

The Politics of Global Partnership

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Much of the conversation surrounding implementation of the Millennium Development Goals (MDGs) is very technocratic in tone and content. People worry about program design and efficiency. They worry about effectiveness and what techniques or programs will work. They worry about evaluation and specifying concrete measures for success. These are all important concerns. Indeed, they are crucial, and one of the very important contributions of the MDGs has been to set concrete, measurable goals that focus attention on some of these technocratic problems of evaluation. But technocratic know-how is only half of what is needed to meet the MDGs. Political know-how is also required.

Implementing the MDGs is as much a political problem as a technical one. Very often, we know what will move us toward these goals but we cannot implement pro-poor policies because of political opposition. The drafters of the MDGs recognized this and Goal 8 highlights the need for political cooperation as well as some potential benefits from it. Goal 8 calls for "global partnerships" and cooperation between a wide variety of political actors (UNDP 2003). It calls for cooperation among governments, both in the wealthy global North and in the poor global South. It calls for cooperation between governments and the large intergovernmental organizations (IGOs) crucial to realizing the MDGs—the World Bank, the International Monetary Fund (IMF), the World Trade Organization (WTO), and others. It calls for cooperation of both governments and IGOs with private companies, such as technology and pharmaceutical firms that can provide the means to health and well-being for the world's poorest. It also requires cooperation with NGOs who are so often the advocates for and implementers of antipoverty programs around the world.

In standard UN-speak, the MDGs and the Millennium Declaration use high-minded language to call on all these political players to get along, cooperate, and do the right thing. However, anyone involved in poverty-alleviation work is well aware that political cooperation is not a naturally occurring phenomenon. Indeed, cooperation is problematic in most forms of social life. It is not effortless in families, in offices, and certainly not among governments. It has to be actively fostered, built, and nurtured by the partners in this implementation effort.¹

In this chapter, I explore a few basic issues surrounding the politics of global partnership. As a political scientist, the first questions I would ask about implementing the MDGs are not technocratic ones about how to design efficient and effective programs. The first questions I would ask about the Goal 8 call for global partnerships are: why would these actors—these governments, firms, IGOs, and NGOs—want to cooperate at all? Why would any of these actors want to work toward implementing the MDGs? What's in it for them? Equally important, what motives might undercut their work toward implementation? Without understanding what motivates these political actors, we will not get far in implementing our programs, no matter how beautifully designed they are.

NGOs understand this. Working to achieve the MDGs, they must navigate often-complex political minefields, and the strategies they choose to do this vary across regions and sectors. Detailed consideration of these strategies would require far more than this chapter. My purpose here is simply to point out that beneath all the technocratic planning and program design lie some serious political challenges, opportunities, and issues. Here, I consider five of these.

1. Mixed Incentives of Partners

It is not at all clear that many of the "partners" named in Goal 8 really *do* care about implementing the MDGs beyond paying lip service. Of course, all of these various actors will sign onto the UN-sponsored platitudes and aspirations. However, one does not need a PhD in political science to know that commitments like this are made all the time but do not receive the sustained support needed for success. Why might this be? Many of these actors have very mixed motives when it comes to the nitty-gritty of MDG implementation. They may sincerely support the MDGs at some elevated level of rhetoric, but most face very powerful incentives that run counter to or distract from MDG support.

Governments, in both the North and the South, have many other demands on their time and resources. Like any other goal, alleviating poverty, especially among citizens in foreign countries, must compete with

other policy priorities for the attention of decision makers and for government resources. To compete successfully, a policy usually has to offer some clear political payoff for governments, so it is worth asking: what is the political payoff to governments in implementing the MDGs? The answer is not obvious. The poor tend not to be politically powerful anywhere, not in poor countries or rich ones.² Pats on the back from the UN or other actors for implementing MDG-directed policies do not obviously translate into political benefits that will help governments stay in power or win elections.

Intergovernmental organizations, such as the IMF and the WTO, have mandates and missions that do not always or obviously put pro-poor policies at the forefront of concern. IMF staff are not convinced that poverty alleviation is their job; neither are WTO staff, and it is not at all clear that either institution is well set up to implement the MDGs. The IMF is staffed by macroeconomists who understand their job to be promoting macroeconomic stability. This is not some misapprehension by staff. Many powerful member governments provide clear direction that this is to be the fund's primary concern. Alleviating poverty is often understood to be the World Bank's job, and many staff at the Fund will say so in private if not in public (Barnett and Finnemore 2004; Evans and Finnemore 2001; Woods 2006). Similarly, the WTO is staffed by trade lawyers and economists who believe their primary job is to promote agreement among members on trade rules, not the alleviation of poverty. Member states decide whether trade rules will help the poor, not staff. Macroeconomic stability and expanded trade may help the poor, but the MDGs are add-on goals for these institutions, not core missions (Kruger 1998).

Business firms may see public-relations benefits to supporting the MDGs, and some business people may genuinely be willing to roll up their sleeves and get involved, but their overarching concern will always be about the bottom line. Businesses need to make money and shareholders need to be satisfied. Again, poverty alleviation needs compete with other, very pressing, concerns (Haufler 2001).

In sum, supporting the MDGs has a mom-and-apple-pie quality. How can you be against helping the poor? But there is a lot of symbolic politics going on in these negotiations that mask very powerful countervailing interests. Creating sustained support for the MDGs among these partners will require addressing these mixed incentives.

2. Turning Words into Deeds

Symbolic politics is not empty politics. Powerful governments, IGOs, and other actors often make symbolic and rhetorical commitments with little expectation that they will ever be forced to follow through. However an

increasing body of research in political science is documenting ways in which these actors can become trapped by their commitments and forced to deliver. NGOs are crucial to this process. Generalizing, the research suggests that when states, IGOs, or businesses make public commitments, these commitments become focal points for political mobilization. NGOs and publics mobilized by these commitments monitor performance and follow-through by actors, exposing nonperformance and creating political costs for those who do not deliver. Such cases have been well documented in human rights and environmental activism.³ Similarly, the UN's Global Compact is set up in part to take advantage of this dynamic since it explicitly relies on NGOs to monitor business compliance with Compact commitments (Hurd 2003).

3. Bring Advocacy Back In

Chapter 4 (Brinkerhoff, Smith, and Teegen) mentions the advocacy role of NGOs without exploring it in detail, but this role is essential to the politics of successful implementation. It is only through strong advocacy for the MDGs and constant pressure to implement them that the various global partners will be able and willing to follow through with the often-demanding measures needed for success.

NGOs have some important tools with which to shape behavior of more powerful actors. At first glance, this is not obvious. Most NGOs are very weak by traditional measures of political power. They are usually much smaller, with fewer people and resources than other "global partners" such as states, IGOs, or transnational companies (Keck and Sikkink 1998). However, NGOs can be essential to creating and maintaining the political climate that gives other actors political reasons to follow through and implement the MDGs. They can do this in a variety of ways, many of which involve either creating political costs for reneging on commitments to the MDGs or creating new political benefits from implementation.⁴

Collection and dissemination of information is one such tool. NGOs often provide watchdog functions, making sure that other actors deliver on promised behavior. They publicize failures and hypocrites; they also can and should praise those who meet their obligations. They issue reports critical of laggards; they may rate or rank the best/worst performers; they collect information on relative successes and failures; and they disseminate information about best practices. NGOs often make *publicity* of this information a central portion of their mission and their advocacy, in this case for the MDGs. They use techniques of *shaming* to impose costs on large institutional actors who care about their reputations both internationally and domestically. They can also engage in *emotional appeals* to create a

climate of broad public awareness of and support for the MDGs. This climate, in turn, shapes incentives for larger actors who require public support or might be sensitive to public opinion.⁵

Many of the characteristics identified in chapter 4 as contributors to NGOs' effective performance also enhance their performance as advocates. NGOs are often skilled at working at many levels—at the apex of policy-making and on the ground during implementation. They can be skillful intermediaries both between partners and between different levels of government. They are often more flexible than other actors and face fewer bureaucratic constraints and formalized accounting procedures. This kind of flexibility also makes it possible for NGOs to be creative and entrepreneurial in ways that other partners may not be. Big, ossified bureaucracies have trouble generating new ideas and implementing them quickly. This is much easier for the smaller, more flexible NGOs; and new ideas about how to engage partners and publics often come from the NGO sector. Finally, in the advocacy realm NGOs often benefit from public assumptions about their altruism and principled commitment, assumptions not generally accorded to governments, business, or even many prominent IGOs. These assumptions often give NGOs a certain moral authority that buttresses their information claims and enhances the effectiveness of their publicity (Wapner 1995; Keck and Sikkink 1998.) Indeed, this often seems to work even when NGO leaders, publics, and politicians all understand that NGOs also have "private" agendas of their own that may have little connection to altruism or achieving the MDGs.

4. The Myth of Being Apolitical

Advocacy is inherently a political action, but the advocacy function of NGOs can create tensions when it collides with the often strongly held view that these organizations must be impartial and apolitical. Humanitarian organizations often perceive themselves, and promote themselves, as being above politics, outside of politics, or otherwise apolitical. They imply that their allegiance is to humanitarian ideals, which they want to portray as universally accepted. They explicitly or implicitly claim that, "We all want to relieve hunger, spread education, promote health, and alleviate poverty. How could anyone be opposed?" Mobilizing support for humanitarian programs often depends crucially on the ability of advocates to foster this view of humanitarianism and poverty alleviation as everyone's goal. Indeed, much of the legitimacy and moral authority of humanitarian NGOs flows from a perception that they do not take sides in partisan politics, or that if they do so, it is only because they are fighting for the weak and dispossessed, and that they will work with any party or group who shares these concerns.

NGOs are not alone in cultivating this nonpartisan, apolitical image. The World Bank, the IMF, the UN, and most other IGOs similarly cultivate the image that they are neutral and impartial. As for NGOs, this perception is central to the legitimacy and influence of these organizations.⁶

However, this apolitical image presents something of a paradox for many of the "global partners" involved with implementing the MDGs: they want to be apolitical but there is no apolitical ground on which to stand. Implementing the MDGs is fundamentally a political process. It calls for a change in "who gets what, when, and how," which is a classic definition of politics (Lasswell 1936). The best these partners can hope for is to make implementation of the MDGs so widely accepted as an important goal that it *appears* apolitical because it is impossible for actors to say publicly that they oppose it. This surface consensus eliminates none of the countervailing incentives described earlier. MDG implementation will continue to be a political process in which advocates for pro-poor policies must compete with advocates of other goals for the time, attention, and resources of policymakers and other key stakeholders in society. Further, they must do this while continuing to cultivate the image of being apolitical in order to maintain legitimacy and support. We cannot eliminate this paradox, but we can be aware of it and learn to use it strategically. Certainly advocates, especially NGOs, use the fact that it is difficult to oppose pro-poor policies as an opportunity to exert pressure for action.

5. The Missing Partner: Publics

Achievement of the MDGs will require participation, not just by large institutional actors such as governments, IGOs, and multinational firms. It will require broad support from mass publics, both in the South and in the North. The development community has understood for two decades now that broad participation and "ownership" of antipoverty programs in poor countries is essential to implementation and success. The mixed success of efforts to promote this kind of public involvement has been widely studied, and efforts to improve mechanisms for involvement will and must continue.

Publics in Northern countries also have an important role to play in generating the political support that will allow or require governments, IGOs, and firms to implement pro-poor policies. Indifference or outright opposition in these countries is often a major barrier to implementation. Reducing agricultural protection, increasing foreign-aid budgets, and altering drug patent protections have all become lightning rods for political opposition. Overcoming these forces will require well-organized campaigns to mobilize public support for pro-poor policies in the North and give

politicians the reasons to make favorable decisions. Changes in trade rules that would help realize the MDGs, for example, will entail political battles within and among developed countries, and pro-poor policies will only prevail if publics in the North actively support them. Eliminating protection and subsidies in rich countries' agriculture sectors will be particularly contentious. Domestic agriculture has strong, well-organized lobbies in all these countries, and they will fight hard to protect protection. Without public support within member states of the Organisation of Economic Co-operation and Development for revised trade rules to eliminate these protections, it will be difficult, probably impossible, to change the rules. Politicians who championed such a change would be committing political suicide, and suicidal tendencies are not common in politicians. It will be the job of advocacy groups to make it possible for politicians to take the desired decisions at some reasonable political cost.

There is some reason to be hopeful on this score. Official and NGO aid are in some respects complements rather than substitutes. In particular, the domestic (political) constituency for adequately funded and rigorously evaluated foreign aid can be formed by citizens who become personally engaged in voluntary-sector activities as well as who donate to and learn from poverty-focused international NGOs (Smith 2005, 195).

Implementing the MDGs is not just a management problem. It is a political problem. It requires the creation of political reasons to support implementation and the creation of political will to take action where little may now exist. This means restructuring people's expectations about what is necessary and what is possible. More people in more places need to be persuaded that implementing the MDGs are both. Changing people's minds, raising their consciousness can only be done with constant advocacy and lobbying of not only the obvious "global partners" (governments, IGOs, firms) but also of the publics to which they answer.

Notes

1. For a thoughtful overview of organizational and political issues involved in partnerships such as those entailed in the MDGs and the Global Compact, see Ruggie (2003).
2. For an excellent analysis of the rise of foreign aid and global poverty as a concern of governments in the developed world, see Lumsdaine (1993). For a discussion of the institutionalization of poverty as a concern of the World Bank, see Finnemore (1996, chapter 3).
3. See Keck and Sikkink 1998; Thomas 2001; Risse et al. 1999; Khagram et al. 2002.
4. For an overview of recent studies of NGO activist efforts to shape the behavior of more powerful actors, see Price 2003; Finnemore and Sikkink 2001.