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Language, development and the Millennium Development Goals
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The year 2010 marks a significant milestone for the Millennium Development Goals (MDGs), with the release of the *Millennium Development Goals Report 2010*. Although the global economic crisis of 2008-9 has slowed progress, the world as a whole is still on track to meet the first MDG goal of reducing poverty by half. However, the number of people living in extreme poverty actually went up between 1990 and 2005 by about 36 million. To understand who gets left behind and why, we must examine how economic growth is achieved, how it is shared by different groups, and what policies are adopted to alleviate poverty.

The result of single-mindedly pushing global economic growth over the last decades with little attention to the environment has been environmental destruction with growth for some and increasing poverty for others. MDG 7 of ensuring environmental sustainability is among the targets still presenting formidable challenges. In this International Year of Biodiversity we are also in the midst of a global extinction crisis with annual losses of plant and animal species estimated at 1000 times or more greater than historic background rates.

MDG 1 and MDG 7 are tightly linked. Poverty is a critical constraint on conservation at the same time as conservation is a key ingredient in the alleviation of poverty. The poor are often enmeshed in a vicious circle in which environmental degradation exacerbates poverty and poverty exacerbates environmental degradation. Poverty affects indigenous people disproportionately and indigenous people typically benefit less from poverty reduction efforts, in developed and developing countries alike. Indigenous peoples make up 15% of the world's poor and a third of the world's 900 million extremely poor rural people. They also speak around 60% of the world's 6,900 some languages. Indeed, the fate of most of the world's linguistic and, by implication, its cultural diversity lies in the hands of a small number of people most vulnerable to pressures of globalization. In a rapidly globalizing world with a handful of very large languages and many thousands of small ones, maintaining linguistic diversity is inextricably linked to the survival of small communities, whose subsistence lifestyles depend on healthy ecosystems. Without such resources these groups find it hard to maintain their lifeways and cultural identities on which continued transmission and vitality of their languages depend. We are also in the midst of a global language extinction, with linguists predicting that as many as 60 to 90% of the world's languages may disappear within the next 100 years.

The high overlap between regions of high biodiversity, high cultural-linguistic diversity and poverty means that reconciling development with diversity requires a new understanding of the critical role of language in human development. While some have welcomed the loss and abandonment of traditional languages and cultures as an inevitable prerequisite to modernization, there can be no true development with linguistic development. Yet language is very much the missing link, rendered invisible by the MDG discourse of development. The MDGs reduce the complex notion of development to an oversimplified and to some extent overlapping and interlocking set of targets and indicators, with halving poverty as the overarching policy aim of the last ten years. Such is the power exercised by a dominant discourse that it is hard to find anyone who disagrees with an agenda dedicated to economic growth. Setting the benchmark at only halving poverty rather than eliminating it altogether leaves open the possibility that minorities will constitute the majority of those persons still living in poverty in 2015.

This will adversely affect the possibility of achieving the other MDGs because poverty negatively impacts health, education, welfare and the environment in various ways. Marginalization linked to group-based identities tied to gender, language, culture, race, and ethnicity are among the deepest fault lines in education. We can see these fault lines clearly if we review briefly the progress on the other MDGs. Consider MDG 2 of achieving universal primary education. In many countries ethnic and minority language groups make up a large proportion of the bottom 20%. The second and third MDGs are partly overlapping; neither MDG 2 nor MDG 3 can be achieved in isolation. MDG 3 aims to promote gender equity and empower women. Girls continue to be disproportionately marginalized, particularly in Sub-Saharan Africa, South Asia, and East Asia and the Pacific. Being poor, being female and living in a rural area compounds the educational disadvantage over a lifetime. Two-thirds of the illiterate are women. Like MDG 2, MDG 3 says nothing about the role of language. Speaking a minority language compounds even further the marginalization of being a woman.

Inequalities of various kinds combine to exacerbate the risk of minorities being left behind. The same groups that are most marginalized by the education gap – namely, poor girls and women, especially those belonging to ethnic and linguistic minorities, and residing in rural areas, are also less likely to know how to prevent infection and spread of HIV. This knowledge is vital to MDG 6 to combat HIV/AIDS, malaria and other diseases. Knowledge must be delivered in a variety of oral and written formats in as many languages as possible to those who need it most. Language is key to the empowerment of Africans, but some 90% of Africans have no knowledge of the official language of their country even though it is presumed to be the vehicle of communication between the government and its citizens. Africa as a whole is home to nearly a third (30.5%, N=2,110) of the world's languages and a third of the world's poor surviving on less than \$1 a day (the UN's criterion for absolute poverty). As the part of the globe most left behind by development, sub-Saharan Africa is marked by a greater incidence and depth of poverty. Most of Africa's languages and poor people are concentrated in six of the world's twenty most linguistically diverse countries (Chad, Democratic Republic of the Congo, Tanzania, Nigeria, Cameroon, and Sudan). The closer development comes to the poorest, most marginalized peoples in Africa and other parts of the world, the more likely it is that they will speak a different language from their neighbors. Yet most development projects and education systems rely on international rather than local languages.

UNESCO's statement on *The Use of Vernacular Languages in Education* recognizes "that the best medium for teaching is the mother tongue of the pupil... all languages...are capable of becoming media of school teaching." National policies remain radically out of line with the realities of multilingualism and thus at odds with a rights-based approach as well as at odds with a substantial body of research establishing the value of high levels of bilingualism for learning. The majority of countries in the world actually operate either *de facto* or *de jure* as monolingual in recognizing only one language for use in education. Only a quarter of all nations recognize more than one language. Education for minorities in many parts of the world still operates in ways that contradict best practices, with fewer than 10% of the world's languages used in education. Meanwhile, a fast shift to English-medium education for an increasing number of young learners without appropriate teaching and support of mother tongues is causing educational failure.

The UN links cultural liberty to language rights and human development when it recognizes that there is "no more powerful means of 'encouraging' individuals to assimilate to a dominant culture than having the economic, social and political returns stacked against their mother tongue. Such assimilation is not freely chosen if the choice is between one's mother tongue and one's future". Language shift affects those who have relatively little power. Indeed, the speakers of most of the languages at greatest risk of disappearing over the next few decades are very often also the poorest or the poor at the bottom of the economic ladder, and at the margins of a rapidly globalizing world. Language is key to the empowerment of the poor. Yet few have asked the rural poor what their conceptions and understanding of development are. This is seldom done, despite increasing calls for development to come from within communities, and to be based on local knowledge, so that it is responsive to self-perceived needs, is culturally relevant, and sustainable. The MDGs, like most other large development undertakings, were not initiated by poor countries, but were prompted primarily by the United States, Europe and Japan (co-sponsored by the World Bank, the International Monetary Fund, and the Organization for Economic Cooperation and Development).

The idea that development comes from elsewhere and is synonymous with economic growth continues relations of external dependency and underdevelopment. With business as usual, we have little hope of achieving most of the MDGs, no matter how much money the rich countries contribute to the poor. Good development involves local community involvement, control and accountability. The need to preserve languages and the need for development in the world's peripheral societies are complimentary aspects of the same problem rather than opposing ones. The measures most likely to preserve small languages are the very ones that will help increase their speakers' standard of living in a long-term, sustainable way. Policies that promote a community's economic and cultural well-being will be likely to sustain linguistic diversity as well. Keeping the promise of the MDGs requires reconciling development with linguistic diversity.