

MDGs and beyond: What's in a post 2015 agenda for youth?

Introduction

The Millennium Development goals (MDG), a set of goals and targets to halve global poverty by 2015 were endorsed in the year 2000. With less than three years to the deadline, the UN's latest MDG report suggests some developing countries are unlikely to meet the goals (although some progress was recorded in poverty and gender parity in education). If this occurs, as it appears it would, the effect would be felt mostly by youth aged 15 to 24 (this assertion is supported by the array of recent UN reports, like the ILO global employment trends for youth 2012, which paint a gloomy picture on the status of youth), and perhaps women. While only one MDG target explicitly focuses on youth – 'the development and implementation of strategies for decent and productive work for youth,' the MDGs should essentially be about the development of young people – since they address some of the challenges of today's youth such as HIV/AIDS, environmental sustainability and education, and any process towards setting a new agenda post 2015 needs to integrate the aspirations and values of the youth themselves.

So what will be post 2015 development agenda for young people? What are the 'developmental guarantees' – safeguards to ensure youth issues are included in the development agenda, to ensure that youth are able to achieve the 'functional futures' – a world where they have adequate opportunities to achieve their full potential, they envisage? The key question in essence is: what role will the youth voices play in shaping the post 2015 development agenda? If the processes towards a post 2015 agenda will present the opportunity for young people to achieve optimal functioning, it should be inclusive, integrating young people's own account of their aspirations and values. In addition, new goals, targets and indicators which resonate with what is most of value to young people and should in fact be a natural follow-up on the current set of goals – and perhaps a way of keeping with the UN's recent initiative, 'the future we want' but how do we identify these goals?

Inclusivity and 'developmental guarantees'

The case for youth inclusion is built on the demographic argument. By their sheer numbers – numbering over a billion and constituting around 18 per cent of the world population, young people do deserve 'a seat' at the negotiating table. Youth participation is a right. It serves as a developmental guarantee and a means to enable young people negotiate their aspired functional futures. By being inclusive, the process of the post 2015 development agenda avails itself of the

potential of being one of the most robust and transparent development agendas to be developed by the UN. In the final analysis, the post 2015 agenda requires a fundamental shift from being just another global political declaration to a framework which provides national governments with a roadmap on measures to meaningfully improve young people's quality of life.

During the early 1990s, Roger Hart presented a framework for youth participation recommending the ideal level for youth engagement as that in which youth are equal partners, with shared responsibilities with adults and policymakers. The consultative processes leading up to 2015 need to recognise the importance of youth issues and ensure their adequate engagement in articulating them. Recently, Brian Head made a compelling case for the integration of young people's 'voice' in policy, based on three rationales. The first derives from a rights based framework, presenting participation as a right to which young people are entitled and a way to demonstrate respect for young people's views. The second view suggests that young people's needs assessment and policy design should take an asset based positive youth development approach rather than a paternalistic view of young people's needs. Thirdly, he suggests that participation in development processes provides an opportunity for social learning, which inadvertently contributes to young people's development of skills and competences which are valuable to other aspects of their lives.

The UN recognises and has committed itself to an open, transparent and participatory process as espoused in the recent report of the secretary general 'the future we want for all.' It remains to be seen to what extent this would be pursued.

Framing the discourse of youth in the post 2015 agenda

Thus far, only few of the writings on the UN's post 2015 agenda specifically focus on youth. There are two strands to this. The first is about content, the second is about language. In relation to content Emily Freeburg and colleagues make a compelling case for robust investments in the various youth specific issues which were not included in the MDGs. In framing the discourse towards a development agenda post 2015, it is important the both the issues identified in the Freeburg et al report and similar others (including youth conference declarations and statements) are gleaned for their possible content contribution to the post 2015 agenda. Not only should young people be involved in framing the future development agenda, their voices should provide the needed illumination for development policy trajectories. As this generation of youth is possibly the most

educated than any previous generation of their cohorts, as indicated by the UN, they possess the capacity to contribute meaningfully to the post 2015 development agenda. This factor should not be ignored.

Secondly, it is important that writings with specific mention of youth appear in the discourse leading up to 2015 and beyond. This is perhaps a meaningful way to gain traction in promoting the importance of youth issues. It is important that the UN and civil society organisations working on youth issues in the context of the post 2015 agenda bring attention to the issues of youth not just by the use of concepts like 'the future' but by actual mention of youth or young people. This measure is an important means to ensure that such an agenda would facilitate national level action on youth specific issues. Approaches within well-being research could provide some methodological guidance in terms of keeping the focus on young people's values and aspirations. Such a focus needs to recognise that there is not a single category of youth and thus no single narrative will 'fit' what is most beneficial to the youth in the long term. Perhaps Jan Vandemoortele's notion of 'collectivist targets,' could provide some understanding of how best to weigh what's beneficial to youth within the broader context of the post 2015 discourse.

Elements of a post 2015 youth agenda

While there is the usual temptation to produce a list of 'youth areas' in which the post 2015 agenda, it is beyond the scope of this article to do so. Rather, I point in specific directions as well as methodologies through which such a 'list of youth issues' could be derived. Firstly, a viable approach towards collating and these issues is through rigorous content analysis of declarations and statements from youth forums at different levels. Several youth related events have been held in the last decade across all regions (for example the UN's youth leadership summit series) and the output documents from all of these point in the direction of what young people's future aspirations are. Drawing these conference declarations, could provide the essential elements needed for a post 2015 youth agenda. Certainly, these documents would provide a valuable avenue towards understanding what's important to youth and what needs to be captured in the post 2015 development agenda that would otherwise have been lost.

The second method/ avenue through which youth issues could be gathered is the use of ICT tools such as crowd sourcing. This model has already been used by UNAIDS and the World Bank in the development of youth related reports. Many young people including those in developing countries, are tech savvy, and have

used this as a means to promote social causes. This is easily exemplified by the Arab spring uprising which took place in the last year or so. ICT tools certainly provide viable and cost effective means of gathering information on what is important to young people. In addition, UN country offices (using the one UN system/ youth taskforce approach rather than multiple efforts across agencies) should commission studies working with young people to understand their view on the 'future we want' and how they think this could be realised. This is an important step owing to the fact that not all young people have access to the internet.

Concluding remarks

The MDG era is coming to a close, and already processes leading to the design of a successor framework has been put in place. It is important that such a process recognises the importance of youth inclusion. It is not only the right of young people to be actively involved, it is in fact a meaningful avenue of contributing to their development. It is important that youth issues form an integral component of the post 2015 discourse and that the language of the process integrates specific mentions of youth. It is also important that adequate measures are taken to ensure that not only are tech savvy middle class youth are targeted in the representation at these processes, but a sample as representative of the wide range of young people as possible, including those with special needs, is taken using a range of methods including commissioned studies which work with young people through a participatory outlook.

Going forward, the UN and civil society groups should take specific interest in ensuring that youth issues are not 'missing' or deliberately left out of the discussion towards 2015 and beyond. This is perhaps the most viable means to achieve the 'future we want.' After all, there is no sustainable future without today's generation of children and young people.

***Dabesaki Mac-Ikemenjima** is a researcher on youth quality of life and Policy and Strategy Adviser at the Centre for Youth Development and Research Initiative. He can be reached at dabesaki@gmail.com.*