

After 2015: Promoting Pro-poor Policy after the MDGs

Young Lives Think Piece
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The Millennium Development Goals (MDGs) are about ensuring the best for children. They offered hope that children born in this new millennium could survive childhood, enjoy decent nutrition, have access to schooling and be less likely to face poverty. But they also involved a global social experiment, designed to reshape children's development, in order to fuel the anticipated human capital requirements of developing economies in the twenty-first century. MDG2 is the clearest example as it promises a schooled childhood for all children, throughout the primary years, and is the focus of this think piece. However well intentioned it may be, recent longitudinal research by Young Lives indicates that MDG2 is at best only partially achievable, at worst that it has actually done a disservice to millions of children unable to access good schools that are relevant to their current lives and realistic prospects. This leaves those shaping the 'MDG-plus' agenda with an important challenge. Their target group will be the largest youth cohort in history and each and every one of these children is entitled to educational opportunities that will enable them to negotiate and thrive in an uncertain economic climate. Enrolling them in school will not be sufficient – or necessarily even desirable - within the MDG-plus agenda. The future needs to be about a more holistic understanding of child development, well-being and learning goals, and about a range of innovative models that can be accessed by all.

1. What has been the impact of the MDG paradigm on poverty reduction to date and what does that mean for an 'MDG-plus' agenda?

In many of the poorest countries in the world, the promise of universal primary education offered what may turn out for millions of children and their families to be a false hope that education would pull them out of poverty. Expectations for education are high among Young Lives children and their parents – in many cases unrealistically high. For example, our research in Ethiopia found that over 80% of children in urban areas and 63% in rural areas anticipate that they will go to university. Clearly these figures do not reflect the likely reality: the tertiary gross enrolment rate was 2.4% in 2006, less than 10% of those who were enrolled in secondary education (World Bank 2008). With limited and inequitable opportunities on offer in many countries, what does it mean to raise children's hopes in this way?

For many of these children, the school system isn't even beginning to deliver. MDG2 offered incentives to policymakers and donors to focus resources on 'bums on seats' at the cost of investing in quality education. Although the Education for All (EFA) goals include quality, the overwhelming priority has been quantity. All too often these are hollow statistics, disguising the misery of swollen classes, lacking even the most basic educational resources, supervised – sometimes – by underpaid, barely trained teachers. The paradoxical consequence in one country we are studying, is that educational achievement has actually declined during the period when enrolments have increased. While 94% of 12-year-old children were enrolled in school in Ethiopia in 2006, 39% failed to read a simple sentence such as 'the sun is hot'.

Short-term gains in enrolment are not sustainable for governments unless they are supported by comprehensive reforms and innovations. They are certainly not useful goals for children. If quality is poor, the level of commitment of parents to send their children to school, 'attitudinal sustainability' (King 2007), simply will not hold and any enrolment gains will unravel. Even more troubling is the possibility that implementation of MDG2 may have negative consequences for many of the world's poorest children, failing to equip them with

basic skills required for every modern economy, while denying them many of the broader life skills needed to sustain even a basic livelihood.

So, has MDG2 delivered on its promise to children, parents and policymakers that education is a sure route out of poverty? Arguably not. Research in the last few decades has shown that stimulating school attainment is not having a direct effect on economic growth (Hanushek and Wößmann 2007). Partly, this is a question about the skills children are developing at school. But this also reflects that when children reach adulthood, there are often few job opportunities even for the educated labour force. Many will still live in poverty, and their own children will end up back where their parents were before. Young Lives research indicates a strong correlation between parental characteristics, such as levels of education and household wealth, and both children's achievement in literacy, mathematics and vocabulary tests (Himaz 2009) and their aspirations and psychosocial indicators of self-efficacy, sense of inclusion and especially self esteem (Dercon and Krishnan 2009). These findings underscore the importance of looking at education as a critical mechanism in the intergenerational transmission of poverty, and understanding the factors outside the classroom that affect children's aspirations, well-being and ability to learn.

These reflections inevitably lead to the bigger, in many ways perennial question: what is education for?. Pritchett (2004) has argued that education should equip each individual with the range of competencies (including cognitive and non-cognitive skills, knowledge and attitudes) necessary to lead productive, fulfilling lives, fully integrated into their societies and communities. The vision is clear and in many ways commendable. Implementation would be quite another matter. Besides, for many of the world's poorest children and families, education is viewed in a much more instrumental and pragmatic way, as a route out of poverty and a means of accessing reasonable employment. Young Lives data in Vietnam highlights a growing gap with only 10% of the majority Kinh children living in absolute poverty, compared with 51% of ethnic minority children. While 19% stunting rates are found among majority group children, the rate for ethnic minorities is 60%. This is crucial since we know that stunting has a significant impact on language, maths and reading skills (Dercon 2008). Even more troubling is that the disadvantages these children face before even starting school are at risk of being amplified through their differential access to education: 98% of ethnic majority children are still in school by the age of 12, compared with only 87% of minority children (and only 77% of ethnic minority girls). Not surprisingly, literacy levels echo these educational inequalities. In the context of multiple inequalities within the school system, as well as within households and national economies, the harsh lesson for MDG2 is that education benefits some but is rarely a tool of social mobility for all.

It is clear that MDG2 has not created the incentives to engage with the quality imperative (UNESCO 2000), beyond keeping 'bums on seats', and even then without ensuring even basic equity in many cases. It is equally clear that getting children into school is not necessarily a positive achievement if learning is not taking place. The priority for the MDG-plus agenda is to revisit what education means for children, families and communities, in ways that cut through bureaucratic indicators of progress and crude human capital agendas. An MDG-plus agenda should build on a vision for children's learning as a dynamic process taking place in multiple contexts throughout the life-course. The MDG-plus agenda must also enhance personal and societal adaptability. In the context of economic instability and rapidly rising unemployment, relevant good-quality education will promote flexible skills; and not just for now, but for future generations.

2. What are the key meta-processes shaping development over the next 10 to 15 years and what do they imply for an MDG-plus agenda?

With progress toward MDG2 already unlikely to be sustainable without prolonged national economic growth, the current economic crisis will have profound and long-lasting implications for children currently in or entering school in developing countries. Evidence suggests that school attendance may initially fall as children drop out to contribute to family income, but could be mitigated by lower opportunity costs of schooling if wages for child workers fall (IILS 2008). However the effects of a labour market recession play out, the risk for children is great. Young people will be disproportionately among those affected by increases in informal employment and the heightened numbers of 'working poor' below the poverty line. The ILO and IILS (2009) estimate that the number of working poor living on less than 2 dollars a day could increase by over 100 million as a result of the current crisis. What will happen to the returns to education in the poorest countries? What type of competencies and life-skills will be needed to negotiate this crisis? This is not just a question of increasing access to schools or reducing drop-out rates. The test is whether schools can promote learning, foster well-being, and reduce rather than amplify the disadvantage marginalised groups bring into the classroom.

3. What, if anything, should replace the MDGs?

A clear narrative emerging from Young Lives research is that poverty strongly shapes learning outcomes, well-being and aspirations. MDG2 may have provided 'school for all' (or nearly all) but it has only provided quality, meaningful and relevant 'education for some', often reinforcing rather than reducing poverty and inequalities. In order to turn this around, and start making education a driver of poverty reduction and improved opportunities for children, it is important to give the right incentives to government and donors; incentives to look at holistic quality education (EFA 2000) in relation to learning outcomes and well-being. The MDGs did not offer governments and donors the incentives to look at the factors outside the classroom that drive education outcomes, nor did they encourage them to engage with fundamental questions such as 'what is education for?' and 'what constitutes a quality education in different contexts?'.

Young Lives longitudinal research is highlighting the importance of understanding education in the context of a child's life-course and the complicated dynamics of poverty which affect choices, outcomes and longer-term options in education. The life-cycle approach which Young Lives is uniquely placed to adopt, offers suggestions for a way forward after the MDGs. So, what type of incentives can promote a more holistic approach to quality education? Filmer, Hasan and Pritchett (2006) have proposed a Millennium Learning Goal (MLG) to monitor the outcomes of learning achievement. They advocate moving away from the focus on measurable output indicators which monitor increases in schooling, to an outcome goal of learning competencies (as defined by national governments). They argue a MLG would eliminate the false dichotomy between 'access/enrolment' and 'quality of those in school': as attaining an MLG depends on both of these. This could be a sensible approach, although it is important that this doesn't lead to the need for additional testing in schools or promoting curricula built around testing outcomes. We need to improve what is able to be monitored. Perhaps what is required is to encourage governments to regularly collect and monitor broader multidimensional information on children's learning and well-being, potentially through including modules in the Demographic and Health Survey (DHS). This could inform governments' understanding of education in the context of children's well-being and learning and create a platform for country-relevant learning and life-skills goals. Monitoring this as part of the DHS would enable governments to understand children's outcomes in relation to their family circumstances in this changing economic climate. Children are not well served by vast lists of now unachievable or unhelpful targets and would be better served by a stronger focus on creating the conditions and institutions for economic growth that will enable quality education to provide opportunities for children. National

governments and donors need to think harder about what children and their parents want from education.

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About Young Lives

Young Lives is a longitudinal study of childhood poverty, following the lives of 12,000 children in Ethiopia, India, Peru and Vietnam over 15 years. It is collaborative partnership between research and government institutes in the 4 study countries together with the University of Oxford, the Open University and Save the Children UK.

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