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Millennium Development Goals  
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**The Beijing Platform for Action and the  
Millennium Development Goals:  
Different processes, different outcomes**

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## **The Beijing Platform and the MDGs: different processes, different outcomes**

The Fourth World Women's Conference at Beijing was not just another UN conference. Or to put it another way, it was much more than such a conference<sup>1</sup>. It was a conference that represented an international movement whose members were present, not only in the NGO Forum held alongside the official conference and actively seeking to influence it but were also playing an active role within the official conference itself, as civil society representatives on government delegations and, occasionally, as the government delegates themselves.<sup>1</sup>

Nor could the conference be seen as a one-off event. It was a moment in a process that had begun over two decades ago when WID advocates had been able to persuade the UN to declare 1975 the International Year of Women and then to declare 1975-85 the First International Decade of Women. In one sense, Beijing represented the culmination of this process, which had begun so many years ago. In other sense, however, the Platform for Action with which it concluded represented another moment in that process, the beginning of a new phase in the history of the international women's movement and its attempts to influence the course of development.

The Beijing Platform for Action was the product of difficult negotiations between a much more diverse set of women's constituencies than had been evident in previous conferences. Not only did the official delegates represent different interests within and across the north-south divide, but the religious women's lobbies were now better organized than ever before and threatened to destabilize the north-south convergence that was emerging in the united opposition to neo-liberal fundamentalism. In spite of these divisions, the Platform for Action expressed a holistic and transformative vision for the future, a testimony to the remarkable negotiating skills and lobbying efforts of feminists within and outside the official conference. It opened with the declaration that:

“The principle of shared power and responsibility should be established between women and men at home, in the workplace and in the wider national and international communities. Equality between women and men is a matter of human rights and a condition for social justice and is also a necessary and fundamental prerequisite for equality, development and peace. A transformed partnership based on equality between women and men is a condition for people-centered sustainable development”.

It spelled out 12 critical areas in which action would be needed if the principle of gender equality were to be actualized within the development effort. These covered different arenas of social life and signaled the complex causalities underlying gender inequality and women's subordination across the world (see Appendix). They were accompanied by strategic objectives and actions focusing on the government but including recommendations made by NGOs, political parties, international institutions and so on.

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<sup>1</sup> Eyben, 2004

However, that same year, High Level Meeting of DAC ministers of development co-operation met to come up with a strategic vision for development co-operation after the fall of the Berlin Wall, the end of the cold war and an overall decline in funding by OECD bilateral donors. It launched a year-long process of reflection to review the commitments coming out of the various international conferences that had taken place in the preceding decade, to prioritize and select from among them and to translate these into concrete time-bound targets. In May 1996 they issued their vision statement, called, “*Shaping the 21<sup>st</sup> Century: The role of development co-operation*”, which consisted of seven targets to be achieved by 2015. They are summarized in the Appendix.

The International Development Targets, as they became known, did not attract a great deal of comment, favorable or otherwise, from women’s groups or civil society activists across the world, perhaps because so few of them had been consulted in any way prior to the meeting or invited in any capacity to participate in it. However, the IDTs were taken up by some sections of the development community, one positive result of which was that it helped to draw attention to the importance of the initial inequalities in the distribution of income to the likelihood of countries achieving the reduction of poverty (see special issue of Development Policy Review on this).

As the Appendix shows, gender did not feature very strongly in the IDTs. The target related to gender equality and women’s empowerment was restricted to the achievement of parity in primary and secondary education. However, there was explicit commitment to reproductive health services through the primary health care system for all sections of the population and to the reduction of maternal mortality, a major source of female mortality in poorer countries, by three-fourths by 2015.

A far more international meeting took place at the end of the millennium, which brought together the heads of governments from both north and south. The symbolism of its timing (‘the dawn of a new millennium’) and its high-level international profile ensured that it received a great deal more public attention than the DAC Ministerial meeting. It concluded with the Millennium Declaration, which was adopted by the General Assembly reaffirmed respect for human rights and fundamental freedoms. Among the fundamental values essential to international relations in the 21<sup>st</sup> century were the assurance of equal rights and opportunities for women and men and their freedom from hunger and from fear of violence, oppression and injustice ‘o that they could live their lives and raise their children in dignity.

However, when the spirit of the declaration were translated into the letter of actionable priorities, i.e. concrete goals to be achieved within a time bound period, the results did not differ a great deal from the IDTs, particularly with respect to the IDTs. The goal of gender equality and women’s empowerment was translated once again into the elimination of gender disparities in education, but now extended to include all levels of education. The goal of reducing maternal mortality had remained, but significantly, the commitment to provide reproductive health services through the primary health care system to all individuals in the appropriate age group, a key commitment from the Cairo declaration and one included in the IDTs, had been dropped.

It is not surprising; therefore, that the MDGs have been met with widespread dismay by women's groups in different parts of the world. Critics have pointed to the complete inadequacy of the targets and indicators associated with MDG3 in capturing the goal of women's empowerment. As Peggy Antrobus pointed out in her presentation to the Caribbean Regional MDG conference in 2003, despite the high rates of literacy and education achieved by women in the Caribbean, these had not translated into higher access to employment, decision-making positions in the public domain or political office. Poverty persists, violence against women continues unabated, HIV-AIDS is spreading, and most rapidly among women and safe and affordable abortion services withheld in most of the Caribbean countries. Some critics feared the MDGs would become the new form of conditionality<sup>2</sup>.

A particularly telling set of criticisms related to the MDG process. As Kindervatter pointed out, despite the promotion of the MDGs as a global consensus framework, it has been perceived by civil society as a top-down approach. Many civil society organisations, including women's organisations, had been actively involved in the series of UN conferences that took place in the 1990s and deeply committed to the frameworks and principles which had emerged from them. The MDGs, by contrast, were adopted by the world's political leaders with very little involvement from their civil society constituency. Efforts were being made after the event to 'sell' the MDGs to civil society through the setting up of a campaign structure but it was clear that many sections of civil society, but those representing subordinate and marginalised groups in particular, felt betrayed by both process and content.

At the same time, it has been recognised by many feminists, including by those who were critical of the MDGs, that they could not be ignored. As one observer put it, 'we have no choice but to work with what we have'<sup>3</sup>. More positively, it has been argued that the MDGs represented an unprecedented commitment by heads of state and government to a concrete set of quantified and time-bound targets that addressed at least some of the critical elements of development. It has also been pointed out that the MDGs bring together social and economic goals in a way that provided a window for gender advocates who have been arguing for the indivisibility of the two in women's lives.

However, 'in working with what we have', it is necessary to build ownership of what we have and to do that we should also take every opportunity to transform the content of the MDGs and to make the processes associated with their realisation more democratic and more accountable. The Beijing+10 Review and the forthcoming Millennium Development Review allow such opportunities.

### **The achievements of the Beijing process**

What were the strengths and achievements of the PFA – and what challenges does it face? One set of achievements relates to the process associated with the Platform. It represented a historically unprecedented mobilisation of feminist advocates, activists and academics in the international political arena. This included the period leading up to Beijing which included the

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<sup>2</sup> Barton

<sup>3</sup> van Deuren

recognition of women's rights as human rights in the Vienna conference and the other paradigmatic shift from the population control agenda so evident in the First Population Conference to the focus on reproductive and sexual rights which informed the Cairo declaration.

However, it was Beijing conference that displayed the diversity of the international women's movement at its best and which more than any of the other Women's conferences, brought together grassroots women's organisations from across the world. In India, for instance, a national umbrella organisation set up as part of the Beijing process was able to draw in women's organisations and groups that had not previously participated in international processes of this kind. They participated in the preparations and influenced the processes leading up to the conference. In the Asia-Pacific regional process, around 800 women's organisations from India took part in the discussions on gender equality and negotiations on strategies for change. The networks that were created continued to function after the conference and the exposure gave many women's organisations new perspectives as well as the courage to tackle controversial issues. And in Bangladesh, national and international women's NGOs were able to use the processes leading up to and following Beijing to dramatically improve the Government's attitudes towards the requirements of CEDAW. These changes in turn led to substantive results. Indeed, according to the Secretary for Women and Children's Affairs, Beijing had a significant impact in Bangladesh because the issues identified in the Platform for Action mapped the situation of women's rights in Bangladesh so well.

The second set of achievements related to the legitimacy that the Beijing process gave to a variety of substantive issues which were brought together in the strategic priorities for action outlined in the Beijing Platform, including the gains made through CEDAW and the ICPD. The effects were evident in the actions of various governments as well as donors. National committees and institutions were set up and national plans for action for the advancement of women or the promotion of gender equality drawn up across the world. Attempts were also made to 'mainstream' gender within the international agencies. While the effects of these various efforts may have been uneven – given the uneven levels of commitment evident in the different institutions and agencies – they have certainly helped to raise public awareness on gender issues, legitimise it as a concern as well as to re-direct resources towards women as the generally more disadvantaged group.

Given the challenges facing the promotion of the PFA, the adoption of the MDGs has not been helpful for some of the reasons mentioned earlier. They have served to reduce the vision and aspirations of a movement into a series of narrow and technically conceived targets. Furthermore, they have been adopted at a time when changing aid modalities associated with the PRSPS had begun to shift resources and priorities almost exclusively to governments as policy support and away from the civil society actors who would hold government responsible and accountable for the promises it made in its policies and legislation as well as in the conditionality on which it received such support. Given that women have far less access to government resources than men, resources made available through international agencies had helped to partly compensate for this shortfall.

## **Bridging the PFA and the MDGs: building ownership and accountability**

The challenge therefore is how to re-vision the MDGs – their substance and the processes associated with them – in such a way that they make up a far more people-centred agenda, one that is designed with, driven by and accountable to those who have the most direct stake in their outcomes. From a gender perspective, this would mean reformulating the existing MDGs so that gender equity concerns become more central to them; expanding the goals to include those which the women's movement regards as critical for achieving gender equality and women's empowerment and putting in place the resources and the processes which would help to engage civil society actors.

The Millennium Task Force on Gender equality and women's empowerment has outlined a number of strategic priorities which, if adopted by the Millennium Task Force, could provide a sufficiently broad-based agenda to unite women's organisations round the world and to energise them to engage in the MDG process. These are 1) the promotion of post-primary education 2) guaranteeing sexual and reproductive health and rights 3) investing in infrastructure to reduce women and girls' time burdens 4) guaranteeing women's inheritance and property rights 5) reducing gender inequality in employment 6) increasing women's representation in political bodies and 7) combating violence against women.

These seek to address many of the concerns that gender advocates have felt about the MDGs, its narrowness and its omissions. In particular, they address the two issues whose omissions have been most widely condemned by women's organizations: sexual and reproductive rights and violence against women. It is likely that these two areas constitute a kind of bottom line if the MDGs are to be seen as a serious effort to address the issue of gender equality. I would like to support these recommendations strongly. However, I would also like to make a number of points which relate to my concerns with the existing goals, particularly those relating to poverty reduction and global partnerships.

It is critical that all of the MDGs are conceptualized, translated into policy, acted on and monitored from a gender-aware perspective. For this to happen, MDG 3 needs to be given a far more strategic place within the MDG agenda than it has now (MDG2?) and furthermore, what are now relegated to the status of 'indicators of progress' on MDG3 need to be translated into targets to be actively aspired to. These indicators represent access to education, to paid work and to political participation. If the international community is serious about these indicators as evidence of progress, it should have no objection to treating them as targets that have to work towards.

The goal of poverty reduction should remain central to the MDG effort because it is a goal that unites different sections of government, the international development community and civil society, including women's organizations. However it needs to be reconceptualised from a gender perspective. In particular, it would benefit greatly from drawing on the analysis of poverty contained in the PFA: the persistent and increasing burden of poverty for women, gender inequalities in economic structures and policies, in all forms of productive activities and in access to resources and lack of respect for women's human rights.

Recent appreciation of the multidimensionality of poverty in terms of deficits of assets, services and human capabilities as well as income are important and they point in the direction of a rights-based approach to the eradication of poverty. It suggests that what poor people need is access to decent paid work i.e. work which provides a living wage and can be carried out with dignity. Such work may be generated by the market; it may be created by the state or it may result from the efforts of the poor themselves. What is astonishing therefore is that there is no reference at all in MDG 1 to either the issue of paid work or to the contribution that women's paid work makes to the survival and security of poor households.

Yet across the world, women's participation in paid work has a very marked relationship to household poverty, although the nature of that relationship varies by context. In those parts of the world where social norms seek to curtail women's participation in the public domain, it is largely women from poorer households who undertake paid work. Thus in countries like India, Pakistan and Bangladesh; there is a strong inverse relationship between household income and female labour force participation. By contrast, in those parts of the world where such restrictions do not apply and where women from all classes engage in paid work, there is likely to be a strong relationship between household income and women's unemployment rates such that the poorer the household, the higher the rate of female unemployment (see Alma Espino on Uruguay, for instance and Lucy Ellis on the Caribbean).

In fact, John Sender has argued on the basis of analysis from a number of different countries that there are certain 'stylized facts' that appear to be emerging in the Asian and increasingly the African context about the poorest 15-20% of households in rural areas: they are likely to be made up of a disproportionately female membership, to have very low levels of education (indeed they may not have any literate adult member), to have had no access to male earnings for several years because of death, incapacity, desertion or irresponsibility of male earners; to have low birth weight babies and high rates of infant mortality. The women in these households work in casualised agricultural wage labour and their households are largely dependent on their wages. For many women from poor households, migration into urban areas or across national borders is increasingly important as a way of seeking new forms of employment. While such migration may have a positive effect on the household economy, it may also expose women to hazardous conditions of work, including sexual trafficking.

The issue therefore is not simply that women are bearing a disproportionate share of the burden of poverty but that investment in their efforts to earn a living and care for their families will both help their households to move out of poverty as well as help to break the inter-generational transmission of poverty<sup>4</sup>. Education may not be sufficient to empower women, but it is clearly important in assisting them to move out of the more exploitative margins of the labour market and into improved conditions of work.

However, the MDG3 focus on removing gender disparities in education is unlikely to achieve the sustainable reduction of poverty. Eliminating gender disparities is not the same as ending gender inequality: disparities generally deal with numerical imbalances while inequalities deal with substantive asymmetries<sup>1</sup>. MDG3 focuses on disparities and makes no mention of the structures

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<sup>4</sup> Kabeer, 2003

that generate these inequalities. Moreover, it focuses only on disparities in education while access to other resources that would improve women's capacity to achieve decent forms of paid work are not touched on. The focus of the Millennium Task Force report on women's inheritance and property rights and gender equality in employment partly compensates for this.

There has been growing recognition within national and international bodies that 'participation' by those with the most direct stake in outcomes of policies and programmes is the best way to ensure that those policies and programmes are implemented in the spirit in which they were adopted. That recognition needs to be extended to the participation by the world's women in the MDG process and to ensuring that their participation is 'real' rather than symbolic. However, while the PFA talks about participation in relation to inequalities of power and decision-making between women and men at all levels, the only reference to active participation by women in the MDG relates to the one of the indicators associated with MDG3: expanding women's share of seats in national parliament. I would argue that while this critical, particularly if it is the result of elections rather than nomination; it needs to be expanded to include higher levels of participation at the local level which is where poorer women are likely to be most actively engaged in politics.

I would also argue that it needs to be extended to participation in the global forums of decision-making, but once again, there is very little in the MDGs to encourage the promotion of women's political activity at the global level. The definition of gender issues in purely sectoral terms leaves little scope for addressing gender asymmetries in the key goal that deals with macro-level and global decision-making. MDG 8, which seeks to develop a global partnership for development, will make the rules relating to the world trade and financial system, including a commitment to good governance, development and poverty reduction nationally and internationally. Thus it is in the context of this proposed global partnership that the key decisions about the structures and policies which will determine how resources and opportunities are shared between, and within, countries.

There is nothing in MDG8 that indicates possibilities for consultation with or participation by wider civil society. Women's organisations, particularly those at the grassroots, are unlikely to have any voice in influencing the deliberations of this partnership let alone be given 'a seat at the table' - unless they mobilise actively and strategically for voice and inclusion. One strategic entry point is mobilisation around the MDGs themselves - first of all, to expand them and reformulate them to bring them closer to the letter and spirit of the Platform of Action and then to ensure that they are realised. However, this requires the availability of the necessary resources and the institutionalisation of the appropriate processes that would enable this mobilisation.

However, information, conscientisation, organisation and mobilisation are key ingredients for the substantive and democratic participation by marginalised sections of civil society in the collective decision-making processes that influence their lives, whether it is at the local, national or international level. And while women's capacity to mobilise around the MDGs and to hold government and the international development community responsible for their realisation will influence the extent to which they are achieved, it will be their capacity to participate in global partnership envisaged by MDG 8 that will determine whether the resources and structures that are put in place enable, or constrain, such mobilisation.

The earlier version of the report produced by the Millennium Task Force on Gender equality and Women's Empowerment was called 'Promises to Keep'. It was a reminder that there has been no shortage of rhetoric by national and international leaders about the importance of promoting gender equality but there has been a dearth of action to follow up on these promises. The challenge therefore is how to ensure that this time round, along with revisioning and expanding the MDGs, promises are kept, laws are enforced and policies are implemented in the spirit in which they were agreed.

## **Appendix: a comparison**

### **Beijing Platform for Action: Critical areas for concern**

- 1) The persistent and increasing burden of poverty for women
- 2) Inequalities and inadequacies in, and unequal access to, education and training
- 3) Inequalities and inadequacies in, and unequal access to, health care and related services
- 4) Violence against women
- 5) The effects of armed or other kinds of conflict on women, including those living under foreign occupation
- 6) Inequality in economic structures and policies, in all forms of productive activities and in access to resources
- 7) Inequality between women and men in the sharing of power and decision-making at all levels
- 8) Insufficient mechanisms at all levels to promote the advancement of women
- 9) Lack of respect for and inadequate promotion and protection of the human rights of women
- 10) Stereotyping of women and inequality in women's access and participation in all communication systems, especially the media
- 11) Gender inequality in the management of natural resources and in the safeguarding of the environment
- 12) Persistent discrimination and violation of the rights of the girl child

## **OECD-DAC International Development Targets**

1. The proportion of people living in extreme poverty in developing countries should be reduced by at least one-half by 2015.<sup>5</sup>
2. There should be universal primary education in all countries by 2015.<sup>6</sup>
3. Progress towards gender equality and the empowerment of women should be demonstrated by eliminating gender disparity in primary and secondary education by 2005.<sup>7</sup>
4. The death rates for infants and children under five should be reduced in each developing country by two-thirds the 1990 level by 2015.<sup>8</sup>
5. The rate of maternal mortality should be reduced by three-fourths by 2015.<sup>9</sup>
6. Access should be available through the primary health-care system to reproductive health services for all individuals of appropriate ages, no later than the year 2015.<sup>8</sup>
7. There should be a national strategy for sustainable development, in the process of implementation, in every country by 2005, so as to ensure that current trends in the loss of environmental resources are effectively reversed at both global and national levels by 2015.<sup>10</sup>

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<sup>5</sup> Copenhagen 1995

<sup>6</sup> Jomtien 1990, Beijing 1995, Copenhagen 1995

<sup>7</sup> Cairo 1994, Beijing 1995, Copenhagen 1995

<sup>8</sup> Cairo, 1994

<sup>9</sup> Cairo, 1994, Beijing 1995

<sup>10</sup> Rio, 1992

## The Millennium Development Goals

### **Goal 1: Eradicate extreme poverty and hunger**

**Target 1:** Halve, between 1990 and 2015, the proportion of people whose income is less than one dollar a day

**Target 2:** Halve, between 1990 and 2015, the proportion of people who suffer from hunger

### **Goal 2: Achieve universal primary education**

**Target 3:** Ensure that, by 2015, children everywhere, boys and girls alike, will be able to complete a full course of primary schooling

### **Goal 3: Promote gender equality and empower women**

**Target 4:** Eliminate gender disparity in primary and secondary education preferably by 2005 and to all levels of education no later than 2015

### **Goal 4: Reduce child mortality**

**Target 5:** Reduce by two-thirds, between 1990 and 2015, the under-five mortality rate

### **Goal 5: Improve maternal health**

**Target 6:** Reduce by three-quarters, between 1990 and 2015, the maternal mortality ratio

### **Goal 6: Combat HIV/AIDS, malaria and other diseases**

**Target 7:** Have halted by 2015, and begun to reverse, the spread of HIV/AIDS

**Target 8:** Have halted by 2015, and begun to reverse, the incidence of malaria and other major diseases

### **Goal 7: Ensure environmental sustainability**

**Target 9:** Integrate the principles of sustainable development into country policies and programmes and reverse the loss of environmental resources

**Target 10:** Halve, by 2015, the proportion of people without sustainable access to safe drinking water

**Target 11:** By 2020, to have achieved a significant improvement in the lives of at least 100 million slum dwellers

### **Goal 8: Develop a Global Partnership for Development**

**Target 12:** Develop further an open, rule-based, predictable, non-discriminatory trading and financial system

Includes a commitment to good governance, development, and poverty reduction – both nationally and internationally

**Target 13:** Address the Special Needs of the Least Developed Countries

Includes: tariff and quota free access for LDC exports; enhanced programme of debt relief for HIPC and cancellation of official bilateral debt; and more generous ODA for countries committed to poverty reduction

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| <b>Target 14:</b> Address the Special Needs of landlocked countries and small island developing states<br>(through Barbados Programme and 22nd General Assembly provisions)          |
| <b>Target 15:</b> Deal comprehensively with the debt problems of developing countries through national and international measures in order to make debt sustainable in the long term |
| <b>Target 16:</b> In co-operation with developing countries, develop and implement strategies for decent and productive work for youth   |
| <b>Target 17:</b> In co-operation with pharmaceutical companies, provide access to affordable, essential drugs in developing countries   |
| <b>Target 18:</b> In co-operation with the private sector, make available the benefits of new technologies, especially information and communications                                |

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<sup>i</sup> Of course, addressing gender inequalities in the context of poverty may simply imply equalising disadvantage and do little to transform the structures which generate inequality.