Southern Voice on Post-MDGs: Dhaka Expert Group Meeting

Abstract

Reflecting on the limited consultation with developing country stakeholders prior to the implementation of the Millennium Development Goals (MDGs), the 48 TTI-funded think tanks across Africa, Latin America and South Asia initiated a program through which developing country concerns could be promoted: Southern Voice on Post-MDG International Development Goals. This ongoing initiative was officially launched in November 2012, and TTI Matching Funds were used to organize the first Expert Group Meeting held in Dhaka, Bangladesh in January 2013. Southern Voice, which is led by CPD, is a research program aimed at incorporating Southern perspectives into the post-MDG agenda and implementation strategies. It provides Southern-based think tanks with an opportunity to channel their evidence-based policy findings and outputs into ongoing discussions on post-MDG goals and targets. Southern Voice not only seeks to influence the global agenda while drawing on local perspectives, but also ensures the robustness and relevance of the post-MDG agenda to local realities.

On the Matching Funds

In 2011 the Think Tank Initiative established the Matching Funds program as another source of financial support. These funds support efforts by TTI-funded think tanks to achieve their long-term objectives, and also promote peer learning and collaboration.
COLLABORATING INSTITUTIONS

CPD hosted the Expert Group Meeting held in Dhaka in January 2013 and is leading the wider Southern Voice initiative. It is comprised of the group of 48 TTI-funded think tanks, and benefits from the active participation of the Centre for Policy Alternatives (CEPA - Sri Lanka), the Social Policy and Development Centre (SPDC - Pakistan), the Initiative Prospective Agricole et Rurale (IPAR - Senegal), and the Grupo de Análisis para el Desarrollo (GRADE - Peru).

WHAT THEY DID AND WHY

The United Nation’s (UN) Millennium Development Goals (MDGs) have made a huge contribution to poverty eradication and development worldwide. Their success is often attributed to the unprecedented political support that the goals have received at the global level. This success is due in large part to the concise, concrete and communicable articulation of the 18 time-bound targets, which have helped to capture the imagination of concerned citizens. While the state of actual delivery of MDGs continues to remain a matter of intense debate, with the 2015 deadline drawing near, the international development community remains preoccupied with reflecting on their future.

It is by now well recognised that MDGs were delivered through a top-down process. The framework and the targets were developed with few inputs from the member states, and with practically no contributions from non-governmental actors. Such a process may have been useful in getting the initiative off the ground, but has had consequences in terms of its effective implementation. As such, engaging with policy-oriented researchers from the global South will be particularly important in shaping the next set of targets, as they possess critical local knowledge and expertise.

Discussions on the future of MDGs are taking place globally through a number of channels and in a variety of platforms. The UN has initiated an inter-governmental process, complemented by a certain level of regional consultation. The UN Secretary-General has created a High Level Panel to provide guidance in this regard. Development-oriented civil society organisations are also meeting up to voice their concerns regarding the disparate achievements of MDGs as well as the future incarnation of the initiative. However, close scrutiny of these processes reveals that they benefit in a very limited way from inputs from the South, in particular from Southern think tanks. Such a shortcoming may not only substantively deprive the articulation of post-2015 MDG framework and targets from effective access to a very pertinent knowledge base, but may also circumscribe the ownership of the process, and undermine the consolidation of broad consensus. As the international development community and related stakeholders engage in giving shape to MDG Mark 2, it is imperative that think tanks located in the South – and particularly in low-income countries – be purposefully integrated into the process.

In view of the above, the Southern Voice initiative was launched. Led by CPD and with TTI support, it is aimed at providing Southern think tanks with a means to channel their knowledge and experience into ongoing global discussions on the post-MDG framework and targets. The initiative emerged in Cape Town, South Africa in June 2012 at the TTI Exchange. Since then, CPD has further conceptualised the initiative and prepared its programme document through a consultative process with other think tanks. Southern Voice was officially launched to various stakeholder groups in November 2012. Matching Funds were then used to organize an expert group meeting in Dhaka, Bangladesh on 11-13 January 2013. The purpose of this meeting was to set the agenda for the Southern Voice initiative, which is intended to run through to the end of 2015.
RESULTS

The expert group meeting was very successful. Besides being attended by researchers from a number of Southern think tanks – including many TTI grantees – UN officials and a number of stakeholders, having demonstrated expertise on MDG-related issues, also took part in the Dhaka meeting.

The key outcomes of the Dhaka meeting were captured in the document entitled “First Approximations on Post-MDG International Development Goals.” This paper highlights the main points of consensus from Southern experts with regards to what the content of post-MDG targets and implementation strategies should be. It was shared with the High Level Panel appointed by the UN Secretary General to draft the post-2015 framework. This publication also marked the first in the series called “Southern Voice Occasional Papers,” which is based on inputs received at various platforms of the initiative. The report is available here: http://southernvoice-postmdg.org/first-approximations-on-post-mdg-international-development-goals-2/

NEXT STEPS

Since the expert meeting in January 2013, Southern Voice has consolidated into a formal research and advocacy program. A website for the initiative has been launched (http://southernvoice-postmdg.org/). It features the Occasional Paper Series, of which there are now 14 issues on such varied topics as “Is the Current Booming Growth in Africa Worth Celebrating? Some Evidence from Tanzania” and “Understanding the role of social exclusion in progress towards MDGs for the excluded groups.”

Southern Voice will continue to produce research and collaborate with policy-makers at the UN and elsewhere. For instance, Southern Voice is now part of the research consortium that has been awarded the contract for preparing the European Report on Development (ERD) 2014, in partnership with the Overseas Development Institute (ODI), the European Centre for Development Policy Management (ECDPM), Deutsches Institut für Entwicklungspolitik (DIE) and the University of Athens. Additionally, on October 2013, Dr. Debapriya Bhattacharya, Chair of Southern Voice, made a presentation at a Post-2015 Conference organized by the United Nations Development Programme (UNDP) and the Government of the Republic of Korea.