

October blog

Claudio Schuftan



The United Nations has just completed its assessment and review of the *Millennium Development Goals*, at the two-thirds point between 2000 and 2015, at a summit at UN headquarters in New York. *The Lancet* has taken this opportunity to publish an appraisal of the MDGs, now and for the future, prepared by a distinguished group of London-based academics (1). This is critical of what they see as the somewhat slow progress that has been made towards achievement of the Goals, and also to some extent is critical of the Goals themselves.

We at the *Peoples' Health Movement* agree emphatically that the MDGs, and the thinking behind them, are problematic. While this month's column is by me, it also expresses the considered views of the PHM, which I believe has more than any other organisation earned the right to speak for the people who are most affected by the MDGs, and by all other aid and development programmes.

Reference and footnote

1. Waage J and the London International Development Centre Commission.
The Millennium Development Goals: a cross-sectional analysis and principles for goal-setting after 2015. Available on-line at: www.thelancet.com/mdgcommission. Editor's note: please also see the news item on the home page of the October 2010 Association website, and Reggie Annan's column, which also discusses the latest MDG developments.

The Millennium Development Goals
Who for, and what for?

THE MILLENNIUM DEVELOPMENT GOALS EMBODY A CONTRADICTION. POOR COUNTRIES ARE EXPECTED TO MEET THE GOALS, WHILE AT THE SAME TIME CONTINUING TO SUBMIT TO THE NEO-LIBERAL POLICIES THAT HAVE LARGELY CAUSED THE VERY PROBLEMS THAT THE GOALS ARE SUPPOSED TO RESOLVE

The Peoples' Health Movement, as its name indicates, is a federation of civil society organisations, health professionals and academics, with very many sympathisers within international financial institutions, UN agencies, and national governments and their agencies. Our focus is on communities and citizens especially in impoverished countries – the people who the MDGs are or should be all about.

This month's commentary
World Nutrition



Keith West
Rolf Klemm
Alfred Sommer

**Why vitamin A
supplementation is
a global life-saver**

[Access the commentary here](#)

This month's editorial
World Nutrition

HOT TOPIC

**Conferences: what for.
The future blueprint**

[Access the editorial here](#)
[Access the Rio 2012 news here](#)

Geoffrey Cannon



Hot gossips from Porto
Are booze and drugs nourishing?
The relevance of Susan Sontag

[Access Geoffrey here](#)

HOT SESSIONS

Frank fair fearless firm
reviews of the best
(and not quite so best)
sessions at Porto

[Click here to compare notes](#)

Six shortcomings you need to know

For long now, we have been raising awareness of the MDGs' limitations. The Goals suffer from

- Donor over-influence.
- Technical over-emphasis.
- Inattention to action on underlying social and economic inequities.
- Lack of systematic long-term financial commitment.
- Predominant focus on health and education.
- Overlooking of the entire political and economic economy.

Five points you may not know

Our view is influenced by the following facts and observations, which seem also to be generally overlooked:

- The promises of the rich countries are not quantified in the MDGs paradigm, whereas the obligations of the poor countries are. This evidently assumes that poverty is a problem of poor people only.
- Poverty is defined in the MSDGs as a state in which people have to live in the equivalent of less than \$US 1 a day. But inflation is likely to make the one dollar in 2000 worth around 60 cents by 2015.
- Official responses to the MDGs concerned with nutrition seem to be more concerned with quelling or preventing food riots than with addressing the underlying and basic deeper causes of chronic malnutrition.
- If current trends continue, by 2015, 3.7 million more children in Africa will suffer from malnutrition than are today.
- China, Cuba, and Vietnam (where, by the way, I live, so I am in a position to know), have long focused on core development concerns, but have not labelled them as 'Millennium Development Goals', not wanting to play the MDG game.

Malnutrition is the big human rights issue

Above all, even if the MDGs as currently conceived were ever achieved, this only could result in a modest improvement in global health and nutrition ...if at all. In any event, the Goals cannot be approached, let alone achieved, without adequate input from civil society, and this will not mean simply a blind acquiescence in their assumptions, nature and approach.

It is a fallacy to suppose that health and nutrition programmes addressing the urgent needs of women and children therefore implicitly address equality and human rights. In the human rights-based approach, to which we are committed, nothing is left implicit!

The MDGs operate too much using a 'deficit-filling approach' in addressing poverty and preventable ill-health, preventable malnutrition and preventable premature deaths. 'Filling the last bit of the cup' will not work. What's needed is re-filling the cup, with what is genuinely nourishing.

Poverty, ill-health and malnutrition are the result of the ongoing process of social exclusion. The human rights-based approach specifically explores the exclusionary mechanisms that need to be dismantled – now! Consequently, concrete demands need to be placed on duty bearers – now! Where someone has a right, someone else has a duty. Gone are the days of us 'working with beneficiaries': We now need to act, to mobilise rights holders' (claim holders) so that they demand their rights.

21 problems

Here are 21 more specific problems with the MDGs. There are more! They:

- Perpetuate a focus on communicable diseases.
- Encourage quick-fix technical approaches.
- Offer too little too late and are not really new, but rather rehashed versions from earlier goals set by international policy-makers.
- Emphasise average outcomes across an undifferentiated population. More, they focus on outcomes disregarding the processes through which we are to achieve them.
- Provide, mostly, a template of targets for the bureaucratic mind.
- Ignore the fact that poverty is a function of human rights violations.
- See housing, health care, and access to food and water not as non-negotiable

Claudio Schuftan



21 reasons why the MDGs can't work
Structural reasons for world poverty
A new challenge to our profession

[Access Claudio here](#)

Join the Association at one visit to our (yes really, at last!) simplified system

Do it now, please!

Fabio Gomes



Why it's best to eat fruits in season
Brazil is being poisoned by pesticides
Candid camera: what agronomists eat

[Access Fabio here](#)

The voice of
public health nutrition
Our aims & objectives

[Access them here](#)

Reggie Annan



Big issues, big pictures in Africa
A new African nutrition society
MDGs: looking on the bright side

[Access Reggie here](#)

Food-based control and prevention of undernutrition

Food and Agriculture
Organization of the UN
International symposium,
Rome, 7-9 December

Here is how to participate

[Access full information here](#)

Coming in November

Web2PDF

[converted by Web2PDFConvert.com](http://converted.by/Web2PDFConvert.com)

and universal human rights, but as 'needs' to be met.

- Infuse neo-liberal priorities into development policies, often using just the language of human rights. Ultimately, they attempt to 'wash the face' of neo-liberalism by emphasising what is possible and do-able ...for donors and the market.
- Fail to represent a development paradigm break. Instead, they are a set of indicators embedded in a paradigm --the neoliberal paradigm.
- Come from the outside, in the North, resulting in what some consider 'the ghettoisation of the problems of development'.
- Call for change, but not for creating the conditions to make real needed structural change possible.
- Overlook the roots of inequality.
- Seek to 'eradicate extreme poverty and hunger' (Goal 1), but rely on the discredited notion that economic growth at the national level (GNP) can eliminate poverty.
- Avoid denunciation of the bad governance of the rich 'G8' countries or of the international financial institutions.
- Constitute pre-set international obligations, and are not a real expression of governmental goodwill.
- Fail to provide a real sense of ownership either by poor countries' governments or their civil society actors.
- Place all responsibility on the separate national governments, with no real global authority in charge of their enforcement.
- Pretend to be a moral compass with a set of yardsticks to measure some types of progress, but are mostly a counting and accounting exercise.
- Disregard the effect of trade policies on malnutrition. The negative consequences of current unfair international trade policies are one of their major oversights.
- Fail to even mention women's labour and property rights, or violence against women, which is one of the most fundamental obstacles to ensuring these rights,
- Assume that privatisation of services is a strategy for, rather than an obstacle to, economic development and improved nutrition.

Malnutrition is a political issue

The implications are clear. Political forces cannot be fought with moral attitudes and technical fixes. What is needed is determined and sustained political action, from the ground up.

The MDGs miss what most matters to people who happen to be poor, who are also known as 'the bottom billion'. They overlook or ignore issues of risk, security, respect, status, dignity, voice, and vulnerability. All of these are as important to impoverished populations as issues of income and consumption.

Also, none of the goals can be achieved without empowering women and without recognising the centrality of decent employment, which is a human right.

Furthermore, debt relief is a precondition for even keeping up the hope of meeting the MDGs. In addition, market liberalisation strategies have been oblivious to the ideals of the MDGs. Whatever their rhetoric may claim, transnational corporations are certainly not geared to invest in helping achieve the Goals.

The human rights philosophy **A radical rethink needed**

AS THINGS ARE, INEQUITIES WILL REMAIN ENTRENCHED EVEN IF THE MILLENNIUM DEVELOPMENT GOALS ARE ACHIEVED, BY 2015 OR ANY OTHER YEAR. IT IS NOT INEQUITIES THAT KILL. IT IS THE PEOPLE RESPONSIBLE FOR INEQUITIES WHO ARE THE KILLERS

For all these reasons the MDG approach needs rethinking. We need post-MDG policies, based on human rights principles. These need to be worked on and put into practice now, to minimise harm and disenchantment come 2015.

It is, after all, human rights violations that are the *raison d'être* of all the Goals. Therefore applying the internationally agreed human rights framework to them, or perhaps better, replacing them altogether, will reveal the discrimination, social

World Nutrition



Carlos Monteiro

PORTO DEBATE

**Food processing
is the big issue**

WN

July commentary
Colothur Gopalan



C Gopalan

My life in nutrition

**The testimony of our first
honorary life member**

[Access Dr Gopalan's
September commentary here](#)

[Access Dr Gopalan's
member's profile here](#)

UN Standing Committee on Nutrition (UNSCN)

*The incomparable and
indispensable United Nations
source of news, views and
developments of world
food and nutrition policy*

WN

July commentary
Urban Jonsson



Web2PDF

converted by Web2PDFConvert.com

exclusion, and other human rights gaps in the Goals as framed and applied.

A call to action

So far most civil society organisations are failing to challenge the system that constantly and continually recreates the condition of poverty. It is time for duty-bearers to be held to account. Are more members of the World Public Health Nutrition Association prepared to do this? We cannot in good faith remain aloof from politics.

At the Peoples' Health Movement, we fear that after 2015, what will have been achieved is no more than islands of progress in oceans of remaining grievances and persisting human rights violations. By sticking to the MDG paradigm, inequalities are staring us in the face now, but will be shouting at us after 2015.

The MDGs need not only to be attained, but also sustained long term - post 2015. The Goals as now framed would enable the halving of hunger of all under 5s in the world on 1 January of any year, simply by distributing a few hundred million sandwiches to hungry children the night before. Poverty reduction without redistribution is only to be seen as flimsy rhetoric. Political power is a crucial precondition for a country to rise out of the poverty trap once and for all.

We need to focus on the processes that will lead to overcoming malnutrition (or achieving any of the other Goals. These processes have to be bottom-centered. Without the proper participatory processes, MDGs as outcomes may mean nothing – they will be like a Christmas toy car with no batteries. The process must 'pull' needed changes, and not be the conduit for 'pushed', often packaged, solutions.

Walking the walk

It's not enough for aid and development agencies, and non-government organisations of any type, simply to start inserting human rights language into their discourse. We hear a lot these days about 'a human rights lens', or adding a 'human rights perspective', or having 'human rights projects', or 'mainstreaming human rights'. What's needed is to walk the walk. Policy-makers and decision-takers of all types at all levels have to embark on human rights-compatible programming, using the human rights-based approach, which is by now well delineated.

We in the Peoples' Health Movement feel there is now no other rational choice. Organisations outside government have to decide what, now and when to move in this direction. Governments must be pushed to take up their international responsibilities towards nutrition. One thing this means is that non-government organisations need to shift their work from a welfare perspective to an economic justice perspective. This entails the transformation of current political and economic orthodoxy, into systems that are fair for all. It will also involve engagement in authentic human rights dialogues between claim holders and duty bearers.

As surely we must all know now, what goes on in the world is increasingly shaped by powerful transnational forces. Many of these have dire consequences for the right to nutrition. Local and national level efforts to influence the determinants of malnutrition can have only a limited impact. It is easy to see why health professionals in the public sector so often feel powerless. What therefore is needed, is collective action. Thus the Peoples' Health Movement. What then now about the World Public Health Nutrition Association?

Seven thoughts

I end this month with seven thoughts:

- Real life is more complex than Millennium Development Goal slogans.
- The poor and the marginalised are not where they are by chance.
- The objectives we should strive for are not to stabilise malnutrition, but to make it disappear by pulling it up at the roots.
- Granted, not all the problems of malnutrition are structural. But if structural issues are not addressed the chances of the MDGs sustaining a global improvement of health and nutrition are nil.
- We have to avoid 'othering' people as 'poor' and thus as inferior to the non-poor. This is what the MDGs implicitly do a bit – or a lot.
- The specific, general and structural failings of the MDGs should be denounced publicly, to demystify the 'silver bullet' aura of just going for and achieving the eight Goals.
- The MDGs cannot be achieved without respect for human rights overall and in particular for minority and women's rights. Nor can they be achieved without



The rise and fall of paradigms in world food & nutrition policy

[Access Urban Jonsson's July commentary here](#)

[Access the July editorial here](#)

Working together

Now you can see what the Association is doing for you, with **World Nutrition**, free pdf downloads, news of and from members, our registration scheme, our 2102 congresses, and more and yet more!

[Decide what you can do for the Association](#)

WN

June commentary
Harriet Kuhnlein



Here is the good news

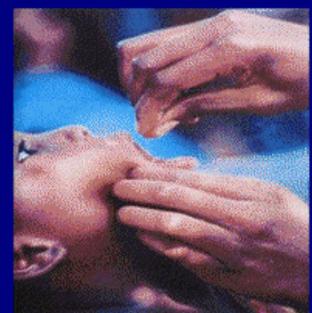
[Access Harriet Kuhnlein's June commentary here](#)

[Access the June editorial here](#)

WN

May commentary
Michael Latham

The great vitamin A fiasco



[Access Michael Latham's May commentary here](#)

Web2PDF

converted by Web2PDFConvert.com

redistribution of wealth from the rich to the poor.

So, in the name of the wretched of the earth, are we to change the world? Or are we the victims of those who have the power to change the world?

If the second is the case, is what we usually discuss in our professional meetings as public health nutritionists going to change things? Did you attend and participate in the Porto world public health nutrition congress that has just ended? Think back please. Did you sense a growing insistence that our profession must now take effective action to empower impoverished populations? I hope you did. But was most discussion in effect uncritical support of the current aid and development paradigms and programmes? I fear it was. As professionals and as part of an organisation, we all can do much better than this.

Request and acknowledgement

You are invited please to respond, comment, disagree, as you wish. Please use the response facility below. You are free to make use of the material in this column, provided you acknowledge the Association, and me please, and cite the Association's website.

Please cite as: Schuftan C. The MDGs: what for, and who for? [Column] Website of the World Public Health Nutrition Association, October 2010. Obtainable at www.wphna.org

*The opinions expressed in all contributions to the website of the World Public Health Nutrition Association (the Association) including its journal **World Nutrition**, are those of their authors. They should not be taken to be the view or policy of the Association, or of any of its affiliated or associated bodies, unless this is explicitly stated.*

This column is reviewed by Geoffrey Cannon. Special thanks to: The Broker, issues 14 and 15, June and Aug. 2009; Development and Cooperation) issues 31:11, Nov 2004; 31:12, Dec 2004; 32:1, Jan 2005; 32:2, Feb 2005; 32:4, April 2005; 32:5, May 2005, 32:6, June 2005, 32:7, July 2005, and 32:8/9, Aug/Sep 2005; Finance and Development), 41:3, Sept 2004. SCN News No.29, late 2004-early 2005. 'Human Rights, Health and Poverty Reduction Strategies', draft, WHO/HDP/PRSP/05.1, 2005. and Yifat Susskind, www.madre.org/articles/int/mdgcritique.html. Also to George Kent and Vicente Navarro.

*cschuftan@phmovement.org
www.phmovement.org*

October blog: Claudio Schuftan

Please respond here

[Access the May editorial here](#)
[Access all June responses here](#)
[Access all July responses here](#)

OUR NEXT ISSUE WILL BE POSTED HERE 1 FEBRUARY 2011