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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 conference¹. It was a conference that represented an international movement whose members were present, not only in the NGO

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 conditionality².

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'³. 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

² Barton

³ 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

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 therefor

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

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

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

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The following citations were from the Women's Coalition for Economic Justice (2004) 'Seeking accountability on women's human rights: women debate the UN Millennium Goals'

Peggy Antrobus: 'The MDGs- The most distracting gimmick'

Carol Barton 'Are the MDGs a new form of conditionality'

Suzanne Kindervatter 'A question of ownership'

ⁱ 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.