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Abstract

Benchmarking has long been a central component of the global development industry, with the most prominent recent initiative being the Millennium Development Goal (MDG) framework. However, within existing scholarship, the agent-level interactions surrounding the MDG framework remain under-explored. Here, on the back of an analysis of interactions that took place within and around key MDG review summits, I develop a typology to clarify the intersection of benchmarking and blame games. Overall, I demonstrate that despite the efforts of the MDG architects to insulate the initiative, blame games have permeated policymakers' engagements with the framework. Moreover, the content of these blame games have been carried over into the recently outlined Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs). A pattern of strategic clarification has seen the emergence within this follow-on SDG framework of more precise responsibilities on higher-income states to meet aid targets, and on lower-income states to meet governance reform targets. Given the deeply-embedded cleavages that were evident in UN review summits, similar blame games seem likely to follow the periodic evaluations within the SDGs' lifespan.

Introduction

The desire to boil the ungovernable complexity of the social world down to a series of manageable proxy-measures seems to be a ubiquitous feature of life in and around the modern state. In many cases the demand from state agencies for ever greater flows of data was initially linked to practices of war-making, with reliable information needed to guide the movement of standing armies and supplies, and the levying of taxes to fund these operations.[1] Over time, with the expanding reach of governing structures into other policy areas, the creation of data flows has proliferated. It is now standard practice for states to collate indicators on a wide range of demographic trends, forms of economic activity, the performance of education and healthcare systems, and many other areas.[2] And while the instruments of the modern state may have enjoyed something of a head-start, international organisations are now working hard to reproduce this quantification of the social world on a global scale. Although transformations across other areas of global governance have been dramatic,[3] it is perhaps in the realm of development that benchmarking practices are at their most extensive.[4]

Through this paper I focus on the Millennium Development Goal framework, which represents arguably the most prominent attempt to benchmark global development. The Millennium Development Goals were launched at the end of 2001, with an unprecedented number of heads of state signalling their support through a period of high-profile United Nations summitry. The performance of the international community as a whole through the early 2000s was, it was suggested, to be assessed by evaluating the extent to which the lot of

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[1] Max Weber, *Economy and Society* (Berkley: University of California Press, 1978), pp. 956-1005; James C. Scott, Seeing Like a State: How Certain Schemes to Improve the Human Condition Have Failed (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1998), pp. 11-33.

[2] Michael Power, *The Audit Society: Rituals of Verification* (Oxford: University Press, 1997).

[3] Citations to special issue contributions; Lorenzo Fioramonti, *How Numbers Rule the World* (London: Zed, 2014); Lorenzo Fioramonti, 'A Post-GDP World: Why It's Time To End The Tyranny of Gross Domestic Product', *Foreign Policy* 2nd June, 2015. Available at http://foreignpolicy.com/2015/06/02/a-post-gdp-world/. Accessed 8th June, 2015.

[4] For detailed insights into the historical origins of benchmarking and statistics in the field of international development, see Hans Arndt, 'Economic Development: A Semantic History', *Economic Development and Cultural Change* 29:3 (1981), pp.457-66. A significant foundation on which modern practices have been built is widely held to have been provided by Eugene Staley, *The World Economy in Transition* (New York: Council on Foreign Relations, 1939).

its lowest income members was improved. The MDGs were introduced as a means of assessing the progress achieved in this regard. With its eight Goals and associated indicators and time-bound targets, the framework served to establish a multidimensional vision of poverty and poverty reduction for the Twenty-First Century. The MDG initiative has been the subject of much analysis through its fifteen year lifespan, with a number of works emerging as the Goals' 2015 census point is reached.[5] Here, I contribute to this literature by exploring the interactions that took place in and around a series of UN reviews of the MDGs.

Through an analysis of archival records and primary documents, I demonstrate that blame games have permeated these MDG-related processes. To conceptually unpack these blame games, I develop a typology that classifies the attribution of responsibility within benchmarking exercises that differentiates between their design and execution phases. In the case of the MDGs, the framework's architects sought to produce an initiative that used diffuse lines of responsibility to limit the prevalence of blame games. Developing country governments' low level of integration of the Goals into domestic policy frameworks served to maintain this opacity. However, UN review summits through 2008 and 2013 saw the emergence of prominent attempts to attribute blame for poor performance. A clear cleavage emerged between, on the one hand, representatives of developed states who laid primary responsibility for under-achievement on the MDGs at the door of developing countries' institutional weaknesses, and, on the other, representatives of emerging and developing states

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[5] Oxfam, *Failing to Deliver: The IMF and the Millennium Development Goals* (Washington: Oxfam, 2003); Dennis Garrity, 'Agroforestry and the Achievement of the Millennium Development Goals', *Agroforestry Systems*, 61:1 (2004), pp. 5-17; Andy Haines and Andrew Cassels (2004) 'Can the Millennium Development Goals be Attained?', *British Journal of Medicine*, 329:7462 (2004), pp. 394-97; Shalendra Sharma, 'The Promise of Monterrey: Meeting the Millennium Development Goals', *World Policy Journal*, 21:3 (2004), pp. 51-66; Suzanne Akiyama, 'Millennium Development Goals', in Naonobu Minato (ed.), *New Approaches to Development and Changing Sector Issues* (Tokyo: Foundation for Advanced Studies in International Development, 2005), pp.34-50; Tamar Gutner, 'When "Doing Good" Does Not: The IMF and the Millennium Development Goals', in Deborah Avant, Martha Finnemore, and Susan Sell (eds), *Who Governs the Globe?* (Cambridge: University Press, 2010), pp. 266-91; David Hulme and James Scott, 'The Political Economy of the MDGs: Retrospect and Prospect for the World's Biggest Promise', *New Political Economy*, 15:2 (2010), pp. 293-306; John McArthur, 'Own the Goals: What the Millennium Development Goals Have Accomplished', *Foreign Affairs*, 92:2 (2013), pp. 152-63.

who singled out insufficient flows of aid.[6] Through a process of strategic clarification, enhanced attention has been placed on these issues within the Sustainable Development Goal framework that is in the process of superceding the MDGs.[7] Overall, through the paper I address the under-examination of agent-level dynamics within the MDG-related literature,[8] and I offer initial reflections on the relationship between benchmarking and blame games to the emerging literature on the politics of global benchmarking.

In developing this line of analysis, the paper proceeds through the following structure. In the opening section, I outline the scope of the conceptual and empirical contribution that is made through the paper. I introduce the four-fold typology to clarify the intersection between benchmarking and blame games, and provide an overview of the primary analysis that underpins this contribution. Through the second section I provide a history of the Millennium Development Goals, outlining the capturing of the drafting process by a narrow group of UN technocrats, and their layering of diffuse lines of responsibility into the design of the MDG framework. I then through the third section review the content analysis of MDG summitry and associated policy framework documents, which uncovers the ongoing practices of blame shifting through UN fora. This dynamic has seen developed country representatives laying responsibility for poor performance at the door of corruption and low institutional capacity in developing countries, and developing countries identifying

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[6] Throughout the paper, the terms 'developed country' and 'developing country' are used to refer to members and non-members of the Organisation for Economic Cooperation and Development respectively.

[7] At the time of writing, the content of the Sustainable Development Goals had been drafted by the Open Working Group and reviewed and approved at the close of the 68th Session of the United National General Assembly. The final sign-off on the SDGs will take place in September 2015, with the UN Secretary General and his Special Advisor on the SDGs predicting overall stability in framework content. See Liz Ford, 'Sustainable Development Goals', *The Guardian Online*, 19th January. Available at http://www.theguardian.com/global-development/2015/jan/19/sustainable-development-goals-united-nations. Accessed 26th March, 2015. Throughout the paper, I use the term Sustainable Development Goals to refer to the version approved at the close of the 68th Session, which included 17 Goals and around 160 related indicators.

[8] Amongst the large body of MDG-related literature considered below, patterns of engagement and resistance displayed by particular agents in particular fora are explored in most detail by Sakiko Fukuda-Parr, 'Are the MDGs a Priority for Development Strategies and Aid Programs? Only Few Are!', *International Poverty Center Working Paper Series*, No.48 (2008), pp. 1-28; Sakiko Fukuda-Parr and David Hulme, 'International Norm Dynamics and 'the End of Poverty': Understanding the Millennium Development Goals (MDGs)', *Global Governance: A Review of Multilateralism and International Organizations*, 17:1 (2011), pp. 17-36.

developed countries' unmet aid commitments as the key factor inhibiting progress. Strategic clarification has come as the MDGs have evolved into the Sustainable Development Goals, whose relatively open and inclusive drafting process has led to the incorporation of more precisely delineated responsibilities into this follow-on system. Through the concluding section of the paper, I provide a brief recapitulation of the paper's core themes and findings.

The exploration of blame games in the world of the MDGs that I provide below focuses on state representatives' engagements with the MDG framework that were manifest through the 2008 and 2013 UN review summits of the initiative, and through a series of post-MDG launch Poverty Reduction Strategy Papers (PRSPs). This picture is, of course, partial; the network of relationships surrounding the MDG framework extended out beyond this selection of actors and arenas. International and domestic non-governmental organisations, in particular, remained closely hooked-in to the framework, and contributed to the emergence of extended blame games that unfolded across multiple levels of governance.[9] While these extended blame games sit beyond the central scope of the paper, they represent an important subject for future research. Indeed, given the ambitions of the SDG architects to use the post-2015 framework to push for enhanced domestic accountability processes as a means of improving developing-country government performance, these extended blame games look set to become increasingly important over time.

Benchmarking and Blame Shifting in Global Development

In the realm of global development, benchmarks come in many different shapes and sizes. In many quarters the GDP measure continues to reign supreme, and has come to be seen as an objective yardstick with which to assess the performance of developed and developing countries alike.[10] Through the mid-2000s several prominent critical appraisals sought to

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[9] See, for example, Duncan Green 'The Power of Numbers: Why the MDGs Were Flawed (And Post-2015 Goals Look Set To Go the Same Way)', *Oxfam Blogs* (14th August, 2014) available at http://oxfamblogs.org/fp2p/the-power-of-numbers-why-the-mdgs-were-flawed-and-post2015-goals-look-set-to-go-the-same-way/. Accessed 8th June, 2015.

[10] The taken-for-grantedness of this conceptualisation amongst groups inside the World Bank, for example, is touched upon by several analyses. See Anthony Bebbington, Scott Guggenhein, Elizabeth

extend the range of data captured by this narrowly-targeted indicator, with proposals to augment the GDP figure with additional measures pertaining to both environmental and social factors. [11] Beyond these economistically-centred frameworks, more self-consciously multidimensional frameworks have been crafted by agencies of various stripes. These frameworks have been created to try to ensure that the way in which we measure and promote development includes an explicit focus on education, health, and other measures of living standards. The initiatives that can be listed in this regard include the United Nations Development Programme's Human Development Index, the World Economic Forum's Gender Gap Index, and, the focus of this paper, the Millennium Development Goals.

In the paragraphs below I outline the extension offered by this paper to both the emerging literature on the politics of global benchmarking, and the MDG-related literature. The former body of work offers many valuable insights, exploring both the constitutive and relational aspects of benchmarking interventions. By analysing the intersection between benchmarking and blame shifting, I in particular engage with works that focus on the relational dimension. Within the MDG-related literature, there is a tendency toward exploring the constitutive impact of the framework in a way that can obscure the role of agent-led contestation. By exploring the detail of agent interactions surrounding the MDGs, I rebalance the focus of these works. As is noted in the introduction to this special issue, benchmarks represent inescapably political interventions. Here, I draw on the roadmap provided by the special issue editors to outline the contribution from this work on the MDGs.

The first set of properties associated with benchmarking that are flagged up by the editors of the special issue serve to highlight the constitutive power of these systems. These properties relate to the reification of particular normative standards into observable and

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Olson, and Michael Woolcock, 'Exploring Social Capital Debates at the World Bank', *Journal of Development Studies*, 40:5 (2004), pp. 33-64; Liam Clegg, 'Our Dream is a World Full of Poverty Indicators: The US, the World Bank, and the Power or Numbers', *New Political Economy*, 15:4 (2010), pp. 473-92.

[11] Nicholas Stern, 'The Economics of Climate Change', *American Economic Review*, 98:2 (2008), pp. 1-37; Joseph Stiglitz, Armatya Sen, and Jean-Paul Fitoussi, *Report by the Committee on the Measurement of Economic Performance and Social Progress* (Paris: INSEE, 2009). More recently, see Fioramonti, *How Numbers Rule the World*; Fioramonti, 'A Post-GDP World'.

seemingly objective categorisations, and the commensuration of discrete units into a common evaluative metric.[12] By providing an authoritative ideal-type template that embodies a set of short-hand assumptions about how to understand and address a policy issue, the successful dissemination of a benchmark can serve to frame the way in which a community of relevant actors perceive significant aspects of their social and political environments. In existing literature, it is relatively common for benchmarking systems to be criticised for the blind-spots they can create in their rises to dominance. By reproducing existing power relations, so critics argue, there is a tendency for benchmarking initiatives to crowd-out the perspectives and interests of more marginalised agents.

Prominent contributions to feminist and critical accounting scholarship offer analyses that progress along these lines. Literature within this area has, for example, sought to highlight the systematic devaluation of social reproduction that has been locked in through the rise to dominance of the UN System of National Accounts (SNA) as the core point of reference shaping statistical agencies' attempts to track economic activity. By excluding labour undertaken within the household from its sphere of calculation, the SNA has been said to marginalise forms of work predominantly undertaken by females in both the study of political economy and the practice of economic management. [13] In a similar vein, the Millennium Development Goals themselves have also been attacked for their totalising impact. The MDG framework has been criticised, *inter alia*, for embedding a neo-liberal conceptualisation of development, and for rolling out a top-down, technocratic approach that leaves little space for substantive input from domestic populations.[14] Findings from this paper

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[12] Editors, 'Governing the World at a Distance', 10-12.

[13] Marilyn Waring, *Counting for Nothing: What Men Value and What Women Are Worth* (Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 2004); Michèle Pujol, 'Into The Margin', in Edith Kuiper and Jolande Sap (eds) *Out of the Margin: Feminist Perspectives on Economics* (London: Routledge), pp.17-34.

[14] Gabay classifies the body of scholarship adopting this stand on the MDGs as 'the reductionists'. Clive Gabay, 'The Millennium Development Goals and Ambitious Developmental Engineering', *Third World Quarterly* 33:7 (2012), pp.1253-4. Particular works singled out by Gabay include Ashwani Saith, 'From Universal Values to Millennium Development Goals: Lost in Transition', *Development and Change* 37:6 (2006), 1167-99; Peggy Antrobus, 'MDGs: Most Distracting Gimmicks', *Convergence* 38:3 (2005), pp.49-52; Samir Amin, 'The Millennium Development Goals: A Critique from the South', *Monthly Review* 57:10 (2006), pp.1-9. See also Sakiko Fukuda-Parr, Alicia Ely Yamin, and Joshua Greenstein, 'The Power of Numbers: A Critical Review of Millennium Development Goal Targets for Human Development and Human Rights, *Journal of Human*

shed some light on the constitutive side of the MDG process. In particular, by demonstrating that the integration of MDG indicators into domestic policy frameworks has remained modest, and that contestation of the Goals within reviews remains widespread, I demonstrate that the constitutive impact of the MDGs remains relatively limited in the examined fora. Discussion over the appropriateness of the Goals, and use of alternative measures of development, has continued to feature prominently. It is, however, toward the more relational elements of benchmarking interventions that the core engagement from this paper is directed.

The second set of properties belonging to benchmarking systems that are flagged up by the editors in their introduction refer to the relational aspects of these structures. The relational impact of benchmarking comes with what the editors refer to as the closing of the recursive loop. Through benchmarking interventions, value rankings of an aspect of the social world are made, and the recursive loop is completed as benchmarked agents adjust their subsequent behaviour.[15] In its most simplified version, a hierarchical and unidirectional relationship can be seen to exist between the benchmarker, who designs the framework and operationalises the symbolic judgement, and the benchmarkee, who receives the judgement and responds accordingly. However, as is outlined elsewhere in the special issue and in the wider literature on the politics of global benchmarking, the relational aspects of benchmarking interventions can take the form of complex and iterative interactions.[16] Guided by the interactions observed through MDG review summits and associated processes, and drawing on insights from both the existing literature on blame games and on the politics of benchmarking, below I present a framework for exploring the intersection of blame games and benchmarking interventions.[17]

Development and Capabilities 15:3 (2014), pp.105-17; Gita Sen and Avanti Mukherjee, 'No Empowerment without Rights, No Rights without Politics: Gender-equality, MDGs and the post-2015 Development Agenda', *Journal of Human Development and Capabilities* 15:3 (2014), pp.188-202.

[15] Editors, 'Governing the World at a Distance', 10-12.

[16] Citation to special issue contributions; Sakiko Fukuda-Parr, 'Global Goals as a Policy Tool: Intended and Unintended Consequences', *Journal of Human Development and Capabilities* 15:3 (2014), pp.118-31.

[17] It is suggested by Rhodes that by acknowledging an iterative relationship to exist between conceptual clarification and empirical investigation, 'organising perspectives' can be established to guide our understanding of the social world. See Rod Rhodes, 'From Marketisation to Diplomacy: It's the Mix that Matters', *Australian Journal of Public Administration* 56:2 (1997), pp.40-53. In this study,

To gain analytic traction over the intersection of blame games and benchmarking interventions, it is useful to begin by exploring the issue of responsibility. Two distinct moments can be identified that shape the nature of the lines of responsibility that become embedded within benchmarking interventions. The first of these comes at the benchmarking design phase. At this phase, the intervention's architects can opt to identify discrete agents with responsibility for the achievement of outcomes, agents who will be rewarded or sanctioned in line with benchmarked indicators. Conversely, these architects can design a benchmark with less direct lines of responsibility. In such cases, rather than being driven by the application of direct material or normative sanctions, any subsequent behavioural change will result from more diffuse shifts in beliefs about appropriate standards.[18] The second of these moments comes through the implementation phase. By virtue of their socially negotiated nature, lines of responsibility in the world of benchmarking retain a fluidity that outlasts their initially designated structure. As is comprehensively catalogued in the work of Christopher Hood and others,[19] many strategies are available to agents with which to either associate or dissociate themselves from a particular benchmarking exercise.[20] Through the implementation phase, lines of responsibility can be either clarified or blurred.

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an initial review of interactions highlighted the prevalence of blame shifting in MDG review summits, and prompted the subsequent drawing together of the work of Christopher Hood and others on this topic with other literatures on the politics of global benchmarking.

[18] Across the field of International Studies, much literature has sought to analytically and empirically cut between behavioural change associated with these 'logic of consequence'- and 'logic of approrpiateness'-based drivers. See, for example, James March and Johan Olsen, 'Institutional Perspectives on Political Institutions', *Governance* 9:3 (1996), pp.247-64; Harald Müller, 'Arguing, Bargaining, and All That: Communicative Action, Rationalist Theory, and the Logic of Appropriateness in International Relations', *European Journal of International Relations* 10:3 (2004), pp.395-435. These issues are not directly explored in this paper, although there is an implicit assumption that, at different times and in different contexts, changes in behaviour brought about by benchmarking interventions can be mediated through either form of causal pathway.

[19] Christopher Hood, *The Blame Game: Spin, Bureaucracy, and Self-Preservation in Government* (New Jersey: Princeton University Press, 2011); Christopher Hood, 'What Happens When Transparency Meets Blame-Avoidance?', *Public Management Review* 9:2 (2007), pp. 191-210. Earlier work on the politics of blame include Kathleen McGraw, 'Avoiding Blame: An Experimental Investigation of Political Excuses and Justifications', *British Journal of Political Science* 20:1 (1990), pp. 119-131; Kathleen McGraw and Clark Hubbard, 'Some of the People Some of the Time: Individual Differences in Acceptance of Political Accounts', in Diana Mutz, Paul Sniderman, and Richard Brody (eds) *Political Persuasion and Attitude Change* (Michigan: University of Michigan Press, 1996), pp. 145-170.

[20] Although he rarely uses the terms 'benchmark' and 'benchmarking', significant aspects of Hood's work reflects on interactions that are in nature similar to those focused on by the editors of this special issue. Hood's favoured terminology for benchmark-like structures is 'synecdoche', which refers to the

Given the existence of these two potential starting points and two potential processes of evolution, a four-part matrix can be created to capture the intersection between blame games and benchmarking processes. This typology is presented in Figure 1. I briefly discuss dynamics associated with each mode below, paying particular attention to benchmarking interventions in the field of development.

Figure 1: Responsibility in Global Benchmarking

| | | *Responsibility through execution* | |
		Direct	Diffuse
Responsibility by design	Direct	Direct responsibility	Strategic blurring
	Diffuse	Strategic clarification	Diffuse responsibility

The inclusion of direct responsibilities within benchmarking interventions can be expected where asymmetric relationships exist between benchmarker and benchmarkee that enable the former to lock in their preferences against the contrasting preferences of the latter, or where there is a sufficient level of consensus amongst relevant parties. The asymmetric version of this mode coheres closely with practices associated with the new public management agenda; by collating and publishing a range of performance-related data, benchmarking systems are structured so as to encourage the assessed units to 'up their game'. [21] The increasing application of this mode of benchmarking in the realm of development is particularly associated with the rise to dominance of neo-liberal practices through the 1980s.[22] In such cases, even if the benchmarkee disputes the legitimacy of the

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proxy measurement that is used to gauge performance as a whole. See Gwyn Bevan and Christopher Hood, 'What's Measured is What Matters: Targets and Gaming in the English Public Health Care System, *Public Administration* 84:3 (2006), pp. 520-1.

[21] Patrick Dunleavy, Helen Margetts, Simon Bastow, and Jane Tinkler, 'New Public Management is Dead - Long Live Digital-Era Governance', *Journal of Public Administration Research and Theory* 16:3 (2006), pp. 467-494; Chris Lorenz, 'If You're So Smart, Why Are You Under Surveillance? Universities, Neoliberalism, and New Public Management', *Critical Inquiry* 38:3 (2012), pp. 599-629.

[22] For an overview of this transformation, see John Toye, 'Changing Perspectives in Development Economics', in Ha-Joon Chang (ed) *Rethinking Development Economics* (London: Anthem, 2003), pp.21-40. In a similar vein, Jacqueline Best's recent work on transformations in development practice suggests that the increased preoccupation with managing risk and benchmarking performance has been driven by a growing preoccupation with policy failure through the 1990s. See Jacqueline Best,

framework content or application, they will nonetheless receive material or normative sanctions in the case of under-performance. In order for this mode to be achieved through benchmarking interventions that bring together more equal partners, it is necessary for all parties to continue to 'buy in' to the framework through its execution. Where direct lines of responsibility are layered in to the framework at the moment of design and maintained through the process of execution, the benchmarking intervention overall can be characterised as one of 'direct responsibility'.

From the same starting point of direct responsibility by design, an alternative mode can be reached through more dynamic patterns of interaction between the agents brought together by a benchmarking intervention. Where evaluations flag up poor performance, blame games can kick in to play as benchmarkees work to evade material sanctions and preserve reputation. While sanctions and reputational loss can be hard to avoid,[23] the invocation of mitigating factors can be used to minimise these costs by laying responsibility for sub-optimal outcomes with exogenous events.[24] In addition, third-party actors can be used by the benchmarkee in blame avoidance techniques. In the realm of development, the International Monetary Fund in particular is often singled out as being responsible for perceived performance failures in national economies operating under its loan arrangements.[25] Where direct lines of responsibility are layered in at the moment of design and successfully challenged through the process of execution, the benchmarking intervention overall can be characterised as one of 'strategic blurring'.

Turning now to the modes in which the starting point for the benchmarking intervention was one of diffuse lines of responsibility, the relationships surrounding the Millennium Development Goals as explored below provide useful exemplars. Diffuse lines of

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Governing Failure: Provisional Expertise and the Transformation of Development Finance (Cambridge: University Press, 2014).

[23] Patterns of stability and change in actors' perceptions in this regard are explored in Thomas Preston, 'Weathering the Politics of Responsibility and Blame' in Arjen Boin, Allan McConnell, and Paul Hart (eds) *Governing after Crisis: The Politics of Investigation, Accountability and Learning* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2008), pp. 33-61.

[24] McGraw, 'Avoiding Blame'.

[25] For detailed exploration of scapegoating and the IMF, see James Vreeland, *The IMF and Economic Development* (Cambridge: University Press, 2003).

responsibility may be layered in to a benchmarking intervention where the architects are located on the margins of a given policy area and so are unable to control the flow of normative and material sanctions, or where there is a low level of consensus over the identity of the actors with the predominant capability to shape the benchmarked outcome. In the case of the MDGs, a combination of these two factors shaped the incorporation of diffuse lines of responsibility in to the benchmarking system. In addition to fearing that the creation of direct responsibilities on state actors might reduce their willingness to sign-up to the scheme, the MDG architects were working in a context in which beliefs over the actors and factors influencing development outcomes remain heavily contested.[26] As such, the location of responsibility for the achievement of MDG-related indicators remained under-specified. Outcomes in the realms of education, health, sanitation, and the environment were diffused across the 'international community'. In the realm of overseas development aid, the one area where a relatively precise group of relevant actors can be seen to exist, responsibility was diffused through the creation of an imprecisely specified target.[27]

From this starting point, an overall mode of 'diffuse responsibility' will be achieved if there is an overall pattern of stability in the relationship between actors brought together by the intervention. Through the lifetime of the MDGs, prominent dynamics served to create such institutional inertia. As is analysed below, by largely eschewing MDG targets and indicators within their national development strategies, developing country governments were able to avoid establishing a more direct line of responsibility for these benchmarked outcomes. However, additional interactions that occurred within and around the UN review

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[26] See, for example, Frederick Cooper and Randall Packard (eds) *International Development and the Social Sciences: Essays on the History and Politics of Knowledge* (Los Angeles: University of California Press, 2008).

[27] Interestingly, it seems that other attempts to benchmark the 'big picture' of development achievements have sought to embed more precisely delineated lines of responsibility than occurred with the MDGs. The 2005 Paris Declaration and its later Accra and Busan manifestations, for example, consciously aimed to adopt this more precise mode. In contrast to the MDGs, where the reluctance of the framework's closed team of architects to scare state representatives away from the benchmarking system led them to avoid imposing clear lines of responsibility, the Paris and later declarations were the product of more open drafting processes with more direct state representative involvement. See Bernard Wood, Dorte Kabell, Nansozi Muwanga, and Francisco Sagasti, *Evaluation of the Implementation of the Paris Declaration* (Paris: OECD, 2005). Thanks to the Review of International Studies anonymous reviewer for drawing my attention to these points of comparison.

summits served to generate a momentum that, in fact, was followed by an overall pattern of 'strategic clarification' as the MDGs were superseded by the Sustainable Development Goals.

Strategic clarification in benchmarking systems can be driven by both pull- and push-related factors. With the former, the emergent benchmarkee works to clarify their line of responsibility to the benchmarked indicator; with the latter, third-party actors work to identify the benchmarkee to whom a clarified line of responsibility is to be attached. Actors' desire to secure reputational enhancement constitutes a significant pull-related factor. Where a benchmarked indicator begins to signal signs of success, actors may attempt to take ownership of positive performance.[28] Actors' desire to compel others into behavioural change constitutes a significant push-related factor. By establishing a clearer relationship between an actor and a benchmarked indicator that is signalling a sign of failure, normative and material sanctions can be deployed to catalyse change in the emergent benchmarkee.[29]

With the MDGs, it is through these push-related dynamics that strategic clarification has over time become layered in to the framework. In particular, throughout the MDG review summits that have been analysed, consistent calls were voiced for clearer lines of responsibility to be drawn to two additional components of the benchmarking system. On the one hand, a significant proportion of developing country representatives made calls to layer-in a more precise overseas development assistance target into the framework, to be met by their developed country counterparts; on the other, many developed country representatives made calls to layer-in more precise targets in relation to domestic institutional reform and anti-corruption measures, with responsibility tied to their developing country counterparts.

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[28] Christopher Hood, 'Public Service Managerialism: Onwards and Upwards, or "Trobriand Cricket" Again?', *The Political Quarterly* 72:3 (2001), pp.300-309. Similar dynamics are explored in Ben Clift and Jim Tomlinson, 'Whatever Happened to the Balance of Payments "Problem"? The Contingent (Re)construction of British Economic Performance Assessment, *British Journal of Politics & International Relations* 10:4 (2008), pp. 607-629.

[29] Several studies have explored the way in which the Organisation for Economic Cooperation and Development's Programme for International Student Assessment has been invoked in this manner. See Ruth Dixon, Christiane Arndt, Manuel Mullers, Jarmo Vakkuri, Kristina Engblom-Pelkkala, and Christopher Hood, 'A Lever For Improvement Or A Magnet For Blame? Press and Political Responses to International Educational Rankings in Four EU Countries', *Public Administration* 91:2 (2013), pp.484-505; Johanna Ringarp and Martin Rothland, 'Is the Grass Always Greener? The Effect of the PISA Results on Education Debates in Sweden and Germany', *European Educational Research Journal* 9:3 (2010), pp. 422-430. For more general reflections on this form of blame shifting, see Christopher Hood, *The Blame Game*, 67-89.

While these elements remained excluded from the content of the MDG framework, they have become incorporated into the expanded set of Sustainable Development Goals that have recently superseded the 2001-15 initiative. By adopting an extended view that considers the MDG framework and its transition into the SDGs, and noting that the push towards the creation of more direct lines of responsibility emerged in the examined UN review summits, through this paper I suggest that the MDG benchmarking intervention can be characterised as following the mode of strategic clarification.

The empirical material contained in this paper comes from an analysis of the archival records connected to UN summitry on the Millennium Development Goals, and of a series of national development plans. The archival records drawn upon come from the repository of speeches delivered at two major Millennium Development Goal progress reviews, held at the United Nations headquarters in September 2008 and September 2013. In total, 86 contributions were analysed.[30] In addition to evaluating the level of support displayed for the benchmarking system overall and its component parts, I have also recorded whether clear calls for re-focusing or extending the initiative were delivered. Where such a call was issued, the primary reform being advocated was recorded.[31] The national development plans analysed consisted of a randomly selected sample of one-third of the Poverty Reduction Strategy Papers published by low-income countries by the close of 2013.[32] Given that UN documentation surrounding the launch of the MDG framework suggested that PRSPs be used by developing countries to outline their pathways towards meeting the framework's targets and indicators, this represents an appropriate location at which to further probe the presence

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[30] 75 of these were delivered by state representatives, eight from representatives of non-governmental organisations, and three from representatives of inter-governmental organisations.

[31] Single counting was used in order to enhance the comparability of the data collected; had multiple counting been used to track each of the suggested areas of reform, noise from representatives with wide-ranging agendas would have effectively drowned out the more focused contributions. For discussion of the operationalization of quantitative coding techniques, see Carl Auerbach and Louise Silverstein, *Qualitative Data: An Introduction to Coding and Analysis* (New York: New York University Press, 2003).

[32] The selected countries used in this study (and the year in which the PRSP was published) are: Bangladesh (2012), Burundi (2006), Cambodia (2005), Ethiopia (2005), Kenya (2004), Liberia (2008), Madagascar (2007), Malawi (2012), Rwanda (2007), Sierra Leone (2005), Tajikistan (2009), and Uganda (2010).

or absence of strategic clarification through the lifetime of the benchmarking initiative.[33] The finding that the extent of engagement with MDG indicators within PRSPs remains limited serves to confirm and extend the conclusions offered by Fukuda-Parr's evaluation.[34] Overall, by demonstrating that sustained contestation within review summits has been followed by strategic clarification through the SDGs, new light is shed on the intersection between blame games and this most prominent of benchmarking initiatives.

The empirical analysis presented in the sections below provide an overview of the blame games involving state representatives in the world of the Millennium Development Goals. The terrain of blame games and the MDGs stretches out beyond these parameters, to other actors and to other levels of governance. In domestic political constellations across many developing countries, local and national actors have attempted to tie blame to governing authorities for perceived underperformance in relation to particular Goals. Indeed, it has been suggested by Bergh et al that 'a large part of the MDG success story seems to be the role played by domestic politics',[35] with progress having been catalysed when non-governmental organisations and others have helped generate such strategic clarification. While acknowledging the importance of these additional sites of contestation and recognising the need for further study of the intersection of blame games and benchmarking through these networks, through the sections below I review the dynamics as manifest in the key UN review summits and the surrounding PRSP policy documentation.

The MDGs and Diffuse Responsibility By Design

Authorship processes matter in the world of global governance. Strategically important actors can go to extraordinary lengths to ensure that documentation providing an institutionally-

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[33] Indeed, PRSPs were used by Fukuda-Parr when assessing the extent to which the MDGs had been disseminated across developing country governments. See Fukuda-Parr, 'Are the MDGs a Priority?'. In order to gauge the extent to which (aspects of) the MDG framework have been incorporated into the overarching developmental vision these PRSPs, I have concentrated analysis on the Executive Summary or equivalent section. These sections typically run to between 15 and 20 pages in length.
[34] Fukuda-Parr, 'Are the MDGs a Priority?'. The extension relates to the chronological coverage and individual cases reviewed.
[35] Gina Bergh, Marta Foresti, Alina Rocha Menocal, and Leni Wild, *Building Governance into a Post-2015 Framework: Exploring Transparency and Accountability as an Entry Point* (London: Overseas Development Institute, 2012).

endorsed perspective coheres with their own preferences and ideas.[36] Here, I explore the impact of the writing process behind the formation of the Millennium Development Goals on the designation of responsibility for the performance indicators within the framework. The drafting of the MDGs was a highly atypical production process at the United Nations. UN reports are often the product of extended drafting processes, through which a wide range of interested parties are provided with an opportunity to review and suggest amendments to a given text. This writing by committee can lead to the production of balanced documents whose contents are widely approved, but which lack a clear 'take home message'.[37] In contrast, the tightly-controlled process surrounding the MDG initiative saw direct input limited to a small circle. In crafting a framework capable of generating rapid endorsement from across the whole body of UN membership, the content laid down by the MDG authors was designed to exclude clear lines of responsibility for the achievement of particular development-related outcomes. By design, the MDG framework was a benchmarking intervention with diffuse lines of responsibility.

It was on 18th September 2000 that the 189 member states of the United Nations adopted the Millennium Declaration. The Declaration was the core outcome of the Millennium Summit earlier that month, at which the largest gathering of world leaders in history had articulated their collective commitment to the values and principles of the United Nations. The Summit had been called by the General Assembly to 'provide an opportunity to strengthen the role of the UN in meeting the challenges of the twenty-first century'.[38] In keeping with the unprecedented scale and extremely high profile of the event, the text of the Declaration established an ambitious vision.[39] The agenda that was laid out was broad ranging, detailing hopes for progress in issue areas including reform of the UN, peace and

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[36] Robert Hunter Wade, 'US Hegemony and the World Bank: The Battle Over People and Ideas', *Review of International Political Economy*, 9:2 (2002), pp. 215-43.

[37] The information about drafting processes was provided by a former member of staff from the UN Habitat programme, in a May 2012 interview with the author. A similar account is provided by Fukuda-Parr and Hulme, 'International Norm Dynamics'.

[38] UN, *Millennium Declaration* (New York: UN, 2000).

[39] For a comprehensive review of contributions to the Millennium Summit, see Jerome Glenn, Elizabeth Florescu, and Theodore Gordon, *Analysis of United Nations Millennium Summit Speeches* (Georgia: Army Environment Policy Institute, 2001).

security, and poverty reduction. It was around 18 months after the adoption of the Declaration that the Millennium Development Goals were unveiled as the vehicle through which these development commitments would be operationalised.

To understand the emergence of the Millennium Development Goal framework, it is necessary to switch venues from the United Nations to the OECD.[40] The OECD was established in 1960, and throughout the Cold War functioned as something as a 'think tank of the West'. Throughout the 1990s, following the close of the ideological standoff between the US and USSR, the OECD's leadership sought to enhance the policy relevance of its work programmes as a means of securing the institution's future role.[41] It is in this context that the OECD extension of its engagement with issues surrounding aid and development occurred. As part of its efforts to improve the effectiveness of bilateral assistance and the level of harmonisation amongst donor states, the OECD had in the late 1990s established a series of International Development Goals on which to focus their efforts. In 1999 the profile of the International Development Goal benchmarking system was significantly increased when the OECD joined with the European Commission, IMF, UN, and World Bank to conduct a progress review. In June 2000, as final preparations for the Millennium Summit were underway, the collaborative report on *A Better World For All* was published. The structure and content of the International Development Goals would, in due course, would come to form the basis of the MDGs.

The transfer of these ideas from the OECD-led initiative into the MDGs was facilitated by the contracting-in of actors involved with the former into the process surrounding the drafting of the latter. Once the initial green light had been provided by through the Millennium Summit, the task of transforming a somewhat amorphous Declaration into an actionable benchmarking system was taken up by a handful of individuals in UNDP and the United Nations Secretary General's Office (UNSGO). Under the leadership of Mark

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[40] The following narrative account draws together insights put forward in Hulme and Scott, 'Political Economy of the MDGs'; Fukuda-Parr and Hulme, 'International Norm Dynamics', and Huck-Ju Kwon and Eunju Kim, 'Poverty Reduction and Good Governance: Examining the Rationale of the Millennium Development Goals', *Development and Change*, ifirst (2014), pp. 1-23.

[41] Von Bogdandy and Goldmann, 'International Public Authority', 77-8.

Malloch-Brown of UNDP and Michael Doyle of UNSGO, staff from across the OECD, UN, and World Bank were brought together to form a small MDG committee. All members of the committee had been involved in the *A Better World For All* publication, and the preliminary version of the Millennium Development Goals was framed around the same seven pillars that had provided structure to the earlier iteration. Through the process an eighth goal, relating to the formation of a global partnership to foster development, was layered in to the benchmarking system.

The Millennium Development Goals were presented to the UN General Assembly in December 2001, where the benchmarking system was 'noted' without objection from the floor.[42] The MDG system is made up of three interlinked levels. At the broadest level are the goals. Each goal has between one and six targets, which in turn are monitored by between one and four indicators. In total, the MDG framework includes eight goals, 21 targets, and 60 indicators. The eight goals at the heart of the framework outline a commitment to: eradicate extreme poverty and hunger; achieve universal primary education; promote gender equality; reduce child mortality; improve maternal health; combat HIV/AIDS and other diseases; ensure environmental sustainability, and; establish a global partnership for development.

In line with their differing professional affiliations, the team involved in drafting the Millennium Development Goal framework had consciously aimed to create a benchmark around which a wide range of agencies could coordinate their activities. Drawing-in major international organisations and leaders of developed and developing countries alike, the MDGs were designed as a tool to 'express the resolve of the world's political leaders to… make the right to development a reality for everyone'.[43] In order to minimise the possibility of any constituent group wishing to dissociate themselves from the framework or stall its progress through the UN General Assembly, the drafting team structured the framework in such a manner as to avoid directly apportioning responsibility for the achievement of individual elements on particular actors. Goals One to Seven were linked to precisely defined

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[42] Such noting represents a lower-order form of acceptance than 'approval', which requires a positive vote. Fukuda-Parr and Hulme, 'International Norm Dynamics', 26.
[43] UN, *Implementation of the United Nations Millennium Declaration* (New York: UN, 2002), p. 8.

targets and indicators, but responsibility for the ultimate achievement of these outcomes was placed rather diffusely at the door of all members of the international system. Goal Eight specifically aimed to encourage developed countries to adjust their aid, trade, and other externally-oriented policies so as to foster a more development-enhancing environment; however, unlike the earlier elements of the framework, no quantitative metrics were tied to this aspect. The MDG authors were particularly wary of including the 0.7 percent of GDP aid target, for fear of alienating in particular the US and Japanese leadership from the initiative.[44]

Driven by this imminent conflict-avoiding dynamic, responsibility for the achievements of the development outcomes being monitored by the Millennium Development Goal framework was diffused across a wide range of actors. With no direct mechanisms in place to hook material resources or normative suasion to the achievement of the Goals, the framework lacked the necessary foundations through which to compel good performance through the exercise of precisely targeted sanctions.[45] As is outlined below, this lack of focus on the discrete responsibilities of identified agents would come to be criticized through subsequent reviews of the Millennium Development Goal framework. It is to the evaluation of these dynamics that I now turn. Initially, disengagement from the MDGs within national development strategies served to reproduce the diffuse lines of responsibility that had been embedded at the design phase. Through the 2008 and 2013 review summits the foundations of strategic clarification began to be laid; foundations that, in due course, would come to be incorporated into the successor Sustainable Development Goals framework.

The MDGs and the Emergence of Strategic Clarification

The context into which the Millennium Development Goal initiative was born did not augur well for the success of the benchmarking intervention. The immediate aftermath of the launch of the MDG framework was a turbulent time across the UN system, with the schism created

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[44] Fukuda-Parr and Hulme, 'International Norm Dynamics', 29.
[45] The situation is succinctly summarised by John McArthur, who in a recent evaluation noted that '[t]he MDGs were not born with a plan, a budget, or a specific mapping out of responsibilities… No single individual or organization is responsible for achieving the MDGs'. McArthur, 'Own the Goals', 154.

by the 2003 Iraq invasion and subsequent investigation into corruption within the 'oil for food' programme creating significant reputational damage.[46] The legitimacy of the MDG framework itself was also initially challenged by actors dissatisfied with the closed nature of the drafting process through which the initiative was created,[47] although over time the Goals did come to attract a high degree of support from across the international development policymaking community. As is detailed below, initially the lines of responsibility surrounding the framework remained diffuse, with developing country governments by and large eschewing MDG targets and indicators from their Poverty Reduction Strategy Papers. However, through the MDG review summits of 2008 and 2013, the beginnings of a push toward strategic clarification began to emerge. Through the successor Sustainable Development Goals, this process of strategic clarification has been consolidated.

Within the 12 Poverty Reduction Strategy Papers that were reviewed, all contained a broad commitment to the framework. These national development plans are variously presented as aiming towards 'freeing our people from poverty and achieving the targeted MDGs',[48] achieving 'poverty reduction linked to the MDGs',[49] and creating the structural foundations whose establishment 'are directly linked to the achievement of the MDGs'.[50] However, the extensity with which the MDG framework was used to frame national development plans varied significantly. At one end of the scale, in their development plan the Cambodian government consciously and directly mirrored the MDG framework. Indeed, focusing as it did on achieving the Cambodian Millennium Development Goals, the ends of development included in this Paper borrowed their title and core content from the UN

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[46] These issues are identified by Mark Malloch-Brown, who led the UNDP throughout this period, as having played a major role in holding back the progress of the MDG initiative. Mark Malloch-Brown, *The Unfinished Global Revolution: The Limits of Nations and the Pursuit of a New Politics* (London: Allen Lane, 2011), pp.162-70.

[47] Roberto Bissio, 'Civil society and the MDGs', *Development Policy Journal* 3:1 (2003), pp. 151-160.

[48] Government of the People's Republic of Bangladesh, *National Strategy for Accelerated Poverty Reduction* (Dhaka: National Planning Commission, 2012), p. i.

[49] Government of the Republic of Kenya, *Investment Programme for the Economic Recovery Strategy and Employment Creation* (Nairobi: Government of the Republic of Kenya, 2004), p.1.

[50] Government of the Republic of Tajikistan, *Poverty Reduction Strategy* (Dushanbe: Government of the Republic of Tajikistan, 2009), p.30.

framework.[51] At the other end, in several development plans the MDG framework remaining a marginal feature, attracting just one or two brief mentions.

Further insights into the lines of responsibility between developing country governments and MDGs can be gained by exploring the detail of the engagement with individual targets and indicators in PRSPs. In keeping with the prominence of its discursive commitment, the Cambodian government leads the field in outlining a commitment to address 27 of the individual indicators from the MDG framework.[52] These indicators are drawn from across the spectrum of the MDGs, with aspects of Goals One to Seven all represented. Other instances of a relatively high level of correspondence between the content of the MDG benchmarking system and individual national plans come with the Tajik and Bangladeshi PRSPs, through which 14 and 13 indicators have been incorporated respectively. At the other end of the scale, while the Liberian PRSP did contain a discursive commitment to 'progressing toward the Millennium Development Goals',[53] no individual MDG indicators were included in the core focus of the Paper. The core focus of the Burundian, Kenyan, and Ugandan Papers included just one of the MDG indicators, coming in the form of the measures of the prevalence of HIV/AIDS, primary school enrolment, and the proportion of the population living on US$1 per day respectively.

Beneath this pattern of individual variation, common features of the PRSPs can be discerned that highlight where MDG indicators have – and have not – been integrated into national conceptualisations of the appropriate ends of development. The US$1 per day poverty benchmark was already a prominent feature of the development landscape by the launch of the MDG framework,[54] and as such it is perhaps unsurprising that this element was the most widely drawn upon within Poverty Reduction Strategy Papers (see Figure 2). Three-

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[51] Royal Government of Cambodia, *Poverty Reduction Strategy Paper* (Phnom Penh: Royal Government of Cambodia, 2006).
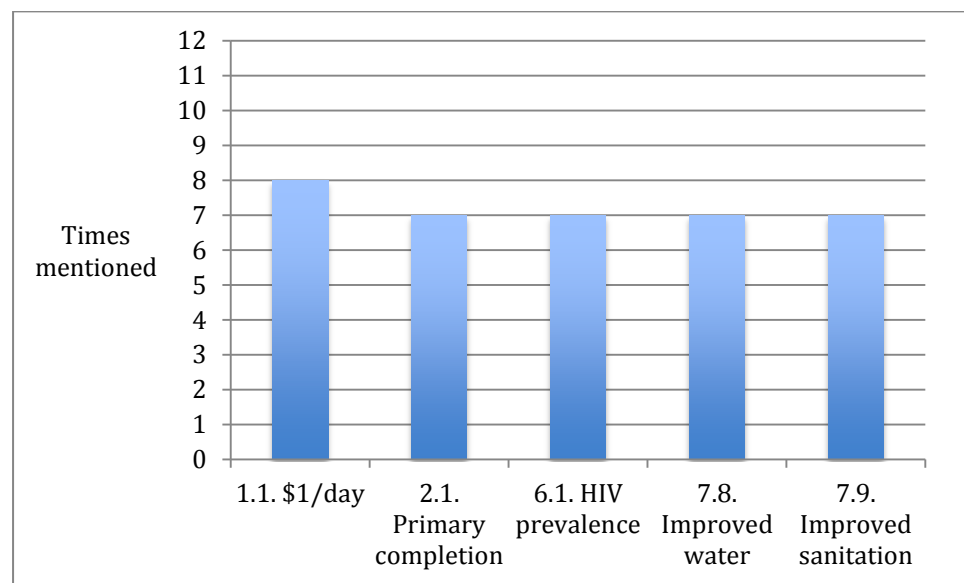
[52] In total, 44 indicators are associated with Goals One to Seven of the MDGs, which are the aspects of the framework that relate to developing country outcomes. As such, even the best-performing PRSPs display only a modest level of engagement in absolute terms.

[53] Government of the Republic of Liberia, *Poverty Reduction Strategy* (Monrovia: Government of the Republic of Liberia, 2008), p.13.

[54] Kwon and Kim, 'Poverty Reduction and Good Governance', 2-3.

quarters of the Papers included this indicator as a core end to be achieved in national development programmes. Beyond this central marker for the first Millennium Development Goal, key measures from Goal Two regarding primary school completion, Goal Six regarding HIV prevalence, and Goal Seven regarding access to improved water and sanitation were present in the core aims of two-thirds of the Papers.

Figure 2: Most commonly appearing MDG indicators in PRSPs

Source: Author's analysis of PRSP content.

The establishment of clear lines of responsibility between developing country government and MDG indicator was, however, the exception rather than rule in the examined PRSPs. Beyond the 5 mentioned in Figure 1, none of the other 60 indicators from the MDG benchmarking system appeared in over half of the papers examined. In total, one quarter of the 60 failed to make it into any of the core aims of these PRSPs. Goal Five, which focuses on maternal health, remained the most overlooked. [55] Amongst the component indicators, measures relating to adolescent motherhood and unmet family planning requirements remained entirely absent, while indicators on births attended by a professional, the prevalence

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[55] Goal Five had a prevalence rate of under 10 percent: from a potential 72 appearances, the six associated indicators were mentioned on just seven occasions.

of contraceptive use, and antenatal visits appeared only in the Cambodian Paper. Goal Seven, which focuses on environmental sustainability, remained the second most overlooked.[56] Indicators relating to the proportion of land mass covered by forest and the proportion of terrestrial and marine areas under official protection featured in just two Papers each. In addition, six indicators associated with Goal Seven remained entirely absent. Included amongst these were the measures of CO_2 emissions, consumption of ozone-depleting materials, and total water use.

Given that one-quarter of MDG indicators failed to feature at all in the reviewed PRSPs, and that the average prevalence rate was just 16 percent,[57] it can be seen that by and large developing country governments remained disengaged from the benchmarking system through these documents. In the main, direct lines of responsibility between governments and Goals failed to emerge within PRSPs. Through the UN review summits of the MDGs, the dominant pattern of engagement from participants was to display a combination of effusive support for the framework in general terms, while raising points of contestation in relation to particular points of detail. It is through the latter that evidence of a push toward strategic clarification of the benchmarking system can begin to be seen, with developed and developing country representatives working to lay blame for under-performance at each other's door.

At both the 2008 and 2013 events, virtually all participants presented strong praise for the MDG framework in their delivered statements. Examples include the following:

> At the dawn of the new millennium… the Millennium Declaration was signed that provides a bold vision that… provides a crucial point of reference for measuring progress towards the establishment of a new world order that would be more equitable.[58]

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[56] Goal Seven had a prevalence rate of 15 percent: from a potential 120 appearances, the ten associated indicators were mentioned on just 18 occasions.

[57] Goals One to Seven, which are the aspects of the MDG framework that relate to developing country outcomes, contain 44 associated targets and indicators. Across the 12 examined PRSPs, a 100 percent prevalence rate would have required a total count of 528; the actual count of 86 equates to a prevalence rate of 16 percent.

[58] Hamad Al-Thani, 'Statement from the State of Qatar at the High-Level Event of the United Nations on the Millennium Development Goals', UN General Assembly Hall 25th September (2008), p. 2.

> The Millennium Development Goals were not a mere declaration. They are expressions of our common humanity, our common vision for a better world.[59]

> At the beginning of the new millennium, our leaders came together… to express our shared commitment to reduce poverty and promote a more secure and prosperous world. The Millennium Development Goals express these shared commitments.[60]

However, underlying this superficial acceptance of the MDG framework as constituting a compelling vision for international development in the Twenty-First Century, significant discontent was displayed regarding the detail of the benchmarking system.

In total, around 85 percent of the representations delivered at the UN review summits contained clear injunctions to extend the MDG framework.[61] Underlying these calls was a shared assumption that a higher degree of specificity was required in relation to the lines of responsibility surrounding the achievement of the benchmarked MDG outcomes. Overwhelmingly, developed country representatives shifted blame toward the high levels of corruption and poor institutional performance in developing countries, while developing country governments shifted blame toward the unwillingness of developed country counterparts to live up to aid commitments.

The most commonly raised area for enhanced attention within the MDG framework related to the responsibility of developed country representatives to deliver appropriate volumes of aid flows. Discussions of Official Development Assistance (ODA) have an established lineage in UN forums; it was within the UN Conference on Trade and Development that, in the late 1960s, the much-cited 0.7 percent of GDP first emerged and gained traction.[62] The exclusion of this target from the MDG benchmarking system generated notable discontent. In total, this was the primary criticism offered by around one-third of

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[59] Haim Divon, 'Statement from the State of Israel at the High-Level Event of the United Nations on the Millennium Development Goals', UN General Assembly Hall 25th September (2008), p. 1.

[60] Julie Bishop, 'Statement from the State of Australia at the Special Event of the United Nations Towards Achieving the Millennium Development Goals', UN General Assembly Hall 25th September (2013), p. 1.

[61] Of the 87 statements reviewed, 13 did not include a clear call for the MDG framework to be extended or re-focused.

[62] For a detailed history of this target, see Michael Clemens and Todd Moss, 'Ghost of 0.7%: Origins and Relevance of the International Aid Target', *International Journal of Development Issues* 6;1 (2007), pp. 3-25. The evolution of the target within the UN can be traced back to the beginning of the first Decade of Development, and the General Assembly resolutions 1522 and 1711 of 1960 and 1961 respectively. These resolutions initially set the target at 1 percent. Thanks to the Review of International Studies anonymous reviewer for directing my attention to these roots.

participants at the 2008 and 2013 events. Through these contributions, inadequate levels of funding were highlighted as the core impediment to the more effective achievement of the ends of development as outlined in the MDG framework. The following calls are broadly representative:

> All studies on the attainment of the MDGs have identified lack of finances as the main imperative… The imperative to reach the goal of 0.7 percent of Gross National Income on an urgent basis cannot be overstated.[63]

> Inadequate financing… limits our capacity to implement MDG initiatives.[64]

> [Poverty reduction] will remain elusive if the cooperating partners do not play their part and fulfil their role. It is sad to note that net official development assistance dropped by 4.7 percent in 2006 and a further 8.4 percent in 2007. Only five countries met or exceeded the 0.7 percent target.[65]

Amongst advocates of this extension, failures to reach the 0.7 percent figure were commonly alluded to, and the fact that this target remained absent from the plethora of indicators within the benchmarking system attracted critical comment.[66] No OECD members were amongst the supporters of the extension of the MDG framework's focus on this issue.[67]

Where OECD country representatives at the UN review summits did advocate extension of the benchmarking system, their focus was firmly directed towards foregrounding the responsibilities of developing country governments in fostering effective progress.

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[63] Palaniappan Chidambaram, 'Statement from the Government of India at the High-Level Event of the United Nations on the Millennium Development Goals', UN General Assembly Hall 25th September (2008), p.2.

[64] Frank Bainimarama, 'Statement from the Republic of Fiji at the Special Event of the United Nations Towards Achieving the Millennium Development Goals', UN General Assembly Hall 25th September (2013), p.1.

[65] Bradford Machila, 'Statement from the Zambian Delegation at the Special Event of the United Nations Towards Achieving the Millennium Development Goals', UN General Assembly Hall 25th September (2008), p.2.

[66] Arsenio Balisacan, 'Statement from the Government of the Philippines at the Special Event of the United Nations Towards Achieving the Millennium Development Goals', UN General Assembly Hall 25th September (2013), p. 2; Wang Yi, 'Statement from the People's Republic of China at the High-Level Event of the United Nations on the Millennium Development Goals', UN General Assembly Hall 25th September (2008), p.5; Nancy Birdsall, 'Statement from Center for Global Development at the High-Level Event of the United Nations on the Millennium Development Goals', UN General Assembly Hall 25th September (2008), p. 2; Celestino Migliore, 'Statement from the Holy See at the High-Level Event of the United Nations on the Millennium Development Goals', UN General Assembly Hall 25th September (2008), p.1.

[67] It is particularly interesting that China and India feature within this grouping, given that these states are increasingly major donors. More fine-grained analysis is required of the motivations behind these two particular interventions. While it remains plausible that this represents a case of blame avoidance through push-based strategic clarification, it is possible that other dynamics are at play. In aggregate, the interventions from the developing country grouping in UN review summits fall more straightforwardly under the rubric of push-based strategic clarification.

Attention on the role of domestic institutions in fostering development was relatively well-established by the time of the launch of the MDGs, most notably at the World Bank.[68] At the UN events, strong advocacy for enhancing the focus on domestic institutional reform came from many representatives of developed country governments. Around half of the OECD representatives highlighted this issue as the key intervening variable in shaping successful outcomes. Comments from the US, Poland, and Sweden respectively capture the flavour of these injunctions:

> Governance is the factor that best explains the performance of African countries… The fight against corruption and entrenched interests remains a challenge in many places.[69]

> It is of utmost importance that the community of recipients live up to the rules of good governance, and assumes responsibility for the initiatives designed to achieve the MDGs.[70]

> We need democratic, effective, and accountable public institutions. We cannot fight poverty without fighting corruption… Corruption undermines growth and prosperity, and an effective state and stable society. We… have a responsibility to fight corruption, and we should make a special effort in the coming 800 days [leading to the MDG census point].[71]

From amongst the non-OECD members, the Rwandan representative was the sole representative to strongly endorse the call for a greater focus on domestic governance reform.[72]

As the MDGs drew towards their 2015 final census point, discussions over the form to be taken by their replacement became increasingly focused. It is through the creation of these Sustainable Development Goals that the process of strategic clarification, evident in the

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[68] For reviews of the embedding of this focus, see Weaver, *Hypocrisy Trap*; Liam Clegg, 'The Governance of the World Bank' in Tony Payne and Nicola Phillips (eds) *Handbook of the International Political Economy of Governance* (Cheltenham: Edward Elgar, 2014), pp.259-74.

[69] Henrietta Fore, 'Statement from the Government of the United States at the High-Level Event of the United Nations on the Millennium Development Goals', UN General Assembly Hall 25th September (2008), p. 2.

[70] Ryszard Schnepf, 'Statement from the Republic of Poland at the High-Level Event of the United Nations on the Millennium Development Goals', UN General Assembly Hall 25th September (2008), p. 4.

[71] Fredrick Reinfeldt, 'Statement from the Government of Sweden at the Special Event of the United Nations Towards Achieving the Millennium Development Goals', UN General Assembly Hall 25th September (2013), p. 3.

[72] Indeed, there was notable resistance from other non-OECD members to such an extension. See Wen Jiabao, 'Statement from the People's Republic of China at the High-Level Event of the United Nations on the Millennium Development Goals', UN General Assembly Hall 25th September (2008), p. 3; Yi, 'Special Event', p. 4.

UN review summits outlined above, was consolidated. In a marked contrast to the MDGs, the authorship process leading up to the launch of the SDGs has involved consultations with a wide range of state and non-state actors. As attempts to shape the SDGs reached their peak through a series of thematic workshops in late 2013 and early 2014, it was in fact suggested that 'a whole industry is now in gear to construct the global goals'.[73] Led by a 30-member Open Working Group,[74] 13 sessions were held between March 2013 and July 2014 to populate a 17-Goal template that had been generated through the earlier Rio+20 UN Conference on Sustainable Development. The outcome from this process, which was released in July 2014, lists over 160 targets and indicators to be met by census points in 2020 and 2030.[75] Through the inclusion of more precisely specified obligations, the SDG framework is serving to enact a strategic clarification of the lines of responsibility surrounding the UN-centred global development benchmark (Figure 1).

The disputes that were evident in the MDG review processes between developed and developing states over the lines of responsibility surrounding global poverty reduction have carried over into the Open Working Group discussions of SDG content. In the Open Working Group discussions that sought to clarify and quantify the 'global partnership' needed to support development progress, while many of the contributions from developing countries pressed for the inclusion of the 0.7 percent target, no support was forthcoming from developed country representatives.[76] In a similar vein, through the discussions of the role of

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[73] Robert Wade (2013) 'Current Thinking About Global Trade Policy', *International Development at the LSE Blog*, available at http://blogs.lse.ac.uk/internationaldevelopment/2013/12/19/current-thinking-about-global-trade-policy/. Accessed 21st April, 2014.

[74] States were arranged into constituency groupings of between one and four members, with each grouping selecting a representative. For details of these groupings see UN Official Website, available at http://www.un.org/ga/search/view_doc.asp?symbol=A/67/L.48/Rev.1&Lang=E. Accessed 22nd August, 2014.

[75] For the complete listing of these outcomes see UN Sustainable Development Goals Official Website, available at http://sustainabledevelopment.un.org/content/documents/4518SDGs_FINAL_Proposal%20of%20OWG_19%20July%20at%201320hrsver3.pdf. Accessed 22nd August, 2014. The document was reviewed at the close of the 68th Session of the United Nations General Assembly in September 2014. Final confirmation of the list of targets and indicators associated with the Sustainable Development Goals will be confirmed in September 2015.

[76] The only OECD country submission to the global partnership-focused section of the Open Working Group came failed to mention this target. See UN Sustainable Development Goals Official Website,

good governance and the rule of law in fostering development developed country support was counter-balanced by developing country resistance.[77] Whereas in the case of the MDGs the tightly-controlled drafting process led to the creation of a framework lacking clearly delineated lines of responsibility, the more open SDG drafting process has culminated in a markedly different end-point. Covering the theme of global partnership, SDG 17 includes a direct call to developing countries to 'fully implement their commitments to provide 0.7 percent GDP to developing countries'; covering the theme of accountable and inclusive institutions, SDG 16 calls for developing countries to 'substantially reduce corruption and bribery… and develop transparent institutions'.[78]

Viewed holistically, the interactions that have occurred within and around MDG review summits have, over time, created a push towards a strategic clarification of the benchmarking system. The diffuse lines of responsibility layered in to the benchmarking intervention by its architects were initially reinforced by developing country governments, through their low level of engagement with the Goals in national development strategies. However, with the launch of the Sustainable Development Goals, the pushes that emerged for more clearly delineated responsibilities on overseas development assistance and governance reform have recently been incorporated into the follow-on version of this most prominent of benchmarking initiatives.

Conclusion

Benchmarking is widely acknowledged to be an inherently political form of intervention. Having gained a high degree of prominence across the community of international development practitioners and scholars since their launch in 2001, the Millennium

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available at http://sustainabledevelopment.un.org/index.php?menu=1680. Accessed 18th February, 2014.

[77] Compare, for example, the statement delivered on behalf of China, Indonesia, and Kazakhstan, with those from Canada, the Netherlands, and the UK, Canada, Israel, and the US, and France, Germany, and Switzerland. See Sustainable Development Goals Official Website. Accessed 22nd August, 2014.

[78] See UN Sustainable Development Goals Official Website, available at http://sustainabledevelopment.un.org/content/documents/4518SDGs_FINAL_Proposal%20of%20OWG_19%20July%20at%201320hrsver3.pdf. Accessed 22nd August, 2014.

Development Goal benchmarking initiative has over the years attracted much comment and analysis. In the lead up to the final census year of 2015, this level of attention has increased further. Through this paper, I have contributed to this MDG-related literature by presenting an empirically-focused exploration of agent-level dynamics surrounding the initiative. The insights generated through the paper are founded on new analysis of archival material from UN reviews of the MDGs undertaken in 2008 and 2013, and of the content of a series of national development plans as presented in Poverty Reduction Strategy Papers.

Through my analysis of this material, I outlined the existence of prominent blame games around the Millennium Development Goals. To explore this intersection between blame games and benchmarking in global development, I brought observations from this case together with existing literature on blame games and benchmarking. Through this process a four-part typology was created, which differentiated between benchmarking modes according to the nature of the lines of responsibility that were layered in to the system at the point of design, and whether there was stability or change in the nature of these lines of responsibility over time. Initially, the MDG architects incorporated diffuse lines of responsibility in to the framework. Challenges to this opacity began to emerge through UN reviews, with pressure emerging in particular for clearer lines of responsibility in the realms of overseas development assistance and domestic governance reform. With the superseding of the Millennium Development Goals with the Sustainable Development Goals, this push has been consolidated. As such, viewed holistically, the MDGs can be seen to have followed the mode of strategic clarification.

Beyond this embedding of calls for strategic clarifications initiated within MDG review processes, a number of additional important changes have occurred with the emergence of the Sustainable Development Goals. Perhaps most intriguingly, by extending the coverage of the framework from a limited sub-section of lower-income states to all members of the UN system, the SDGs will challenge an entrenched dichotomy between 'developed' countries to whom development prescriptions and yardsticks do not apply, and 'developing countries' to whom they do. When aligned with its inclusion of calls to prioritise

the income growth of the poorest 40 percent of domestic populations, SDG prescriptions can be seen to cut against the grain of contemporary distributional trends in many countries. As was the case with the MDGs, blame games and processes of contestation will determine which, if any, of the many targets and indicators associated with the SDGs gain traction across national and international policymaking processes.

The existing academic literature on the Millennium Development Goal framework provides valuable explorations of the power relations that were reflected in and (re-)produced by this benchmarking initiative. While presenting important insights, the high level of abstraction within much of this literature served to underplay the role of agency and agent-level interactions in shaping the politics of the Millennium Development Goals.[79] Here, I have extended the MDG-related literature by systematically exploring the agent-level blame games that have accompanied the MDGs. Through the examined interactions, developed-country representatives were found to have sheeted home responsibility for under-performance to their developing-country counter-parts, and developing-country representatives were found very much to have returned the favour. With the incorporation of clarifications on aid- and governance reform-related benchmarks in the SDG framework, both sides' calls are being carried forward into the post-2015 initiative.

In important respects, the elite-level blame games that took place in and around the UN headquarters building represent a starting point in the politics of MDG and SDG global development benchmarking interventions. Throughout the lifetime of the MDGs, UN review summits provided a location in which strategic clarification of the lines of responsibility took place at dispersed intervals. Domestic political constellations across the global South provided locations in which parallel contests, undoubtedly, took place at a much greater level of frequency. These domestic blame games remained by and large off the radar of International Studies scholarship. With the SDGs' enhanced focus on governance reform, accountability, and transparency, it is likely that the domestic blame games surrounding the

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[79] As outlined above, this point of critique is most readily applicable to the 'reductionist' literature highlighted in Gabay, 'The Millennium Development Goals', 1253-4.

post-2015 benchmarking exercise will be played with equal or greater levels of intensity. In order to extend our understanding of the intersection between blame games and benchmarking in global development, it is important that these coming interactions are subjected to a more complete examination.