

Are the MDGs enough? Donor perspectives and recipient visions of education and poverty reduction in Rwanda

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Abstract

Achieving the Millennium Development Goals (MDGs) has increasingly become the central focus of many multilateral and bilateral donor agencies, with resources being channelled into those areas of education and training considered crucial to poverty reduction. The development policies of the poorest countries mirror this 'global' poverty reduction agenda, particularly where dependency on external resources is high and where Poverty Reduction Strategy Papers have become a necessary requirement to obtain debt relief. However, subtle - and not so subtle - variations can be observed in the application of these policies by the different partners.

Drawing on the example of Rwanda, this paper explores the perspectives of donors and the developing country government with regard to education and training, and examines how their approaches aim to reduce poverty and promote socio-economic development. Since the late 1990s, poverty reduction has lain at the heart of the Government of Rwanda's (GoR) strategy for socio-economic development. Within that strategy, education and training play a crucial role. However, while attaining the international education targets may have taken increasing prominence in GoR discourse over the last five years, it is looking well beyond this goal. In a context of limited resources, the GoR is required to strike a difficult balance between the provision of basic education within the poverty reduction logic and the provision of higher levels of education and training as prerequisites for attaining the Government's broader vision of transforming Rwanda into a knowledge-based economy. This dilemma manifests itself in both an internal struggle between different policy priorities and viewpoints, and an external struggle with donor agencies whose influence over policy processes is considerable.

Concurrently, a closer look at individual donor policies for education and training in Rwanda reveals that the core message may be the same, i.e. investment in basic education to achieve the MDGs, but differences of tone reflect variations in prioritisation. The actual activities of different multilateral and bilateral donors in-country demonstrate a less than clear focus on the MDGs, or certainly very different ways of approaching the issue. The choice of activity and approach depends upon factors determined within the donor country, such as the general policies and procedures of the individual donor, as well as those determined on the ground, the outcome of negotiations with the Rwandan Government and comparative advantage vis-à-vis other donors.

This paper goes on to consider whether attaining the MDGs is sufficient to reduce poverty in the eyes of the recipient and indeed of the donor community when faced with realities on the ground. Some donors are urging the GoR to concentrate on the core objectives of basic education; others are looking at a broader picture. In a situation of severe dependency on external resources for the development of education and training systems, recipient countries are required to balance their own agendas with the exigencies of their donors. The seeming consensus around achieving the MDGs masks complex politics of negotiation, debate and compromise.

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Introduction

Achieving the Millennium Development Goals (MDGs) has increasingly become the central focus of many multilateral and bilateral donor agencies. This trend can be traced back to the mid-1990s when the Development Assistance Committee of the OECD set about bringing together the disparate array of objectives adopted at various world summits held in the late 1980s and early 1990s, into what became known as the International Development Targets.¹ This subsequently led to the adoption of the United Nations Millennium Declaration in 2000 (UN 2000) and the MDGs. For some analysts, these now represent the overarching framework of dominant international development discourse (Maxwell 2005) at the heart of which lies poverty reduction and the promotion of sustainable development. For the heavily-indebted countries of sub-Saharan Africa, development assistance has consequently become inextricably linked to the elaboration of internationally-accepted poverty reduction strategies which also address the social and environmental concerns laid out in the MDGs. Therefore, the internal development policies of many of the poorest countries mirror this ‘global’ poverty reduction agenda, particularly where dependency on external resources is high.

In tune with this agenda, development assistance has been channelled into those areas of education and training which are both a specific topic of an MDG, such as MDG2 on achieving universal primary education and MDG3 on promoting gender equality, and considered crucial to poverty reduction. The specific areas of attention of the international community with regard to education and training are continually shifting, but at present considerable emphasis is placed on access to quality basic education and gender parity in the basic cycle of education.

Drawing on the example of the education sector in Rwanda, this paper explores the perspectives of the Government of Rwanda and its main donors to the education sector with regard to education and training, and examines how their approaches aim to reduce poverty and promote socio-economic development in light of the MDGs. Variations in the application of the MDG and poverty reduction agenda by the different partners on both the donor and recipient sides are evident and for this a series of explanations can be offered. Of particular importance is the difference in perspective between medium-term goals captured in the MDGs and longer-term development desires which impacts upon policy priorities and can lead to tensions between the Government and donors. However, there are also differences amongst the donors, part of which can be explained by the nature of the engagement in the education and training sector: the type and extent of support; the policy directives adopted at headquarter level; and the historical involvement in this sector in the specific Rwandan context. In exposing these variations, this paper then goes on to consider the application of global principles in practice, questioning whether an explicit focus on the MDGs represents a sufficient strategy to reduce poverty in the eyes of the recipient and indeed of the donor community when faced with realities on the ground.

Poverty Reduction, the MDGs and Education: the Rwandan Perspective

¹ The OECD-DAC website states explicitly that “all of the DAC’s work relates to achievement of the Millennium Development Goals” be it monitoring the goals, working the different goals/targets working on aid effectiveness, examining links between MDGs, (since 2004) conflict prevention and peace building (http://www.oecd.org/about/0,2337,en_2649_34585_1_1_1_1_1.00.html, accessed 8 August 2005).

Since the late 1990s, poverty reduction has lain at the heart of the Government of Rwanda's (GoR) strategy for socio-economic development. This is captured most clearly in the Poverty Reduction Strategy Paper (PRSP) which was finalised in 2002 but on which work began in the late 1990s. Although specific reference to the MDGs is scarcely made in the final PRSP, these targets have begun to take increasing prominence in Rwandan policy discourse. For example, the annual Development Indicators produced by the Ministry of Finance in 2002 and 2003 explicitly outlined how the objectives of Rwanda's PRSP and the GoR's long-term development strategy, Vision 2020, addressed the MDGs and what progress had been made (Minecofin 2002, 2003). Within education and training policy, the international targets with regard to Education for All (EFA) and Universal Primary Education (UPE) are a central focus (Mineduc 2003a, 2003c) and in the most recent PRSP Progress Review from 2004, the achievement of EFA targets and the MDGs was placed at the heart of priorities for education (Minecofin 2004a).

The PRSP now constitutes the main policy instrument for dialogue and coordination of development assistance to Rwanda and its particular version has been held up as a good example of a coherent poverty reduction strategy (Mutebi, Stone and Thin 2001; World Bank and IMF 2002). However, it must be recognised that the poverty reduction language is relatively new, and that the strategies and visions for socio-economic development captured within the PRSP build on a longer policy history. Rwanda's Vision 2020 underpins the PRSP and this Vision has its origins in internal debates held over the course of 1998 and 1999 to address Rwanda's multi-faceted social, political and economic challenges. Early versions make only passing reference to poverty but over time the Vision developed from general ideological statements to a more coherent strategy, where resonances with the concerns of external actors supporting the policymaking process began to be more evident (GoR 2000, 2002a). However, the ideas expressed in the Vision themselves build on earlier policy statements by the GoR, namely the 'fundamental principles' outlined in 1994 (Twagirimungu 1994). While Vision 2020 and the PRSP have been aimed both at an external as well as an internal audience, the achievements of the GoR presented to the people around elections have focused primarily on progress towards implementing these 'principles'. Consequently, to understand the core political priorities on the internal political scene, it is these principles which must be recalled, which latterly formed the basis of the 7-Year Programme adopted by the new Government elected in 2003 (Makuza 2003).

Interestingly, within the 7-Year Programme there is no mention of the MDGs and only a small passing reference to poverty reduction. The core philosophy of the GoR which runs through all of these political and policy statements from 1994 to the present day is a preoccupation with security in its broadest sense. This covers promoting national unity and reconciliation (and with it tightly controlling the political space), taking a strong (and often belligerent) stance with regard to the regional security situation, notably the rebel elements still active in the eastern Democratic Republic of Congo, addressing internal governance issues such as corruption and judicial problems, and economic development plans. Consequently, the real centrality of poverty reduction and achieving the MDGs has to be viewed in this context. There is a strong resonance between the priorities outlined in the 7-Year Programme and the PRSP, and there is strong evidence to suggest a clear commitment by the GoR to poverty reduction. However, this sits within a wider strategy for achieving long-term political and economic stability.

Within this strategy, education and training are seen to play a crucial role in two ways: in promoting national unity and reconciliation through the promotion of 'new' values beyond the ethnic and regional divisions of the past; and in providing the skilled manpower necessary for the economic development of the country which the GoR plans to transform from a rural

agricultural society into a service-oriented, ICT-led knowledge economy (GoR 2002b; Mineduc 2003b). Given Rwanda's, land-locked position, its limited natural resources and its high population density, the main potential source for economic growth it seen to be its human resources. In light of this, education and training policies in Rwanda seem caught between two different objectives. On the one hand, there is a commitment to the provision of basic education which comes out strongly in the PRSP but also within education policy documents and Government rhetoric. This is set within the framework of the international education targets and poverty reduction goals. Increasing resources are being put into primary and lower secondary education, with a promise to expand access for all children to nine-years of basic education. The nine-year programme is intended to equip children with sufficient knowledge and skills to lead productive lives, thus addressing poverty reduction on an individual and societal basis.

On the other hand, however, the GoR has placed considerable emphasis over the last ten years on expanding tertiary education, and more recently on science and technology training at all levels of the education system. A large proportion of the education budget (over 37%) has been devoted to higher education, often to the frustration of donor agencies. In the early post-genocide years the justification for this was the need to replace professionals who had died or fled as a consequence of events; in any case, the tertiary sector was seriously underdeveloped prior to the genocide. A number of new public tertiary institutions were established at the end of the 1990s and since 2000 several private universities have been opened. More recently this rationale has been replaced by the need to have highly skilled workers to support socio-economic development and to attain the long-term economic development goals outlined above. This agenda places quite different demands upon the education and training sector.

Therefore, while attaining the international education targets may have taken increasing prominence in GoR education and training discourse over the last five years, it is very clear that the GoR is looking well beyond these medium-term goals towards a further horizon. Primary and basic education are a priority, but only one of a set of priorities for the education and training sector. However, problems arise between these priorities in the face of the GoR's limited resources. It is dependent upon external resources to the tune of just under 50% of its overall recurrent budget; over 95% of the development budget for education comes from external resources (Hayman 2005: 17-18). Limited resources mean that the GoR would be required to strike a difficult balance between its own priorities for the education sector at the best of times. However, in light of the dependence on external donors, striking the balance between the provision of basic education within the poverty reduction logic to which most donors subscribe and the provision of higher levels of education and training as prerequisites for attaining the Government's broader vision of transforming Rwanda into a knowledge-based economy is rendered even more complex. This dilemma manifests itself in both an internal struggle between different policy priorities and viewpoints, and an external struggle with donor agencies whose influence over policy processes is considerable.

Donors, Poverty Reduction and the Education Sector in Rwanda

At the annual conferences held in Rwanda in 2001 and 2002 which brought together the GoR with donor agencies, the donor community as a whole endorsed the PRSP as the main strategy around which development assistance would be coordinated from then on. This reflects the broader overall policies of nearly all of the main OECD donors to Rwanda, who demonstrate an adherence to the goals of poverty reduction, with some making attainment of the MDGs a central priority. Not all donors embrace these ideas with the same enthusiasm as

others, however. Although all major donor countries have signed up to this global ‘consensus’, their real levels of commitment in terms of translating that into policy and practice is another matter. Donors such as the UK, the European Commission, the Netherlands and the Scandinavian countries have made the link much more explicit than others, such as France, Italy and Spain (Healey and Killick 2000; Rogerson, Hewitt and Waldenberg 2004). The UK, for example, has made the attainment of the MDGs a cornerstone of its development policy (DFID 2000a; HMG 2005). While different donors to Rwanda have their own rationales for engaging in this particular country, often related to historical ties or as a reaction to the genocide, nearly all OECD bilateral donors place poverty reduction and/or commitments with regard to the MDGs amongst their core objectives for assistance.²

Education is one of the core elements of the MDGs, and for some donors providing aid to this sector in Rwanda is justified in terms of commitments to these goals. For example, the UK’s programme of general budget support as well as specific sectoral support to the education sector is premised upon aiding the GoR to attain the MDGs and fulfilling the commitments outlined in the PRSP:

The Purpose of Budget Support is to increase the level and effectiveness of GOR expenditure on poverty reduction, especially in the education sector... DFID’s mission in Rwanda is to help the country to meet the IDTs. (DFID 2000b: 1, emphasis in original)

This in turn reflects the UK’s broader commitment to basic education outlined in the White Paper of 2000 (DFID 2000a) and re-affirmed in a recent report on the UK’s actions to support the MDGs (HMG 2005).³ Similar concerns are expressed in Belgium’s support programme for basic education in Rwanda, which is set within the broader political commitments of the Belgium government to attaining the international targets for education adopted at various international conferences, and to poverty reduction through assistance to the provision of basic education and vocational training (BTC-CTB 2001: 6).

However, a closer look at individual donor policies for education and training in Rwanda reveals that although the core message may be the same, that is investment in basic education to achieve the MDGs and poverty reduction, differences of tone reflect a range of priorities as well as ways and means of achieving the stated objectives. Table 1 provides an overview of the main donors supporting the education sector in Rwanda at the present time. These are the UK, the World Bank, UNICEF, Germany, Belgium and France. Sweden acts as a silent partner through the UK. A number of large international NGOs are also active, such as Voluntary Service Overseas which provides volunteer teachers, Concern and CARE International which are particularly involved with access for vulnerable children. Other bilateral and multilateral donors and UN agencies have also been and continue to be engaged in small-scale activities, for example school feeding programmes, construction of buildings, and support to particular districts and schools. It is interesting to note that a great many donors have provided some support to Rwanda’s old and new tertiary education institutions for infrastructure, equipment, research grants and study grants (Minecofin 2004b).

² Interviews with various bilateral donor agency representations, Rwanda 2003-2004.

³ In this report, DFID emphasises its support for education, particularly girls’ education and supporting the World Bank’s Fast Track Initiative. It recognises the importance of taking a broad approach to education within the poverty reduction agenda, but is clearly concentrating specifically on certain areas, notably girls’ education and teacher training. This clearly resonates with the thrust of current debates on education and training in Rwanda, as we shall see below.

Table 1: Donor support to the Rwandan education sector

Donor	Education sector support (main areas)	Main instruments
Belgium	Vocational training (Youth Training Centres) Professional Education (nursing and agro-veterinary schools) Lower secondary science University support and study grants	Projects undertaken by Belgian Technical Cooperation, Flemish and Walloon Cooperation agencies, university exchange programmes. Technical assistants attached to each project.
France	Curriculum (French-language) GIS mapping of schools	Technical assistants seconded to the Ministry of Education; projects.
Germany	Technical education (Technical schools) Technical education teacher training	Provision of technical assistants to Ministry of Education and Kigali Institute of Science and Technology.
Sweden	Programme support Support to National University of Rwanda (research)	Silent partner through DFID (UK) Individual projects
UK	Institutional support; teacher training; curriculum development; textbooks	Large programme managed by contractor. Long-term technical assistants to Ministry of Education; short-term consultancies.
World Bank	Human Resource Development; infrastructure; textbooks; HIV/AIDS	Projects
UNICEF	Vulnerable and out of school children Girls education and gender issues Textbooks	Projects

Source: CEPEX Registry of External Aid (Minecofin 2004b); interviews with Ministry of Education and donor agencies; individual policy documents of donor agencies.

As Table 1 demonstrates, the actual activities of different multilateral and bilateral donors in-country demonstrate a less than clear focus on the specific targets of the MDGs, or certainly very different ways of approaching the issue. The choice of activity and approach depends upon a range of factors determined by broader donor country policies and objectives, as well as context-specific factors. These include: historical engagement in the education sector in Rwanda, e.g. the German history of involvement in technical education or Belgian support for vocational training; the outcome of negotiations with the Rwandan Government, e.g. Belgian support for lower secondary science teaching represents a compromise between the GoR desire for Belgium to support secondary education and Belgian interest in basic education; or comparative advantage vis-à-vis other donors. The UK's initial involvement in the education sector came about through a funding gap in that sector and a GoR request for the UK to assist in this area; but it also has extensive experience in other countries of establishing sector-wide approaches in education.

In terms of education policymaking, the UK and the World Bank have been the most influential since the late 1990s, although between 1994 and 1998 the UN was more prominent. Since 2001, the UK has provided considerable institutional support to the Ministry of Education through long and short-term technical assistance, helping to produce policies and strategies, notably driving the implementation of a Sector-Wide Approach (SWAp). Both the UK and the World Bank adhere to a similar logic on education and training, demonstrating a concern to focus on the provision of basic, formal education in line with the MDG targets. This comes out particularly clearly in the World Bank's recent study on education for poverty reduction in Rwanda, which emphasises the need to reorient more resources towards basic education (World Bank 2004). Nevertheless, in practice, as Table 1 shows, the support provided by the UK and World Bank covers a range of activities. The underlying rationale for this is that for the targets to be achieved, what first is required is a general, institutional strengthening of the system including policy-making and financial

management; but there is also recognition that an integrated, sector-wide approach is necessary in line with GoR thinking:

GOR recognise that in order to achieve sustained poverty reduction underpinned by steady economic growth, education reforms need to be broader than the IDTs. (DFID 2000b: 3)

The UK has consequently provided a great deal of support to the Ministry of Education as well as advisors in core areas like primary education, teacher training, higher education, planning and financial management. Short-term consultancies have provided advice and policy input on a range of activities, e.g. HIV/AIDS and education, language policy, the nine-year basic education system and teacher management. Other donors also provide policy input in line with their particular fields of interest, for example Germany (GTZ) helped prepare a technical education policy for the Ministry in 2004,⁴ and the French have been involved in curriculum reform.

In the early 2000s, a great deal of effort was put into establishing a SWAp in education. A new education policy was adopted in 2002, followed by the Education Sector Strategic Plan (ESSP) in 2003. The UK has been particularly active in supporting this. The education sector in Rwanda is now held up as a model within the GoR due to the existence of this coherent strategy, which engages all the main ministries involved in education and training. Coordination of external support to the education sector has also been enhanced, with an Education Development Partners Group established in 2001 to facilitate regular coordination meetings (led by DFID), retreats organised to discuss enhanced collaboration, and annual reviews of the sector. However, within these activities, certain donors are much more active than others. There is clearly a core group of 'like-minded' donors – the UK, the World Bank, UNICEF and Sweden – which are more engaged than others, with their sights focused on basic education and the MDGs. Smaller donors to the sector, such as Germany, France and Belgium are much less prominent and sometimes feel excluded from discussions.⁵ Coordination also suffers from a lack of Ministry leadership, with meetings almost exclusively the domain of donors and little indication of the Ministry wishing to take this activity on, despite attempts throughout the Government to improve ownership of coordination activities.

Different Priorities, Different Perspectives: recent trends in the education sector

The policy priorities of several sub-Saharan African countries demonstrate a widely-held perspective that providing basic education alone will not be sufficient to bring about socio-economic transformation, which will in turn impact upon poverty reduction. Indeed, policy positions would suggest that it is rather post-basic levels of education and training which are likely to have the greatest impact on poverty reduction in the long term (see Akoojee and McGrath 2005; Palmer 2005; Wedgwood 2005). However, in a situation of severe dependency on external resources for the development of education and training systems, such as that in which Rwanda finds itself, the Government is required to balance its own agenda with the requirements of the donors. As already mentioned, this leads to a tension between the medium-term goals of achieving the MDGs and direct poverty reduction through

⁴ The preparation of the technical education policy is an interesting example of donor influence within the Ministry of Education. When I first conducted interviews in the Ministry of Education in 2003, technical and vocational training was scarcely mentioned by Ministry officials; one year later, it was quite the reverse with many officials talking about the importance of formal and informal skills training, with a technical education policy under preparation and talk of a similar requirement for vocational training. This can partly be attributed to the German support for drafting a technical education policy, which put this issue firmly on the table.

⁵ Interviews with donor agencies, Rwanda 2003-2004.

a concentration on providing basic education and training; and the long-term goals of socio-economic transformation which require significant investment in post-basic levels of education and training and a broader approach to the relationships between education, training, employment, social change, and economic development. These medium and long-term objectives are interlinked but not the same. These dilemmas are not only present within GoR thinking but also within individual donors. The seeming consensus around achieving the MDGs therefore masks complex politics of negotiation, debate and compromise.

In line with their particular perspective, donors such as the UK and the World Bank have been urging the GoR to concentrate more resources on the core objectives of basic education. Other donors are increasingly coming on board this agenda, with Sweden following the UK's lead, Belgium seeking to move into basic education and likewise the Netherlands is considering providing sectoral support for basic education. The pressure on the GoR to prioritise basic education has been going on for some time, and has been particularly captured in the debates over the proportion of the education budget devoted to higher education. As we have seen above, the GoR's rationales for investing in higher education have shifted but their commitment to it has not. Significant work has therefore been put into persuading the GoR to find alternative sources of finance for tertiary education and to reflect on the distribution of resources within the tertiary sector in order to rationalise the budget and free up additional funding for other areas of education and training, basic education in particular. This has been done through the provision of technical assistance and studies.

This is one example of a difference in prioritisation between the GoR and donors. Others also exist, such as the insistence by the GoR on a trilingual education policy for political reasons, with which few donors agree due to the impact on quality in light of poor language skills across the board in the education system, and the shift to a nine-year basic education system. This again is a consequence of a political commitment, based on a recognition that children are leaving the education system with inadequate skills to lead a meaningful life. The fact that donors have helped to translate these commitments into policy demonstrates that there is at least a willingness to engage with the GoR's own priorities, even if these would not be the first concern of the donors.

However, the reality is that despite the existence of the ESSP and a coherent education sector strategy, which covers every aspect of formal and non-formal education and training, certain sub-sectors within the education system have received greater attention than others, as table 2 demonstrates. This reflects GoR priorities as well as donor ones in the face of limited resources. As we can see, to date the main emphasis has been on the sub-sectors of primary and higher education, with other areas neglected except where a particular donor has taken the initiative, e.g. the Germans on technical education policy and the Belgians to a lesser extent in vocational training. Moreover, despite donors agreeing to work within the ESSP, there are still instances of donors offering support outside the priority sectors which the Ministry does not refuse.

Table 2 also shows that plans are in place to address the needs of almost all the sub-sectors over the coming years, with extensive new plans outlined in the draft ESSP update for the 2005-2010 period (Mineduc 2005). In some respects this has been facilitated by increased coherence in the education sector. Until 2004, vocational training came under the remit of the Ministry of Labour and adult education under the Ministry of Local Affairs. Although involved and strategised within the ESSP, these areas lay outside the budget remit of the Ministry of Education and were essentially neglected within their own ministries. Since these were moved to the Ministry of Education there appears to be greater commitment to addressing these areas, non-formal and adult education in particular. Nevertheless, it remains

to be seen if the resources will be provided for implementing these plans. Past experience would indicate that the enthusiasm with which these new plans will be driven forward into action will depend upon donor willingness to provide the financial, human and material resources. If these are not forthcoming, then projected timelines are likely to be revised as has happened in the past, for example with regard to the provision of new vocational training centres.

Table 2: Prioritisation of Education Sub-Sectors in Rwanda

Education/Training Sector	Priority up to 2004	Current and future plans
HRD / capacity building	Lots of talk but little action	High priority under public service reform with establishment of human resources agency (HIDA)
Tertiary	Strong political priority since 1994; new institutions from 1999	Proportion of public spending to decline as other forms of funding are mobilised.
Upper Secondary	Professional & technical streams neglected. Limited donor engagement	Technical education policy to be operationalised. Main plans are for ICT in upper secondary to be expanded; teacher training.
Lower Secondary	No specific prioritisation	New emphasis within 9-year basic education cycle; expansion. Spending % on secondary as whole to increase.
Vocational Training	Neglected – no policy, shunted around ministries, limited donor attention.	Ministry talking more about it, onto agenda for 2005-2007; to be self-financing. No specific discussion about informal skills training.
Non-formal Education	Neglected	To be developed over 2006-2008 period
Primary Education	Initial focus on reconstruction, but lots of attention overall – policy, infrastructure, supplies, etc.	% of funding to increase. Emphasis on equitable access and quality
ECCD	Neglected – limited availability	To be addressed over 2005-2007 period

A further indication of evolving priorities can be gleaned from the Joint Reviews of the sector which are held annually. These events provide the occasion to review progress on the ESSP over the previous year and to consider priorities for the coming year. For example, in 2004, the emphasis was on fine-tuning the ESSP 2003-2008 and establishing evaluation indicators and financial tracking mechanisms. It was noted that there should be a gradual decrease in public funding to higher education and a subsequent increase in pro-poor spending (JRES 2004). In terms of specific areas, teacher management and training received considerable attention, as did tertiary education (notably in terms of rationalising costs), trilingual strategy, fee-free primary education, gender issues and vulnerable children, and technical education. In 2005, the emphasis was particularly on expenditure performance and management, decentralisation of the education sector strategy, implementing the nine-year education policy, higher education reform (notably the establishment of the Student Financing Agency), literacy policy, girls' education and vulnerable children, and coordination of donor support to the education sector.⁶ On the one hand, this represents an evolving situation where priorities considered of lesser importance in one year can be addressed as resources become available and as priorities get ticked off the list. On the other hand, it demonstrates changing interests and priorities.

At the Joint Review of April 2005, the draft ESSP update for the 2005-2010 period was also on the table (Mineduc 2005). This provides a very interesting insight into the way thinking is evolving within the Ministry with regard to education and training. While the full gamut of sub-sectors are dealt with, the core themes which run through the strategies are access to

⁶ Agenda and various presentations from the Joint Review of the Education Sector, 25-29 April 2005.

basic education for all, girls' education as well as access for orphans and vulnerable children (OVCs). There is clear resonance with the MDGs within this. However, the issue of specifically *pro-poor* strategies are striking by their absence. Girls' access to education and training is featured, but not specifically in terms of the *poorest* girls; there is no consideration of access of *poor* boys within this strategy. The concern with OVCs obviously covers to some extent these groups, but there is a striking absence of reference to specific poverty issues. This raises questions about whether the specific *poverty* focus of education and training is losing ground in Rwanda.

This would imply that the medium-term objectives of achieving the MDGs and direct poverty reduction through the provision of basic education are taking precedence in education and training policy in Rwanda. At the same time, the GoR priority of promoting ICT, science and technology throughout the education system is very prominent, which reflects much more its longer term perspective. One question which emerges, however, is whether the current direction of thinking on education and training can fulfil these longer-term needs; particularly in light of the considerable expectations that are made of the education and training sectors for the wider development of Rwanda, in terms of providing skilled manpower, fuelling economic transformation and in providing research on context-specific issues. In this respect, it is worth reflecting on how support for education and training policy, as well as donor assistance to the education and training sector, relates to broader objectives for poverty reduction and socio-economic development.

As we have seen above, the GoR perspective would imply that focusing on the MDGs and poverty reduction alone will not suffice to bring about the socio-economic transformation necessary to reduce poverty in the long-term, given Rwanda's natural resource constraints. Rwanda's education sector strategy attempts to take an integrated approach to education and training. The question is whether it is broad enough to capture the potential impact of education and training on poverty reduction and socio-economic development and to turn that into reality. A more coherent strategy is required to marry the short and medium-term demands of providing basic education to bring about direct and indirect poverty reduction, and the longer-term vision of socio-economic transformation in Rwanda. To do this, much deeper inter-ministerial collaboration is required on the relationship between education and labour market development, between education and agricultural and rural transformation, between education and justice, environmental sustainability, governance and health, etc.

Conclusion: Are the MDGs enough?

There appears to be consensus that the MDGs represent "a powerful and politically attractive frame within which to approach international development", providing a useful set of benchmarks against which to measure progress. Indeed the attractiveness of the MDGs seems to lie precisely in the fact that they are quantifiable (Vandemoortele 2005), at a time when donors are increasingly concerned with demonstrating the effectiveness of their aid in measurable terms. However, it is also widely agreed that there are deficiencies in the way in which the various concerns outlined in the Millennium Declaration of 2000 have been translated into this specific set of objectives and targets. As Vandemoortele goes on to say: "the MDGs can be seen as either an agreed agenda, a minimalistic agenda or an incomplete agenda for human development" depending upon how the targets, their content and their ambitions are analysed.

To date, progress on achieving the MDGs has been mixed, with sub-Saharan Africa demonstrating the weakest results. While the World Bank insists that some countries in

Africa are showing signs of “turning the corner” (World Bank 2005: xvii), sub-Saharan Africa as a whole is off-track for each target. As the world prepares to gather in September 2005 to assess progress,⁷ one wonders whether a shift may be in the offing with regard to the MDGs. The 35-page draft declaration for the MDG+5 Summit, while acknowledging the progress made on the specific targets and the considerable challenges ahead if the targets are to be achieved, devotes a great deal more page space to wider international concerns of the day. These include several pages on security, terrorism and international crime; on human rights and governance, as well as reforming the UN institutions and their role vis-à-vis the MDGs.⁸ Only one small paragraph is specifically devoted to education. Basic education remains the core focus, but there is also explicit recognition of the need to look beyond basic education for poverty reduction:

We emphasize the critical role of both formal and informal education, in particular basic education and training for eradicating illiteracy, and strive for expanded secondary and higher education as well as vocational education and technical training, especially for girls and women, creating human resources and infrastructure capabilities and empowering those living in poverty.⁹

This raises the possibility that the MDGs may ripe for revisiting. The connection between the MDGs and poverty reduction has already come under fire, with evaluations of the PRSP approach observing that the strategy is falling short of expectations. Indeed for Vandemoortele (2005), this “confirm[s] that the PRS-approach does not provide a strategic vision or ambitious framework for reaching the MDG targets”. Moreover, as Maxwell (2005) observes, what is lacking in the targets adopted is sufficient appreciation of social inclusion and social protection needs, the need for investment in the productive sectors, and security concerns. Perhaps an outcome of the 2005 summit may be a recognition that a much broader outlook is required. Certainly something needs to be done if the MDGs are to be achieved. For the World Bank this demands renewed ‘momentum’, give that “overall, progress been slower than envisaged, uneven across policy areas and countries, and far short of what is needed” (World Bank 2005: xvii). But it could also be that the MDGs themselves require revisiting to take account of the anomalies and problems inherent within them.

The example of Rwanda demonstrates that neither within Government nor donor policy is the focus on the MDGs clear-cut. There appears to be a gap between the rhetoric and the practice, with donors encouraging the GoR, through more or less subtle means, to concentrate on the MDG targets within the education sector, but actually demonstrating a less than obvious focus themselves. On the one hand this would imply that other factors take precedence, such as wider donor interest or funding prerogatives. On the other, it raises the possibility that achieving the MDGs is not enough – either to satisfy GoR priorities, donor interests, or wider development goals.

This example also captures the potential conflicts present at the international level, between the demands of direct poverty-reduction activities to address fundamental human rights, interpreted in terms of provision of social services within the MDGs (universal primary

⁷ In preparation for this summit, various donors have set out how their policies have been oriented towards the MDGs, and what still needs to be done. See for example HMG (2005) and EU (2004).

⁸ Note that UK policy is also shifting slightly to recognise more the problems of dealing with security-related issues, especially vis-à-vis fragile and failing/failed states. The focus is no longer about provision of support to well-performing states with good government commitment to and policies for poverty reduction, but devising ways to support poverty reduction in weak states with poor policy environments which tend to experience the highest poverty levels (HMG 2005).

⁹ UN, Revised draft outcome document of the high-level plenary meeting of the General Assembly of September 2005 submitted by the President of the General Assembly (22 July 2005) from http://www.un.org/ga/59/hl60_plenarymeeting.html (accessed 8 August 2005).

education, gender equity, health care and disease control), and indirect poverty reduction activities, interpreted primarily in terms of growth and economic management. Indeed, growth is seen to be the most important and easiest driver of poverty reduction, and not just any growth, but growth based on neo-liberal principles (Maxwell 2005; World Bank 2005).¹⁰ Getting the balance right between the different demands of this agenda – the provision of social services in a pro-poor, equitable manner, and working towards long-term socio-economic development which may require hard choices between equity and growth – leads to a certain tension, which is evident in the Rwandan case.

Behind this lies another fundamental question: what is the real priority of the GoR? GoR official discourse stresses “that the wealth of Rwanda lies in its people, which need to be educated and healthy for the economic development of the country, as well as for reconciliation and lasting peace (Hayman 2005: 49). Despite its insistence on the importance of poverty reduction, it is clear that the GoR’s prime objective is economic development first and foremost, which should have knock-on effects on poverty. This distinction is important, as a great deal hinges upon the assumption that governments receiving aid under poverty reduction strategies are primarily focused on poverty reduction. Rwanda is not necessarily a case in point here, but as Taylor observes, in many African countries provision of social services is not the first priority. Indeed, Taylor implies a naivety in the Western idea that poverty reduction can come about through pumping increased aid resources into Africa, given the evidence that many African states could easily provide social services from their own pockets if only they had the necessary political will to do so (Taylor 2005).

The education sector in Rwanda provides a good example of a decent consensus amongst donors and the Government about priorities and strategies. There is reasonable coordination, good policy dialogue, a coherent strategy, and effective collaboration. Yet there are also conflicting views, between the agendas and perspectives of the GoR and donors, and also amongst donors. Those donors at the heart of education sector support - the UK, the World Bank and UNICEF - appear to take a fairly literal approach to the MDGs, seeking to focus the GoR’s attention on the provision of basic education for all, and increasingly on girls’ education, through funding of specific activities and policy dialogue. On the other hand, however, their own support has been about more than basic education alone.

The core question is whether focusing too closely on the specific targets of the MDGs in terms of education and training, that is achieving universal primary education (MDG2) or gender equity in education (MDG3), is sufficient for the expected poverty reducing outcomes to be achieved. A narrow interpretation of the targets may “mean neglect of the broader growth context, which enables increased social services spending to become sustainable in the longer term” (Rogerson *et al.* 2004). If the MDGs are to be achieved in Rwanda, a broader look is necessary, particularly given the lack of evidence to date in Rwanda to suggest that investing in basic education produces significant changes in the lifestyles and life chances of individuals. It would appear that donors are taking a broader approach to a certain extent. Their activities demonstrate that they are also looking beyond the medium-term goals of the MDGs. The question is whether they are doing this because they recognise these broader needs or because it suits the particular strategic, bureaucratic or practical interests of the donor.

¹⁰ The World Bank’s Global Monitoring Report of 2005 contains the usual refrains in its five-point action plan to accelerate progress towards achieving the MDGs, namely: anchoring actions on MDGs within country-led development strategies, especially the PRSPs; improving environments for private-sector led growth; scaling up human development services, e.g. basic education and health (including “Cost-effective investments in medical, nursing, and teacher training capacity”, pg.7); dismantling barriers to trade; and increasing aid levels and effectiveness (World Bank 2005).

Despite this, in Rwanda we are seeing a trend towards the channeling of resources into basic education which means the potential neglect of other sub-sectors of the system which are essential not only to supporting basic education but also to transforming the outcomes of education and training into poverty reduction. Until the mid-1990s, basic education was not at the forefront of donor support to education (Healey and Killick 2000; Watkins 2000; King and Palmer 2005); so the shift in this direction is fairly recent, but there is a danger that the scales may tip too far in the opposite direction. It may become too easy to focus exclusively on the internationally agreed, quantifiable targets that can be used to justify a donor's policy position or that appear to give the greatest return in the face of limited resources, than to focus on the specific needs of a particular country. In the process, there is a risk that the longer-term visions required for real change in African countries may be lost to short or medium-term objectives.

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