Ten years of 'war against poverty'

The MDGs as an Institution of Hope

Alastair Greig
Australian National University
Mark Turner
University of Canberra

September 2010

What's it all about?

- Paper argues that MDGs have
  - Considerable symbolic value
  - Injected hope into the poverty eradication discourse
  - Reinvigorated ethical interest in development issues

UN development decades

- 1950s, 1960s and early 1970s decades of optimism
  - Difficult but possible
  - Technology, resources and commitment
- 1980s a lost decade of development
  - Poor growth, disorder, disillusionment with development discourse
  - Abdication of responsibility to market

'Increasingly unthinkable'

- In 1990s, Richard Rorty described the problems of development as becoming 'increasingly unthinkable'
- A rethink needed to move from

Despair ⟶ Hope ⟶ Action

Rorty and social hope

- Neo-liberalism and postdevelopmentalism had led to a loss of hope
- Growing inability
    - To imagine alternative futures
    - 'To construct plausible narratives of progress'
- Urgent need for an alternative vision based on pragmatic acceptance of reality of late-20th century development

Rorty and social hope

- Globalisation had transformed economic realities
  - Economic situation beyond control of laws of the state
  - 'global overclass' dictated 'all major economic decisions'
- But beyond the global regulation of capital Rorty could only point to an as yet unimagined bureaucratic-technological initiative

Institutions of hope

- Hope is
  - 'Motivating' emotion (Grayling 2008)
  - 'Psychological necessity' (Grayling 2008)
  - 'Powerful fuel of political achievement' (Courville and Piper 2004)
- To galvanise social hope requires institutionalisation
  - 'Sets of rules, norms and practices that ensure that we have some room not only to dream of the extraordinary but also to do the extraordinary' (Braithwaite 2004)

Institutions of hope

- Hope inspires the desire for social transformation
- When 'action is seen as the companion of hope, social movements gather momentum'(Braithwaite 2004)
- 'Collective hope' about social conditions can empower through collective action

The MDGs

- *If* people agree that
  - Cost of ending extreme poverty is well within the global reach
  - Past successes and failures provide lessons
- *Then* the challenges become an ethical issue
- *And* this signals a return of development discourse

'Not any hope will do'

- Authentic or false institutions of hope?
  - Empowerment without the capability to act will promote frustration and despair
  - 'Hope as emotional sharing' must be 'tempered by ideas, deliberation, experimentation and cold analysis' (Braithwaite 2004)
  - This requires contestation

The MDGs and their critics

- Criticism of MDGs include
  - Too ambitious
  - Not ambitious enough
  - Following wrong goals
  - Folly of setting goals
  - Adopting wrong means
  - Applying faulty measurements
- But if following Rorty's pragmatism be aware of
  - 'Pessimism of the intelligence, optimism of the will' (Gramsci 1971)

Authentic institutions of hope?

- Need to reappraise functions of the MDGs
  - Institutions that 'secure hope'
  - 'substantial, rational and orienting hope'
  - Stretch goals
  - Targets as wellsprings of hope
  - Contribute to reinventing a plausible notion of progress
- What we want is to 'make hope possible, not despair convincing' (Williams) because hope abandoned is 'unthinkable'