Local governance
The missing link in the SDG debate?

Bernd Steimann, January 2013

2015 is approaching fast, and the debate on what should come after the Millennium Development Goals (MDGs) has meanwhile gained full speed. Development practitioners, government officials, academics, and donor representatives around the globe invest their time and brainpower to come up with a new, better, and more inclusive set of 'Sustainable Development Goals' (SDGs) – or whatever the successor framework to the MDGs will be called.

Undoubtedly, much has been learnt from the MDGs and their rather mixed track record. Many decision makers understand today that focusing on income poverty is too simplistic, or that GDP is useless to measure inequality. However, the basic paradigm underlying the MDGs – that global development goals have a measurable impact at the grassroots level – has not yet been tackled seriously.

A few thoughts on why certain countries are clearly off the MDG track would be useful, though. While the goals' rallying effect on donors is obvious – international ODA spending has significantly increased since the year 2000 (1) – a causal relationship between the MDGs and local advances in development is usually hard to establish. Instead, experiences from various countries suggest that the MDGs were hardly ever translated into national development goals, but in most cases were simply adopted in the form of a rhetorical commitment by national planning authorities (2). Thus, the Deputy Chairman of the Indian Planning Com¬mission recently remarked that

"*We are committed to our goals. MDG is a UN terminology. If you want to describe our goals as MDGs, that is a different issue. But I am making this distinction because in our programme, we acknowledge the importance of MDGs. But we do not call this a commitment because of the MDGs. This has been part of our planning process for year.*" (3, pp 37)

Many countries have simply included the MDGs in their already existing Poverty Reduction Strategy Papers (PRSPs), without aligning them to specific national needs (cf. 4,5). Thus, the MDGs got directly confronted with national planning realities, their respective logic and constraints. Since many countries continue to define their PRSPs in a non-participatory manner, largely ignoring local people's needs and the preconditions for effective implementation, the MDGs have often remained a 'virtual reality' (6). As such, they have at best helped to get additional funds from the international donor community.

The question how future development goals shall effectively be translated and implemented at national level is therefore key. Obviously, this goes beyond the existing (and important) consensus that the definition of the SDGs must be more participatory and inclusive than what had happened in 2000. Instead, it is about letting people have their say when it comes to the implementation of development goals and poverty reduction plans. In other words: local governance must be at the centre stage of the post-2015 debate should the SDGs become more successful than the MDGs.

The Development Partner Working Group on Decentralisation and Local Governance has recently brought forward some ideas on how this may happen (7). However, in view of the countless and quickly evolving sectoral debates on particular goals and targets, the question remains whether there is still room and willingness enough to revisit and close the missing link.

References

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