

A Southern critique of the Millennium Development Goals.

Samir Amin recently had an article published in the journal *Monthly Review* entitled 'The Millennium Development Goals: A Critique from the South.' This article is essential reading especially for activists and campaigners in the north as it calls into question the whole northern led project of poverty reduction. At a time when campaigners are thankfully turning to their southern colleagues and brothers and sisters for leadership this is a welcome contribution to the debate from a renowned academic and activist.

Samir Amin is director of the Third World Forum in Dakar, Senegal. He is author of *Obsolescent Capitalism* and *The Liberal Virus*, among other books, and is a regular contributor to the socialist journal *Monthly Review*.

Amin starts by accepting of course the 8 goals are desirable, nobody in their right mind could disagree with the goal of reducing extreme poverty and hunger by a half or ensuring environmental sustainability. So *his* goals are of course the same as what all committed humanitarians should be. However, from the beginning, he maintains the goals are so contradictory in places or simply statements with no substance in other places that the 8 goals are ultimately unachievable. Worse than that, Amin argues, the process of 'liberalization' they are attached to will actually *increase* poverty, the opposite of what they were *supposedly* designed to do. A key question Amin asks and answers towards the end of the article and that we will look at further on is, were they designed to reduce poverty or are they a cover or a smoke screen for a much more sinister project that the architects know full well will actually increase poverty, increase inequality and further dis-empower the subjects. Sadly it seems, upon reading this analysis, the latter is the truth.

The author starts by looking at the process through which the goals were drawn up, an often enlightening place to start. One would hope, maybe even presume, that a global campaign and institutional framework designed to half poverty and hunger world-wide would begin with an open, honest, accountable and ultimately democratic debate and discussion with a southern led focus. This could not be further from the truth as, Amin points out. Instead of genuine committees, although these existed on paper, drawing up proposals and drafts for discussion the draft that eventually led to the Millennium Development Goals was drawn up by Ted Gordon 'a well known consultant of the CIA.' Given that organizations history in the regions most affected by poverty warning bells must surely sound at this point of the process! Amin goes on to argue, "Instead of forming a genuine committee for the purpose of discussing the document, a draft was prepared in the backroom of some obscure agency."

Given the less than satisfactory start to the achievement of these goals and in many ways their fairly obvious failures. To put it to Bob Geldof, Bono and co. 240 million people are not waking up better off this morning, and that is not merely my northern opinion. It is now an appropriate time to ask the very important question, are these goals at best pipe dreams or are they a more sinister smoke screen for a well planned process of further exploitation of resources, people, culture and society in general? Are they part of a neo-

colonial or imperialist process designed by a triad of northern powers the US, the EU, and Japan? “Are not the authors of the document (*CIA consultant*) actually pursuing other priorities that have nothing to do with ‘poverty reduction’ and all the rest?” My italics added.

It is the process of liberalization, privatization, de-regulation, neo-liberalism or whatever we want to call the subjection of all else to the interests and needs of capital attached and conditioned to the goals that Amin identifies as the major contradiction that ultimately leaves the so-called goals unachievable but that make the further exploitation of these countries the number one result.

“It is assumed without question that liberalism is perfectly compatible with the achievement of the goals ... the MDG cannot be taken seriously. A litany of pious hopes commits no one. And when the expression of these pious hopes is accompanied by conditions that essentially eliminate the possibility of their becoming a reality ... The MDG’s are part of a series of discourses that are intended to legitimize the policies and practices implemented by dominant capital and those who support it, i.e. in the first place the governments of the triad countries, and secondary countries in the south.”

What are these conditions Amin talks about? Well, they are the usual ones. We have seen them attached to the Structural Adjustment Programs, attached to qualification for debt relief, attached to loan applications, attached to applications to join the EU, enshrined in Free Trade Agreements across the globe, and contained in the New Partnership for Africa’s Development. They are privatize state owned industry or business, reduce tariffs, taxes or any trade barriers, encourage foreign investment through tax incentives, create and maintain a ‘flexible’ labor force through anti-union legislation and actions often involving assassinations and torture in many African and Latin American countries, reduce state expenditure, and above all else reduce the role of the state to the administrator of lucrative contracts to multi-national companies.

Amin runs through each goal analyzing where each one fails and where the conditions and contradictions lie. He argues in:

Goal 1. There is neither analysis of the policies that generate poverty nor any denunciation of policies that generate poverty. Without this how can there be policies to effectually eliminate poverty proposed.

Goal 2. Ground has been lost in the area of education since the late 70’s. The reduction of public expenditure and the wide-spread privatization of education needs to be examined in both fact and theory.

Goal 3. Genuine discussion is needed in the area of gender equality given the powerful role religious fundamentalism is playing globally. ‘Without discussion, declarations on this question are only empty talk.’

Goal 4, 5, and 6. Health issues are to be tackled with total respect to intellectual property rights and extreme privatization. These are to be conducted in partnership with global companies. Again there is no analysis or discussion of the often highly negative role played by pharmaceutical companies in the regions most affected or any discussion of the theoretical basis for intellectual property rights. This might be to close to Bono's millions for comfort!

Goal 7. Environmentally sustainable policies are to be integrated into national and global policies and this while the largest polluter on the planet the United States refuses to sign the Kyoto Protocol! Again there is no analysis of the role companies play in environmental destruction and the ability of states to regulate or intervene is greatly curtailed. "It is presupposed, then, that the rationality of capitalist economic strategy is compatible with the requirements of 'sustainable development.'"

Goal 8. Amin is worth quoting in full here on the goal to develop a partnership for development.

"The writers straight away establish an equivalence between this 'partnership' and the principles of liberalism by declaring that the objective is to establish an open, multilateral commercial and financial system. The partnership thus becomes synonymous with submission to the demands of the imperialist powers. Progress in access to the market is measured by the share of exports in the GDP (an increase in this ratio is thus synonymous with progress regardless of the social price!), progress in the conditions of non-discrimination by the reduction in subsidies."

The 'real goals' of these processes Amin outlines in 5 points. We might call them 'The Real Millennium Development Goals':

1. Extreme privatization, aimed at opening new fields for the expansion of capital.
2. The generalization of the private appropriation of agricultural land.
3. Commercial opening within the context of maximum deregulation.
4. The equally uncontrolled opening up of capital movement.
5. States are forbidden in principle from interfering in economic affairs.

In answering the question re-the real design of the Millennium Goals it appears, sadly, the truth is our worst fears. They appear to be no more than a smoke screen for a purposely exploitative process to further enrich the elites in the north at the expense of the south and indeed humanity.

"Although imposed on the societies of the South with extreme brutality, the new model had to be clothed in a discourse that gives it the appearance of legitimacy. It was necessary to reintroduce the word 'development' but empty it of all meaning."

All the above is of course largely carried out hand in hand with the elites in the south, with the governments of the south. For all the talk of corrupt governments responsibilities let us look at where these corrupt governments come from, who supports them?

“There is a new comprador class in the countries of the periphery that actually derives its existence from the new model of globalised liberalism. This comprador class participates in the new government arrangements that followed the erosion of national populist models inspired by Bandung.”

Amin clearly sees the above process of exploitation as being purposefully designed to benefit elites at the expense of ordinary people and the environment and so ultimately all of humanity is being put at risk. If this is the case, as seems likely, it requires a look at tactics to best achieve poverty reduction. The ‘development’ cover needs to be exposed through both discourse and action. Support and solidarity for alternative people centric models of development needs to be forthcoming from the north to those countries like Venezuela, Cuba, Boliva, the Chiapas region in Mexico and elsewhere, where poverty history is being made on a grand scale every day.

Another conclusion to be drawn on tactics from Amin’s analysis is that no matter how much we show the goals are not being met nothing will change because the governments that drew up the process and enforce know full well that poverty reduction isn’t the desired goal at all! From their point of view states are being opened up to capital and capital is moving more freely. Their goals are being met. Therefore the northern campaigns should no longer be seeking to persuade their governments but instead should be seeking to replace and change their governments with genuine people centered alliances. A northern campaigns focus should also be to support the social and democratic movements in the south as the best way of reducing poverty long term.

In many ways what the campaign needs in the north is politicization. Poverty is a political question. It is a result of politics, the politics of the few, and so needs to be tackled by politics, the politics of the many. This direction may, indeed will, loose support from those rock stars, politicians and businessmen who make their millions and livelihoods out of the present system but they are not the ones we need nor the ones we want support from. Only politics of the ordinary people at home will conduct politics of the ordinary people globally. And there is tremendous hope for this if we seize the opportunities presented us.

“The legitimacy of governments has disappeared. This the conditions are ripe for the emergence of other social hegemonies that make possible a revival of development conceived of social progress, democratic advancement, and the affirmation of national independence within a negotiated multipolar globalization. The possibility of these new social hegemonies is already visible on the horizon. I bet that at the end of 2015, no one will propose a balance sheet of the achievements of the MDG’s or NEPAD, which will have long been forgotten.”

