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Global Governance Campaigning and MDGs: from top-down to bottom-up anti-poverty work

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ABSTRACT *What should be the foundational campaigning demands for those attempting to eradicate Third World poverty? The Millennium Development Goals are popular, serving in 2005 to motivate the British Make Poverty History movement, the Live8 consciousness-raising rock concerts and the Johannesburg-based Global Call to Action Against Poverty. Yet, upon closer inspection, the implementation processes associated with the MDGs have serious weaknesses. They were generated non-transparently by the United Nations, itself moving since the early 2000s to embrace the Washington Consensus and co-operate with the World Bank, to 'bluewash' the world's largest corporations with its Global Compact, to endorse 'Type 2' public–private partnership privatisation strategies, to condone US militarism, and to reject even elementary democratic reform. The main decisions at the Monterrey and Doha finance and trade summits were biased against poor people, workers, women and the environment. Aspirational targets like the MDGs are, in any case, far less important than the actual social struggles underway across the world for basic needs and democracy. As shown in the 2005 campaigns, work on MDGs distracts us from solidarity with the real agents of progressive social and environmental history, in progressive civil society.*

The role of the Millennium Development Goals (MDGs) in the movements for global justice is contentious. The time is ripe for social movements, labour, environmentalists and allied NGOs to debate the top-down strategy and instead seek solutions emerging from below, where the agency of progressive history is invariably found. Advocates of the MDGs have, indeed, posed a profound problem for serious anti-poverty activists, through their legitimation (and material strengthening) of adverse power relations, unreformed global-scale institutions and capital accumulation patterns that work against the poor and the environment.

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No one would object to the broad MDG goals, of course, which are to:

1. eradicate extreme poverty and hunger;
2. achieve universal primary education;
3. promote gender equality;
4. reduce child mortality;
5. improve maternal health;
6. control HIV/AIDS, malaria and other diseases;
7. ensure environmental sustainability;
8. develop a global partnership for development.

United Nations General Assembly Resolution 55/2 set seven targets:

- to reduce the proportion of people living in extreme poverty by half between 1990 and 2015;
- to enrol all children of school age in primary schools by 2015;
- to make progress toward gender equality and empowering women by eliminating gender disparities in enrolment in primary and secondary education by 2005;
- to reduce infant and child mortality ratios by two-thirds between 1990 and 2015;
- to reduce maternal mortality ratios by three-quarters between 1990 and 2015;
- to provide access for all who need reproductive health services by 2015;
- to implement national strategies for sustainable development by 2005, to reverse the loss of environmental resources by 2015.

MDG shortcomings

Yet the MDG process, the international venues for the MDGs' elaboration, and the concrete strategies for achieving these objectives—including privatisation of basic services such as water and electricity—are doing more harm than good. My own critique of the MDGs as such adds little to what has been already argued, not only by traditional critics in civil society and academe, but even by the United Nations itself. To be sure, there may be some benefits associated with the globally constituted, universal objectives. As Peggy Antrobus of the internationalist, feminist Development Alternatives for Women in a New Era (DAWN) puts it, 'Viewed within the context of "the new aid agenda", the MDGs provide a common framework agreed to by all governments with measurable targets and indicators of progress, around which governments, UN agencies, International Financial Institutions and civil society alike could rally'.[1] They permit at least notional accountability for donor agencies and states, which civil society activists are already pointing to—adorned with white wrist- and headbands as a guilt-trip reminder.

However, speaking the language of many feminists and social justice activists, Antrobus is blunt: 'I do not believe in the MDGs. I think of them as a Major Distraction Gimmick':

> There is evidently widespread awareness of their limitation: their inadequate targets and indicators; their restriction to indicators that are quantifiable, when much of what is most important—such as Women's Equality and Empowerment—is not easily quantifiable; their omission of important Goals and Targets, such as Violence against Women and Sexual and Reproductive Rights;[2] their silence on the context and institutional environment in which they are to be met . . . In fact, a major problem of the MDGs is their abstraction from the social, political and economic context in which they are to be implemented—the 'political economy' of the MDGs . . . To the extent that all the goals relate to the role of the state, one must ask how feasible it is that states weakened by the requirements of policy frameworks of neoliberalism and whose revenues are reduced by privatisation and trade liberalism can be expected to achieve the goals and targets of the MDGs?

Central to MDG political economy is the role of the Bretton Woods Institutions and World Trade Organization (WTO), acting mainly for G8 governments and corporations. These neoliberal (and now neoconservative) agencies appear intent upon bringing ever more aspects of life under the rules of commodification, attributing market values to society and nature. Hence, as the UN itself admits, 'International Monetary Fund programme design has paid almost no systematic attention to the goals when considering a country's budget or macroeconomic framework'. A 2005 UN report complains that 'In the vast number of country programmes supported by the IMF since the adoption of the goals, there has been almost no discussion about whether the plans are consistent with achieving them'. The report documents how budget constraints prevent scaling up sectoral strategies for some of the MDGs, and that, in some cases, 'countries are advised not to even consider such scaled-up plans' by the Bretton Woods Institutions.[3] UN Habitat's website also admits 'the common criticism of MDG as a "top-down" process, which excludes Local Authority and other stakeholders' involvement . . . There is, thus, an inherent danger that even if the targets are achieved, the inequalities within a nation across people and places would still persist'.[4] Minority Rights Group International agrees: 'There is a genuine risk that the strategies used to achieve the MDGs will be less beneficial for minority groups, might increase inequalities and may harm some minority communities'.[5] That risk was acknowledged in the UNDP's *Human Development Report 2003: Millennium Development Goals*, which conceded that 'Women, rural inhabitants, ethnic minorities and other poor people are typically progressing slower than national averages—or showing no progress—even where countries as a whole are moving towards the Goals'.[6] As was widely acknowledged in the run-up to the September 2005 United Nations summit, large parts of the world—especially Africa—were completely off-track and would not reach the MDGs by 2015.

Yet the MDGs themselves are sometimes ridiculed for their lack of ambition. Kumi Naidoo of Civicus—who is responsible for energetic advocacy of MDGs within the 'Global Call to Action Against Poverty' (GCAP)—admits that 'Those that use the MDG framework do so on a strategic level and are pushing for goals beyond the MDGs, ie Vietnam speaks of MDG Plus, and others speak of "beyond MDGs"'.[7] Civicus staff sometimes refer to the 'Minimalist Development Goals', even though MDGs are the central focus of the GCAP. But notwithstanding these concessions, the MDG, Make Poverty History and Live8 campaigning so evident at the Gleneagles G8 protests in July 2005 all suffer from the direction of their gaze—to the powerful—and from their simultaneous diminution of the organic anti-poverty, pro-justice struggles that will genuinely make history. The gaze to the powerful takes for granted that the G8, the WTO, Bretton Woods Institutions and Third World state elites are the solution, not the main part of the problem.

Hence some UN officials argue that the MDG commitments to a 'global partnership' on aid, trade and debt:

> find their current official commitments in the Monterrey Consensus on development finance, the Doha 'development' round on trade, and the Highly Indebted Poor Country (HIPC) initiative, respectively. Progress on global commitments for improved aid, fairer trade and steep debt relief will determine, to a large extent, the successful achievement of the first seven MDGs by 2015 in most if not all developing countries.[8]

If so, that official commitment worsens poverty rather than reduces it. The UN bureaucrats do admit that, while 'Monterrey, Doha and HIPC hold great promise to make significant contributions to the achievement of the MDGs; however, progress thus far has been extremely slow'. Is it, however, the case that 'significant contributions' can be made by three processes that are so explicitly neoliberal?

Monterrey

What happened in Monterrey, Mexico in March 2002? The UN Financing for Development (FFD) Conference was the first major international opportunity to correct global capital markets since the spectacular late 1990s emerging markets crises, ranging from Mexico (1995) through Latin America (1995), to Eastern Europe and South Africa (1996), to Thailand, Indonesia and Malaysia (1997), then South Korea, Russia and South Africa again (1998), to Brazil (1999), on to Turkey and Argentina (2000), and back to Argentina and South Africa (2001). South African finance minister Trever Manuel and former IMF managing director Michael Camdessus were UN secretary general Kofi Annan's special envoys. Aid shortfalls and external debt were considered the main constraints, whereas global financial volatility, while recognised as a problem, was not explicitly linked to development goals. Achieving the MDG targets would cost \$54 billion per year, according to IMF and World Bank estimates.[9]

The central premises of what became known as the 'Monterrey Consensus' were straightforward: deeper integration of developing countries into the global financial system, and combining World Bank, IMF, WTO and donor government powers, so as to more effectively twist the arm of Third World countries. During the course of the proceedings Manuel endorsed privatisation: 'Public–private partnerships are important win-win tools for governments and the private sector, as they provide an innovative way of delivering public services in a cost-effective manner'.[10] (Back in South Africa, PPPs were universally failing, from the standpoint of workers and consumers, and sometimes also businesses, in water, sanitation, electricity, telecommunications, the postal system, forestry, air and road transport, ports and road construction.[11]) To that end, the Monterrey Consensus aimed to grant more power to the Bank, Fund and WTO. In contrast, the World Health Organisation (WHO), International Labour Organisation, the UN Conference on Trade and Development and the UN Research Institute for Social Development were too centrist to be integrated into Monterrey's neoliberal framework. When Monterrey requested states to 'encourage policy and programme coordination of international institutions and coherence at the operational and international levels', some institutions were more coherent than others. Coordination would come between the Bretton Woods Institutions and WTO first, and was a dangerous new mode of introducing cross-conditionality. As critics in the main progressive agriculture think-tanks explained in May 2003:

> Over the decades, loan conditions of the IMF/World Bank have forced developing countries to lower their trade barriers, cut subsidies for their domestic food producers, and eliminate government programmes aimed to enhance rural agriculture. However, no such conditions are imposed on wealthy industrial countries ... [The WTO permits dumping] surplus foods at prices below the cost of production, driving out rural production in developing countries and expanding markets for the large transnational exporting companies. It also prohibits developing countries from introducing new programmes that may help their local agriculture producers. As a result the agriculture sectors in developing countries, key for rural poverty reduction, have been devastated.[12]

Similar NGO complaints were made about Monterrey's 'coherence agenda' on water privatisation, regulation of foreign investors, and governance of the multilateral institutions. Supporters of the MDGs and Monterrey would no doubt reply that many such problems could be resolved, but only if momentum increased to *reform* the institutions to more democratically reflect the needs of southern countries instead of northern voting power. The Monterrey final report recognised 'the need to broaden and strengthen the participation of developing countries in international economic decision-making and norm-setting'.[13] But the democracy deficit actually worsened in the wake of Monterrey, as witnessed by the controversial, undemocratic appointments of Spanish and US conservatives Rodrigo Rato and Paul Wolfowitz in 2004–05.

What then of the aid promised at Monterrey? It is well known that donor aid to Africa dropped by 40% during the 1990s, especially in the wake of the West's cold war victory, but the general decline in rich countries' overseas development assistance had begun during the late 1960s (from 0.45% of GDP to a low of 0.15% in 2000). Official aid flows subsequently rose again, to \$69 billion. But the use of debt relief funds to boost these figures—as was notoriously done in 2005 by British finance minister Gordon Brown—is highly dubious, especially since at Monterrey governments agreed that debt relief should be 'additional' to existing and rising aid. (Debt relief rose from around \$1.5 billion in 2000 to more than \$6 billion in 2003, but was provided in such a way as to deepen not lessen dependence and Northern control.) Even with this distortion, and even using official World Bank data, it is clear that most countries (except Scandinavian states and the Netherlands) are well below the 0.7% target for aid set 35 years ago in the UN. The US and Japanese figures of 0.12% and 0.23% are most egregious. Compared with military spending of \$642 billion in 2003, aid of \$69 billion is a pittance. The USA is the most striking arms spender compared to aid stinginess, along with Greece, the UK, France and Portugal. Moreover, once one factors in the vast wastage associated with the aid bureaucracy, tied aid, as well as other 'phantom' aspects such as debt relief, a further correction can be made. The worst offenders of tied aid are Italy and the USA, while France and the USA are the major 'phantom' donors, with 89% and 86%, respectively, failing to qualify as real aid. Globally, Action Aid estimates, total official aid of \$69 billion in 2003 was reduced to 'real' aid to poor people of just \$27 billion.[14]

Doha

Doha was, likewise, so imbalanced that the so-called 'Development Agenda' (a euphemism for a new round of trade) again made matters worse not better.[15] In short, the agenda of deepening liberalisation was successful at the WTO's November 2001 ministerial summit, in the wake of the Seattle 1999 breakdown and the 9/11 terrorist attack on the USA, which played into Washington's hands. Amid exceptionally tight security, dissenting delegates were threatened that trade preferences to their countries would be withdrawn if they didn't sign on. At one point a live microphone picked up then-WTO leader Michael Moore's discussion with the Qatari host trade minister about how to stop the Indian delegation from even taking the floor to speak. Save the Children trade analyst John Hilary concluded, 'Bullying and blackmail have become an integral part of how the WTO works, as we saw all too clearly at the Doha ministerial. Time and again, developing countries have been forced to abandon negotiating positions as a result of economic, political and even personal threats to their delegates'.[16] The African delegation was a key site of struggle. Aileen Kwa of Focus on the Global South reported, 'What broke Africa in the final two days, was when the US and the EU contacted heads of state such as President Obasanjo of Nigeria and other African leaders. This led to delegations in Doha receiving calls from their capitals. While Nigeria had earlier been quite firm in its opposition, it suddenly went silent in the final 13th November meetings'.[17] The possibility of a coerced deal became tangible when South African trade minister Alec Erwin met the African, Africa-Caribbean-Pacific (ACP) and Less-Developed-Country groups on the final day of the Doha negotiations. Dot Keet reports that Erwin

> advised them that they had no choice but to accept the text, which was 'the best possible outcome for them in the circumstances.' According to participants and eyewitnesses, there were a number of angry responses to the South African minister, some even asking rhetorically who he represented and whose interests he was serving . . . The joint meeting dissolved in disarray. This was the final maneuver that dissipated the resistance of a major grouping of developing countries that many had hoped would repeat [at] Doha their role in Seattle. This was not to be. All the pressures and persuasions, manipulations and maneuvers only managed to secure what one Member of the European Parliament characterised as 'a resentful acquiescence'.[18]

In 2002 other Doha deadlines were missed by trade negotiators concerning the 'special and differential treatment' required by the Third World, and the health sector's need for exemptions from Trade in Intellectual Property Rights pharmaceutical patent provisions. By September 2003 there was still no procedure and the Cairns Group strategy was conclusively frustrated. At the WTO's Cancun ministerial summit, in spite of efforts by Erwin and the G20 group to continue negotiating a deal, the ACP countries again led a Seattle-style walkout to end the charade. The renewed WTO framework established in Geneva in mid-2004 promoted further commodification through the General Agreement on Trade in Services, while providing some rhetorical (not yet real) agricultural subsidy cuts.[19] The UN Development Programme's 2005 *Human Development Report* identified a 15% increase in subsidies between the late 1980s and 2004, from $243 billion to $279 billion, with Japan relatively most subsidy-intensive (56%) in relation to agricultural production, compared with the EU (33%) and the USA (18%).[20] The problem persisted in the run-up to the December 2005 WTO ministerial summit in Hong Kong, where, again, the central issue was whether the North would make good on repeated promises to cut agricultural subsidies. According to Bloomberg News columnist Andy Mukherjee,

> The promise by rich countries to cut their perverse farm subsidies is an elaborate charade that wouldn't fool a 10-year-old . . . Seemingly generous offers have raised expectations that negotiations this week in Geneva just might produce a plan that satisfies developing nations. Scratch the surface of magnanimity, and this is what the proposals boil down to: Billions of dollars are to be taken out of the 'amber box', which is the World Trade Organization's jargon for subsidies that are seen as heavily price-distorting, only to be given a backdoor entry through the 'blue box', a name for handouts that are presumably less harmful.

> And in exchange for this chicanery, which will do precious little to improve market access for their poor farmers, fast-growing Asian economies—China, India and Vietnam—must allow global financial institutions, such as Citigroup Inc and Allianz AG, a free run of their growing middle classes.[21]

The debt trap

Turning to the third aspect of the UN officials' agenda, what progress was there on debt—the main budget constraint on Third World states' capacity to meet MDG goals? In absolute terms Third World debt rose from \$580 billion in 1980 to \$2.4 trillion in 2002, and much of it is now simply unrepayable. In 2002 there was a net outflow of \$340 billion in servicing this debt, compared with overseas development aid of \$37 billion. As Brussels-based debt campaigner Eric Toussaint remarks, 'since 1980, over 50 Marshall Plans (over \$4.6 trillion) have been sent by the peoples of the Periphery to their creditors in the Centre'.[22] Hence Africa now repays more than it receives. In 1980 loan inflows of \$9.6 billion were comfortably higher than the debt repayment outflow of \$3.2 billion, so the Ponzi-type scheme (borrowing simply to repay interest) continued: by 2000 only \$3.2 billion flowed in, and \$9.8 billion was repaid, leaving a net financial flows deficit of \$6.2 billion.[23] For 21 African countries the debt outstanding had reached at least 300% of exports by 2002, and for impoverished countries like Sudan, Burundi, Sierra Leone and Guinea-Bissau it was 15 times greater than annual export earnings. In at least 16 countries a very strong case could be made that the inherited debt from dictators is legally 'odious', since the citizenry were victimised both in the debt's original accumulation (and use against them), and in demands that it be repaid: Nigeria (\$30 billion), South Africa (\$22 billion), the DRC (\$13 billion), Sudan (\$9 billion), Ethiopia (\$8 billion), Kenya (\$5.8 billion), Congo (\$4.5 billion), Mali (\$2.5 billion), Somalia (\$2.3 billion), Malawi (\$2.2 billion), Togo (\$1.4 billion), Liberia (\$1.2 billion), Rwanda (\$1 billion), Uganda (\$0.6 billion), the Central African Republic (\$0.2 billion). Other undemocratic countries—including Zimbabwe (\$4.5 billion)—could also be added to this list, which easily exceeds 50% of Africa's outstanding debt.[24]

Instead of debt repudiation by the South or cancellation by the North, Washington financiers from the Bretton Woods Institutions and the US Treasury Department devised the Highly Indebted Poor Countries Initiative (HIPC) in 1996. HIPC was subsequently augmented by a June 2005 G8 finance ministers' deepening of debt relief for 18 countries. However, the deep neoliberal conditionality associated with these deals did not change, and includes state basic services privatisation requirements in a vast proportion of country programmes, and associated Poverty Reduction Strategy Papers. Moreover, as Jubilee Plus reported in mid-2003, 'According to the original HIPC schedule, 21 countries should have fully passed through the HIPC initiative and received total debt cancellation of approximately \$34.7 billion in net present value terms. In fact, only eight countries have passed

Completion Point, between them receiving debt cancellation of $11.8 billion'.[25] The subsequent relief package announced before the Gleneagles G8 summit in mid-2005 meant very little, according to the Australian newspaper *GreenLeft Weekly*:

> The huge figures most often quoted by the press, $50–55 billion, include IMF, World Bank and African Development Bank debts owed by around 20 of the other poorest Third World countries, which may become eligible for debt cancellation in the future; possibly nine more in 12–18 months, and another 10 or so at some undetermined date. While the $1.5 billion a year made available will certainly be of use for the 18 poverty-stricken countries, it will only boost their collective budget by about 6.5% per annum. The modest sum illustrates that the Western media's backslapping over their governments' 'generosity' is more than a little exaggerated and somewhat premature. Those 18 countries account for only 5% of the population of the Third World, and if all 38 countries become eligible in the future, it will still only affect around 11%... Washington will need only find between $130 million and $175 million a year, which is almost three times less than it spends each year just to run its Baghdad embassy. The total 10-year cost for the US is around what Washington will spend to build a new embassy in the Iraqi capital. Washington alone spends $2 billion a month to wage war in Iraq. If those figures call into question the 'historic' scale of the West's benevolence towards Africa and the Third World, compare them to the US annual defense budget, which will be more than $441 billion in 2006 alone... It should be also noted that debts owed to the Inter-American Development Bank and the Asian Development Bank are not included in the deal, nor are the Third World countries' huge bilateral debt burden (that is, debt owed to individual rich countries). Even if all 38 nominated countries eventually have their multilateral debts wiped, it will still represent just 18% of Africa's total external debt of $300 billion, and a tiny part of the Third World's total debt, which is estimated at a staggering $2.4 trillion.[26]

Other African and global justice advocates were even harsher in their condemnations.[27] According to Jubilee South, 'The multilateral debt cancellation being proposed is still clearly tied to compliance with conditionalities which exacerbate poverty, open our countries further for exploitation and plunder, and perpetuate the domination of the South ... Even if the debt cancellation were without conditionalities, the proposal falls far too short in terms of coverage and amounts to demonstrate a bold step towards justice by any standard.' Remarked Jayati Ghosh, New Delhi-based co-ordinator of the economics network IDEAS, 'Even otherwise well-informed and progressive people in the developing world were fooled into thinking that, for a change, the leaders of the core capitalist countries were actually thinking about doing some good for people desperately in need of it... The G8 debt relief deal is actually a paltry and niggardly reduction... And this pathetic amount is being traded for yet more major concessions made by the debtor countries, in terms of sweeping and extensive privatisation of public services and utilities, which is about all that is left for governments to sell in these countries, as well as large increases in indirect taxes which fall disproportionately on the poor.' Finally, as the Harare-based African Network & Forum on Debt & Development put it, 'The recent solutions offered by the G8 for the Debt crisis in poor countries are nothing short of the continuation of the chains of slavery and bondage for the citizens in those countries . . . they are just raising people's hopes unnecessarily as the world waits to see the devil in the details . . . The deal only represents one eighth of what Africa needs in terms of debt cancellation, as this means canceling only US$40 billion out of Africa's burgeoning debt stock of over US$330 billion. The agreement does not address the real global power imbalances but rather reinforces global apartheid.' In late June 2005 African heads of state meeting in the African Union in Sirte, Libya issued an unprecedented call for comprehensive debt cancellation for all of Africa. According to Nairobi-based debt campaigner Soren Ambrose, even two presidents of benefiting countries, Abdoulaye Wade of Senegal and John Kufuor of Ghana,

> responded to the deal by saying it would only have real meaning in the context of continent-wide cancellation. Activists now have the opportunity to use these statements to pressure their governments to repudiate, or at least demand a much better deal. The example of Nigeria is fresh in people's minds: when the lower house of the federal legislature called for repudiation of the entire external debt, and President Olusegun Obasanjo demurred but said it may come to that, the country's bilateral creditors instantly became significantly more willing to make a deal at the Paris Club. The merits of the deal Nigeria got in June 2005 are the subject of fierce debate, but the important thing for campaigners is the successful deployment of a credible threat of repudiation, which can be held up to other countries. Another lesson from Nigeria may well concern the dangers of a top-down campaign: since the pressure for repudiation came largely from legislators, once they are satisfied with a deal, the pressure can easily disappear. But one of the civil society campaigners, Justice Egware of the Civil Society Action Coalition on Education for All in Nigeria, drew the logical conclusion from the G8 Summit, saying, 'The message from Gleneagles is clear to us in Africa. We will intensify our call to our governments that have not secured debt cancellation to strongly consider repudiating unjust and odious external debt'.

Campaigning for MDGs or for popular power?

The more moderate GCAP network, in contrast, uses MDGs as the universalising point of reference: 'A single global title for the mobilisation is needed to provide focus, cohesion and to maximise impact of activity'. There *is* a genuine need for focus and cohesion, but it is impossible to lift up poverty campaigning with MDG handles, so badly bent have they become in Monterrey on aid, in Doha on trade, through HIPC on debt and at Gleneagles. The UN's September 2005 Millennium Summit demonstrated how very little can be expected at the scale of global governance these days, in view of the prevailing balance of forces.[28] For focus and cohesion some have suggested that the World Social Forum (WSF) be the logical site for the development of an ideological programme and plan of action to fight poverty, militarism and ecological degradation simultaneously. An equally strong if not stronger case could be made for building the programme not through WSF but rather through integrating and interrelating the existing sectoral movement-based networks.[29] If a global programme is developed in the manner conceived by GCAP's strategists, it could have the reverse effect: organisational demobilisation accompanied by lowest-common-denominator analyses and demands.

To illustrate, GCAP's first newsletter, issued on 14 June 2005, is a 3600-word report-back on campaigning across the world. Yet it contains no reference to organic anti-poverty activism in the Global South, such as—in no particular order—labour strikes, popular mobilisations for AIDS treatment and other health services or reconnections of water/electricity, land and housing occupations, anti-GMO and pro-food security campaigns, women's organising, municipal budget campaigns, student and youth movements, community resistance to displacements caused by dam construction and the like, anti-debt and reparations movements, environmental justice struggles, immigrants' rights campaigns, political movements to take state power, etc, etc. There was no mention of sites like Bolivia and Venezuela, where popular initiatives have changed governments. The formidable recent upsurge of popular unrest—1980s–1990s IMF riots, high-profile indigenous people's protests since Zapatismo in 1994, global justice activism since Seattle in 1999, the Social Forum movement since 2001, anti-war demos since 2001, autonomist protests and the Latin American left's revival—might never have happened, from the standpoint of GCAP. In contrast to rhetoric about MDGs, serious activists are crossing borders, races, classes and political traditions in sector after sector: land (Via Campesino), healthcare (International People's Health Council), free schooling (Global Campaign for Education), water (the People's World Water Forum), energy/climate change (the Durban Declaration), debt (Jubilee South), democratic development finance (IFIs-Out! and World Bank Bonds Boycott), trade (Our World is Not for Sale), and so on. Of course, it is not at all easy to interlock the already overlapping grassroots and shopfloor justice campaigns. South Africans now campaigning for an overall programme of 'decommodification' and socioeconomic rights know this, as a result of the various movements' political splits (mainly over the merits of alignment to the corruption-riddled, neoliberal ruling party of Thabo Mbeki).

Certainly one of the 'top-down' characteristics of the MDGs is its origins within the United Nations. The UN's drift away from serving the interests of poor people, into the circuit of global neoliberal power, has begun to attract formidable protest, certainly in South Africa. In September 2001 at the World Conference against Racism, the UN's failure to address reparations for slavery/colonialism and Israeli apartheid led to a hostile demonstration outside the Durban convention centre by 20 000 activists. In August 2002 the Johannesburg World Summit on Sustainable Development's drive to privatise basic services, and its utter failure to address most major ecological problems (such as global warming), were grounds for 25 000 people marching 12 km from an impoverished township to the luxury suburb of Sandton, demanding the UN delegates disband before doing yet more damage. The UN's 1991–2003 sanctions against Iraq and its endorsement of the illegal US-led occupation on 22 May 2003 were also a source of great concern to peace activists.

Subsequent attempts to democratise the UN Security Council were watered down to the point of uselessness, notwithstanding the initial mid-2005 prospect of two African countries (probably South Africa and Nigeria) gaining permanent Security Council seats alongside India, Brazil, Japan and Germany—but without veto power enjoyed by the permanent members. Then even that Bantustan-type modification to global apartheid fell out of reach by September 2005, thanks to US Ambassador John Bolton's disruptive tactics, as well as a principled rejection by the African Union. What that left for the Summit was a revealing lack of action on the MDGs. As South African president Thabo Mbeki observed with uncharacteristic pessimism, 'our approach to the challenge to commit and deploy the necessary resources for the realisation of the MDGs has been half-hearted, timid and tepid'.[30] According to an apparently surprised Vicente García-Delgado, the UN representative for Civicus,

> What took place at the UN during the few weeks leading to the Summit was a disgrace—an ugly diplomatic spectacle where a large majority of Member States saw their carefully drafted outcome document blown up before their eyes, and where the entire process of delicate intergovernmental negotiations was held hostage to a small minority pulling in opposite directions. After juggling the Millennium Development Goals (MDGs) which are literally a life or death matter for hundreds of millions of people living in extreme poverty, we have now landed up with an insipid declaration that is long on generalities and short on actions... By blocking global efforts to bring about the basic conditions that would allow poor nations and poor communities to pull themselves out of the poverty trap, the UN Member States who held the World Summit hostage, have shown an appalling lack of urgency, responsibility and vision, and a profoundly sad failing of wisdom. Worse yet, they have missed a unique opportunity to make good on their past promises and to take concrete, measurable steps toward achieving the MDGs.[31]

Nevertheless, García-Delgado claims, GCAP 'actions have not been in vain. Without their participation and activism, the results of this Summit might have been much, much worse (notably, the pressure exercised by a broad coalition of US Christian leaders on their government might have saved the MDGs from disappearing into thin air)'. But to be quite frank, weren't these efforts in vain given that no new resources or strategic changes emerged, and doesn't the September 2005 fiasco demonstrate the need for the much deeper and also much more urgent work of expanding existing organic activist initiatives? After all, given the power structures, the militarism, the bureaucratic lethargy and the neoliberal processes that are continually reinforced in the UN, many now ask, why not let it instead 'go the way of the League of Nations', as Tariq Ali advocates?[32]

There is a better approach, as Nicola Bullard of Focus on the Global South argued in mid-2005:

> The UN also has many supporters amongst NGOs and some sectors of civil society who believe it has the potential to curb excesses of power, redress injustices and to form the basis of democratic global governance. Some support it simply because their own existence is tied to the fate of the UN . . . Where is the potential for democratising the global system when the main sources of the 'democracy deficit'—the market and militarised, globalised capitalism—are outside the UN system? Is it realistic to imagine that the UN could 'control' the market and curtail the world's superpower? And, most importantly here, what sort of reforms, if any, would address the concerns of peoples' organisations and social movements, especially those struggling for basic rights such as land, water, work, housing, health and education? 'We the peoples' in the 21st century is a powerful idea because it is a self-definition that arises out of this consciousness, one which is generated and reinforced by collective action and solidarity. The elegant opening words of the UN Charter have become alive and manifest in the diversity of social movements and NGOs that constitute the 'movement of movements'. The 'movement of movements' includes the global justice, anti-war, anti-globalisation, anti-imperialist and anti-capitalist movements. It includes workers and women and migrants and peasants and young people and indigenous peoples and all who are struggling for peace and justice. It defies a single category or morphology and encompasses the local and the global, the vertical and the horizontal. It displays a tremendous capacity to create its own organisational forms and processes based on an ever-widening commitment to pluralism and democracy . . . It is difficult to imagine what sort of institutional reforms would be useful in this struggle. What use would be an expanded Security Council to the coca farmers of Bolivia? Would an Economic Security Council defend the peoples' resources against the multi-nationals? It seems most unlikely. However, the still potent and universalising morality of the human rights discourse is one aspect of the United Nations that must be defended because it can be a genuinely powerful tool (albeit largely rhetorical) for social movements in their struggles . . . Therefore, the task is not to 'reform' the United Nations but to join arm in arm with the social movements and communities to build the political and institutional tools so that 'we the peoples' can, ourselves, fulfil the promises made by the UN 60 years ago. Our work is to transform 'we the peoples' from being the objects of an imaginary benevolent state to 'we the peoples' who are the active subjects in building global democracy.[33]

Taking this advice seriously would leave two other approaches to try at this present stage, ahead of a future effort to rebuild genuine democratic global governance when the conditions are more amenable: 'decommodification' and 'de-globalisation'.[34] It should not require pointing out that, by use of this latter word, no one intends the revival of autarchic experiences (the 20th century's Albania, Burma or North Korea), or corrupt Third World chaos (contemporary Zimbabwe), or authoritarianism (Malaysia). The strategic formula which, among other movements, South African progressives have broadly adopted—internationalism combined with demands upon the national state to 'lock capital down'[35]—could begin by removing the boot of the Bretton Woods Institutions from Third World necks, as an example of what must be done. The World Bank Bonds Boycott (http://www.worldbankboycott.org) is having remarkable success in de-funding the institution that is most often at the coalface of neoliberal repression across the Third World. In addition, South Africans and other activists have won dramatic victories in de-globalising the Trade Related Intellectual Property Rights regime, by demanding and winning generic anti-retroviral medicines instead of branded, monopoly-patented drugs. Similar struggles are underway to de-globalise food, especially transnational corporate GMOs, to halt bio-piracy, and to kick out the water and energy privatisers. These are typically 'non-reformist reforms' insofar as they achieve concrete goals and simultaneously link movements, enhance consciousness, develop the issues, and build democratic organisational forms and momentum.

As for the scale of the non-reformist reform struggles, the most important problem is 'subsidiarity': determining whether local community, subnational, national or regional strategies can best mitigate and reverse global economic tyranny for particular issues. The main reason to de-globalise is to gain space to fight neoliberal commodification. To illustrate, the South African decommodification agenda entails struggles to turn basic needs into genuine human rights, including: free anti-retroviral medicines to fight AIDS (hence disempowering 'big pharma'); 50 litres of free water per person per day (hence ridding Africa of Suez and other water privatisers); one kilowatt hour of free electricity for each individual every day (hence reorienting energy resources from export-orientated mining and smelting, to basic-needs consumption); extensive land reform (hence de-emphasising cash cropping and export-orientated plantations); prohibitions on service disconnections and evictions; free education (hence halting the General Agreement on Trade in Services); and the like. A free 'Basic Income Grant' allowance of $15/month is even advocated by churches, NGOs and trade unions. All such services should be universal (open to all, no matter income levels), and, to the extent feasible, financed through higher prices that penalise luxury consumption. This potentially unifying agenda—far superior to MDGs, in part because the agenda reflects real, durable grassroots struggles across the world—could serve as a basis for wide-scale social change, in the manner that Gosta Esping-Andersen has discussed with respect to Scandinavian social policy.[36]

By endorsing the MDGs, alongside the global-scale neoliberal institutions—including most of the UN—the campaigners are making a mistake. Working seriously, bottom-up, with the existing anti-poverty, global justice movements would constitute a much wiser use of resources, energy and political commitment.

Notes

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1 Peggy Antrobus, 'Presentation to Working Group on the MDGs and Gender Equality', UNDP Caribbean Regional Millennium Development Goals (MDGs) Conference, Barbados, 7 July 2003.
2 Antrobus argues: 'The deliberate exclusion of this fundamental indicator of women's human rights and empowerment from the MDGs symbolises both the lack of sincerity on the part of the majority of those who voted on them, and the struggle that lies ahead for anyone who seriously seeks equality, equity and empowerment for women'. *Ibid.*
3 Wachira Waruru, 'IMF, World Bank come under heavy criticism', *East African Standard* (Nairobi), 18 January 2005.
4 UN Habitat, 'Urban management programme', at http://hq.unhabitat.org/cdrom/ump/CD/about.html, accessed 7 July 2005.
5 UNDP, *Human Development Report 2003—Millennium Development Goals: A Compact among Nations to end Human Poverty*, New York: UNDP, 2003, p 3.
6 Minority Rights Group International, 'The Millennium Development Goals: helping or harming minorities?', presentation to UN Commission on Human Rights Sub-Commission on Promotion and Protection of Human Rights, Working Group on Minorities, New York, 30 May 2005.
7 Kumi Naidoo, Civicus Secretary General and Chief Executive Officer, 'Civil society gears up for a major global campaign against poverty', Johannesburg, 21 January 2005.
8 Jan Vandemoortele, Kamal Malhotra & Joseph Anthony Lim, 'Is MDG 8 on track as a global deal for human development?', United Nations Development Programme Bureau for Development Policy, Socio-economic Development Group, New York, June 2003.
9 United Nations, 'Report of the International Conference on Financing for Development', A/CONF.198/11, Monterrey, Mexico, Statement by Mike Moore, Director-General, World Trade Organization, 22 March, 2002. The IMF and Bank tend to underestimate the recurrent costs associated with most basic-needs goods, because the institutions generally insist on cost-recovery and self-financing.
10 Trevor Manuel, 'Remarks to the International Business Forum at the International Conference on Financing for Development', Monterrey, 18 March 2002.
11 See Patrick Bond (ed), *Fanon's Warning: A Civil Society Reader on the New Partnership for Africa's Development*, Trenton, USA: Africa World Press, Durban: UKZN Centre for Civil Society and Cape Town: AIDC, 2005, pp 160–162, for a discussion of the primary pilots and their failings. In August 2001 and October 2002 the main trade unions held two-day mass stayaways against private parternships involving essential public services. Manuel didn't mention these problems, even as caveats, nor did he concede his government's repeated failure to reach revenue targets from state asset sales.
12 Center of Concern, International Gender and Trade Network and Institute for Agriculture and Trade Policy, 'IMF–World Bank– WTO close ranks around flawed economic policies', 2003, at http://www.coc.org/resources/articles/display.html?ID=484.
13 United Nations, 'Report of the International Conference on Financing for Development', Final Resolution, paras 62–63.
14 Statistics are drawn from Action Aid, *Real Aid: An Agenda for Making Aid Work*, London: Action Aid, 2005.
15 For a critique, see Robert Wade, 'The ringmaster of Doha', *New Left Review*, 25, 2004, pp 146–152.
16 Cited in Mark Lynas, 'Playing dirty at the WTO', *Third World Network Features*, Penang, June 2003.
17 Aileen Kwa, *Power Politics in the WTO*, Bangkok: Focus on the Global South, 2002, p 24.
18 Dot Keet, *South Africa's Official Role and Position in Promoting the World Trade Organisation*, Cape Town: Alternative Information and Development Centre, 2002, p 35.
19 Martin Khor, 'Preliminary comments on the WTO's July decision and process,' Penang, Third World Network, 6 August 2004; Mark Weisbrot, 'No boost for development in world trade negotiations', Knight-Ridder Syndicate, 4 August 2004; and One World, 'International groups denounce World Trade Pact', 2 August 2004, at http://us.oneworld.net/article/view/91015/1/3319.
20 UNDP, *Human Development Report 2005*, New York: UNDP, pp 129–133. A crucial ongoing debate is whether reducing northern agricultural subsidies would genuinely benefit African peasants, given that export markets are typically captured by capital-intensive large farmers and plantations. No reliable studies exist to make definitive statements. There are, indeed, African heads of state who advocate continued EU agricultural subsidies, because in turn they believe that this reduces their cost of food imports bought in international markets. As in all such cases of state spending, the most crucial question is who benefits. The UNDP pointed out that northern agricultural subsidies overwhelmingly benefit large agrocorporate producers, with the EU's 15 major countries far more unbalanced (with a 0.78 Gini coefficient) than even the USA (0.68).
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23 World Bank, *Global Finance Tables*, Washington, DC: World Bank, 2002.
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25 Jubilee Plus, 'Real progress report on HIPC', London, September 2003.
26 'Africa needs justice not charity', *GreenLeft Weekly*, 29 June 2005.
27 The following quotes are sourced from Soren Ambrose, 'Assessing the G8 debt proposal and its implications', *Focus on Trade,* 25 September 2005.
28 For a defence of this position, see Patrick Bond, 'Bottom-up or top-down?', in David Held (ed), *Debating Globalisation*, Cambridge: Polity Press, 2005, pp 83–92.
29 This is argued in more detail in Patrick Bond, 'Gramsci, Polanyi and impressions on the World Social Forum from Africa', *International Journal of Urban and Regional Research*, 29 (2), 2005, pp 433–440.
30 Thabo Mbeki, 'The UN Millennium Review—time running out!', Address of the President of South Africa at the United Nations Millennium Review Summit Meeting, New York, 15 September 2005, p 3.
31 Vicente García-Delgado, 'The big letdown: UN summit shortchanges the poor', Civicus statement, New York, 16 September 2005.
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33 Nicola Bullard, 'Why UN reform is not a priority', *Focus on Trade*, September 2005, at http://www.focusweb.net.
34 Walden Bello, *Deglobalisation: Ideas for a New World Economy*, London: Zed Books, 2002.
35 Patrick Bond, *Against Global Apartheid*, London: Zed Books, 2003, Part Four.
36 Gosta Esping-Andersen, *The Three Worlds of Welfare Capitalism*, Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 1991.