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Development as Power

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Abstract

While material progress towards the Millennium Development Goals is laudable, and pledges of new resources are necessary, we can never fully address poverty without talking about power. As Amartya Sen pointed out, true development depends on freedom.

Keywords

Human rights, United Nations Millennium Development Goals Summit, Global economy, Global community

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Development as Power

by Alison Brysk

While material progress towards the Millennium Development Goals is laudable, and pledges of new resources are necessary, we can never fully address poverty without talking about power. As [Amartya Sen](#) pointed out, true development depends on freedom.

At the current Millennium Development Summit, Bhutan's contribution was to encourage a broader and more holistic measure of development, based on its own Gross National Happiness Index, which measures good governance as a dimension of development. Along another dimension of the power-development nexus, [Thomas Pogge](#) has shown that decreasing economic inequity both within and between countries is inextricably linked to the fulfillment of all human rights.

Perhaps the clearest link between poverty and empowerment is in the area of gender equity. Women are the poorest, sickest, least educated, and least powerful members of most developing societies. We know that women's education leads to more sustainable levels of population growth; conversely, we know that gender inequity is correlated with underdevelopment. As far as the well-being of half of society, we know that gender-based inequity in political, property, and reproductive rights puts women at risk for the fatal consequences of underdevelopment, including AIDS, domestic violence, and maternal mortality. The Millennium Goals already recognize these connections, but there has been less progress here than elsewhere.

Across the board, as a "lowest common denominator" international consensus, the Millennium Goals are necessary but insufficient insofar as they do not address fundamental freedoms. While China and other rising powers in Asia still claim that "a rising tide lifts all boats," they fail to heed the lessons of the past generation of Latin America's experience of the perils of unequal development. It is no accident that the most violent countries are not the poorest, but rather the most unequal.

On the other side of the ledger, the programs that have actually reduced poverty are precisely those that empower the most vulnerable members of society. Micro-credit for women in South Asia and Africa *has* improved incomes, nutrition, education, and political participation, at least at the local level. Perhaps the single most effective anti-poverty program today is school allowances for children, notably in Brazil and Mexico. What makes these programs work is that they go beyond the necessary (but not sufficient) goals of transferring resources to poor families or protecting children from labor exploitation, and empower children within their families and societies through education.

Garnering the resources to support these programs and other facets of the Millennium Goals is also a question of power in several ways. First, it is a question of finding leverage to make powerful countries contribute to global common goods. For example, middle power Canada ended up increasing its pledge to the Global Fund to Fight HIV, Tuberculosis and Malaria even under a conservative spending-averse government, because Canada will soon seek a seat on the UN Security Council.

Second, progress requires harnessing the growing power of non-governmental transnational exchange—like the tax on air tickets. Similar measures include fair trade campaigns to bolster developing countries' producers, and people-to-people micro-credit schemes such as [KIVA](#). The proposed Tobin Tax on financial transactions would be another powerful mechanism, and is currently being debated in Europe.

Finally, we must find a way to link rising power to rising responsibility in the international system. Countries like China that grow from globalization must also contribute to ameliorate humanitarian suffering and the displacement of traditional producers. Something like a WTO Buffer Fund for food prices, indexed to growth, rates of rising powers would accomplish this goal. Even lower-income rising powers such as India or Brazil could contribute concessionary technology transfer or intellectual property—like bio-fuels or generic anti-retroviral drugs for HIV.

The Millennium Goals are a wonderful way to focus world attention and political pressure on the development gap. While new mechanisms and modalities for transferring resources are a good first step, real progress requires deeper understanding of the power distortions that cause the gap. The most effective programs will be those that redistribute power, not just wealth. And the best way to construct new policies is not just to “follow the money,” but “follow the power.”

ALISON BRYSK is Mellichamp Professor of Global Governance at the University of California, Santa Barbara. She is the author of The Politics of Human Rights in Argentina (1994), From Tribal Village to Global Village (2000), Human Rights and Private Wrongs (2005), and Global Good Samaritans: Human Rights as Foreign Policy (2009). Professor Brysk has been a visiting scholar in Argentina, Ecuador, France, Spain, Sweden, the Netherlands, South Africa, and Japan. In 2007, she held the Fulbright Distinguished Visiting Chair in Global Governance at Canada's Centre for International Governance Innovation.