁷ Many other PRSPs fail to give attention to urban poverty and, more specifically, to this MDG target.

There are actually a number of countries where substantial rural gains in water provision have been accompanied by stalled progress in urban areas. Among nations for which data are available, 35 showed a decline in urban water provision between 1990 and 2010. Urban progress on sanitation is also dismal, failing to keep pace with growing populations. Rural sanitation coverage has improved globally by 62 percent since 2010, but in urban areas coverage has increased by only 3 percent.⁴⁸ Fotso and colleagues, focusing on child mortality in sub-Saharan Africa, note that while mortality rates improved in rural areas, they have been stagnating or worse in many urban areas. They argue that the failure of many nations to achieve MDG health targets in particular may be due to the rapid growth in the numbers of the urban poor and the lack of attention to their basic needs.⁴⁹

There are certainly many countries where it is rural realities that are delaying the achievement of the MDGs. The intent here is not to downplay the extent of rural poverty, but to stress that urban deprivation and exclusion present some different challenges, and that context-free assessments can mean the neglect of growing populations of deprived and invisible people. Progress in reaching goals is important, but the situation can be more complex than the various targets indicate. As Clemens and Kenny noted in 2004, the MDGs are better seen not as realistic targets “*but as reminders of the stark contrast between the world we want and the world we have, and a call to redouble our search for interventions to close the gap.*”⁵⁰

The MDGs as a framework for action

Progress on goals and targets aside, the effectiveness of the MDGs as a framework for development has been hotly debated. Given the overarching goal of addressing global poverty and inequality, observers have pointed to a number of concerns. This synthesis relies heavily on two discussion papers, the UN Task Team paper of Jan Vandemoortele⁵¹ and the Lancet/LIDCC paper by Jeff Waage and colleagues.⁵² They are in agreement around some basic issues, but also represent between them some broad differences regarding the strengths and weaknesses of the MDG framework.

- *Limited consultation and ownership:* It is generally acknowledged that the MDGs were not the product of a broad-based debate and consensus around development priorities. Although there are frequent allusions to the political consensus

subsequently inspired by the MDGs, observers point out that this agenda was rather summarily prepared by a limited group of experts, rather than involving the kind of preparation and debate among member countries that is usually the procedure for global agendas.⁵³ The ownership concern, however, extends well beyond the involvement of national governments to the inclusion of all development stakeholders, including civil society and sub-national governments. As Waage and colleagues point out, had the global women's movement had a say, it would probably have resulted in attention to reproductive rights, adult literacy and violence against women.⁵⁴ By the same token, had local governments been represented, there might have been more careful attention in the framing of targets to population dynamics and issues around rapid urban growth, and the budgets to address it. "Localizing" the MDGs, from the perspective of local government, means more than adapting global goals to national action plans or PRSPs.

- *A narrow view of development:* Vandermoortele sees the MDG agenda as a practical statement of feasible objectives, based on global development trends set in place in previous decades. Waage and colleagues argue that it represents an overly narrow, simplistic view of development, ignores the complexity of a process that should build on synergies and interconnections. They see the view of poverty reduction behind this set of separate goals as mechanistic, associating development with economic growth and sectoral fixes rather than giving more nuanced attention to the role of inequalities and power structures.⁵⁵ The narrowing of the agenda through the focus on fragmented, "minimalist" targets, argue Waage et al, has discouraged collaboration within and between sectors. The focus on primary education, for instance, has ignored the proven links and powerful synergies between secondary schooling and progress in areas of health and improved incomes.⁵⁶ Vandermoortele points out that it is not possible for the MDGs to be comprehensive without becoming a cumbersome and unmanageable exercise in futility. Clear, brief achievable targets are in his mind a necessity and they serve as a proxy for the more general development that occurs in tandem around them.⁵⁷
- *Ends rather than means:* Waage and colleagues, along with a number of other critics,⁵⁸ feel the agenda does not go far enough in identifying approaches for achieving the ends. Although some targets are as much about means as ends (economic growth is implied to be the means for reducing poverty; mosquito nets are the means for reducing the incidence of malaria), the overall emphasis is clearly on the "what" more than the "how" or the "who". Vandermoortele, on the other hand, argues that spelling out strategies would deny countries the freedom to make context-specific decisions based on their own domestic politics. He agrees, however, that basic principles for guiding equitable, sustaining development, could be incorporated without becoming prescriptive. Example of such principles might be that economic growth is necessary but insufficient for development; that public action is essential; that external finance cannot substitute for domestic investment.⁵⁹
- *Leaving the poorest behind:* This is a generally recognized weakness of the MDG agenda. Widening disparities worldwide, even where there has been economic growth, has stimulated far greater attention to inequality in recent years. Waage and colleagues argue that the focus on partial targets, and the intentness on achieving them, has made it easier to ignore the needs of those who are hardest to reach.⁶⁰ Many of the MDG targets are actually less ambitious than UN targets set during the 1970s where governments committed themselves to universal provision for water, sanitation and health care. Vandermoortele feels that that the failure to address growing disparities underlies the failure to reach goals.⁶¹ In part this is related to the tendency

to choose the “low hanging fruit” in an effort to reach targets; in part it is a function of the failure to identify the most disadvantaged, which is to some degree a function of available data. (see below). The first step in addressing inequality is being able to identify it.

- *Concerns with data:* The MDGs have increased the demand for data, and have led to greater attention to the quality of data. Certainly this elevated concern for monitoring has had its benefits. But there are concerns about the quality of data obtained, and even about the possibility of accurately measuring progress on some problematic targets (such as poverty or genuine access to “safe” water). Difficulties with data have also encouraged an increasingly narrow focus on just some of the indicators, which have then narrowed the efforts and the investments.⁶² The framework of the goals tends to encourage a focus on national averages, and the UN task team acknowledges that progress has not been well monitored at sub-national levels. There is still a widely recognized need for the kind of accurate, detailed, disaggregated statistics required to identify the most disadvantaged and to monitor progress on goals and targets. In most countries the reliance on sample surveys like the Demographic and Health Surveys make this kind of local identification of deprivation impossible.

5. How do these successes and concerns relate to local government?

Most of the MDGs depend directly or indirectly on the provision of infrastructure and services. And most infrastructure and services depend to a greater or lesser degree on local governments doing their job. All development interventions are local in the sense that they play out through the provision of some good or service to individuals and communities in a particular location. Their implementation depends on local institutions – utility companies, solid-waste collection services, schools, day-care centres, health-care centres, public transport systems, police stations, etc. Even where interventions are the responsibility of national ministries, or are delivered through private enterprises or international NGOs, the ease and effectiveness with which they are delivered can be greatly enhanced by local government support. The MDGs are most likely to be met where local governments have the competence and capacity to fulfill their responsibilities, and where their residents are equipped to make demands for accountability and transparency, especially those residents whose MDG needs are not yet realized. This is even more the case if local government is taken to include all sub-national government levels. It is too easy to forget the key roles that local government has played in achieving routinely accepted standards in what are today’s high-income nations – often with the support of national governments.

There are many situations in which a lack of capacity or political will within local government has contributed hugely to the disadvantage of its citizens and to the failure to realize the MDGs. Inadequately resourced local authorities in rapidly growing cities struggle to keep up with the demand for infrastructure and services. The failure to recognize and support the residents of informal settlements has also helped to entrench people in slum conditions rather than supporting their struggles to improve their own conditions. Denying them access to publicly funded health services or schools further constrains their potential. Through exclusionary practices with informal enterprises and workers, local authorities have also obstructed people’s chance of working their way out of poverty. But there are also many ways in which committed and capable local governments have made all the difference. Where substantive progress is being made on the MDGs, it is more likely to be because local

governments are doing their job than because of specially designed national campaigns or policies.

Take, for instance, the poverty reduction goal. Despite the widespread association of poverty reduction with macroeconomic growth, this equation does not always hold up.⁶³ For instance, an analysis of PRSPs from a few African countries indicates that economic growth does not automatically mean a change for those in poverty. In Mali, average annual growth of 6.7 percent between 2000 and 2005 was expected to reduce the incidence of poverty by about 16 percent. In fact it only dropped from 64 percent to 59 percent.⁶⁴ In Tanzania, which also experienced impressive economic growth, the incidence of poverty declined hardly at all.⁶⁵ Economic growth can mean simply an increase in disparities, as benefits are concentrated at the top and the poorest are left behind. But local governments can address poverty in critical ways. Poverty is widely acknowledged to be multi-dimensional in nature, and its different dimensions tend to reinforce one another. Local regulations that do not discriminate against the informal solutions of the poor, equitable land management systems, and a focus on service provision for marginalized citizens can have a significant effect in helping to lift people out of poverty – even in the absence of redistributive policies on the part of central government.⁶⁶

Children's malnourishment and mortality are also good examples. They depend on the availability of food and resources, which could be tackled centrally with redistributive programmes and feeding campaigns. But young children are also particularly vulnerable to the impacts of poor provision for water and sanitation, and local government action on this front is critical, especially in urban areas, where these problems are increasingly significant. In a number of countries, while rural rates of child mortality and underweight are improving, in urban areas they are stagnating, a function in large part of the highly threatening environments of poverty and the fact that those living in informal settlements may be denied access to public healthcare.⁶⁷ In most urban areas, local authorities are on the front line on these issues. Without coordinated efforts on the part of national and local governments, it may be increasingly difficult to manage progress in rapidly growing towns and cities.

Strong committed local governments have a considerable comparative advantage when it comes to tackling some of the particular MDG framework weaknesses that have been discussed here:

Targeting the most disadvantaged: A number of MDG goals are dependent for their achievement on the careful targeting of especially disadvantaged groups and assertive outreach to the most marginal. This is something that can only happen effectively at the local level. Even where health programs or education are delivered by central government, only collaborative efforts on the part of local agencies and local communities can determine how to reach those who may remain invisible – women whose husbands disapprove of family planning; girls who are kept out of school because of concerns about safety on the way to school; children whose illiterate mothers don't know about oral rehydration. A UN Millennium Campaign account of success stories from the Asia/Pacific region points repeatedly to the role of local authorities in this regard even when initiatives are implemented by national ministries.⁶⁸ A rural maternal health programme in Cambodia, for instance, needed local authority involvement for the accurate targeting of vulnerable women and households; a rural sanitation project, also in Cambodia, acknowledged that going to scale depended on the integration of sanitation into local development plans. The success of an institutional support project in Indonesia was attributed to “strong political will and commitment by the local leadership and the interventions designed purely based on the local

needs and local planning and budgeting cycle.”⁶⁹ In Brazil, the bolsa familia that provides low-income households with a small monthly payment is a national (federal) government programme but mostly implemented through local government.

The non-linearity issue. Large national campaigns are most likely to address the easiest to reach situations. But a point comes where gains are harder to achieve, and where further progress requires more careful targeting and more assertive measures. In South Asia, for example, according to the 2011 report for the UN Secretary General, the benefits from the drive to improve sanitation were realized disproportionately by the wealthy, while the situation in the households of the poorest 40 percent hardly changed.⁷⁰ Worldwide, as noted above, few countries have managed to close the gap between the poorest and the wealthiest quintiles when it came to child mortality. When it is a matter of turning attention to the hardest to reach, local attention can be critical and the coordination between local government and local community organizations may be paramount.

The synergy issue: As Waage and colleagues emphasize, development at its most successful is an integrated process that depends heavily on the synergies that emerge from collaborative efforts. They point out that within the present fragmented MDG scenario, “*some positive interaction will inevitably arise from the independent pursuit of different MDG goals and targets, but even this interaction will need local interventions in poverty reduction, health, education, and gender equality coming together for the same groups of people. This convergence is made less likely by the reality that goals are compartmentalised into responsibilities of different line ministries nationally, subnationally, and locally, which means that the potential for simultaneous actions in the same location, working with the same communities and households, is unlikely.*” The convergence they see as a necessary condition for optimal achievement relies on the proximity of local government to the beneficiaries and co-creators of effective development. By the same token, political pressure from organized disadvantaged groups is key to encouraging that action and convergence.

The data issue: Accurate data are essential to monitoring the success of initiatives, but even more important, to identifying those who are at the losing end of the growing disparities in most countries, the hundreds of millions of disadvantaged citizens who are being left behind by MDG initiatives. Available data sets in most countries are from nationally representative samples (such as the Demographic and Health Surveys) that do not make it possible to identify the spatial concentrations of those in the greatest need. For instance, by presenting urban aggregate figures, they overlook the incredible depth of poverty and exclusion among many urban residents. This can only be remedied by detailed local data, which can best be collected by those close to the ground.

There are excellent precedents in the “enumerations” conducted by local authorities and urban poor federations in cities around the world, often with the support of their local governments. These local surveys detail the living conditions and level of provision of local citizens who would otherwise remain invisible, and become the starting point for evidence-based initiatives on a number of fronts. Such locally detailed data sets are critical not only for monitoring the achievement of the MDGs, but for allowing local authorities, wherever they are located, to understand and respond adequately to the most disadvantaged people in their jurisdictions.⁷¹

Examples around data collection are not unique to urban areas. According to a report on Asia Pacific MDG success stories, “*In the State of Orissa in India, rural poor households are participating in real-time tracking of the delivery of social protection entitlements by using a*

mobile phone-based monitoring system. In Bangladesh and the Philippines, participatory citizens' monitoring initiatives have also contributed to effective local planning of development projects, better use of funds for MDG priority areas that matter to the community, and increasing transparency and accountability."⁷² Some of the success factors identified in Bangladesh include the independent management by local government institutions of the available financial resources, and their consultations with local communities on budget allocations and planning decisions.⁷³

The urban issue: Cities are widely recognized as major catalysts of growth and development; their sound management is central to the capacity of nations to advance. And in cities more than anywhere else, effective management depends on local government. This means, among other things, attention to the growing phenomenon of urban poverty. It is widely assumed that the most intransigent poverty is in rural areas, since urban averages point on the whole to healthier, better educated, less poor populations. There is strong evidence, however, that poverty, hunger, disease, a lack of schooling are becoming increasingly prevalent in many urban areas. As urban populations grow, there are growing backlogs in basic provision, growing inequalities, growing social problems and growing vulnerability to disasters. The achievement of the MDGs may well become most difficult in urban areas.⁷⁴

Part of the failure to address urban realities has been related to the more general lack of attention to population dynamics. The only target in the MDGs that makes specific reference to the urban situation is the significant improvement sought in the lives of at least 100 million slum dwellers (by 2020). Apparently, this has been met; UN Habitat reported that more than 200 million 'slum' dwellers moved out of slum conditions from 2000 to 2010 largely due to slum upgrading⁷⁵ but there is little supporting evidence for this and this apparent success may be the result of changes in the criteria for defining 'slums'. But even if the target of at least 100 million slum dwellers has been exceeded, it fails to offset the growth in the target population. The significant growth in the number of poor urban dwellers has been identified as an obstacle in the way of MDG achievement, and it is one that will only continue to block progress if it is not assertively addressed. This is especially significant for local governments because of their substantially greater role and power in the urban areas of many countries. The growing burdens that urban local authorities face are hugely challenging, yet the resources available to them to tackle these challenges remain limited. When the major urban donors met in 2006, almost all of their representatives said that investment in urban development was a shrinking proportion of their agency's budget because of competing claims from such politically important issues as climate change and food aid.⁷⁶

Even in the absence of adequate resources, however, there are an increasing number of precedents for effective urban change being brought about by committed local governments. Among other things, their capacity to link with local communities and create the space for local citizens to play an active role is ensuring that resources can be effectively targeted and optimally used. Stren notes that even in Africa, in the context of decentralization and democratization, "*cities, their local populations, and their local governments, are much more connected to a wide range of solutions to their service and administrative challenges than they were before, and as a result much more ready to engage in creative efforts to respond to their own needs.*"⁷⁷

Participatory budgeting is a good case in point. First developed in Brazil in the late 80s, it has been gradually expanding and no less than 1400 urban centres around the world are now giving their local communities a voice in determining the priorities for at least some portion

of their city's budget. This implies a budgeting system that is transparent and available to public scrutiny, thereby limiting clientelism and corruption. It helps link municipal investments to local priorities and generally means more funding going to the poorer areas of a city and an increase in expenditure in social provision (for instance education, health care and basic services.) There is no single blueprint for participatory budgeting. It is a flexible approach and there is considerable variation in terms of the form of participation, who is in charge, and how much of the budget is involved. The common theme is whether the final decision on spending priorities remains within the local government or whether people decide in assemblies.⁷⁸

Many local authorities are also working collaboratively with organizations and federations of slum or shack dwellers and the urban poor, building on their efforts and ingenuity to address the range of deprivations that affect them. Some of these federations have gone to scale, reaching hundreds of thousands of low-income households and involving them in efforts to secure tenure and housing, improve infrastructure and services and influence local government decisions and practices. The transnational network of these organizations and federations, Slum/Shack Dwellers International, is now active in 33 countries in Asia, Africa and Latin America, providing a global platform for their learning, advocacy and mobilization. Where local governments are actively supporting their work, the scale of what they can do is much increased.⁷⁹

It might be argued that this local involvement should be assumed in any discussion of global goals. Of course all development is ultimately local; of course it cannot happen without the active engagement of local partners. This may seem so obvious that it doesn't bear spelling out in global agendas or the documents and processes that support them. But where countries have made efforts to clarify the role of local government and strengthen its capacity, they tend to draw attention to this in their reports, as is evident in PRSPs for Mali and Nigeria.⁸⁰

Rio+20 also offers another perspective. In line with previous progress in the recognition of local and regional governments seen in the climate change negotiations and in the implementation of the Convention on biodiversity, both the process and the agenda coming out of it have made an explicit point of highlighting the engagement of local governments. In the outcome document, tribute is paid to the progress already achieved at local and sub-national levels and recognition is given to the need for effective governance at local and sub-national levels in advancing sustainable development. The involvement of local governments is actively encouraged not only in implementing action, but in planning the strategies for guiding decision making and implementation. Particular attention is given to the local government role around the sustainable development of the world's cities, and commitments are made to support local authorities on this front. Specific follow up mechanisms are in place that will permit the political representation of local authorities, through their representatives.⁸¹

6. What has to be in place for local government to fulfil its potential in addressing new agendas?

If the key role of local and regional governments is recognized in a post-2015 agenda that is committed to reducing poverty and inequality, what will this involve? It makes sense first to review the UN efforts that have been made over the preceding decade to "localize" the

MDGs – not just in national terms, but to ensure that they were promoted and supported at local level and that the local level was equipped for this to happen.

In 2004, the UN Urban Management Programme with the backing of UNDP and UN Habitat, acknowledged that little had been done within the UN system with regard to the local or urban level to compensate for the lack of attention within the MDG agenda itself. They proposed the establishment of an “Urban Millennium Partnership” which would build partnerships between UN agencies and UCLG. Efforts would be made to build local capacity and to ensure local government involvement in developing indicators to capture MDG status locally.⁸² But there is no evidence of any follow up to this. Research in seven countries⁸³ concludes that little guidance has been available to UN Country Teams on supporting integrated local development; while there have been efforts to raise local awareness of the MDGs, little support was given on the preparation of local development plans or to ensure local service delivery. Two key constraints were noted: limited capacity on the part of local stakeholders (communities, civil society and local authorities) and the absence of funding mechanisms and models that take into account the priorities of local development. Of the various efforts made in this regard, most bypassed local authorities and local development planning.⁸⁴

If the UN system and the official aid agencies and development banks fail so routinely to support the contributions of local governments, and even to acknowledge them as stakeholders, repeatedly using language that renders them invisible, it is not surprising that national governments might also fail to take them seriously as players in the MDG scenario. Even where local authorities *are* acknowledged, the absence of practical support can render this acknowledgement somewhat rhetorical. The subsequent gap between rhetoric and reality, responsibility and resources can become self-perpetuating, undermining this primary avenue to development.

Moving Post-2015 development agenda toward more ownership and accountability

Post-2015 process success can only be guaranteed if it develops a sense of ownership and accountability at all levels, international, national and also sub-national. To contribute to this end, three primary concerns can be highlighted within all facets and levels of post 2015 preparations:

- The explicit recognition of local and regional authorities as critical agents in the achievement of most of the MDGs and SDGs,
 - Attention to local and regional governments’ capacity to deliver on their mandated responsibilities,
 - Attention to the capacity of local citizens and civil society to hold their local governments accountable.
- i) *Recognizing the role of local governance:* This means explicitly conceptualizing “ownership” and “localization” as bottom-up processes that pertain to citizens, the administrative bodies closest to them and other stakeholders in local provision. It means recognizing that:
- Planning, monitoring and support to local and regional governments is critical if the post 2015 agenda wants to give greater attention to growing inequalities than has been the case to date.
 - Reinforcing participatory processes at local level is necessary for translating and adapting a global agenda and its national implications to local settings. The UN Task

Team governance report acknowledges that this is needed to make Post-2015 Agenda most effectively.⁸⁵

ii) Attention to the capacity of local and regional governments: Achieving the MDGs (or related goals) means that local governments have to be equipped to do their job. Analyses of decentralization and local governance point repeatedly to the gap between responsibilities and the fiscal and technical capacities to tackle them.⁸⁶ Local politicians and civil servants can often do very little to address large deficiencies in infrastructure and service provision because they lack the power, funding and revenue-raising capacity. There is no single blueprint for improving the effectiveness of local and regional governments, but:

- Clearly attention needs to be directed towards the funding framework under which local governments operate – both through fiscal decentralization and national devolution of resources to better match the decentralization of tasks, and improved mechanisms geared towards local level support by international agencies.
- Strong efforts need to be made to improve human resources, technical capacity and management and strengthen the capacity to involve citizens in planning and decision making, with special attention to the most excluded
- Specific support to associations of local government to support the more systematic development of policies such as effective cooperation and exchange on technical and management capacities.

iii) Social accountability: Over the last decade there has been increasing interest on the part of international agencies in the assertion that service provision will improve if the providers are more accountable to their “clients”.⁸⁷ The failure of government to provide this in efficient, equitable, transparent ways is linked to the limited voice of citizens to hold their governments accountable. This is why:

- Poor groups need mechanisms and channels other than voting through which to hold politicians and civil servants to account. Collective organizations are often the most effective means for increasing their influence.
- The partnership between local governments and civil society organizations has to be reinforced to go beyond service provision to the fundamental structural problems of development, in order to overcome important structural constraints on the ability of the poor to exercise their voice.⁸⁸
- The interest of the international development world in social accountability should be accompanied by greater attention to ways of supporting this partnership within the post-2015 development priorities.

Going further to end with poverty and setting new objectives

There is a need to rethink existing goals and targets to include the (national and local) governance capacity to ensure the end of poverty is linked with a more sustainable future. Goals can be universal but many targets and most indicators need to recognize differences between national and sub-national contexts, and rural and urban realities.

Below are a set of thinking points intended as first inputs towards building concrete recommendations on the part of local and regional governments for areas to be tackled by the Post-2015 development agenda:

- ***Reduce inequalities, build inclusive cities and territories, minimise risk:***

The reduction of inequalities needs increased effort towards a more inclusive provision of basic services. This will involve a closer collaboration between national and local levels and major investments in infrastructure to ensure access for: 1) safe sufficient water, 2) sanitation, 3) health care, 4) primary education and 5) emergency services.

Not to leave anyone by the wayside, specific indicators for urban areas will be necessary to take into account their distinct context and internal disparities, and in particular: ensuring ongoing improvement in the lives of slum dwellers, through access to the basic services mentioned above, secure tenure, decent work, and safe communities.

The goals should also include objectives to build more resilient cities and territories, to reduce disaster risks and the impacts of climate change.

In addition to infrastructure, one of the main priorities should be to assure food security for all.

- ***Include new objectives on governance and targets for sub-national governments***

Governance frameworks, including intergovernmental coordination and harmonisation, should be strengthened.

Local and regional development planning should be supported by national development strategies, and include specific targets for addressing inequalities, as well as concrete actions to reduce identified disaster risks and to assure climate change adaptation. In urban areas, a special focus on low-income groups to ensure they can find or build accommodation without increasing slum populations would be important. More attention needs to be paid to the roles and responsibilities of local governments in addressing MDG and post-MDG goals and targets and in monitoring systems that monitor this within each locality.

Strengthening local and regional government capacities to ensure they are able to work with their populations and civil society organisations to meet the above challenges, and implement local development plans will be essential.

Mechanisms and funding to support local and regional governments to commit to relevant goals and targets will also be essential to ensure concrete actions are taken at the local level. These will necessarily lead to a broader discussion on international financial institutions that can support governments (at all levels) that have the responsibility of addressing citizen needs and managing local development.

- ***Monitoring and Indicators***

Reforms to official data collection services will be necessary so that these may serve sub-national governments (for instance with data identifying where needs are concentrated within each local jurisdiction) and are able to monitor progress within local and regional governments.

With regard to the development goals themselves it will be important to determine a variety of indicators which distinguish between the very different context of territories, reflecting both rural and urban communities. It may be necessary to set different base lines, and benchmarks for progress to ensure a more accurate reflection of the wellbeing of populations and to provide a more detailed sub-national picture of progress.

- ***Building a new Global Partnership***

Under the lead of UN System, identification, coordination and enabling of a wide spectrum of actors (international agencies and national governments, but also local and regional governments, CSOs, and community based groups), at different levels will be essential in ensuring progress to attaining the post 2015 development goals.

The success of alternative development strategies depends on a fundamental revision of this global partnership and the institutional and financial framework that should underpin the goals and targets. The new framework should be supported by a stronger and more democratic international governance structure that includes new stakeholders and covers issues and regulations not being addressed at present.

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