ARGUING ON QUALITIES AND PROCESSES

REASONING 'OUT OF THE BOX' ON CURRENT BEYOND 2015 DEBATES

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Measuring development

The International debate on the objectives of development, and on the ways it they needs to be measured and appreciated has seen remarkable progresses during the last years. GDP has been for long the most accepted synthetic indicator of the advancement of the human societies, and the effort of replacing it with something different and more comprehensive has kept busy for years scholars and development practitioners. In 1993, the UNDP first published its Human Development Index, thus opening an important space in the international debate, that was further deepened with the different thematic summit of the nineties and an increased awareness about the biophysical limits of the earth. This reflection found one of its peaks with the Millennium Declaration, on which the Millennium Development Goals were then founded. This renewed understanding of change in human societies represents a real advancement; yet, the framework on which MDGs are based and the MDGs themselves are not perfect, and have become object of criticism. Issues have been raised at various levels, and discussions have been revived when looking at cases such as those of some of the countries that experienced the so-called 'Arab springs' during the last years: they were recorded among the best MDG performers just until immediately before serious social unrests highlighted that perhaps MDG were not fully measuring the 'right' things. For instance, cross-cutting issues such as inequality, or elements related to social and environmental sustainability, seem to largely escape to goals as commonly defined.

The issue arising can be stated as it follows: is the problem with 'those' goals and the way they were formulated? Or there is something that the goals as such are not really able to capture? Clearly enough, if the problem laid exclusively with 'that kind of goals', it would be enough to improve them, within a sort of MDG 2.0 exercise; if not, a question has to be raised on what, beside the goals, would be needed to represent in a more consistent and holistic way the transformation of societies, in order to support analysis and decision making.

Some issues with goals

Goals offer a direction; be they really achievable or only defined in aspirational terms, they indicate a clear line of action, which helps consolidating a consensus among the different social actors. They do it by showing the possibility of a series of actions that are supposed to transform the reality through a relatively understandable 'theory of change'. Finally, goals indicate the boundaries of what is assumed to be worth looking at, therefore operating a double-sided selection: by establishing a priority among the elements of the intended social change; and by redistributing power and influence among the institutions/organizations that have a stake in the process.

The first element recalled above raises questions about 'consensus on what', with reference to the objectives identified: how well in technical terms they really capture the change that should take place; but even more importantly whether they stem out of an 'holistic' representation, and of a fair mediation between the oftentimes diverse (and perhaps contrasting) priorities of the social actors.

Beside the differences that may well exist in the ideas and values that are 'upstream' in the identification of any goal, the legitimacy of goals and objectives (how inclusive has been the process that defined them?) is crucial. Furthermore, there are unanswered questions on the relation between an 'universal' set of objectives (based on a shared understanding of human rights) and how practically they can fit well to the specificities of the myriads of specific situations.

Whether the change can be really represented in relatively simple cause-effect terms is still also an open issue. The most recent research highlights the need of adopting a vision which is open to considering the world under a perspective of 'complexity': goals can then be functional, but they cannot fully respond to the needs of understanding the ways change takes place. Oftentimes, change cannot be described only by intercepting it 'downstream', by measuring the change that took place, without questioning the planned or unplanned circumstances that brought it about.

If the risk of reducing the understanding of the reality to a given set of variables, goals, objectives, is to be avoided, an extra effort will be required in keeping the necessary link with the whole social transformation process. However, such an effort is often made nearly impossible by the necessary concentration on the objectives themselves. The clear delimitation of the boundaries around an objective generates a further important consequence, by incentivizing a process of organizational and institutional reification within those boundaries. This mechanism is at the root of the often criticized 'silo effect' which, from this point of view, is not a 'side effect' of the goal/objectives approach, but rather one key feature of the latter.

Room for more comprehensive views?

Going beyond these limitations requires a better awareness about the need for flexibility; a deeper understanding of change under different situations, circumstances, cultures; a higher consideration of the levels of legitimacy of the processes defining goals and objectives; a better appreciation of the qualities of the processes through which the change takes place; a capacity of understanding the interconnections between the different sets of objectives; a stronger link between the process of change and its context.

The international debate 'beyond-2015' is currently focusing on a 'new' set of goals/objectives/targets: as if something not reflected into a 'goal' may be considered not really important; in this, giving a very limited response to the issues raised before. Yet, the awareness of the need for 'something more' than an almost business-as-usual perspective (at least under this profile), can be read in backlight: for example, the report "A new Global Partnership" shows an encouraging move by putting forward the idea of the five 'transformative shifts': an approach that could surprise for the strength of its wording. In other cases, the debate seems to witness a shared concern for a more comprehensive approach than that implied by the goals/objectives only.

An alternative view has not so far concretized into an elaboration able to complement the (often only apparent) strength of the commonly adopted 'goals and outcomes based' approach. The concerns summarized above risk therefore to become marginal if not given an appropriate attention and prescriptive content. If we want to reason 'out of the box', we should perhaps recognize that what we need now is making those elements more visible in the international debates 'beyond 2015': paying more attention to the need of reflecting the specificities of the different situations, to the qualities of the processes, to the political spaces where change has to be monitored and appreciated.

Key References

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