

**INTERNATIONAL INSTITUTE FOR ENVIRONMENT AND DEVELOPMENT**

**HUMAN SETTLEMENTS WORKING PAPER SERIES  
POVERTY REDUCTION IN URBAN AREAS – 39**

# Getting the Engagement of Local Institutions in the UN Development Agenda Post-2015

by **DAVID SATTERTHWAITE, SHERIDAN BARTLETT, YVES CABANNES  
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**SEPTEMBER 2013**



**International  
Institute for  
Environment and  
Development**

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**David Satterthwaite, Sheridan Bartlett, Yves Cabannes and Donald Brown**

**September 2013**

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## ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

This paper was prepared for UCLG (United Cities and Local Governments) with support from The Development Partners Working Group on Decentralisation and Local Governance – DeLoG.

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ISBN: 978-1-84369-928-6

This paper can be downloaded free of charge from <http://pubs.iied.org/10627IIED.html>

Disclaimer: The findings, interpretations and conclusions expressed here do not represent the views of any organisations that have provided institutional, organisational or financial support for the preparation of this paper.

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## ACRONYMS

DeLoG	Development Partners Working Group on Decentralisation and Local Governance
MDG	Millennium Development Goal
PRSP	Poverty Reduction Strategy Paper
SDG	Sustainable Development Goal
UCLG	United Cities and Local Governments
UMP	Urban Management Programme
UNDESA	United Nations Department of Economic and Social Affairs
UNDP	United Nations Development Programme
UNESCO	United Nations Educational, Scientific and Cultural Organization
UNICEF	United Nations Children's Fund
UNISDR	United Nations International Strategy for Disaster Reduction
UNTT	United Nations Task Team
VDC	Village Development Committees
WHO	World Health Organization
WMO	World Meteorological Organization

# Getting the Engagement of Local Institutions in the UN Development Agenda Post-2015

## SUMMARY

Wherever living standards are high, local governments have played, and continue to play, a major role in their achievement – often the primary role. This can be seen in the wide range of responsibilities they have for infrastructure and services. They also generally have key roles in ensuring health and safety in buildings and enterprises, in disaster prevention and preparedness and in engaging with citizens and civil society.

The importance of local governments for development in low- and middle-income nations is recognised. Indeed, this is emphasised in the Rio+20 Summit, the 2011 Busan Declaration and the High Level Panel of Eminent Persons. But the pivotal involvement of local governments in implementing and ‘localising’ the Millennium Development Goals (MDGs) and sustainable development goals is rarely recognised or acted on by national governments and international agencies.

Most of the Millennium Development Goals (MDGs) depend directly or indirectly on the provision of infrastructure and services – for instance for health, education, water, sanitation, emergency services and waste management. Most infrastructure and services depend to a greater or lesser degree on local governments doing their job. All development interventions are local in the sense that they depend on local institutions – utility companies, solid waste collection services, schools, day care centres, health care clinics, public transport systems, police stations etc. Reaching the most disadvantaged requires local institutions and action. Even where interventions are the responsibility of national ministries, or infrastructure or services are delivered through private enterprises or international NGOs, their effectiveness usually depends on local government support, coordination and oversight.

The MDGs are most likely to be met where local governments have the competence and capacity to fulfil their responsibilities, and where their residents are able to make demands for accountability and transparency, especially those residents whose MDG needs are not yet realised. Many local governments have been pioneers and implementers of inclusive development innovations, including participatory budgeting and co-production with urban poor organisations and federations. Where substantive progress is being made on most of the MDGs, it is more likely to be because local governments are doing their job than because of specially designed national campaigns or policies.

But often, the human and financial resources available to local governments are not adequate to fulfil the roles and responsibilities assigned to them. This helps explain the failure in many nations to meet many of the MDGs. Getting the best out of local governments is fundamental not only to the MDGs but also to most of the goals and targets being discussed for post-2015. But local government is hardly mentioned in almost all of the 20 thematic think pieces prepared for considering the post-2015 process. The UN system and the official aid agencies and development banks fail to understand and thus to support the contributions of local governments, and even to acknowledge them as stakeholders. The MDGs may be clear about what they want to achieve but they say very little about who needs to act to meet the goals and targets and how they get resourced and supported to do so. Post-MDG goals and targets need to pay far more attention to this.

Three primary concerns can be highlighted within all facets and levels of post-2015 preparations:

- the explicit recognition of local authorities as primary agents in the achievement of most of the MDGs and SDGs;

- attention to local governments' capacity to deliver on their mandated responsibilities; and
- attention to the possibilities of local citizens and civil society to hold their local governments to account, and their capacity to do so.

The need for more attention to the roles of local governments applies to both rural and urban areas, and local governments in rural areas often face particular challenges for meeting their responsibilities for infrastructure and service provision because of large jurisdictions and spatially dispersed populations. But what is also notable is the lack of attention to local government in urban areas.<sup>1</sup> Managing and servicing the concentration of people, enterprises and buildings in urban centres requires good local governance. Many of the MDG targets and indicators are designed for rural contexts and so under-report the scale of deprivation in urban areas – for instance with regard to poverty (the US\$1.25 a day poverty line is unrealistically low for many urban areas) and the criteria used to define 'improved' provision for water and sanitation. For many low-income nations, the proportion of the urban population with good quality water and sanitation has declined since 1990.

Reducing child mortality and malnutrition remains a priority in most rural and urban contexts. In a number of countries, while rural rates of child mortality and underweight are improving, in urban areas they are stagnating, a function in large part of the highly threatening environments of poverty in the informal settlements where around one billion people live. This is also linked to the fact that those living in informal settlements may be denied access to public health care (and much else besides). In many nations, a legal address is needed to get on the voter's register.

Over the last decade there has been increasing interest on the part of international agencies in 'social accountability' for service provision. This should allow groups that get poor quality services to hold service providers to account. But large sections of the population in many nations don't receive the service, so they cannot hold the service provider to account. Collective organisations are often the most effective means to increase their influence in local government and get more attention to basic services. The attention must also go beyond services to the fundamental urban problem of illegality, in order to overcome an important structural constraint on the ability of the poor to exercise voice. The interest of the international development world in social accountability could be accompanied by frank attention in the lead up to post-2015 discussions to ways of supporting the organisations of the poor and their legitimacy.

There is a need to rethink goals and targets so that these focus more on building the local government capacity to ensure their achievement, and to work with citizens and civil society in order to do so. Goals can be universal but many targets and most indicators need to recognise differences between rural and urban contexts.

So among the recommendations for the post-2015 agenda on rethinking goals and targets to encourage and support local buy-in and local action:

*1: Reduce inequalities, build inclusive cities and territories, minimise risk.* This has to include a closer collaboration between national and local levels and major investments in infrastructure to ensure universal access to: a) safe, sufficient, affordable water; b) safe and convenient sanitation; c) health care; d) primary education; and e) emergency services. Specific indicators for rural and urban areas will be needed to take into account their distinct contexts and internal disparities. This also has to include building more resilient cities and

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<sup>1</sup> Of course, local government (and governance) are critically important for rural development as well; this and other points relating to urban development are included because the general (national) discussions on MDGs and post-MDGs pay so little attention to urban contexts.

territories, to reduce disaster risks and ensure adaptation to the increasing risks from climate change.

*2: Food security for all* – recognising how the means to achieve this will differ (for instance between farmers, agricultural labourers and those working in cities).

*3: New objectives on governance and targets for sub-national governments.* More attention is needed to the roles and responsibilities of local governments and civil society organisations in addressing MDG and post-MDG goals and targets and in systems that monitor progress within each locality. These should be supported by national development strategies and by mechanisms and funding to support local and regional governments to commit to relevant goals and targets to ensure concrete actions are taken at the local level. In urban areas, a special focus on low-income groups to ensure they can find or build accommodation without increasing slum populations would be important.

*4: Monitoring and indicators.* Reforms to official data collection services are needed so these serve local governments (for instance with data identifying where needs are concentrated within each local jurisdiction) and are able to monitor progress within local governments. Goals may be universal but indicators need to reflect specific contexts – for instance in most urban contexts, the indicators needed to measure adequate provision for water and sanitation differ from most rural contexts.

*5: Building a new global partnership that enables and supports all key contributors to development.* This includes not only national but also regional and local governments and civil society organisations, including community-based groups. This needs a fundamental revision in the institutional and financial framework that should underpin the goals and targets. This should be supported by a stronger and more democratic international governance structure that includes new stakeholders and covers issues and regulations that are not being addressed at present. This has to include a much greater capacity to work with and support key local actors.

## 1. Introduction

Wherever living standards are high, local governments have played, and continue to play, a major role in their achievement – often the primary role. This can be seen in the wide range of responsibilities they have for provision, maintenance and, where needed, expansion of infrastructure and services that usually includes provision for water, sanitation, drainage, streets, emergency services, parks and public spaces. Their responsibilities often extend to health care services and schools (although usually with national government). They have key roles in ensuring health and safety – for instance through building standards, land use planning and management, and environmental, occupational and public health services.<sup>2</sup> They usually have key roles in disaster prevention and preparedness (UNISDR 2012). Good local governance is also central to democratic participation, civic dialogue, economic success and facilitating outcomes that enrich the quality of life of residents (Shah 2006). Attention to local governance is also a reminder of the importance of other actors working with local government; local governance includes “...a range of interactions between multiple local actors (local governments, private enterprises, civil society and community-based organizations), institutions and systems at the sub-national level through which services are provided to citizens, enterprises and local communities (especially marginalized groups).” (Awortwi 2012).

The importance of local governments for development in low- and middle-income nations has long been recognised but rarely acted on. National governments have been reluctant to cede to local governments the funding or revenue-raising powers that are commensurate with their responsibilities. The official aid agencies and multilateral development banks work primarily with and through national governments (and often through sectoral national ministries) and have found it difficult to know how to support local governments (and local governance). Their interest in local governments is evident in current international discussions. The recent Rio+20 Summit formally recognised the organisations and networks of local and sub-national governments as a “Major Group” in providing feedback to the state-led formal negotiations (UCLG 2012). The 2011 Busan Declaration affirms the role of local governments in ensuring a broad-based and democratic ownership of countries’ development agendas. The High Level Panel of Eminent Persons, charged with overseeing the preparations for the post-2015 Development Agenda, now includes in its membership United Cities and Local Governments’ (UCLG) president, the Mayor of Istanbul. But in general, the pivotal involvement of local governments in implementing and ‘localising’ internationally agreed development and environmental agendas remains under-recognised and under-supported. *With regard to the MDG agenda in particular, the degree to which local governments must be relied on to achieve most of the goals has received virtually no attention.*

A major question in the preparation for the post-2015 agenda is whether global processes that are still largely dominated by national governments and international agencies will be able to adapt to give sufficient attention to local governments and to their two very critical roles:

- as implementers, funders and managers of so much of what is needed to meet development and environmental goals and targets (including most of the MDG goals and targets); and
- as the focal point for democratic engagement with citizens and civil society on understanding and jointly addressing needs, including being accountable to them.

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<sup>2</sup> For most of these, responsibilities are shared with national government, or different aspects of the responsibilities are divided – for instance, as national government sets regulations and standards and local government enforces them. In many higher-income nations, most infrastructure and service provision relies on multi-level government systems.

Those who are discussing and determining the post-2015 agenda tend to be at a vast distance from local realities. When they talk about ‘localising’ the MDGs, they mean at national level, not within local jurisdictions. When they discuss good governance, they refer to the activities of national governments, not the vital relationships between citizens and their local administrations. When they measure progress, they use nationally representative data sets, relying on aggregate data to demonstrate success, but failing to reveal who is being left out and where they live. Moving forward, a much sharper focus is needed on the roles and responsibilities of sub-national governments and on the support they need to fulfil their critical responsibilities.

## **2. The disconnect between the UN task team’s assessment of weaknesses and its initial contributions on future directions**

Many of the achievements related to the MDGs have been a product of local government action – as described later in this paper. In addition, the many instances of very limited progress on the MDGs is because of the incapacity of local governments to fulfil their responsibilities, in large part because they are denied the funding, or capacity to raise funding, by national government.

Developing a post-2015 framework that builds on lessons learned will have to acknowledge local government and find better ways to support and encourage its optimal contribution. How likely is this to happen within the preparations for a new agenda? The discussion papers generated by the UN Task Team provide an interesting resource in this regard. The evidence is quite mixed. On the one hand, this body has acknowledged many of the problems discussed in this paper, the solutions to which involve a more integrated and locally rooted development approach. But on the other hand, the initial discussion papers on future directions make little or no reference to the role that must surely be played by local governments and their civil society partners.

In its discussion of concerns and problems with the MDG framework, the UN Task Team does not specifically point to the role of local government as having been overlooked. However, most of the weaknesses it describes relate very specifically to local government, its relevance to this process, and the absence of attention to its role. The following are some of the concerns specifically pointed out by the Task Team in their 2012 discussion paper (UNTT 2012), along with a brief reiteration of the relevance of each to local government:

- *“Limited consideration of the enablers of development”*: Local government and its partners are certainly among the most immediate of these ‘enablers’. In the context of decentralisation this is true in most cases countrywide. Even national programmes require the support of local bodies in order to be implemented effectively. This is especially the case in urban areas, where local government is most likely to be the responsible party for the widest range of relevant concerns.
- *“Lack of consultations at its conception to build ownership led to the perception of a donor-centric agenda”*: Given the level of responsibility of local government for fulfilling this donor-centric agenda, the importance of ownership at the most local level is clear. Local involvement in initial consultations is essential for this. Much attention has been drawn to the need for bottom-up processes in these consultations. These are being planned in various ways, but can most effectively begin within local government jurisdictions or at community level, facilitated by local government and leading by steps to the development of national priorities that reflect local realities.
- *“Failure to account for differences in initial conditions”*: While this concern is more generally articulated in terms of national conditions and the unfair burden placed on very low-income countries, the problem extends to sub-national differences. In order

to determine the most effective and equitable use of resources, these differences can most successfully be determined through assessment at local level and the application of the subsidiarity principle.

- *“Imprecise quantitative targets were set for some dimensions, such as for reducing the number of slum dwellers”*: The MDG target of significantly improving the lives of at least 100 million slum dwellers by 2020 failed to take into account the fact that the population living in slum conditions was growing fast, so that even successfully meeting the stated target would barely have made a dent in the overall numbers. Given that up to 70 per cent of the inhabitants of some cities live in slums, with most of their basic needs being the responsibility of their local governments, the systematic involvement of these local governments in both clarifying and implementing this target was fundamental.
- *“Lack of clarity on how to tailor global targets to national realities and regional dynamics among others”*: ‘Among others’ here might most reasonably be considered to include the local realities that fall within local government jurisdictions. There has been broad acceptance of the need to translate and adapt targets to the local situation, and this, again, cannot happen effectively without the active engagement of local government and its civil society partners. Here, coherent multi-level government systems have such importance, so that all levels of government work together to address goals and targets.
- *“The setting of rather rigid national policy agendas, following international benchmarks, rather than local conditions and often ignoring the complexities of the development process”*: Once again, this points to the role of local government in helping to adapt national policies and agendas to the local level.
- *“Policies and programmes did not consider the synergies between achieving the different goals and targets”*: Synergies are certainly a reality at the highest levels. A strong education system, for instance, is critical for economic growth. But it is at the local level that these synergies are most often apparent and achievable. We live in a sectoral world, and sectoral expertise is essential for many initiatives. But sectoral initiatives, so often in the end directed at the same communities and households, are most effectively implemented when there can be practical convergence on the ground. This can only happen at the most local level. Sectoral national (or in some nations state or provincial) ministries need effective local partners to meet most of their goals and targets and to ensure local buy-in and locally appropriate interventions for fulfilling their goals and targets.
- *“Overemphasising financial resource gaps to the detriment of attention for institution building”*: It has been widely recognised that without political will and strong institutional capacity, additional resources may accomplish little for those most in need. The burdens placed on local governments in the context of decentralisation call for strong attention to capacity building. This is not only for the management challenges they face but also for their ability, in turn, to help provide the space and support the capacity for local citizens to represent their own needs, and to collaborate in realising them.

This list of MDG framework weaknesses identified or acknowledged by the Task Team should in theory be the basis for practical recommendations for including and strengthening local governments as part of the larger global agenda. There is a strange disconnect though, between the acknowledgement of these concerns and the contributions of the Task Team in the early stages of the new consultation process. In a series of 20 ‘thematic think pieces’ compiled by experts from various of the Task Team members, mostly UN agencies, there has been an attempt to provide support and direction to the post-2015 process. Concern about the weaknesses outlined above, though, is practically invisible in these think pieces.

A review of all 20 documents for their discussion of ‘local’, of local governments and of

governance showed how little attention these received. These terms, when they turned up at all, were most often contained within the titles of works referenced by these papers in footnotes. In some cases, these think piece topics could reasonably enough have been discussed without specific reference to action at the local level. Papers on culture, on human rights, macroeconomics, countries with special needs, international migration, science and technology for instance, although they have undeniably local implications, can be forgiven for not anchoring their concerns at a local level. Even population dynamics, peace and security and social protection *can* be conceived of as topics that might be addressed as more abstract, upstream concerns. But health? Disasters? Inequalities? Employment? Sustainable development? Governance?

For instance, in the disaster risk and resilience paper (UNISDR and WMO 2012), the word 'local' does in fact appear once – in a paragraph affirming the advances in emergency preparedness in several countries “...*at national to local levels*” (page 5). The paper acknowledges that the failure of government is a critical component of disaster risk: “...*the main drivers of risk...*”, state the authors, “...*are poorly planned and managed urbanization, environmental degradation, poverty and weak governance.*” We are also told that, in the context of growing levels of risk, “...*communities will have to adapt.*” The paper refers to seven detailed case studies of good practice and draws from them some common principles, including political recognition, 'clear responsibilities' for the 'various stakeholders' and adequate resources. It also recommends that better data be collected for better 'prediction models'. There is a discussion of the fact that disaster risk reduction is a cross-cutting issue that involves more than disaster preparedness – it also requires internationally agreed development goals. *Nowhere is there a discussion of the very concrete implications of the fact that disasters happen locally and that communities and local government agencies bear the brunt.* There is no discussion of what it might take to avoid the 'poorly planned and managed urbanisation' that is described as the main driver of risk – nothing about local land use policies and alternatives, the provision of storm drains, all-weather roads and other infrastructure capable of withstanding extreme weather, emergency response systems, local capacity building or the resources necessary to manage all of these and to rebuild where needed. With no attention to the actual responsibilities and the actual stakeholders, this think piece remains detached from any practical agenda for progress.

The think piece on governance provides another interesting example of the direction that the Task Team debate is taking. Although it does of course refer to government, local government is not a distinct presence in the discussion. Generic references to 'government' or 'national partners' suggest that local governments are somehow subsumed within central government, taken for granted as a component of the government system, rather than having their own very specific and often autonomous roles.

The term governance widens a focus on formal government institutions to include their relationships with civil society. This think piece includes in its definition “...*the mechanisms, processes and institutions through which citizens and groups articulate their interests, exercise their legal rights, meet their obligations and mediate their differences.*” (UNDESA *et al.* 2012). While, clearly, the principles of good governance extend to all levels of government, the inclusion of the civil society interface makes 'governance' from this perspective something that happens most actively at the local level. To make no specific reference to the especially important role of local government in this regard seems limiting. The paper acknowledges that any new framework “...*must be based on an understanding of the importance of and a commitment to further promote resilient, legitimate and inclusive national and local institutions, as well as inclusive participation in public processes*” (page 10). But the most significant recent trend in this regard that the paper identifies are the advances in the use of Information and Communications Technologies. While technology may open up the scope for citizen involvement, it is not a replacement for the kinds of strong relationships that are necessary on the ground between local communities, especially of

more excluded citizens, and the local governments that are responsible for helping to address their basic needs.

The general lack of attention to the local level in these think pieces has a precedent in the stance taken in the Secretary General's 2011 annual report, following on from the Millennium Summit (UN Secretary General 2011). Outstanding challenges are openly discussed here – especially the fact that the most vulnerable populations continue to miss out. But the approaches discussed here for meeting 2015 goals in inclusive and equitable ways, and then going beyond them, are largely macroeconomic and donor oriented, and they give little attention to the pragmatics of implementation. This is not to say that strategies should be spelled out in a report like this – as numerous observers have noted, nations need the flexibility to develop plans and policies relevant to their situations, and in any case, this would not be the place for detailing strategies. But if a primary stakeholder fails so signally to be recognised, the implicit message is that they have no serious role and hence require no serious support or place at the table. In a segue regarding the importance of good governance, the Secretary General notes: “*Progress in meeting the Millennium Development Goals can be enhanced if human rights are institutionalized to enable citizens to organize and participate in public policy decisions and monitor results. Good governance and maintenance of the rule of law at the national and international levels are also essential*” (pages 12–13). It is worth noting the use of the passive voice in describing the ‘enabling’ of those citizens. There is no ‘enabler’ here. There are citizens and there are national and international governments. It may seem a petty concern to point to the absent stakeholder in this passage – were it not that this absent stakeholder is so frequently absent and so central to addressing the oft-repeated challenges.

To return to the UN Task Team think pieces: only two of these pay clear attention to the local level of action. The first is the paper on inequalities produced by six UN agencies (ECE *et al.* 2012), where one paragraph is dedicated to decentralisation and participation (page 14). Here, it is recognised that local and municipal governments not only provide essential services and commodities, but also apply local solutions that bring international goals to local people, fostering their participation, shared responsibility and ability to exercise accountability. The second is the paper on sustainable urbanisation, produced by UN Habitat (2012), and here, not only are local authorities identified as primary players in local development but they are also seen as having “...*transcended narrow local political confines to become prominent players exerting regional and global influence*” (page 10). But there is not much discussion here of the local government role. Much of the substance of this discussion is focused on cities themselves as entities capable of spurring global development and transformation – they are written of here as “...*the locus for change, and the venue where the human agency can be mobilized*” (page 10).

### **3. The roles and responsibilities of local and regional government in poverty reduction and sustainable development**

Most countries are engaging in decentralisation processes that increase the authority and responsibilities of local governments. This is based both on the economies of scale that local governments provide for many aspects of infrastructure and service provision (Shah 2006) and the principle that proximity to citizens allows local governments to be more responsive and more accountable. In many countries this has been associated with the ascendancy of democratic rule (Campbell 2003), and it is a principle encouraged by the donor community, including the World Bank (Stren 2012). Far from being just managers of a limited range of services, local governments are increasingly involved in meeting a wide range of their citizens’ basic needs either as primary providers or as regulators and managers of services provided by national government, sometimes through private entities. If ‘local government’ is understood to include all sub-national government levels, the role is that much greater. This

decentralisation is still a work in progress. New structures, policies, distributions of power, functions and resources continue to evolve at different paces in different countries (Stren 2012). There is mixed evidence on the successes of decentralisation (Connerly *et al.* 2010) – largely because responsibilities are seldom matched by resources – and there are even moves to recentralize in some places (DeLoG 2011). Often, the political commitment to decentralisation is more rhetorical than practical in the sense of supporting local government roles and capacities (see Eaton *et al.* 2010). For example, in the Republic of Congo, the constitution describes local authorities as the primary agents responsible for the interests and needs of local populations; it also states in its 2010 Poverty Reduction Strategy Paper that accelerating decentralisation is essential for achieving the MDGs; yet in 2009, most funding went to sectoral goals with very little going to support decentralisation (Brown 2012). But there is no escaping the reality that sub-national governments have long been critical actors in development, and that their responsibilities in this regard are growing.

Structures differ from country to country. Sub-national jurisdictions include everything from villages to large metropolitan areas, boroughs to provinces, and there are usually multiple levels of local government within a single country. The size of jurisdictions varies enormously both between countries (in India, it averages about 3,000 people; in Uganda more than 300,000) and within countries (Brazil's municipalities range from 800 people to more than 11 million.) Most countries have separate structures for urban areas. Many have specific provisions for large cities that are formed by a range of local government jurisdictions, with some functions assigned to a regional or metropolitan authority. For instance, in Kenya there are three kinds of urban authority, depending on the size of the town or city in question.<sup>3</sup>

As the level closest to people, local government is where citizen involvement is most likely to take place, and it is often purposefully structured to promote this engagement. In Nepal, for instance, local VDCs (village development committees) are autonomous elected institutions that serve as an interface between local citizens and centralized government institutions, creating partnerships between community and the public sector and ensuring that villagers have some control over local development. Local wards below the VDC level have elected committees that demand accountability from VDCs. The system in theory allows for the full involvement of citizens in local self-governance; but the lack of capacity and resources, coupled with elite capture, means the promise is often not fulfilled.<sup>4</sup> But many local governments have in fact been pioneers and implementers of inclusive development innovations, including participatory budgeting and co-production with urban poor organisations and federations. The capacity of local government to encourage and manage collective action on the part of citizens is an important part of this relationship, especially in the context of scarce resources.

The degree of autonomy for lower levels of government varies considerably. In a few cases, as in Brazil, they may be equal partners with state government, an arrangement ideal for promoting more citizen-centred governance. More often, local governments are extensions of central or state government, more or less controlled by central government, with considerable variation in the decentralisation of responsibilities and resources. Local government members are appointed in some cases, elected in others. But even though local election is critical for accountability, it does not imply autonomy in either function or finance.

Most local governments have a very large range of responsibilities, even though their range varies considerably between nations. Table 1 below illustrates this, although it is difficult to provide an accurate summary given the differences between nations in local government responsibilities, and the differences within nations (for instance between rural and urban local government units). Especially in urban areas, they are traditionally responsible for

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<sup>3</sup> [http://en.wikipedia.org/local\\_government](http://en.wikipedia.org/local_government)

<sup>4</sup> [http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Village\\_development\\_committee](http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Village_development_committee)

developing local plans, managing infrastructure and providing such services as sanitation and waste management, water supply, and police and fire protection. In the context of decentralisation, they may also have a growing role in education, health care services and social protection – although usually within systems where responsibilities for provision are shared across different levels of government. Even where some services are privatized or run by higher levels of government, local governments often have key roles in ensuring their provision. Most sectoral functions consist of distinct activities that can be carried out by different levels of government (or other institutions), depending on the advantages each can bring. Policy, standards and oversight are often national responsibilities, while actual provision and administration are local. In education, for instance, curriculum, budget and overall policies may be centrally determined, but district or local levels manage routine operations such as hiring teachers, building and maintaining schools, enrolling children, handling local data. The need for close cooperation with local governments remains, regardless of how centralized nominal responsibilities are. As Nigeria’s 2010 Poverty Reduction Strategy Paper notes: “*Without state and local governments, federal programmes alone would amount to attempting to clap with one hand.*”<sup>5</sup>

**Table 1: The different local public infrastructure and services in which city/municipal governments have roles (as providers, supervisors or managers)**

NB: The extent to which the roles listed are the responsibilities of city or municipal governments obviously varies; this table is intended to illustrate the wide range of relevant responsibilities that they usually have.

Infrastructure needed for service provision		Role of local government
Water supply	Piped water supplies and water abstraction and treatment; other water sources provided or supervised	In many nations, local government as the provider of these; in some, as the supervisor of private provision
Sanitation	Provision for sewers and other services relating to sanitation or liquid waste disposal	In most nations a municipal or city authority responsibility
Drainage	Provision for storm and surface drains	In most nations a municipal or city authority responsibility
Roads, bridges, pavements		Usually divided between local and supra-national authorities (often on the basis of hierarchy of roads)
Ports and airports		Often shared responsibility between local and national governments
Solid waste disposal facilities	Landfills, incinerators, dumps	Solid waste disposal usually responsibility of local government
Electricity supply		Usually private sector provision or national agency; local government may have role in extending connections
Parks, squares, plazas, other public spaces		Almost always local government responsibility for provision and maintenance

<sup>5</sup> Nigeria PRSP (2005), page vii, cited by Brown 2012.

Wastewater treatment		Usually local government responsibility
<b>Services</b>		
Fire protection services		Usually local government responsibility
Public order / police/ delivery of early warning for disasters		Police usually a national government responsibility although often a responsibility shared with local government
Solid waste collection for homes and businesses	May be household connections, may be communal bins	Local government responsibility
Child care, schools, libraries		Local government often has some responsibility for provision; some provision may be under local offices of higher levels of government
Public transport – road, rail		Public road transport usually under local government – although much provision is contracted out; suburban railways and metros may be under city or metro government
Health care/ public health	Provision from primary health care through different levels	Primary health care services usually under local government; higher level services often under higher levels of government?
Environmental health		Local government responsibility; may include licensing of certain enterprises and markets
Occupational health and safety		Usually a local government responsibility regarding implementation, with standards and regulations set by national government
Pollution control and management of toxic/ hazardous wastes		Usually standards set by national government; implementation by local government
Ambulance service		Usually a local government responsibility
Public toilets		Usually a local government responsibility
Social welfare (includes provision for child care and old-age care)		Mostly national, although local government offices may have key roles in implementation
Cleaning of streets, squares and other public spaces; also markets		Local government responsibility
Disaster response	Range of measures from disaster preparedness to response	Much responsibility for this within local government, although often not addressed

Registration of births and deaths		Often a local government responsibility
<b>Responsibilities for housing</b>		
Building regulations		Local government responsibility for enforcement; often some role in defining or adjusting national legislation
Public provision and/or maintenance of housing		Where there is public housing, local governments often play a role in their management and maintenance
Regulations for rental housing		Local governments may be responsible for implementation
<b>Other local government responsibilities that influence service provision or poverty reduction</b>		
Urban planning		Local government responsibility; should have major role in defining infrastructure provision for expanding urban area
Building regulations		
Land use controls		Local government responsibility
Site clearance for infrastructure and resettlement		
Raising of revenues		A proportion of revenues usually come from locally collected taxes, fees or other revenue sources
Provisions for public employees		
Provisions for disabled persons		Local government with responsibilities defined by higher level of government

Local governments may also determine whether citizens have access to entitlements provided by national government. Especially in urban areas, where so many residents live in informal settlements, a lack of documentation may prohibit them from voting, getting basic services, sending their children to school or gaining access to government-supported health care. Authorities may be reluctant to provide access to services because they feel that this encourages the development of even more informal settlements; or high density and narrow lanes may simply make it inconvenient to provide residents in such settlements with services such as piped water or waste removal. Of course, access to all these services for urban citizens determines whether many of the MDG targets are met.

There is often a critical gap between the mandated functions of local governments and their capacity to fulfill their role – especially their fiscal capacity. Responsibilities are seldom accompanied by adequate resources, and many rural areas, towns and cities have huge backlogs in service provision. Rural India provides an example of the disconnect between mandate and reality. Local panchayats have broad responsibility for essential services and functions, 29 in all, including sanitation, drinking water supply, roads, electricity and other infrastructure, housing, schools and local social welfare, agriculture, forestry and land management. But most panchayats are financially and technically ill-equipped to perform even their core functions, which continue to be carried out by line departments of state

government (Alok 2006). The Government of India described the situation in 2004:

*“[P]anchayats are starved of finances in virtually all states. This has led to a situation where there has been a constitutionally mandated devolution of powers and responsibilities to the local bodies, but with no real means, financial or statutory, with which to implement the plethora of schemes and programmes devolved. This chicken and egg syndrome has led to panchayati raj and municipality administrations almost everywhere being discredited by mainline developmental administration, leaving elected members disillusioned and frustrated by their very powerlessness and impotence.”* (Govt of India 2004).

It might be argued that as long as essential functions are performed by some arm of government, it matters little which it is. But it does matter. The accountability and integration that is possible at the local level is critical. The ‘plethora’ of centrally administered schemes described above in India (151 of them in 2006, related to 15 ministries and departments) are characterised, according to Alok (2006), by rigid conditionalities, a lack of transparency, inefficient funding, implementation and monitoring and a consequent lack of progress. This can also lead to considerable confusion as to roles and responsibilities, resulting in less reliable and more fragmented services.

This has also been documented in Malawi by Manda (2009), who notes:

*“The effectiveness of [local] councils is further inhibited by an acute deficit of trained staff at point of action... weak monitoring and evaluation systems, including dysfunctional district data banks and poor record keeping. Consequently, the critical up-to-date information that is needed to inform decision-making is severely lacking. Combined with a lack of strategic leadership skills within often uncoordinated administrative structures, activities and meetings appear to be frequently ad hoc, uncoordinated and unplanned.”*

Adequately trained, adequately funded local governments can be an alternative, responding flexibly and efficiently with local solutions that meet people’s requirements and being accountable to them. But their success as instruments of self-governance depends on the devolution of resources (Alok 2006).

The financing of local governments, limited as it tends to be, takes many forms. But in general, decentralised responsibilities for public service delivery are not accompanied by decentralised taxation powers (or at least not the power to control and spend what is raised locally) (Stren 2012). Uganda depends on central government for more than 85 per cent of its revenue, and the average in low-income countries is about 60 per cent (Shah 2006). In general, urban governments are more likely to be able raise their own revenues. In South Africa, for instance, most larger municipalities are virtually self-sustaining, while some smaller ones are almost totally dependent on central transfers (Heynman 2006). But even with their generally greater control over their revenues, city governments can face stark limitations. In Brazil, where municipalities have broad autonomy in both raising and spending revenues, the Municipality of São Paulo has revenues equal to US\$1,266 per person. But in most African cities the figure is well under US\$ 100 per person. In Bamako, Mali, where local government is responsible for economic development, urban planning, education, health, water and sanitation, land tenure, roads and transport, it is less than US\$6 per person (Stren 2012). An analysis of participatory budgeting and its contribution to basic services showed municipal budgets in the 20 cities selected for analysis to vary between US\$5 and US\$1,350 per inhabitant (Cabannes 2013).

Even given the vast global range of responsibilities, capacities and resources for local government, in a growing number of places the local level provides the best governance framework for developing much-needed local responses to agreed national and international goals and targets. MDGs are most likely to be met in places where local governments have the competence and capacity to fulfil their responsibilities, to provide accountability and

transparency to their residents, and to draw as effective managers on collective public action. It is difficult to see how the post-2015 development framework, not to mention the SDGs coming out of Rio+20, can be implemented without closer consideration of the contribution of local government. The following section will provide some context on the MDGs, before returning to the local level to consider how both MDG strengths and concerns relate to local government and its civil society connections.

#### **4. What has been learned from addressing the MDGs?**

There is no question that the MDGs have been an important and valuable undertaking. They have galvanised political commitment, influenced debate, provided a focus for advocacy and improved the monitoring of development projects (Waage 2010). More than 60 countries have integrated the goals into their national strategies (Vandermoortele 2012). They have been widely acknowledged for their success in mobilizing and targeting aid resources; the OECD notes, for instance, that between 2000 and 2006, total development assistance for health more than doubled (OECD *et al.* 2008) (although the most recent OECD Development Assistance figures suggest that the proportion of bilateral agency commitments to health stopped increasing during 2006 to 2010). The goals and targets have provided an incentive in rallying stakeholders and shaping the development agenda within countries, and there have been some impressive success stories. Perhaps the most ringing endorsement of the MDGs is the fact that civil society organisations, governments and academia overwhelmingly agree that there should be some sort of replacement agenda post-2015 (Vandermoortele 2012).

But there have also been significant challenges and numerous critiques – regarding, among many other issues, ownership, a simplistic vision of development, little attention to equity and an emphasis on ends to the exclusion of means. The MDGs are very clear about what they want to achieve but say very little about who needs to act to meet the goals and targets and how they get resourced and supported to do so. While the MDG agenda implies the transformation of society, it has been more accurately described as a set of technical, sectoral, macroeconomic undertakings that overlook the very local and integrated nature of social transformation (Vandermoortele 2011). The problems have often been the flip side of the strengths – for instance, the simple, easily communicated goals that have been able to strengthen global consensus have also tended to obscure the complexity of the development process; parsimonious goals, realistically premised on continuing the pace of global trends in preceding decades, cannot at the same time be aspirational in any universal sense. In reviewing the successes and concerns around the MDGs, two separate concerns are discussed here: what has actually been achieved in the way of meeting goals and targets; and how appropriate or effective have the MDGs been as a framework for development action? These concerns are then discussed with reference to local government.

##### **4.1 What has been achieved in the way of meeting MDG goals and targets?**

Although there have been impressive achievements around meeting the MDG goals and targets, the world is a long way from being ‘on track’ across the board, and several goals have seen a discouraging lack of headway. Progress has been uneven both between and within regions. Although middle-income countries are largely on-track to meet goals, low-income countries are lagging behind overall, especially in sub-Saharan Africa and countries experiencing conflict. Gains have also tended to by-pass the poorest and most marginalised within countries. Not surprisingly, progress has been less encouraging in countries where political commitment is limited.

##### **4.2 The UN’s summary of progress**

The UN’s (2012) MDG report summarises progress goal by goal. It notes that extreme poverty has fallen in every region and that the goal to halve it will be met globally well before

2015. But it also reports that about 80 per cent of these people lifted out of poverty are in China, which calls into question the real global success. Meanwhile, extreme poverty remains widespread, especially in sub-Saharan Africa where, despite rapid economic growth since 2000, many countries lag far behind. At the current rate of progress, it is estimated that about one billion people will still be living on less than US\$ 1.25 a day in 2015, the great majority in South Asia and sub-Saharan Africa. (This does not, of course, raise the question of the validity of this definition of poverty or the measurement concerns.) There has been little progress in reducing the numbers of hungry people, owing in large part to the global economic crisis and the rise in food prices. Progress has slowed or stalled, with the most serious problems again being in sub-Saharan Africa and South Asia. About one child in five in low- and middle-income countries is seriously or moderately underweight, a reality that affects every area of their development, with long-term implications. In South Asia, the proportion is more than one-half.

Access to primary school has increased substantially over recent decades and, if sub-Saharan Africa is excluded, 90 per cent of primary school age children globally were enrolled in school in 2010. Of those entering school, the primary completion rate reached 90 per cent. Considerable progress has been made even in countries with the biggest challenges, but this progress has stalled since 2004, and in sub-Saharan Africa almost one-quarter of children remain out of school. There are still more than 120 million young people who cannot read or write. The gender gap in schools is closing, but girls still account for the majority of those out of school at all levels, especially tertiary. Gender parity problems remain, more generally, a serious concern especially in sub-Saharan Africa, South and West Asia. Women still have less access to secure employment, and worldwide they account for less than 20 per cent of parliamentarians.

Progress on the child mortality goal has been considerable – rates are down by one-third since 1990. But this is only half-way to meeting the 2015 goal. Despite substantial progress in some countries, almost one sub-Saharan African child in eight was still dying before the age of five in 2010. Maternal mortality is half of what it was in 1990, but no region has managed to meet the target of reducing maternal deaths by three-quarters. There have been good advances on the goal of combatting HIV, malaria and TB, but only in the case of TB is the target likely to be met (although there are still worrying gaps in the diagnosis and treatment of multi-drug resistant TB). An impressive increase in the numbers accessing and using treated nets has led to about 45 per cent of affected countries reaching the target of halving the number of malaria cases; others are making progress. Access to treatment for HIV has expanded in all but one region, but is still not close to being universal.

By 2010, almost 90 per cent of the world's population was estimated to have improved access to drinking water, thereby meeting the global target five years ahead of schedule. Coverage remains low in sub-Saharan Africa and Oceania. Nor does the access figure cover water quality, reliability or readiness of access, and so it is greatly overestimating the numbers with safe and reliable sources. The sanitation target is still well out of reach. Coverage has increased by more than one-third, but more than 15 per cent of the global population still defecates in the open, 60 per cent of them in India. The target to significantly improve the lives of at least 100 million 'slum' dwellers is said to have been met, but the evidence for this is in doubt and global numbers of slum dwellers have continued to rise.

#### *Some provisos about the definition of targets and the assessment of progress*

Vandermoortele (2012) reminds us that the overall failure to reach the targets should not cause us to minimise the very respectable progress that has been made in response to these quantifiable time-bound targets (also Waage *et al.* 2010). These targets, he argues, should be seen as servants, not masters. Nonetheless, there are some specific concerns with the way various targets have been operationalised and the way progress has been assessed.

There are problems, first of all, with accuracy, not surprising given the challenges around collecting adequate data. The Republic of Congo's Poverty Reduction Strategy Paper, for example, acknowledges that the government's capacity to monitor is so limited that it actually knows very little about poverty. Yet for the MDGs, it confidently reports its progress on poverty reduction (Brown 2012). Numbers that show discrepancies with other more reliable sources are not unusual. According to official statistics in Malawi, for instance, 96 per cent of the urban population has access to potable water and 97 per cent to safe sanitation. Yet Manda (2009) found that more than 60 per cent of the population of Malawi's three largest cities was living in largely unserved informal settlements. (Malawi also uses the definition 'basic' rather than 'improved' for progress in sanitation, and this includes rudimentary pit latrines. This definition ends up inflating and misrepresenting the country's progress.)

Another problem that affects our understanding of success is the definition of targets in relative terms. As in the case of the target for improving the lives of slum dwellers, this can result in apparently good progress while at the same time the increase in absolute numbers means that even more people are actually falling behind. There is also the problem of linearity; there is an implicit assumption, in assessing progress, that getting half-way to a target means that half the investment and effort has been made. In fact, the closer a target gets, the more likely it is that the most intractable problems remain. The assessment of MDGs has repeatedly shown that the poorest and most marginalised (whether by age, gender, ethnicity, disability) are often by-passed. The UN Task Team (2012) provides a disturbing example:

*"Only one-third of those countries that have reduced child mortality rates at the national level, for instance, have succeeded in reducing the gap between child mortality in the richest and poorest households."*

The targets also did not take explicit account of the level that different countries were at when they started. It has been pointed out frequently that the MDGs are global goals and targets, and were never intended to serve as a blueprint for achievement in each country without being adapted to country realities (Vandermoortele 2012). But in fact, these global targets continue to serve as national reference points. This has its positive side – a low starting point can mean it is easier to make visible progress. But it also puts a greater burden on countries with the greatest problems to tackle. Halving the numbers of people who are hungry, for example, is more of a challenge where a greater proportion of the population is hungry. A country can make significant progress in a given area, but still not come close to meeting the target. Being considered 'off track' can be demoralising in the context of serious effort and progress. *"Going forward..."* notes the UN Task Team, *"...recognition of the initial conditions of countries will help to provide adequate global support for the implementation of successful national policies."* (Vandermoortele 2012). Within countries, also, the recognition of conditions by locale could help ensure optimally targeted responses.

### **4.3 Achievements in urban areas**

An area that crystallises many of these targeting concerns is the increasing share of deprivation among the world's growing urban population. There are two related worries here: the use of assessment metrics that are inappropriate in the context of most urban areas; and the relative neglect of urban areas in MDG-related campaigns because of the higher levels of urban well-being and provision suggested by misleading aggregate figures.

On the first point, the standards used to determine progress, for urban areas this is most obviously problematic with the poverty target. Income-based poverty lines are always questionable as the single measure of a multi-dimensional phenomenon; but a poverty line of US\$1.25 per person per day is especially misleading within cash-based urban economies.

Given the higher costs of necessities in most urban areas (especially in larger or more prosperous cities), this poverty line is both inaccurate and misleading. It is inaccurate in that it is far below the costs low-income groups face in paying for (poor quality) accommodation and access to services. Set a poverty line low enough and no-one is poor. The application of this single poverty line across all urban and rural areas in low- and middle-income nations, with no adjustment with regard to the costs of non-food needs, locates most extreme poverty in rural areas and deflects attention from the extent of urban deprivation (Mitlin and Satterthwaite 2013).

Reports on progress with water and sanitation in urban areas are also misleading. Access to both water and sanitation is estimated to be far higher in urban than rural areas; but this fails to take into account the ways in which high density and large population concentrations in many urban settlements affects the adequacy of available provision in supporting health and convenience. The existence of a water point does not necessarily mean genuine access for all residents within a given radius. When it serves dozens or even hundreds of households, it is likely to mean unreasonably long waits and a reliance on costly vended supplies. The numbers of urban households receiving piped water to their premises is a far better indication of provision that supports health and convenience in densely settled areas. Globally, 130 million urban dwellers lacked 'improved' provision in 2010; but more than five times that number lacked piped provision to their premises (UNICEF and WHO 2012). Figures on sanitation can be equally misleading. 'Improved' sanitation coverage is higher in urban than in rural areas (79 per cent compared to 47 per cent in 2010), but a large part of this 'improved sanitation' is poorly maintained and over-used pit latrines that are inadequate from a health perspective. This calls into question the context-free assumption that urban dwellers are better served, and reflects the broad-brush concerns implicit in many targets.

The other concern is the relative neglect of urban areas in MDG-related initiatives, based on such context-free assumptions. A review of African Poverty Reduction Strategy Papers (PRSPs), for instance, indicates that they are strongly rural focused, and that key structural and governance reforms tend to be oriented towards rural areas despite rapid urbanisation trends. In the Republic of Congo, for example, despite acknowledged concerns about rapid urbanisation, the PRSP, in outlining its MDG progress goal by goal, makes no mention of the MDG target for significantly improving the lives of slum dwellers (Brown 2012). Many other PRSPs fail to give attention to urban poverty and, more specifically, to this MDG target.

There are actually a number of countries where substantial rural gains in water provision have been accompanied by stalled progress in urban areas. Among nations for which data are available, 35 showed a decline in urban water provision between 1990 and 2010. Urban progress on sanitation is also dismal, failing to keep pace with growing populations. Rural sanitation coverage has improved globally by 62 per cent since 2010, but in urban areas coverage has increased by only 3 per cent (UNICEF and WHO 2012). Fotso and colleagues, focusing on child mortality in sub-Saharan Africa, note that while mortality rates improved in rural areas, they have been stagnating, or worse, in many urban areas. They argue that the failure of many nations to achieve MDG health targets in particular may be due to the rapid growth in the numbers of urban poor and the lack of attention to their basic needs (Fotso *et al.* 2007).

There are certainly many countries where it is rural realities that are delaying the achievement of the MDGs. The intent here is not to downplay the extent of rural poverty, but to stress that urban deprivation and exclusion present some different challenges, and that context-free assessments can mean the neglect of growing populations of deprived and invisible people. Progress in reaching goals is important, but the situation can be more complex than the various targets indicate. As Clemens and Kenny (2004) note, the MDGs are better seen not as realistic targets "*...but as reminders of the stark contrast between the world we want and the world we have, and a call to redouble our search for interventions to*

close the gap.”

#### 4.4 The MDGs as a framework for action

Progress on goals and targets aside, the effectiveness of the MDGs as a framework for development has been hotly debated. Given the overarching goal of addressing global poverty and inequality, observers have pointed to a number of concerns. This synthesis relies heavily on two discussion papers, the UN Task Team paper by Jan Vandermoortele (2012) and the Lancet/LIDCC paper by Jeff Waage and colleagues (2010). They are in agreement around some basic issues, but also represent between them some broad differences regarding the strengths and weaknesses of the MDG framework.

- *Limited consultation and ownership:* It is generally acknowledged that the MDGs were not the product of a broad-based debate and consensus around development priorities. Although there are frequent allusions to the political consensus subsequently inspired by the MDGs, observers point out that this agenda was rather summarily prepared by a limited group of experts, rather than involving the kind of preparation and debate among member countries that is usually the procedure for global agendas (see also Samir 2006). The ownership concern extends well beyond the involvement of national governments to the inclusion of all development stakeholders, including civil society and sub-national governments. As Waage and colleagues point out, had the global women’s movement had a say, it would probably have resulted in attention to reproductive rights, adult literacy and violence against women. By the same token, had local governments been represented, there might have been more careful attention in the framing of targets regarding population dynamics and issues around rapid urban growth, and the budgets to address it. ‘Localising’ the MDGs, from the perspective of local government, means more than adapting global goals to national action plans or PRSPs.
- *A narrow view of development:* Vandermoortele sees the MDG agenda as a practical statement of feasible objectives, based on global development trends set in place in previous decades. Waage and colleagues argue that it represents an overly narrow, simplistic view of development and ignores the complexity of a process that should build on synergies and interconnections. They see the view of poverty reduction behind this set of separate goals as mechanistic, associating development with economic growth and sectoral fixes rather than giving more nuanced attention to the role of inequalities and power structures (Fukuda-Park 2010). The narrowing of the agenda through a focus on fragmented, ‘minimalist’ targets, argue Waage and colleagues, has discouraged collaboration within and between sectors. The focus on primary education, for instance, has ignored the proven links and powerful synergies between secondary schooling and progress in areas of health and improved incomes. Vandermoortele points out that it is not possible for the MDGs to be comprehensive without becoming a cumbersome and unmanageable exercise in futility. Clear, brief, achievable targets are in his mind a necessity and they serve as a proxy for the more general development that occurs in tandem around them.
- *Ends rather than means:* Waage and colleagues, along with a number of other critics (see for instance Nayyar 2011), feel the agenda does not go far enough in identifying approaches for achieving the ends. Although some targets are as much about means as ends (economic growth is implied to be the means for reducing poverty; mosquito nets are the means for reducing the incidence of malaria), the overall emphasis is clearly on the ‘what’ more than the ‘how’ or the ‘who’. Vandermoortele, on the other hand, argues that spelling out strategies would deny countries the freedom to make context-specific decisions based on their own domestic politics. He agrees though that basic principles for guiding equitable, sustaining development could be incorporated without becoming prescriptive. Examples of such principles might be that economic growth is necessary but insufficient for development; that public action is essential; that external finance cannot substitute for domestic investment.

- *Leaving the poorest behind:* This is a generally recognised weakness of the MDG agenda. Widening disparities worldwide, even where there has been economic growth, has stimulated far greater attention to inequality in recent years. Waage and colleagues argue that the focus on partial targets, and the intentness on achieving them, has made it easier to ignore the needs of those who are hardest to reach. Many of the MDG targets are actually less ambitious than UN targets set during the 1970s, where governments committed themselves to universal provision for water, sanitation and health care. Vandermoortele feels that the failure to address growing disparities underlies the failure to reach goals. In part, this is related to the tendency to choose the 'low hanging fruit' in an effort to reach targets; in part, it is a function of the failure to identify the most disadvantaged, which is to some degree a function of available data (see below). The first step in addressing inequality is being able to identify it.
- *Concerns with data:* The MDGs have increased the demand for data and have led to greater attention to the quality of data. Certainly this elevated concern for monitoring has had its benefits. But there are concerns about the quality of the data obtained and even about the possibility of accurately measuring progress on some problematic targets (such as poverty or genuine access to 'safe' water). Difficulties with data have also encouraged an increasingly narrow focus on just some of the indicators, which have then narrowed the efforts and the investments (Waage *et al.* 2010). The framework of the goals tends to encourage a focus on national averages, and the UN Task Team acknowledges that progress has not been well monitored at sub-national levels. There is still a widely recognised need for the kind of accurate, detailed, disaggregated statistics required to identify the most disadvantaged and to monitor progress on goals and targets. In most countries, the reliance on sample surveys such as the Demographic and Health Surveys makes this kind of local identification of deprivation impossible.

## 5. How do these successes and concerns relate to local government?

Most of the MDGs depend directly or indirectly on the provision of infrastructure and services. And most infrastructure and services depend to a greater or lesser degree on local governments doing their job. All development interventions are local in the sense that they play out through the provision of some good or service to individuals and communities in a particular location. Their implementation depends on local institutions – utility companies, solid waste collection services, schools, day care centres, health care clinics, public transport systems, police stations, bank branches. Even where interventions are the responsibility of national ministries, or are delivered through private enterprises or international NGOs, the ease and effectiveness with which they are delivered can be greatly enhanced by local government support. The MDGs are most likely to be met where local governments have the competence and capacity to fulfil their responsibilities, and where their residents are equipped to make demands for accountability and transparency, especially those residents whose MDG needs are not yet realised. This is even more the case if local government is taken to include all sub-national government levels. It is too easy to forget the key roles that local government has played in achieving routinely accepted standards in what are today's high-income nations – often with the support of national government.

There are many situations in which a lack of capacity or political will within local government has contributed hugely to the disadvantage of its citizens and to the failure to realise the MDGs. Inadequately resourced local authorities in rapidly growing cities struggle to keep up with the demand for infrastructure and services. The failure to recognise and support the residents of informal settlements has also helped to entrench people in slum conditions rather than supporting their struggles to improve their own conditions. Denying them access to publicly funded health services or schools further constrains their potential. Through

exclusionary practices with informal enterprises and workers, local authorities have also obstructed people's chances of working their way out of poverty. But there are also many ways in which committed and capable local governments have made all the difference. Where substantive progress is being made on the MDGs, it is more likely to be because local governments are doing their job than because of specially designed national campaigns or policies.

Take, for instance, the poverty reduction goal. Despite the widespread association of poverty reduction with macroeconomic growth, this equation does not always hold up. It is generally quite a small proportion of the workforce that gets higher real incomes from economic growth – and typically the better educated and connected groups (Mitlin and Satterthwaite 2013). For instance, an analysis of PRSPs from a few African countries indicates that economic growth does not automatically imply a change for those in poverty. In Mali, average annual growth of 6.7 per cent between 2000 and 2005 was expected to reduce the incidence of poverty by about 16 per cent. In fact, it only dropped from 64 per cent to 59 per cent.<sup>6</sup> In Tanzania, which also experienced impressive economic growth, the incidence of poverty declined hardly at all (United Republic of Tanzania 2010). Economic growth can mean simply an increase in disparities, as benefits are concentrated at the top and the poorest are left behind. But local governments can address poverty in critical ways. Poverty is widely acknowledged to be multi-dimensional in nature, and its different dimensions tend to reinforce one another. Local regulations that do not discriminate against the informal solutions of the poor, equitable land management systems and a focus on service provision for marginalised citizens can have a significant effect in helping to lift people out of poverty – even in the absence of redistributive policies on the part of central government (Mitlin and Satterthwaite 2013).

Children's malnourishment and mortality are also good examples. They depend on the availability of food and resources, which could be tackled centrally with redistributive programmes and feeding campaigns. But young children are also particularly vulnerable to the impacts of poor provision for water and sanitation, and local government action on this front is critical, especially in urban areas, where these problems are increasingly significant. In a number of countries, while rural rates of child mortality and underweight are improving, in urban areas they are stagnating, a function in large part of the highly threatening environments of poverty and the fact that those living in informal settlements may be denied access to public health care (Van den Poel 2007 and Fotso 2007). In most urban areas, local authorities are on the front line on these issues. Without coordinated efforts on the part of national and local governments, it may be increasingly difficult to manage progress in rapidly growing towns and cities.

Strong, committed local governments have a considerable comparative advantage when it comes to tackling some of the particular MDG framework weaknesses that have been discussed here.

*Targeting the most disadvantaged:* A number of MDG goals are dependent for their achievement on the careful targeting of especially disadvantaged groups and on assertive outreach to the most marginal. This is something that can only happen effectively at the local level. Even where health programmes or education are delivered by central government, only collaborative efforts on the part of local agencies and local communities can determine how to reach those who may remain invisible: women whose husbands disapprove of family planning; girls who are kept out of school because of concerns about safety on the way to school; children whose illiterate mothers don't know about oral rehydration. A UN Millennium Campaign (2010) account of success stories from the Asia/Pacific region points repeatedly

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<sup>6</sup> Mali, Republique du (2006) "Growth and Poverty Reduction Strategy Paper" available at <http://www.imf.org/external/pubs/ft/scr/2008/cr08121.pdf>

to the role of local authorities in this regard, even when initiatives are implemented by national ministries. A rural maternal health programme in Cambodia, for instance, needed local authority involvement for the accurate targeting of vulnerable women and households. A rural sanitation project, also in Cambodia, acknowledged that going to scale depended on the integration of sanitation into local development plans. The success of an institutional support project in Indonesia was attributed to “...*strong political will and commitment by the local leadership and the interventions designed purely based on the local needs and local planning and budgeting cycle.*” (UN Millennium Campaign 2010).

*The non-linearity issue:* Large national campaigns are most likely to address the easiest-to-reach situations. But a point comes where gains are harder to achieve and where further progress requires more careful targeting and more assertive measures. In South Asia, for example, according to the report for the UN Secretary General (2011), the benefits from the drive to improve sanitation were realised disproportionately by the wealthy, while the situation in the households of the poorest 40 per cent hardly changed. Worldwide, as noted above, few countries managed to close the gap between the poorest and the wealthiest quintiles when it came to child mortality. When it is a matter of turning attention to the hardest to reach, local attention can be critical and coordination between local government and local community organisations may be paramount.

*The synergy issue:* As Waage and colleagues emphasise, development at its most successful is an integrated process that depends heavily on the synergies that emerge from collaborative efforts. They point out that within the present fragmented MDG scenario, “...*some positive interaction will inevitably arise from the independent pursuit of different MDG goals and targets, but even this interaction will need local interventions in poverty reduction, health, education and gender equality coming together for the same groups of people. This convergence is made less likely by the reality that goals are compartmentalized into responsibilities of different line ministries nationally, sub-nationally and locally, which means that the potential for simultaneous actions in the same location, working with the same communities and households, is unlikely.*” The convergence they see as a necessary condition for optimal achievement relies on the proximity of local government to the beneficiaries and co-creators of effective development. By the same token, political pressure from organised disadvantaged groups is key to encouraging that action and convergence.

*The data issue:* Accurate data are essential to monitoring the success of initiatives, but even more importantly, to identifying those who are at the losing end of the growing disparities in most countries, the hundreds of millions of disadvantaged citizens who are being left behind by MDG initiatives. Available data sets in most countries are from nationally representative samples (such as the Demographic and Health Surveys) that make it impossible to identify the spatial concentrations of those in greatest need. For instance, by presenting urban aggregate figures, they overlook the incredible depth of poverty and exclusion among many urban residents. This can only be remedied by detailed local data, which can best be collected by those close to the ground.

There are excellent precedents in the ‘enumerations’ conducted by urban poor federations in cities around the world, often with the support of their local governments. These local surveys detail the living conditions and level of provision of local citizens who would otherwise remain invisible, and become the starting point for evidence-based initiatives on a number of fronts. Such locally detailed data sets are critical not only for monitoring the achievement of the MDGs, but for allowing local authorities, wherever they are located, to understand and respond adequately to the most disadvantaged people in their jurisdictions.<sup>7</sup>

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<sup>7</sup> See *Environment and Urbanization* Volume 24, Number 1 (2012), special issue on “Mapping, enumerating and surveying informal settlements and cities”.

Examples around data collection are not unique to urban areas. According to a report on Asia Pacific MDG success stories:

*“In the State of Orissa in India, rural poor households are participating in real-time tracking of the delivery of social protection entitlements by using a mobile phone-based monitoring system. In Bangladesh and the Philippines, participatory citizens’ monitoring initiatives have also contributed to effective local planning of development projects, better use of funds for MDG priority areas that matter to the community, and increasing transparency and accountability.”* (UN Millennium Campaign 2010).

Some of the success factors identified in Bangladesh include the independent management by local government institutions of the available financial resources, and their consultations with local communities on budget allocations and planning decisions.

*The urban issue:* Cities are widely recognised as major catalysts of growth and development, and their sound management is central to the capacity of nations to advance; and in cities more than anywhere else, effective management depends on local government. This means, among other things, attention to the growing phenomenon of urban poverty. It is widely assumed that the most intransigent poverty is in rural areas, since urban averages point on the whole to healthier, better educated, less poor populations. There is strong evidence, however, that poverty, hunger, disease, and a lack of schooling are becoming increasingly prevalent in many urban areas. As urban populations grow, there are growing backlogs in basic provision, growing inequalities, growing social problems and growing vulnerability to disasters. The achievement of the MDGs may well become most difficult in urban areas (Urban Management Programme 2004).

Part of the failure to address urban realities has been related to the more general lack of attention to population dynamics. The only target in the MDGs that makes specific reference to the urban situation is the significant improvement sought in the lives of at least 100 million slum dwellers (by 2020). Apparently, this has been met; UN-Habitat (2010) reported that more than 200 million ‘slum’ dwellers moved out of slum conditions between 2000 and 2010 largely due to slum upgrading, but there is little supporting evidence for this, and this apparent success may be the result of changes in the criteria for defining ‘slums’. But even if the target of at least 100 million slum dwellers has been exceeded, it fails to offset the growth in the target population. The significant growth in the number of poor urban dwellers has been identified as an obstacle in the way of MDG achievement, and it is one that will only continue to block progress if it is not addressed assertively. This is especially significant for local governments because of their substantially greater role and power in the urban areas of many countries. The growing burdens that urban local authorities face are hugely challenging, yet the resources available to them to tackle these challenges remain limited. When the major urban donors met in 2006, almost all of their representatives said that investment in urban development was a shrinking proportion of their agency’s budget because of competing claims from such politically important issues as rural-focused climate change and food aid (Stren 2012).

Even in the absence of adequate resources, there are an increasing number of precedents for effective urban change being brought about by committed local governments. Among other things, their capacity to link with local communities and create the space for local citizens to play an active role is ensuring that resources can be targeted effectively and used optimally. Stren notes that even in Africa, in the context of decentralisation and democratisation, “...cities, their local populations and their local governments are much more connected to a wide range of solutions to their service and administrative challenges than they were before, and as a result much more ready to engage in creative efforts to respond to their own needs.” (Stren 2012, p21).

Participatory budgeting is a good case in point. First developed in Brazil in the late 1980s, it has been gradually expanding, and no less than 1,400 urban centres around the world are

now giving their local communities a voice in determining the priorities for at least some portion of their city's budget. This implies a budgeting system that is transparent and available to public scrutiny, thereby limiting clientelism and corruption. It helps link municipal investments to local priorities, and generally means more funding going to the poorer areas of a city and an increase in expenditure in social provision (for instance education, health care and basic services). There is no single blueprint for participatory budgeting. It is a flexible approach and there is considerable variation in terms of the form of participation, who is in charge and how much of the budget is involved. The common theme is whether the final decision on spending priorities remains within the local government or whether people decide in assemblies (see Cabannes 2004).

Many local authorities are also working collaboratively with organisations and federations of slum or shack dwellers and the urban poor, building on their efforts and ingenuity to address the range of deprivations that affect them. Some of these federations have gone to scale, reaching hundreds of thousands of low-income households and involving them in efforts to secure tenure and housing, improve infrastructure and services and influence local government decisions and practices. The transnational network of these organisations and federations, Slum/Shack Dwellers International, is now active in 33 countries in Asia, Africa and Latin America, providing a global platform for their learning, advocacy and mobilisation. Where local governments are actively supporting their work, the scale of what they can do is greatly increased.<sup>8</sup>

It might be argued that this local involvement should be assumed in any discussion of global goals. Of course, all development is ultimately local; of course, it cannot happen without the active engagement of local partners. This may seem so obvious that it doesn't bear spelling out in global agendas or the documents and processes that support them. But where countries have made efforts to clarify the role of local government and strengthen its capacity, they tend to draw attention to this in their reports, as is evident in PRSPs for Mali and Nigeria (Republic of Mali 2008, Federal Republic of Nigeria 2010).

Rio+20 also offers another perspective. Both the process and the agenda coming out of it have made an explicit point of highlighting the engagement of local governments. In the outcome document, tribute is paid to the progress already achieved at local and sub-national levels, and recognition is given to the need for effective governance at these levels in advancing sustainable development. The involvement of local governments is actively encouraged not only in implementing action but also in planning the strategies for guiding decision-making and implementation. Particular attention is given to the role of local government around the sustainable development of the world's cities, and commitments are made to support local authorities on this front. Specific follow-up mechanisms are in place that will allow the political representation of local authorities through their representatives (UCLG 2012).

## **6. What has to be in place for local government to fulfil its potential in addressing new agendas?**

If the key role of local governments is recognised in a post-2015 agenda that is committed to reducing poverty and inequality, what will this involve? It makes sense first to review the UN efforts over the preceding decade to 'localise' the MDGs – not just in national terms, but in ensuring that they were promoted and supported at local level and that the local level was equipped for this to take place.

In 2004, the UN Urban Management Programme (with the backing of UNDP and

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<sup>8</sup> <http://www.sdinet.org/about-what-we-do/> Also [http://eau.sagepub.com/cgi/collection/work\\_of\\_slum\\_shack\\_dwellers\\_federations](http://eau.sagepub.com/cgi/collection/work_of_slum_shack_dwellers_federations)

UN-Habitat) acknowledged that little had been done within the UN system with regard to the local or urban level to compensate for the lack of attention within the MDG agenda itself. They proposed the establishment of an 'Urban Millennium Partnership', which would build partnerships between UN agencies and UCLG. Efforts would be made to build local capacity and ensure local government involvement in developing indicators to capture MDG status locally (Urban Management Programme 2004). But there is no evidence of any follow-up to this. Research in seven countries<sup>9</sup> concludes that little guidance has been available to UN Country Teams regarding supporting integrated local development; and while there have been efforts to raise local awareness of the MDGs, little support has been given to preparing local development plans or in ensuring local service delivery. Two key constraints were noted: limited capacity on the part of local stakeholders (communities, civil society and local authorities); and the absence of funding mechanisms and models that take into account the priorities of local development. Of the various efforts made in this regard, most by-passed local authorities and local development planning.<sup>10</sup>

If the UN system and the official aid agencies and development banks so routinely fail to support the contributions of local governments, and even to acknowledge them as stakeholders, repeatedly using language that renders them invisible, it is not surprising that national governments might also fail to take them seriously as players in the MDG scenario. Even where local authorities *are* acknowledged, the absence of practical support can render this acknowledgement somewhat rhetorical. The subsequent gap between rhetoric and reality, responsibility and resources can become self-perpetuating, undermining this primary avenue to development.

What basic measures could be taken for the next phase? There are three primary concerns that should be highlighted within all facets and levels of post-2015 preparations:

- the explicit recognition of local authorities as primary stakeholders;
- attention to local governments' capacity to deliver on their mandated responsibilities; and
- attention to the capacity of local citizens and civil society to hold their local governments accountable.

*Recognising the role of local government and governance:* This means explicitly conceptualising 'ownership' and 'localisation' as bottom-up processes that pertain to citizens, the administrative bodies closest to them and other stakeholders in local provision. It means recognising that without planning, monitoring and support at the local level, no post-2015 agenda can hope to give better attention to growing inequalities than has been the case to date. An accepted process for translating and adapting a global agenda and its national implications to local settings can, as the UN Task Team governance report (UNDESA *et al.* 2012) acknowledges, be done most effectively and legitimately through participatory processes.

The Report of the High-Level Panel of Eminent Persons on the Post-2015 Development Agenda<sup>11</sup> is unusual in that it recognises the key role of local governments (including city governments) in "setting priorities, executing plans, monitoring results and engaging with local firms and communities" (page 10) and the role of many local authorities in delivering or supervising essential public services and disaster risk reduction. "Local authorities have a

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<sup>9</sup> *Localizing the MDGs for Effective Integrated Local Development: An Overview of Practices and Lessons Learned*, [http://www.hurilink.org/tools/Localizing\\_the\\_MDGs.pdf](http://www.hurilink.org/tools/Localizing_the_MDGs.pdf)

<sup>10</sup> Ibid.

<sup>11</sup> *A New Global Partnership: Eradicate Poverty and Transform Economies through Sustainable Development*, The Report of the High Level Panel of Eminent Persons on the Post-2015 Development Agenda, United Nations, New York, 60 pages. This can be downloaded from <http://www.post2015hlp.org/wp-content/uploads/2013/05/UN-Report.pdf>

role in helping slum-dwellers access better housing and jobs and are the source of most successful programs to support the informal sector and micro-enterprises” (page 11). The Report also recognises that city governments “...have great responsibilities for urban management. They have specific problems of poverty, slum upgrading, solid waste management, service delivery, resource use, and planning that will become even more important in the decades ahead. The post-2015 agenda must be relevant for urban dwellers. Cities are where the battle for sustainable development will be won or lost..... The most pressing issue is not urban versus rural, but how to foster a local, geographic approach to the post-2015 agenda. The Panel believes this can be done by disaggregating data by place, and giving local authorities a bigger role in setting priorities, executing plans, monitoring results and engaging with local firms and communities” (page 17).<sup>12</sup>

*Attention to the capacity of local governments:* Achieving the MDGs (or related goals) means that local governments have to be equipped to do their job. Analyses of decentralisation and local governance point repeatedly to the gap between responsibilities and the fiscal and technical capacities to tackle these responsibilities (for instance DeLoG 2011, Shah 2006 and Stren 2012). Local politicians and civil servants can often do very little to address large deficiencies in infrastructure and service provision because they lack the power, funding and revenue-raising capacity. There is no single blueprint for improving the effectiveness of local government, but clearly attention needs to be brought to the funding framework under which they operate – whether through mechanisms geared towards local level support by international agencies or national devolution of resources better matching the decentralisation of tasks. Through support to their networks and associations, local governments could be more systematically supported with regard to improved technical capacity, better local data collection and management, and improved capacity to involve citizens, with special attention to the most excluded, in planning and decision-making.

*Social accountability.* Over the last decade, there has been increasing interest on the part of international agencies in the assertion that service provision will improve if the providers are more accountable to their ‘clients’ (see for instance World Bank 2004 and UNDP 2010). The failure of government to provide in efficient, equitable and transparent ways is related to the limited voice of citizens who are not empowered to hold their governments accountable. But poor groups need mechanisms and channels, other than voting, through which to hold politicians and civil servants to account. Collective organisations are often the most effective means for increasing their influence. Attention also has to go beyond services to the fundamental urban problem of illegality, in order to overcome an important structural constraint on the ability of the poor to exercise voice (Satterthwaite *et al.* 2011). The interest of the international development world in social accountability could be accompanied by frank attention in the lead-up to post-2015 to ways of supporting the organisations of the poor and their legitimacy.

*Rethinking goals and targets to encourage and support local buy-in and local action:* There is a need to rethink existing and proposed goals and targets, to include the (national and local) governance capacity to ensure that the end of poverty is linked with a more sustainable future. Goals can be universal, but many targets and most indicators need to recognise differences between national and sub-national contexts and between rural and urban realities.

Below are a set of thinking points intended as first inputs towards building concrete recommendations on the part of local and regional governments for areas to be tackled by the post-2015 development agenda:

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<sup>12</sup> See also <http://www.environmentandurbanization.org/assessing-report-high-level-panel-eminent-persons-post-2015-development-agenda>

- **Reduce inequalities, build inclusive cities and territories, minimise risk**

The reduction of inequalities needs increased effort towards a more inclusive provision of basic services. This will involve closer collaboration between national and local levels and major investments in infrastructure to ensure access to: a) safe, sufficient, affordable water; b) safe and convenient sanitation; c) health care; d) primary education; and e) emergency services.

This also means returning to global commitments to universal provision, not the partial goals and targets of the MDGs.<sup>13</sup> To avoid leaving anyone by the wayside, specific indicators for urban areas will be needed to take into account their distinct contexts and internal disparities – for instance, what forms of water and sanitation provision are adequate in high-density (and often multi-storey) contexts. Also, in particular, ensuring on-going improvements in the lives of slum dwellers, through access to the basic services mentioned above, secure tenure, decent work and safe communities.

The goals should also include objectives to build more resilient cities and territories, to reduce disaster risks and adapt to the increasing risks from climate change.

In addition to infrastructure, one of the main priorities should be to ensure food security for all. This needs to recognise how the means to achieve this will differ (for instance between farmers, agricultural labourers and those working in cities). Discussions on food security often focus on the supply side and not on what ensures people's access to food.

- **Include new objectives on governance and targets for sub-national governments**

Governance frameworks, including inter-governmental coordination and harmonisation, should be strengthened.

Local and regional development planning should be supported by national development strategies, and should include specific targets for addressing inequalities as well as concrete actions to reduce identified disaster risks and ensure climate change adaptation. In urban areas, a special focus on low-income groups is needed to ensure they can find or build accommodation without increasing slum populations. More attention needs to be paid to the roles and responsibilities of local governments in addressing MDG and post-MDG goals and targets, and on systems that monitor progress not only nationally but within each locality.

Strengthening local and regional government capacities to ensure they are able to work with their populations and civil society organisations to meet the above challenges and implement local development plans will be essential.

Mechanisms and funding to support local and regional governments to commit to relevant goals and targets are needed to ensure that concrete actions are taken at the local level. These will necessarily lead to a broader discussion about international financial institutions that can support governments (at all levels) that have responsibility for addressing citizen needs and managing local development. One way to do so would be to consider how to encourage and support local governments to be engaged in making commitments to global goals and then to monitoring progress in their jurisdiction.

- **Monitoring and indicators**

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<sup>13</sup> See also <http://www.environmentandurbanization.org/real-issue-universal-access-affordable-basic-services>

Reforms to official data collection services are needed so that these can better serve sub-national governments (for instance with census data being available to local governments to help identify where needs are concentrated within each local jurisdiction) and are able to monitor progress within the jurisdictions of local and regional governments.

With regard to the development goals themselves it will be important to determine a variety of indicators that distinguish between the very different contexts of territories, reflecting both rural and urban communities and the complexities of large cities and metropolitan areas. It may be necessary to set different base lines and benchmarks for progress to ensure a more accurate reflection of the well-being of populations and to provide a more detailed sub-national picture of progress on basic services provision. For instance, in most urban contexts, the indicators needed to measure safe, sufficient, affordable provision for water and sanitation differ from most rural contexts.

- **Building a new global partnership that enables and supports all key contributors to development**

Under the lead of the UN system, the identification, coordination and enabling of a wide spectrum of actors is essential in ensuring progress to attaining the post-2015 development goals. This includes international agencies and national governments but also local and regional governments and civil society organisations, including community-based groups. Global partnerships need effective and accountable local initiatives and institutions to meet most of their goals.

The success of alternative development strategies depends on a fundamental revision of this global partnership and the institutional and financial framework that should underpin the goals and targets and support those who can achieve them. The new framework should be supported by a stronger and more democratic international governance structure that includes all key stakeholders and covers issues and regulations not being addressed at present. This has to include a much greater capacity to work with and support key local actors.

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