Abstract

The world is approaching the 2015 deadline for achieving the Millennium Development Goals (MDGs) in little more than a year. In Bangladesh, remarkable progress has been made across many of the MDGs, particularly in the areas of poverty reduction, gender parity in education, child mortality, maternal mortality and combating HIV/AIDS and other major diseases. However, the present global economic and political climate is vastly different from the one during which the MDGs were formulated and adopted in 2000. A number of critics have made by academicians and researchers on different aspects of the current MDGs. As they argue, despite generalized improvements, trends have been uneven within and across countries and regions. The UN has already taken initiative to set new goals and strategies to ensure sustainable development across the globe beyond MDG period. Based on available information, this paper attempts to focus on existing status of MDGs in Bangladesh and then tries to shed some light on the Country’s initiative for setting post-2015 development agenda.

1. Introduction

The Millennium Declaration presented by the United Nations (UN) at the dawn of the new millennium is a milestone in international cooperation inspiring development efforts in order to improve the living conditions of millions of people around the world. More specifically, it commits the world nations to a new partnership to reduce extreme poverty and setting out a series of time-bound targets—with a deadline of 2015—by which progress in reducing income poverty, hunger, disease, lack of adequate shelter and exclusion—while promoting gender equality, health, education and environmental sustainability—can be measured. These time-bound targets have been popularized as the Millennium Development Goals (MDGs).

The present global economic and political climate has been changed significantly from the one during which the MDGs were formulated and adopted in 2000. During late 1990s, in the backdrop of a shaky economic transitions and unprecedented financial crises in Asia, the MDGs provided useful anchors for revitalizing development efforts on some specific measurable, achievable and time-bound goals for countries like Bangladesh (complete list of goals, targets and indicators can be seen in http://www.un.org/millenniumgoals). Taking all these critics and challenges into account, the United Nation has called for a bottom-up and participatory approach to make sure that the concerns and views of the relevant actors across the globe could shape the priorities and create a stronger sense of ownership in the processes of formulation and implementation of sustainable development agenda beyond the stipulated period of MDGs (UNDG 2013, p. 4). This paper attempts to focus on existing status of MDGs in Bangladesh and draw a brief picture on views and endeavors of the country in crafting achievable goals and strategies to reach sustainable development beyond MDG period.
2. Some Critics on MDGs

Like many other international policies and strategies, MDGs got critics from a variety of sources. The MDGs have some conceptual limitations, since they risk simplifying what ‘development’ is about by restricting the goals to what is measurable, while many aspects of development cannot be easily measured. On the other hand, certain goals do not address some of the problems historically. For instance, the MDG on education focuses mostly on primary schooling, with no reference to secondary and tertiary education, dropout rates and so on.

As one can see, the MDGs focus on a limited set of concrete human development goals and targets to facilitate development efforts, set global and national priorities, and focus action at all levels, mobilizing a vast array of political, financial, technical and human resources for development (UNDG p. 3). This observation may refer to the view that a number of goals and targets do not match fully well with the core theme of the Millennium Declaration, as the choice of MDGs left aside some critical issues including governance, peace and global security and minimized the framing of environmental sustainability in a long run. Besides, the goals in some instances failed to articulate the real-life interactions among and between different development issues. Moreover, emphasis was largely been given to allocate available resources to the activities that had prominence in the MDGs, compromising with some other issues crucial for sustainable development in many developing countries.

Referring to inadequate consultation with and participation of diverse stakeholders, Gold argued that as with any overarching framework, there are critical shortcomings with the MDGs. The framework tends to foster simplistic solutions and top-down approaches which treat some of the symptoms—but not the causes of poverty. Some of these can be overcome through greater attention to a wider context in which the goals are being pursued. She further contended, at a more fundamental level, there is a serious risk that the MDGs could distract attention from underlying causes of structural injustice—at national and global levels. The framework fails to fully appreciate the role of International Financial Institutions (IFIs) in national level economic planning within developing countries and their lack of accountability. Without addressing these basic issues there is little chance that the MDGs will be fully materialized, even with the additional financial contributions promised.

A comprehensive review of the progress of MDGs in Bangladesh, carried out by the General Economics Division (GED pp. 128–129), reveals some critical weaknesses, which include i) MDGs having being a top-down process, follow a sectoral approach where issues are being treated in a fragmented manner practically in silos; ii) MDGs in some cases only address the symptoms instead of root causes of the problem; iii) narrow indicators are used to identify progress toward the targets and goals, which often overlook the consequences those may have generated out of the progress; iv) lack of focus on human development also weaken the framework (it prioritize statistical figures more than the issue of human progress); and v) the issue of mutual accountability along with the principle of common but differentiated responsibilities remain practically absent from the MDG framework.

While the targets have been universal, the achievements could not take a unified pace among many countries because of diversity of preparedness, contexts, resources and many other critical factors. Despite generalized improvements, trends have been uneven within and across countries and regions. Considering this fact, Bangladesh has smartly utilized the global momentum of MDGs by adapting and incorporating its relevant targets and strategies into her own national policies and prorammes.

3. Status of MDGs in Bangladesh

3.1 Road to a middle-income country

The goals and aspirations set out in MDGs have never been new in the context of Bangladesh. Over more than
four decades, since its independence, the country achieved remarkable progress in all socioeconomic sectors, increasing real per capita income by more than 130 percent, reducing its poverty rate by 60 percent, and becoming well set to achieve most of the MDG targets. During this period total production of rice has become tripled despite gradual shrinking of farmland and the annual population growth rate has been brought down to 1.1 percent (BBS 2011, p. 62). Economically, the country has undergone a deep structural transformation, as the ready-made garments sector turned into a US$20 billion-plus export powerhouse; the country also has grown more resilient, and is now more capable of handling natural disasters.

In recognition of the long-term development challenges, Bangladesh Government has adopted its ‘Vision 2021’, which has set solid development targets aimed to be achieved by the end of this period, with a graduation from Least Developed Country (LDC) to middle-income status. These targets, if achieved, will further transform Bangladesh, so that people would enjoy a higher standard of living, better education, strengthened social justice, more equitable socioeconomic condition, and an enhanced protection from climate change and natural disasters by the end of 2021—the 50th anniversary of independence of the country. As a mid-term endeavor of this target, the Government has formulated and implementing its 6th Five-Year Plan during 2011–2015 by aligning with the timeframe of MDGs.

3.2 Attainment of specific targets of MDGs

Despite global economic meltdown, Bangladesh has made remarkable progress in respect to eradication of poverty and hunger by sustaining a GDP growth rate of more than six percent in recent years. This commendable growth has been accompanied by corresponding improvements in major social indicators such as increased life expectancy and lower population growth rate. This inclusive growth has resulted in impressive poverty reduction from 56.7 percent in 1991 to 31.5 percent in 2012. The latest Household Income and Expenditure Survey (HIES) revealed that the incidence of poverty has declined on an average 1.74 percentage points during 2000 to 2010 against the MDG target of 1.20 percentage points (BBS 2011, p. 61). In terms of bringing primary-school-age children to schools, the country is well on track of the MDG target, since the net enrolment ratio in 2013 was 97.3 percent (girls—98.2 percent, boys—96.2 percent) (GED 2014, p. 42). However, making required progress in the survival rate to grade five poses is a critical challenge in achieving MDG 2 (DPE 2012, p. 37).

Bangladesh has already achieved the targets of gender parity in primary and secondary education at the national level. This positive development has occurred due to some specific public interventions focusing on girl students and exemption of tuition fees for girls in rural areas and the stipend scheme for girls at the secondary level. These have contributed to promoting the objectives of ensuring gender equality and empowerment of women. The Government is committed to attaining the objective of Convention of the Elimination of all forms of Discrimination against Women (CEDAW), Beijing Platform for Action and MDGs in conformity with the fundamental rights enshrined in the Bangladesh Constitution.

Among South Asian countries, Bangladesh has made a landmark progress in reducing child mortality rate. The data from Bangladesh Demographic and Health Survey 2011 show that during 2007–2011 the under-five mortality declined by 60 percent (NIPORT 2011, p. 111). For this unprecedented success the country was awarded with UN MDG award in 2010. According to Bangladesh Maternal Mortality Survey 2011, maternal mortality declined from 322 in 2001 to 194 in 2010, showing a 40 percent decline of about 3.3 percent per year (NIPORT 2011, p. 3).

The performance of Bangladesh is quite impressive in halting communicable diseases under MDG 6. The data of the 9th round National HIV Serological Surveillance show that the prevalence of HIV/AIDS has been less than 0.1 percent, which falls below an epidemic level (NASP 2011, p. viii). Besides, a couple of indicators related to TB and other communicable diseases have already met the MDG targets.

According to available data, there is only 13.20 percent of total land of Bangladesh having tree cover with a
density of about 30 percent, which is much lower than the target set for 2015 (GED 2014, p. 87). Since 1991, there has been a steady increase in CO₂ emission because of increasing interventions in industrial sector. Regarding public health concern, access to safe water for all is a challenge, since arsenic contamination and saline water intrusion, as a consequence of climate change, seem to exacerbate the problem of availability of safe drinking water especially for the poor (MoEF 2009, p. 23).

Despite steady economic growth Bangladesh needs both financial and technological supports from bilateral and multilateral development partners to achieve her development goals. Recent data show that the net official development assistance (ODA) received in FY1990–91 was US$1.732 billion and it was recorded highest ever as US$ 2.811 billion in FY2012–13. It implies, during the last two decades the country received on an average US$ 1.677 billion per year. However, the amount of ODA disbursement as a proportion of GDP has declined from 5.59 percent in FY1990–91 to 1.87 percent in FY2012–13 (ERD 2014, Table - 3.0). In absolute terms, the net ODA received by the country has shown upward trend over the last six years notwithstanding it shows significant yearly fluctuations.


4.1 Sustainable development goals

The post-2015 agenda, prior to the end of MDGs timeline, are expected to be adopted by the United Nations (UN) during the summit scheduled in September 2015. The groundwork has started in several tracks and levels in light with the agreement and decisions taken in the UN Conference on Sustainable Development (Rio + 20) in June 2012. The outcome document of Rio + 20, ‘The Future We Want’, paved the path for initiating the intergovernmental process to the post-2015 development agenda. Following the recommendations, a ‘roadmap to 2015’ for the intergovernmental process was approved during the Special Event of the 68th UN General Assembly (UNGA) on 25th September 2013.

During the UN Conference on Sustainable Development, the member states agreed on for the establishment of Open Working Group (OWG) to develop a set of sustainable development goals (SDGs). In March 2014, the OWG moved into a consensus-building stage, which extended over five meetings between March and July 2014. The Group’s final proposal, comprising 17 goals, is being submitted in the opening session of the 69th session of the UNGA.

The goals include i) End poverty in all its forms everywhere; ii) End hunger, achieve food security and improved nutrition, and promote sustainable agriculture; iii) Ensure healthy lives and promote well-being for all at all ages; iv) Ensure inclusive and equitable education and promote life-long learning opportunities for all; v) Achieve gender equality and empower all women and girls; vi) Ensure availability and sustainable management of water and sanitation for all; vii) Ensure access to affordable, reliable, sustainable, and modern energy for all; viii) Promote inclusive and sustainable economic growth, full and productive employment and decent work for all; ix) Build resilient infrastructure, promote inclusive and sustainable industrialization and foster innovation; x) Reduce inequality within and among countries; xi) Make cities and human settlements inclusive, safe, resilient and sustainable; xii) Ensure sustainable consumption and production patterns; xiii) Take urgent action to combat climate change and its impacts; xiv) Conserve and sustainably use the oceans, seas and marine resources for sustainable development; xv) Protect, restore and promote sustainable use of terrestrial ecosystems, sustainably manage forests, combat deforestation, and halt and reserve land degradation and halt biodiversity loss; xvi) Promote peaceful and inclusive societies for sustainable development, provide access to justice for all and build effective, accountable and inclusive institutions at all levels; and xvii) Strengthen the means of implementation and revitalize the global partnership for sustainable development.
4.2 Post-2015 framework

The UN Secretary-General has formed a High-level Panel (HLP) to provide recommendations for post-2015 framework by building synergy with the parallel SDGs. The Panel has submitted a report which contains 12 goals and six cross-cutting issues with a target date of achieving these goals by 2030. The goals include i) End poverty; ii) Empower girls and women and achieve gender equality; iii) Provide quality education and life-long learning; iv) Ensure healthy lives; v) Ensure food security and good nutrition; vi) Achieve universal access to water and sanitation; vii) Secure sustainable energy; viii) Create jobs, sustainable livelihoods and equitable growth; ix) Manage natural resource assets sustainably; x) Ensure good governance and effective institutions; xi) Ensure stable and peaceful societies; and xii) Create a global enabling environment and catalyze long-term finance.

At the initial discussions, dialogues and processes towards the post-2015 development agenda, the UN member states tabled a long list of diverse issues to be considered in setting the goals and strategies beyond MDG timeline. During the process, one critical issue was raised whether SDGs would be the centerpiece of the post-2015 agenda, or a second generation of MDGs would be pursued on a parallel track for giving impetus to sustainable development agenda. It was concluded that the separate strands must come together with the goal of a single, coherent global agenda, and that sustainable development—enabled by the integration of economic growth, social justice and environmental stewardship—must become both a global guiding principle and operational standard.

5. Bangladesh Perspective on Post-2015 Agenda

5.1 Rationale of setting post-2015 agenda

The post-2015 agenda setting process of Bangladesh is being guided by two basic issues, one of which is to achieving unmet targets of MDGs and the other is to reaching the status of a middle-income country within the shortest possible time. Despite remarkable socioeconomic progress, the country is yet to attain a number of priorities both within and outside of MDGs.

In the context of eradicating extreme poverty and hunger, it is important to recognize that just as poverty is multidimensional, hunger also has many faces relating to inadequate calorie intake. Even if the extreme poor households succeed in securing some food, the quality of their diet may not meet adequate energy and micronutrients (Majumder, p. 9). Thus, a steady and sustainable reduction of poverty in Bangladesh will require a pro-poor food regime and to operationalize such regime an efficient management system would be a basic precondition. Besides, poverty targets often face serious downside risks that would require careful monitoring and policy actions to increase investment in infrastructure, strengthening agricultural diversification and improving the level and quality of social safety net spending. So far as food and agriculture are concerned, the sustainable agenda should aim to promote agricultural growth that is employment generating, spatially broad-based, economically efficient and ecologically sustainable (Majumder 2005, p. 56). In particular, the policy framework should seek to address the issues of natural resource sustainability on one hand and the livelihood of rural poor, dependent largely on agriculture, on the other.

Despite significant progress in education sector, significant challenges still persist in attaining some specific targets in Bangladesh. The vision of the present Government includes commitments to developing human resources at all levels. Improving the quality of primary education, creating adequate physical infrastructure, finding ways to reducing opportunity costs of school attendance, providing incentives for key actors at both demand and supply sides, and creating mass awareness are some of the priority areas that would need particular attention in this regard. Goal setting process beyond 2015 should put emphasis on improvement in access and quality in pre-primary, non-formal, technical and vocational, and tertiary education keeping consistency with potential job markets both within the country and abroad.
The situation of women empowerment and gender equality appears to be promising when one looks at the share of women in the higher policy making positions including in the National Parliament. However, at lower levels disparities still exist between men and women in various forms. In order to change the deep-rooted gender norms and attitudes, effective trade-off between top-down and bottom-up approaches are necessary to mobilize the entire society involving men, women, boys, girls, policy makers, civil servants, judiciary, civil societies and other relevant actors. Sensitization of various groups is important and needs to be done in a culturally sensitive manner so that they emerge as advocates for social change in a positive way.

Although Bangladesh has high prospects of achieving the goal of reducing child mortality, she has to overcome a number of challenges beyond 2015. While the overall mortality rate has been declined major inequalities among different segments of the population still need to be addressed. Deaths due to drowning in water, inadequate facilities for child delivery and new-born care, lack of essential drugs and medical instruments are among a number of drawbacks to be accounted while considering sustainable development goals.

Maternal mortality is considered as an alarming issue for many developing countries since long past. To obviate this malady, Bangladesh needs to follow a holistic approach combining three basic components—namely i) family planning advice, ii) skilled birth attendants, and iii) emergency obstetric care. Human resource capacities remain a major obstacle to quality health service delivery. Key challenges include acute shortage of manpower of all categories, insufficient skills-mix and inadequate availability of medical facilities especially in the rural areas.

Regarding MDG 6, Bangladesh is in a better position. There are, however, some challenges facing the national responses towards three targeted diseases, which need attention while thinking about post-2015 development goals. Technical expertise to minimize the threats posed by HIV/AIDS, TB and Malaria is still at the minimal level. While external resources for training and capacity building have increased substantially, lack of institutional capacity often appear to be a bottleneck to achieving desired targets. To make sustainable improvement in this context, strong coordination and active participation of relevant actors including relevant public and private agencies, development partners, NGOs, civil societies and direct beneficiaries deserve appropriate attention both at country and global levels.

In South Asian region, Bangladesh is the first country that has formulated and implementing the Climate Change Strategy and Action Plan (BCCSAP) since 2009 to combat the adverse impacts of climate change in order to make progress towards sustainable environmental management. Given the multifaceted dimensions of the issue, the country lacks both financial and technological resources to reach the target. In many instances, environmental issues are overshadowed by focus on climate change without adequate recognition that the impacts of climate change are often intricately connected with environmental degradation. Setting long-term achievable goals, allocation of adequate resources and close monitoring and supervision both at the country and global levels seem to be imperative to ensure sustainable environmental development.

Despite significant progress, Bangladesh still suffers from wide development gaps including fluctuating income distribution and rising inequalities, inadequate structural transformation, persistence of food insecurity, inadequate employment opportunities, lack of adequate infrastructure, and insufficient ODA flow. The current status of the country indicates that during post-2015 era, priority needs to be given to a number of critical areas, such as increasing productive capacity, enhancing access to knowledge and technology, strengthening trade, human and social development, improving governance and institutional capacity, increasing resilience to economic and natural shocks, adaptation and mitigation of climate change impacts, and enhancing the volume and quality of external resources.

5.2 Priority agenda for post-2015 era

It seems apparent that the global discussions centering up on the formulation of post-2015 agenda would essentially be linked with SDGs. Analysis of the strengths and weaknesses of the existing MDGs as well as the nature
of strategy and partnership for their implementation could be a reference point for the on-going discussions. The post-2015 development agenda should have to carry forward the unfinished tasks of the MDGs along with the new goals. The Busan Partnership for Effective Development Cooperation (http://www.oecd.org/dac/effectiveness/Busan%20partnership.pdf) can be a progressive and forward looking approach to the need for development cooperation beyond the MDGs.

The Bangladesh Government initiated formal consultations on post-2015 development agenda in 2013 through broad-based discussion with, and active participation of all relevant stakeholders. The country consultations were crafted carefully to stimulate an inclusive debate on formulation of a need-based, realistic and achievable agenda for post-2015 era by providing an analytical base, inputs and ideas that i) build a shared vision; ii) amplify the voices of the poor and other marginalized groups; and iii) influence the inter-governmental processes.

Bangladesh has a strong conviction to the notion 'think globally, act locally' (Majumder and Shivakoti 2001, p. 95). Based on this, the country consultation process has provided opportunities to reflect and draw up on its experiences with the MDG framework, reinforce its stand in shaping new development goals and to ensure that these cover the national priority agenda of Bangladesh. In this context, the Government has committed to lead the national consultative process in an inclusive and participatory manner. The basic aim of this process has been to identify gaps and challenges that exist in relation to sustainable development and generate ideas on preliminary goals, targets and indicators for post-2015 development agenda.

The first round of consultation identified and agreed on 11 goals (GED 2014, pp. 117–118), which include i) Unleash human potentials for sustainable development; ii) Eradicate poverty and reduce inequality; iii) Ensure sustainable food security and nutrition for all; iv) Universal access to health and family planning services; v) Achieve gender equality; vi) Ensure quality education and skills for all; vii) Increase employment opportunities and ensure worker rights; viii) Ensure good governance; ix) Promote sustainable production and consumption; x) Ensure environmental sustainability and disaster management; and xi) Strengthen international cooperation and partnership for sustainable development.

Parallel to the process of setting up development goals, Bangladesh Government has put strong emphasis on the theme - ‘participatory monitoring for accountability’ (GED 2014, p. 118). This particular theme has been chosen firstly for its crosscutting nature, and secondly because it would directly address in an inclusive and transparent manner, one of the main criticisms of the MDGs, the lack of mutual accountability.

It is assumed that many development actors with diverse interests and approaches to development cooperation many pose potential challenges both at the country and global levels. New partnership among such actors will require to be addressed and coordinated by designing efficient models and architectures. At the same time, based on MDG experiences, uniqueness of needs and priorities of individual countries (such as Bangladesh) will need to be considered crucial in designing and promoting partnership, more particularly at the country level. South-South cooperation is expected to create potential opportunities to achieving sustainable goals in developing countries.

6. Conclusion

The end of MDGs may leave us with many unmet goals both in individual countries and global spheres obliging us to look for a way not to fail to reach sustainable development goals, to identify new indicators for measuring the progress in achieving the targets, and to build a strong global partnership to hold the promise for development of the human race. The nature and characteristics of the global partnership should essentially be built up on the goals and targets to be set within the post-2015 agenda. The partnership could be required to address new development issues and challenges as well as entail the contribution of many new actors as have been identified and recognized in the Busan outcome document.

Lessons from the MDGs suggest that the sustainable development agenda will need to ensure the inclusion of elements of partnership in financing every single goal, indicators and variables to be achieved within some time-
frame to measure their progress and effectiveness. All the commitments of development cooperation including fi-
nancing made at different global fora should be revisited and operationalized with full potential for successful im-
plementation of post-2015 development agenda.

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