Disciplining anti-poverty: The Global Call to Action against Poverty and the Millennium Development Goals in Malawi

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Introduction

International donors have long viewed the promotion of civil society as key to achieving a variety of multilateral development agendas, from democracy promotion in Eastern Europe and Latin America to combating communicable diseases in sub-Saharan Africa and Asia. Multilateral agencies have been particularly keen to engage with and promote civil society, and often have wide ranging sections of their websites dedicated to this purpose[1]. Several authors have sought to problematize this relationship in a national and regional context, yet this literature has not carried much influence amongst those who have celebrated the emergence of thicker global or transnational civil society networks in the past twenty years.

This paper addresses the manner in which hegemonic discourses of development *can* serve to construct and discipline the knowledge and imaginations of global civil society network nodes, in particular those seeking to advance anti-poverty agendas. This has implications for the degree to which we can understand these networks as working for marginalized people. It also has implications for how global civil society actors understand and re-subjectivize their own positionality vis-à-vis global systems of governance.

[1] See, for example 'The World Bank and Civil Society' at http://web.worldbank.org/WBSITE/EXTERNAL/TOPICS/CSO/0,,pagePK:220469~theSitePK:228717,00.html and 'UN and Civil Society' at http://www.un.org/en/civilsociety/index.shtml, accessed on 15th June 2009

I frame my argument in a discussion of various literatures concerning global civil society, and its relationship to the State and global systems of governance. I then problematize these distinctions and normative positions with an exploration of data drawn from semi-structured and ethnographic interviewing carried out with participants in the Malawian national coalition of a large global civil society network called the Global Call to Action against Poverty (GCAP).

The Global Call to Action against Poverty (GCAP) is, according to its website, "the world's largest civil society alliance fighting against poverty and inequality" (www.whiteband.org), and can be placed under the rubric of global civil society offered by the theorists which will be discussed in this paper. It is constituted by over 100 country level national civil society coalitions and campaigns. These coalitions consist of international and national non-governmental organizations (NGOs), think tanks, trade unions, faith groups, social movements, voluntary groups, and in some cases parliamentarians and State agencies.

GCAP was negotiated into existence at a series of international conferences between 2003 and 2007, attended by a large range of national and international civil society actors. During this time, GCAP acted as a campaign hub, coordinating the campaigns for trade justice, fair trade and international aid held across the world in 2005 at the time of the G8 summit in Scotland. GCAP provided the global umbrella for initiatives such as *Make Poverty History* in the UK and the *One Campaign* in the US. By 2008, GCAP was focusing its activities around large scale mobilization events such as its *Stand Up against Poverty* campaign held annually on the International Day for the Eradication of World Poverty. In 2008, GCAP claims to have mobilised 116 million people to 'stand up' worldwide on this day (GCAP, 2008: 6).

GCAP's relationship with the United Nations Millennium Campaign (UNMC) is a key one. The initial brainstorming meeting which heralded the inception of GCAP in 2003 was organised by the civil society organisation CIVICUS *and* the UNMC (CIVICUS/UNMC, 2003). The report from the meeting reveals that there were initial concerns amongst the participating civil society actors regarding this relationship. However, sessions including topics such as 'Working with the UN: What Advantages and Possibilities?' (Ibid: 13) may have been designed to allay some of these fears. When GCAP was eventually operationalised in 2005, the UNMC was therefore given observer status on what was then called the International Facilitation Team, and what is now known as the Global Council (GCAP's highest decision making body). The UNMC is also one of GCAP's main funders. From 2006 to 2008 the UNMC gave GCAP between $70,000 and $120,000 a year for secretariat support (GCAP, 2008: 13). In addition, in 2009 alone the UNMC gave GCAP national coalition members 40 grants in at least 20 countries[2] at a total of nearly $600,000[3].

It is difficult initially to identify exactly where the UNMC comes from. Even though its name suggests it is a United Nations initiative, its website (www.endpoverty2015.org) and its various proclamations make no mention of this. The UNMC merely "…supports and inspires people from around the world to take action in support of the Millennium Development Goals"[4]. I do not intend here to provide a genealogy of the UNMC, but a cursory glance at its contacts page confirms that whilst it claims to involve "…a wide network of partners, including civil society organizations, faith-based groups, NGOs, youth, parliamentarians and local governments"[5], nearly all of its offices are based in UN agency buildings, and key

[2] see http://grants.spreadlab.com/table.php, accessed on 13th August 2009
[3] see http://www.endpoverty2015.org/resources, accessed on 13th August 2009
[4] see http://www.endpoverty2015.org/about, accessed on 15th May 2009
[5] see http://www.endpoverty2015.org/press, accessed on 15th May 2009

staff are employed by the UNDP. Indeed, on the United Nations website (www.un.org) the UNMC is also listed as a key member of the UN family for achieving the MDGs. The point here is not to suggest anything underhand, but rather and only that the UNMC is squarely an initiative of the United Nations.

Global Civil Society – A Liberal Imagining

The GCAP-UNMC relationship is unproblematic if we consider it in light of a great deal of the global civil society literature. However, it is important to understand the degree to which this literature draws on a benign and liberal imagination of the State. State formations (i.e. both nation states, or, where it is held that the nation state is increasingly irrelevant, global governance structures) are held to "…play a positive-sum role in protecting, funding, and nurturing non-profit organisations in every part of the earth where there is a lively civil society" (Keane. 2001:35). Furthermore, global civil society is constructed with a distinctly post-Westphalian stance. Beck, in particular, has argued that what he calls the "container" theory of the state (1997: 23) has now been shattered by globalisation (Ibid: 24) – "Even urban rummagers live in and from the garbage of world society, and remain linked into the symbolic circuits of global culture industries" (Ibid: 66). Whilst one could move from this position to conceive of new State formations in a number of ways, global civil society theorists tend to look towards the sustenance and evolution of existing institutions of global governance as the bedrock of a new global democracy (Ibid: 129-155. Kaldor, 2005: 107. Falk, 1999: 133). This discussion points towards an issue worth further exploration; namely, that governance structures, whether national or global, at least carry the potential to be facilitative of (global) civil society

In that global civil society theorists foster a belief that national and global governance structures facilitate global civil society, they present a very liberal rendition of this relationship, and do not therefore provide the tools with which to understand the hegemonic role of systems of governance. The position of global civil society theorists is challenged by those who have critiqued State-civil society relations more generally. Chandhoke (1995) for example, illustrates the way in which global civil society theorists are unable to conceptualise the modes of hegemonic control which (global) civil society actors sometimes operate within. Chandhoke argues that State and civil society are in a symbiotic relationship, where whilst the State sets the limits of political discourse, those limits are only set in response to the transgression of previous limits. This, Chandhoke argues, is how civil society is created, although this remains a normative position, for it is quite often the case that civil society *does not* transgress these boundaries, and is in fact defined by them (Ibid: 9).

Chandhoke also shows how the space of civil society is one which is often disciplined and abnormalizing. Codes of 'polite' behaviour and etiquette discipline civil society formations (Ibid: 186), whilst the space of civil society becomes "…a neutralized space, it neutralizes those forms of politics which are outside stipulated limits, or those which question the composition of the sphere." (Ibid: 187). Furthermore, Chatterjee distinguishes between the idealized, or 'fictive' notion of civil society, and the everyday governmentality of 'political society'. According to Chatterjee, civil society describes the relationship between the birth of the nation state in the West, which required engaged citizens to monitor and participate in the State, and its people, who fulfilled this function. The birth of the nation state in most of the world however occurred in the context of colonial rule, which had already instituted a system of governmentality which segmented people into administrable population groups along lines of ethnicity and tribe. These people were not citizens, but subjects,

and were not required to participate in the State. Whilst the early anti-colonial struggles were initially energized by republican ideals of the citizen, the notion of the developmental state, encouraged by international donors and NGOs, re-instituted colonial methods of governmentality, creating population groups along lines of health, wealth and education (Chatterjee, 2004: 36-38), ostensibly so they could be 'cared' for and thus be administered by the State. This does not necessarily result in the reduction of democratic possibilities for people. Indeed, Chatterjee reveals the opposite in his work around the slums of Calcutta, where such subjects have re-subjectified themselves to take advantage of governmental processes (Ibid: 77). However, such an understanding of the relationship between the State and society has ramifications for the ideas and applicability of global civil society as an analytical concept, which assumes a participative role for global civil society networks and the actors which constitute them, in the various modes of global and regional governance which currently proliferate. Whilst I would not entirely share Chatterjee's view that civil society is a fictive and irrelevant notion everywhere in the post-colonial world, his idea of 'political society' (Ibid: 36-38) does problematize the degree to which global civil society allows its members to monitor global institutions, rather than merely legitimate them.

Nonetheless, Kaldor draws heavily on the work of Keck and Sikkink on transnational advocacy networks (TANs) (1998; Khagram, Riker and Sikkink, 2002) to populate her vision of the progressive and representative elements of global civil society (Kaldor, 2003: 95). TANs are held to consist of NGOs and social movements which hold specifically global institutions to account over global norms (Khagram, Riker and Sikkink, 2002: 3-4). It is therefore apparent that the subjects of the liberal realm of global civil society are non-governmental organisations (NGOs) and social movements. Indeed, Kaldor claims these groups "…provide an opportunity for voices

of grassroots groups to be heard" (2003: 95). Similarly, others argue that such networks and coalitions constitute a global democracy (Falk, 1999: 133) and open up a "…transnational space of the moral and the subpolitical" (Beck, 1997: 26). However, this mirrors a perspective on globalization which implicitly flattens or smoothes the processes by which social spaces are constructed, thereby ignoring the power crucial to these constructions, and how different process of globalization are uneven and differential (McGrew, 2008: 18-21). Chandhoke, for example, argues that "…the return of civil society to political vocabularies has in part been the result of neo-liberal projects such as privatization, de-nationalization, deregulation and de-statization which seeks to 'roll back the state'" (1995: 10). Chandhoke here points to a blind spot in the ontological claims of global civil society theorists, and the way they invoke the subjects of global civil society as autonomous self-directed actors.

Indeed, this rendition of global civil society ignores how social networks are constructed as subjects via a differentiated and relational process, and problematizes any claims to democratic representivity made from within these spaces. This in turn problematizes the equalizing effect global civil society is claimed by its theorists to have on power inequalities within it. If global civil society itself is imbued by these very inequalities, then how can the networks which populate it necessarily hold out the promise of a more democratic future? It is interesting to note that both Kaldor (2003:107) and Keane (2001: 38) explicitly recognise this representivity lack. Yet they nonetheless appear to believe that it is not necessarily problematic. Whereas Kaldor argues that the message of global civil society is more important than its internal democracy (2003: 107), Keane (2008) has argued for the recognition of a new form of 'monitory' democracy. He argues that since 1945 there has been a proliferation of non traditional democratic forms, (for example participatory budgeting, truth and reconciliation commissions and social forums) whose common

feature appears to be their 'monitory' capacity i.e. their capacity to monitor traditional (the nation-state) and newer (systems of global governance) sites of power. Keane argues that democracy has always been based on representation, and that these new monitory institutions embody new forms of representation. The multiplication of sites of representivity to monitor the exercise of power is therefore positive, even if they are not necessarily representative in a traditional manner.

The problem with this though is that for the majority of marginalised people such traditional forms of representivity are still incredibly important, and are neither theoretically nor empirically being satisfactorily replaced by the proliferation of NGOs who follow and 'monitor' the agendas of multilateral donors at the UN and elsewhere. Indeed, in a Foucauldian sense one could query whether the multiplication of sites of monitory institutions merely represents a form of advanced governmentality (Foucault, 1982/1994, Danaher, Schirato and Webb, 2000). However, this only serves to draw attention to power *between* organisational forms, rather than within them. As Clegg (1989) argues, organisational forms are fluid, in a constant state of contestation as forces within it fight (sometimes literally) to fix the form's representivity. 'Monitory' institutions therefore do not simply monitor, but take on a whole range of other, sometimes contradictory roles. Keane (2008) argues that when monitory institutions work well they contest and break down power, but while this may indeed be the case, this is a partial picture, as it ignores entirely the potential creation and re-creation of new elites and oligarchies.

Chandhoke is critical of the liberal conception of (global) civil society as purely 'monitory' - "The problem with the liberal discourse which privileges civil society is that it…is profoundly indifferent to the ability or the inability of the inhabitants of civil society to participate in the sphere of discussion and debate on equal terms…far

from being havens of democracy…civil societies have notoriously oppressed their own inhabitants." (1995: 12) Indeed, Pederson and Webster argue that an emancipatory political space is not necessarily rooted in civil society, but in the "…possibilities for groups of the poor to bring about change through local organizations" (2002: 15). This echoes Chatterjee's (2004) distinction between the subjectification of civil society, and the potential for re-subjectification under the conditions of 'political society'. An emancipatory civil society might be the outcome, but civil society *per se* is no guarantor of social change. This is because civil society can always collude in and reproduce domination.

In a discussion of the public role of 'monitory' institutions of global civil society then, this means they are always being worked through by other actors (such as the agents of global systems of governance) as well as working on them. This has implications for the kind of potential for public involvement and social change we invest in what are in reality normative concepts deployed by global civil society theorists in this regard, rather than empirically analytical categories.

Indeed, Kasfir (1998), Tembo (2003), and Mohan and Stokke (2007) challenge benign interpretations of global civil society, and draw attention to how donor civil society programmes and International NGO support can often be inappropriate to developing country contexts in which they are harmful to indigenous democratic formations. Furthermore, far from enabling ordinary citizens to have their voices heard (Kaldor, 2003; 2005), Townsend claims that the select few who populate professionalized NGOs are subsequently drawn into a "transnational community" characterized by a common language of managerialism, reporting and accountability and a desire to legitimize their jobs and organizations (1998: 615). Kamat (2002; 2004) further contends that NGOs are deeply implicated in the neo-liberal hegemonic

project of which the international development agenda is one part. NGOs and 'new social movements', both of which fit into Keane's notion of 'monitory democracy' (2008), do not represent a devolution of power from the State as Keane would hold, but in fact represent a reproduction of the State and capital in public spaces, what Kamat calls the 'NGO-ization' of public space i.e. increasing professionalization, fiscal responsibility and accountability (2002: 615). Heins underlines the more instrumental aspect of this argument, when he notes that many NGOs are more interested in establishing their formal rights with global systems of governance, "…by relying on quasi-feudal institutional habits and personal privileges of access they get more out of the political game" (2005: 194). In stating this he explicitly criticizes Kaldor for imagining "…that a global civil society based on NGOs can make international organizations more attuned to the concerns of ordinary citizens as opposed to states" (Op Cit).

The literature considered above calls into question the ontological claims made by global civil society theorists that global civil society is characteristically progressive, or works in an uncomplicated sense for or on behalf of a global citizenry. That these claims are made in the first place should not be surprising, given the liberal bias which infuses the work of such theorists. Nonetheless it appears that global civil society networks are an assemblage of contradictory and complex characteristics, rather than uncomplicated forbearers of a new global democracy. They are not merely the historical and teleological subjects of socio-economic transformation, as global civil society theorists would have it, but *also* reproduce structural domination and historical imperial projects. This is not to suggest an overly deterministic perspective on global civil society networks, but this discussion does frame the research I carried out with the Global Call to Action against Poverty (GCAP). Whilst certain parts of the GCAP network were found to be creatively engaging with global systems of

governance, in ways which served to partially re-frame global development agendas, in Malawi, where the data for this paper is drawn, GCAP participants appeared to be distinctly monitored by, rather than monitory of, global systems of governance, in this case the Millennium Development Goals and their agents.

The Millennium Development Goals as an actor of Global Governance

It was when I received the following email that the MDGs really came to the fore in my research, not simply as a subject of it, but also acting to shape it and my fieldwork, as will become clear. My perspective on this was drawn from the work of actor network theorists like Law (1992; 2003) and Callon (1986). The email I sent to this GCAP Malawi participant made no mention of the MDGs, merely explaining the background to my project, and requesting his time for an interview:

<xxx@yahoo.com> writes:

Dear Clive,

I hope you are fine. I would like to confirm that I will participate in your research project. Our organisation is called xxx and I am the Executive Director/ Founder. Our address is xxx. Cell is xxx. I will be ready to participate in July. *We are mainly focusing on MDG goal 1, 3 and 6.*

Thanks

xxx

[Personal correspondence with research participant, 13th April 2008: Italics added]

The GCAP coalition in Malawi is also called the National Civil Society Taskforce for the MDGs, and so in many respects it shouldn't be surprising if participants raise the MDGs in their talk about the coalition. Nonetheless, this response struck me as

particularly unusual; so direct and seemingly automatic. What I would come to understand in Malawi was a very problematic relationship between civil society and the particular 'development hegemony' (Kamat, 2002) of the MDGs, which challenged any claim of GCAP being an entirely monitory or oppositional force. However, before investigating this further I will introduce the MDGs more comprehensively, in order to illustrate the manner in which they can be considered as not just a set of benign or progressive development goals, but also in some contexts an articulation of neo-liberal systems of global governance.

What are the MDGs and where do they come from?

The MDGs consist of eight targets each with their own subset of targets. These are:

1. **End Extreme Poverty:**

Halve, between 1990 and 2015, the proportion of people whose income is less than $1 a day

Achieve full and productive employment and decent work for all, including women and young people

Halve, between 1990 and 2015, the proportion of people who suffer from hunger

2. Achieve Universal Primary Education:

Ensure that, by 2015, children everywhere, boys and girls alike, will be able to complete a full course of primary schooling

3. Promote Gender Equality and Empower Women

Eliminate gender disparity in primary and secondary education, preferably by 2005, and in all levels of education no later than 2015

4. Reduce Child Mortality

Reduce by two thirds, between 1990 and 2015, the under-five mortality rate

5. Improve Maternal Health

Reduce by three quarters the maternal mortality ratio

Achieve universal access to reproductive health

6. Combat HIV/AIDS, Malaria, and other Diseases

Have halted by 2015 and begun to reverse the spread of HIV/AIDS

Achieve, by 2010, universal access to treatment for HIV/AIDS for all those who need it

Have halted by 2015 and begun to reverse the incidence of malaria and other major diseases

7. Ensure Environmental Sustainability

Integrate the principles of sustainable development into country policies and programmes and reverse the loss of environmental resources

Reduce biodiversity loss, achieving, by 2010, a significant reduction in the rate of loss

Halve, by 2015, the proportion of the population without sustainable access to safe drinking water and basic sanitation

By 2020, to have achieved a significant improvement in the lives of at least 100 million slum dwellers

8. Develop a Global Partnership for Development

Address the special needs of least developed countries, landlocked countries and small island developing states

Develop further an open, rule-based, predictable, non-discriminatory trading and financial system

Deal comprehensively with developing countries' debt

In cooperation with pharmaceutical companies, provide access to affordable essential drugs in developing countries

In cooperation with the private sector, make available benefits of new technologies, especially information and communications

(un.orgb)

The following excerpt from the United Nations' MDGs website provides an account of their development:

> "In September 2000, building upon a decade of major United Nations conferences and summits, world leaders came together at United Nations Headquarters in New York to adopt the United Nations Millennium Declaration, committing their nations to a new global partnership to reduce extreme poverty and setting out a series of time-bound targets - with a deadline of 2015 …The eight Millennium Development Goals (MDGs) – which range from halving extreme poverty to halting the spread of HIV/AIDS and providing universal primary education, all by the target date of 2015 – form a blueprint agreed to by all the world's countries and all the world's leading development institutions."[6]

This narrative presents a particular history of the MDGs. They were the result of UN summits and were developed and adopted unanimously by the whole host of world nations at the General Assembly. However, other accounts of the MDGs' development problematize this narrative, and provide the context in which GCAP Malawi is subjectified by the MDGs and the discourse of development they represent.

Colin Bradford was the United States representative to the Organisation of Economic Co-operation and Development-Development Assistance Committee (OECD-DAC) during the 1990's. In an unpublished account of his time at the DAC during this period, he relates the process by which the OECD's International Development

[6] see http://www.un.org/millenniumgoals/bkgd.shtml, accessed on 12th May 2009

Targets (IDTs) were formed. According to Bradford (and secondary accounts also – see Hulme, 2007), the IDTs were important pre-cursors to the MDGs and formed the basis of those goals and targets (Bradford, 2006: 1). Indeed, a 1996 document produced by the DAC, 'Shaping the 21st Century: The Contribution of Development Co-operation', lists these IDTs, and claims to be the first attempt at synthesizing targets set at sector-specific summits and meetings from the previous decade (OECD-DAC, 1996: 9). A glance at these targets does indeed reveal their resemblance to the eventual MDGs (I have added the relevant MDG numbers):

Economic well-being:

A reduction by one-half in the proportion of people living in extreme poverty by 2015 *(MDG 1)*

Social development:

Universal primary education in all countries by 2015 *(MDG 2)*

Demonstrated progress toward gender equality and the empowerment of women by eliminating gender disparity in primary and secondary education by 2005 *(MDG 3)*

A reduction by two-thirds in the mortality rates for infants and children under age 5 and a reduction by three-fourths in maternal mortality, all by 2015 *(MDG 4)*

Access through the primary health-care system to reproductive health services for all individuals of appropriate ages as soon as possible and no later than the year 2015 *(MDG 5)*

Environmental sustainability and regeneration:

The current implementation of national strategies for sustainable development in all countries by 2005, so as to ensure that current trends in the loss of environmental resources are effectively reversed at both global and national levels by 2015 *(MDG 7)*

(OEC-DAC, 1996: 2)

Bradford relates that finding an alternative ideological narrative with which to "…sell development" to development actors (including developing States) in the aftermath of the Cold War was a major motivation in the drafting of the IDTs (2006: 2). One can already detect issues of contention here for actors who might have different notions of development to that of the DAC. Indeed, the IDTs, which predated and defined the MDGs, were formulated by a *"groupe de reflexion"* which consisted of all and only the major bilateral donors at that time (Ibid: 3). Furthermore, the IDTs were developed shortly after internal OECD negotiations were being held to develop the subsequently controversial (and opposed by civil society groups) Multilateral Agreement on Investments (MAI). This account clearly problematizes the idea of the MDGs as an automatically benign and apolitical set of goals and targets. Whilst it is not the assertion here that the MDGs are necessarily malign (and indeed, who could argue with eradicating extreme poverty?), I would argue that they represent a hegemonic and therefore exclusionary definition of development. The MDGs do not, for instance, deploy social exclusion, violence against women, or land rights as subjects of development, all of which have provided sites of State-civil society contention. They explicitly position the private sector, and in particular large pharmaceutical companies, as the key to improved development outcomes. This is a view of development, and how it should be achieved, which differs significantly from counter-hegemonic definitions of development (see for example, Bello, 2002; Broad and Cavanagh, 2008). None of this is necessarily problematic if civil society discourses of poverty eradication are drawing from a number of discursive sources. However, in GCAP Malawi at least, they are not. How the MDGs are understood discursively, and the material practices this creates in a self-referential and

reinforcing process, provide a useful way in which to judge the claims of global civil society theorists that networks such as GCAP universally enact forms of monitory representivity and oppositionality. As I will now illustrate, I found that what participants in GCAP Malawi imagined was possible when they talked about 'development' was conditioned by both assemblages of knowledge contained within and deployed through the MDGs, and individual agents of that knowledge.

'It would be like…being in heaven'

Repeatedly during conversations with GCAP Malawi participants, the MDGs were deployed without invite. I say 'deployed', rather than 'referenced' or 'mentioned' because the MDGs appeared to be active, both in shaping the discourses being employed by the research participants, but also in shaping both their own activities and my own research. In this way they served as an 'actor' (Latour, 2005) in the NCSTM network. For example, the following exchange took place during the first interview I undertook in Malawi[7]:

"Joseph: But who are you meeting? Your list…

CG: Ok, so I've got, [pause, papers taken out of bag] these are the people who have so far agreed to be interviewed…

Joseph: Ok…this one I think you should meet *['This one' refers to a UNDP programme officer not on the list being discussed]*… Because she will give you another perspective

[7] Semi structured and ethnographic interviews were carried out in Malawi during June and July 2008. Extensive field notes were written up and all semi-structured interviews were recorded and then transcribed. All participant names have been changed, apart from my own, which is denoted by the initials 'CG' where relevant.

CG: OK … what's her relationship to the taskforce?

Joseph: UNDP are also…I think they are supporting the taskforce…But they are into the Millennium Development Goals, so if you want to hear some stories in terms of what progress government is making *in the eyes* of the UN system so you can get that perspective."

Like the email I had received earlier from another GCAP Malawi participant, the MDGs and the UN had appeared in my research completely uninvited. Later on in the conversation, Joseph said the following:

"…for me, there is the GCAP movement, and there is the MDGs…not everyone who is doing the MDG work is in the GCAP…that's why I was mentioning these people so you can meet them, and just get progress on the MDGs for Malawi…"

It appeared that Joseph felt compelled to direct my research to actors who were not obviously part of GCAP. Here then were the MDGs acting, not simply to shape GCAP Malawi's materialities, but also my own. This resulted in a very productive encounter for this research when I was invited to a meeting of the GCAP Malawi steering group held at the offices of the UNDP in Lilongwe, which I will return to shortly.

However, for the moment I want to briefly illustrate the manner in which the MDGs discursively orientated GCAP Malawi participants' imaginings of their campaign's objectives, and poverty eradication in Malawi more broadly. GCAP Malawi participants invoked the MDGs as the defining frame of their campaign. They

understood their subjectivity as a monitory one, of ensuring that the Malawian government was held to account over its MDG commitments. Furthermore, many of the GCAP Malawi participants imagined that achieving the MDGs would result in the eradication of poverty. For example, Mary told me that GCAP Malawi was "…a coalition of civil society, you know, who want to see poverty gone, ok? But they want to see poverty gone by using the framework of the 8 MDGs ok?"

Similarly, Thandike commented that "…meeting the MDGs, they are put in a way that they should actually eradicate poverty and hunger, whatever, so for Malawi, a third world country, I mean, that would cure everything, the economy, that would be the day we are looking forward to…I think meeting the MDGs in Malawi…I guess…it's…it would be like…being in heaven I guess"

However, the MDGs only promise to reduce *extreme* poverty by 50% by 2015. Even if the 65.4% of people living below the nationally defined poverty line in Malawi (UNDP, 2008) are all living in extreme poverty, rather than 'regular' poverty, then that still leaves nearly a third of the population living in extreme poverty. So whilst the members of GCAP Malawi are trying to enroll the MDGs to their problematizations of poverty eradication in Malawi, the MDGs are in fact acting in ways which contradict this. Nonetheless, an MDG shadow report produced by GCAP Malawi claims that "…the MDGs … look at all people" (GCAP Malawi, 2007: 19). This significantly problematizes any claims that GCAP is oppositional in any universal sense. Indeed, the discourses of poverty eradication amongst GCAP Malawi participants appear to be more of the 'monitored' variety than the monitory. This impression was further reinforced by the material practices of the coalition in Malawi.

The MDGs apportion responsibility to national governments for achieving the goals. The 'monitored' discursive constructions of the GCAP Malawi participants therefore were also intertwined with the material locations and practices of the GCAP Malawi constituent organisations with respect to their relationships with the Malawian government. Many of these organisations are situated in the more modern district of the capital city, Lilongwe. This area features the national parliament building, other government agencies, as well as many multilateral and bilateral donors. It is in this context that government ministers and appointees are reported to be ubiquitous at GCAP Malawi events (GCAP Malawi, 2008), whilst one of the criticisms leveled at the Blantyre-based GCAP Malawi secretariat (some four hours away by road) is that it does not appear often enough at government consultations in Lilongwe (Interviews with Fredericks and Kamugholi). Meanwhile, the United Nations Millennium Campaign (UNMC), based in Nairobi, and whose close relationship with GCAP was discussed earlier, and the UNDP office in Lilongwe play significant roles in devising the work-programmes of the coalition. I was fortunate enough to be able to observe an example of this, the significance of which I will now illustrate.

Please DO attend!

A few pages ago I presented an excerpt of a conversation I had with one of the GCAP Malawi participants, Joseph. In it he recommended that I go and speak to a UNDP employee (Ethel) based in Lilongwe to discuss the government's performance on the MDG targets. For me, this was already an example of the MDGs acting in a very ontological sense, intruding directly on my research in unexpected ways. As I pursued my list of participants in Malawi, I put the UNDP to the back of my mind for a couple of weeks. I was, initially at least, resistant to the idea of getting distracted by government performance targets and UN measurements. However, finding myself

with a couple of days to kill back in Lilongwe, and feeling that here was an actor which had been introduced to the GCAP Malawi network which I hadn't yet chased, I gave Ethel a call, and made an appointment to see her that afternoon. Slightly later on she gave me a call back and told me that there was a meeting being held an hour before our appointment at the UNDP offices which I should come along to. It was going to be addressed by someone visiting from the UN in Nairobi to talk about the MDGs. I expressed my concerns to her that I might be a bit of an intruder, but she insisted I come along. I was soon to find out why.

When I entered the room where the meeting was being held I saw a round table with people sitting around it, like a committee meeting. The meeting had already got underway so I focused first on locating an empty seat and quickly made my way to it trying to cause as little disturbance as possible. But as I sat down and looked around me I realized that I knew every single person sitting around the table, apart from about four people, who, it transpired, were UNDP employees and the person from the UN in Nairobi, who, it transpired, was actually from the UNMC.. The reason why I knew everyone else was because I had interviewed them. They were all GCAP Malawi participants. This was, it seemed, a coalition meeting being addressed by the UNMC representative.

The meeting provided an example of the MDGs acting and embodied through their UN representatives to order the GCAP Malawi network – its understandings of poverty and its actions to alleviate it. The UNDP representatives talked of how much they supported mobilisation events because of their 'Take Action' approach. This, they said, was important in avoiding "dependency syndrome" and encouraging "the poor to take ownership". Malawian society, another UNDP representative said, "loves to suffer in silence", and should be more critical of the government. Setting the

context like this meant that any anti-poverty campaign had to be constructed in a certain way. For example, this implicitly ruled out a critique of global governance systems and economic structures, and placed the responsibility for poverty in Malawi equally on government policy, civil society organisations *and* people living in poverty. This is a discourse of responsibilization which ultimately individualizes poverty, and ignores and leaves unaddressed its underlying structural causes. It is also a discourse which was repeatedly articulated to me throughout the interviews and conversations I conducted with GCAP Malawi participants, despite the explicit rejection of this discourse in reports and statement produced by other GCAP nodes. GCAP Malawi participants spoke of "sensitizing" people to their poverty (Thandike), and getting them to take "responsibility towards themselves" (Andrew). "Sometimes" I was told, "ignorance [the ignorance of those living in poverty] is what has always been the problem, ok?" (Emily). This suggests conflicting power dynamics in GCAP, which in GCAP Malawi is being dominated by a discourse of individualized and responsibilized poverty which, although in all probability predates the MDGs, is being maintained and monitored by it. The comments of GCAP Malawi participants make problematic any claim that GCAP is wholly oppositional, and not constituted in part by the very power global civil society theorists would claim it opposes, or monitors.

The role of the MDGs and UN system in ordering GCAP Malawi's epistemology and ontology at the coalition meeting I attended was not so much a single process of ordering, but consisted of a series of different moments which served to prod GCAP Malawi participants in the direction of certain agreements and outcomes. For example, the coalition secretariat representative was admonished by the UNDP representatives for not attending enough government consultations – "Please <u>do</u> attend!" he was very publicly scolded. The UNMC representative asserted the

importance of concentrating on *formal* government engagement, arguing that this was how policy makers could be bound to decisions and pressure could be brought publicly. This was despite an earlier call by one of the GCAP Malawi participants at the meeting for less reliance on more formal political opportunities, and the success of civil society demonstrations outside the parliament building in Lilongwe to break a deadlock in negotiations over the government budget a year earlier. Furthermore, as the meeting progressed, it became apparent that the UNDP and UNMC representatives were at first translating discussions into 'actionable' points, and then simply taking some decisions themselves, addressing each other in the process rather than the GCAP Malawi members present. However, simultaneously, the UNDP and UNMC representatives responsibilized the GCAP Malawi members, particularly the secretariat. The coalition, they were told, were in a position the UN agencies could not occupy, that of being able to critique government, a role they must take on with greater vigor (although as we already know, this should only be done through 'formal' channels). Similarly, when the secretariat tried to give the UNDP representative responsibility for a task, she refused, responding "You lead this, the UNDP only supports".

In this discussion of the MDGs, I have attempted to illustrate the complex and contradictory ways in which they are a very active actor in the GCAP Malawi coalition, which represent a particular and hegemonic articulation of 'development'. Beyond the scope of this paper has been how in some parts of the GCAP network the presence of the MDGs have provoked counter-hegemonic articulations of the meaning of development and a form of monitory oppositionality. However, in Malawi the MDGs have acted to epistemologically and ontologically order both the understandings and practices of the GCAP coalition. These various articulations and practices problematize ideas of GCAP being universally oppositional or monitory.

Conclusion

The MDGs are presented by UN institutions and talked about by many civil society actors as benign targets designed to lift people out of poverty. This paper has sought to begin to problematize this position, by exploring the discursive relationship between the MDGs and civil society actors in Malawi. Several questions remain unaddressed, for example the exact degree to which the MDGs are part of a broader system of global governance of which international development targets are constituted as one part. Certainly the way in which GCAP Malawi participants responsibilized those living in poverty, and the ways in which the GCAP Malawi campaign focused almost solely on the actions of its own national government, suggests that the MDGs play a part in maintaining the 'good governance' agenda currently proliferating through development thinking (Harrison, 2004). Whilst global civil society networks can provide important monitory and account holding functions over national governments and global systems of governance, this paper has asserted the importance of exploring the relationships between these two positions before proclaiming global civil society as the harbingers of a new, 'people-powered' global democratic order.

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