ADDRESSING INEQUALITIES
The Heart of the Post-2015 Development Agenda and the Future We Want for All

Global Thematic Consultation

EMBEDDING THE EQUALITY DIMENSION IN MDGs:
INTERGENERATIONAL TRANSMISSION OF INEQUALITIES AND IMPLICATIONS FOR POST-2015 UN DEVELOPMENT AGENDA

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Abstract

This paper aims at reviewing the Millennium Development Goals using an equality of opportunity perspective by recalling the major contributions of contemporary philosophy, notably John Rawls, Amartya Sen, Ronald Dworkin, and John Roemer. In doing so, we look at possible diverging views on equality and justice, by focusing specifically on inter-generational transmission of inequalities between parents (i.e. mothers) and children, and implications for the UN development agenda post-2015 and construction of MDGs.

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Introduction

In 2000, world leaders adopted the United Nations Millennium Declaration, defining a new international consensus for the twenty-first century, forged on principles and values of freedom, equality, solidarity, tolerance, respect for nature (UN, 2000). The Millennium Declaration includes measurable and time-bound targets to monitor progresses in its implementation: eight Millennium Development Goals (MDGs) (1-Eradicate extreme poverty and hunger; 2-Achieve universal primary education; 3-Promote gender equality and empower women; 4-Reduce child mortality; improve maternal health; 5-Combat HIV-AIDS, malaria and other diseases; 6-Ensure environment sustainability; 7-Develop a global partnership for development), with 21 targets and 60 indicators and 2015 as deadline (UN, 2012).

The MDGs have aligned development partners’ agendas on the priority of reducing poverty in its multi-dimensional aspects, from income to education, health, and physical environment (Fukuda-Parr, 2012; Vandermoortele, 2012; Von der Hoeven, 2012). In terms of global advancements towards the MDGs, the United Nations’ MDGs Reports (UN, 2011, 2012) highlighted that some targets will be certainly met or they are in a positive trend, notably halving the proportion of people living with less than one dollar a day (MDG1), gender parity for primary education (MDG3), under five mortality rate reduced by two-third (MDG4), halted and begun to reverse the spread of HIV-AIDS, malaria and major diseases (MDG6), halve the proportion of people without access to drinking water and improve lives of 200 million slum dwellers (MDG7).

Nevertheless this picture does not outline inequalities between countries and regions. MDG1 for instance will be met in 2015, but mainly as a result of the remarkable economic development of China and India, while many regions, in particular Sub-Saharan Africa, are not on track (UN, 2011, 2012). More importantly, inequality within countries, thus among individuals and groups, are not accounted for in MDGs as these disregard the distribution based on socio-economic, demographic status, age, geographical location, or gender (UN, 2011). To quote Nayyar (2012) “...a meaningful assessment of progress in the living conditions of people must recognize rather than ignore the existence of inequality. The 'tyranny of averages' can be deceptive, if not misleading. It is essential to disaggregate outcomes so as to reveal rather than conceal distributional realities” (p. 7). In fact, the most vulnerable, notably poor income households, children and women, ethnical minorities, disabled, or those leaving in rural areas, have been largely unconcerned by progresses in MDGs (UN, 2011).
Equality is a pillar of the Millennium Declaration (UN, 2000): “we recognize that, in addition to our separate responsibilities to our individual societies, we have a collective responsibility to uphold the principles of human dignity, equality and equity at the global level” (para. I.2). In addition, “global challenges must be managed in a way that distributes the costs and burdens fairly in accordance with basic principles of equity and social justice. Those who suffer or who benefit least deserve help from those who benefit most” (para. I.6). In fact, inequalities within countries have severely increased from 1990s, boosted by the food prices’ crisis of 2007-2008 and financial crisis since 2008 (Berg & Ostry, 2011; Nayyar, 2012; Ortiz & Cummins, 2011; OECD, 2011; UN, 2012).

World leaders agree, in principle, that equality and social justice are shared universal values. However, defining what it is that needs to be equalized and what justice is, is not an easy task. Contrasting normative interpretations, grounded in different cultural, historical and political standpoints, emerge. As outlined in the Human Development Report 2010 (UNDP, 2010): “MDGs ... reflect the possibilities and limits of a consensus decision by the international community at that time, and they largely overlook, among other important dimensions, inequality and process freedom” (p. 17).

What to equalize? Opportunity: The contribution of contemporary philosophy

Contemporary philosophers, notably John Rawls (1999), Amartya Sen (1979, 1997, 2009), Ronald Dworkin (1981a,b) and John Roemer (1998), have discussed the question of ‘what to equalize’. A comprehensive overview of each scholar’s theory is beyond the scope of this paper. Rather, we outline how they share a rethinking of equality shifting the focus of the ‘what to equalize’ (the equilisandum) from ‘outcomes’ to ‘opportunities’.

John Rawls’s theory explores the equilisandum from the broader perspective of the principles that regulate just societies. In his ‘A Theory of Justice’ (Rawls, 1999) he develops the concept of ‘original position’, as an hypothetical status where each individual “has to decide by rational reflection what constitutes his good, that is, the system of ends which it is rational for him to pursue, so a group of persons must decide once and for all what is to count among them as just and unjust” (p. 10-11). He argues that in the original position, under a ‘veil of ignorance’, thus ignoring ones future positions in the society, human beings will opt for a social contract, governed by fairness. Accordingly, Rawls (1999) proposes two principles of fairness that should guide a just society. The first pertains rights and liberties. The second, which represents the essence of his egalitarian theory, named the ‘difference principle’ for ‘democratic equality’ (p. 65) underlines
that in a just society, available socio-economic positions need to be ‘open to all’, and advantages attached to positions distributed for the greatest benefit of least advantaged. Advantages, or opportunities (Van Parijs, 2009), are a set of ‘primary social goods’, reflecting what rational individuals need in order to pursue their life plans: opportunities, wealth and income, social basis of self-respect (Rawls, 1999, p. 54). The difference principle aims at alleviating the negative influence in life paths and achievements of what Rawls (1999) defines as the ‘natural lottery’ (p. 64): morally arbitrary factors, i.e. the family in which one is born, gender, or genes’ characteristics.

Amartya Sen’s capability theory goes beyond Rawls’ ‘original position’, to look at progresses for actual human lives. In the real world, individuals differ in what they have ‘reason to value’ or desire to be (Sen, 2009, p. 231). Therefore, he rephrases that identifying the equalisandum with a set of fixed goods might not be universally significant. Goods have to be seen rather as means (or ‘functioning’) for individuals’ freedom. Sen associates the ‘what to equalize’ with ‘capabilities’ (Sen, 1979, 1997, 2009): goods and their functioning enabling an individual to choose and thus to be free. Capabilities are influenced by morally arbitrary features: ‘variations’ such as physical characteristics (e.g. disability, illness, age, gender, making needs divers); climate circumstances (temperature, rainfall, flooding, etc.); physical locations of individuals (including the presence of public health care and epidemiology, education, crime and violence, access to facilities, the nature of community relationships); relational perspectives (e.g. commodity requirements in relation to the type of community, contentions and customs); and distributional rules within the family (Sen, 1997, p. 385-386). Sen (1979) admits that listing capabilities is not simple, since cultural, social and economic specificities shape their forms, as well when considering ‘basic capabilities’, allowing “a person being able to do certain basic things. The ability to move about is relevant here, but one can consider others, e.g., the ability to meet one’s nutritional requirements, the wherewithal to be clothed and sheltered, the power to participate in the social life of the community (p. 218). Sen’s capability theory has influenced the human development approach of the United Nations, in particular the design of the Human Development Index (UNDP, 1990, 2010), and MDGs (UNDP, 2010; Von der Hoeven, 2012).

Rawls’ and Sen’s models are mainly concerned with the nature of the equalisandum, identifying the ‘what to equalize’ (primary social goods or capabilities) in relation to an individuals’ needs and accounting for unjust distributional features. In doing so, they imply that inequalities can be just, if resulting from free and responsible choices or preferences from the individual. Ronald Dworkin (1981a,b) and John Roemer (1998) explicitly disaggregate inequalities in responsible and irresponsible factors and indicate compensatory models to reduce the influence of inheritance in opportunity acquisition. Dworkin (1981a, b) argues that individual
responsibility (preferences, taste, choices) is influenced by innate factors, such as resources (or opportunities) that are identifiable with transferrable goods, but also natural endowments, i.e. talent or, in opposition, handicaps. Society should then redistribute available resources in ways that compensate individuals in disadvantaged positions.

In the same vein, John Roemer (1998) considers that life outcomes are determined by two elements: ‘effort’, as Dworkin’s responsibility, and ‘circumstances’ as morally arbitrary features. The latter represent the unfair share of inequality, shaping the distribution of opportunities, defined as ‘access to advantage’. Yet “an individual is responsible for turning that access into actual advantage by the application of effort” (p. 24). Roemer proposes an equality of opportunity model, using econometrics, for the allocation of available resources in societies aiming to ‘level the playing field’ (p. 1): ensuring that individuals expending a same degree of effort (accounting for circumstances’ influence on effort) will have similar outcomes. John Roemer’s model has been the main source of reference for the World Bank’s Human Opportunity Index (World Bank, 2006; Paes de Barros et al., 2009).

To summarize, we can reasonably affirm that contemporary egalitarian philosophers set the problem on ‘what to equalize’. They agree that differences in life outcomes among individuals can be deemed fair, when due to acceptable features, such as free and responsible choices, aspirations, effort, preferences. Alternatively inequalities are unjust when determined by factors beyond individual control (circumstances), such as family background, ethnicity, gender, or genes. Opportunities are to be equalized, as those goods, services, and their functioning that every individual has to have in order to choose and pursue his or her life plans, a thus to be free.

**Integrating the equality of opportunity’s dimension in the MDGs**

The philosophical reflection is crucial to understand how to embed the equality dimension in the post-2015 UN development agenda. MDGs need to outline how societies progress towards equality and social justice. Indicators then reflect the ‘what to equalize’ as opportunities. However, operationalizing equality of opportunity is not an easy task. Philosophers find it hard to provide a clear description of what opportunity are: goods (Rawls, 1999), resources (Dworkin, 1981a,b), capabilities (Sen, 1979, 1997, 2009), or access to advantages (Roemer, 1998). This difficulty is closely related to the fact the selection of opportunities depends on what one decides about the outcomes to contribute to; on what one considers as unfair circumstances, and on how one judges about what is a fair share of responsibility. Depending on how one untangles the interactions among these three elements shaping inequalities,

1. **Basic opportunities** (for ‘basic needs’) of which the distribution is assumed to be solely determined by circumstances.
2. **Extended opportunities** (for outcomes beyond basic needs) of which the distribution is partly determined by circumstances and partly by responsibility.
3. **Process Opportunities** as inequalities in accessing ‘positions’ or outcomes.

**Basic opportunities** can be identified as those means permitting individuals to achieve basic needs, and live in dignity. The present MDGs clearly reflect ‘basic opportunities’: to survive and to be healthy (MDG4, MDG5, MDG6), to have a minimum income (MDG1), to be nourished (MDG1) and educated (MDG2, MDG3), access to water, sanitation and decent housing (MDG7), along with working conditions (MDG1), to live in a non-deteriorated physical environment (MDG7). We universally accept that these basic opportunities are shaped solely by circumstances, regardless of responsibility (Burchardt, 2006; World Bank, 2006). Individuals do not choose (or like) to be poor, in hunger, dying because of diseases, or pregnancy. There is consensus that a child cannot be responsible for her or his survival under the age of five. As a result, MDGs, as basic opportunities, have to be distributed equally among people. Progress must be assessed against universal standards, by disaggregating results in terms of circumstances (i.e. socio-economic conditions, gender, geographical location, disabilities), and with a focus on advancements for the most disadvantaged.

Although ensuring equal basic opportunities is obviously an important egalitarian progress, the question remains whether this is sufficient. Would reaching these basic goals make our societies fair? Surely fairer, yet people might aspire to other things in life from which a part of the society is already benefiting. These may include higher living standards; increased income (beyond the poverty line of one or two dollar a day) and working positions (not merely decent and stable), education (above primary levels), health (beyond survival), as well as opportunities for leisure, access to information and technologies, business and power, community participation, quality of services, environment. On these aspirations, inequalities will persist unless all (or most) available opportunities are distributed equally, regardless of circumstances. This is the main difference between poverty and equality. MDGs seek to eradicate severe poverty in its multi-dimensional aspects. Eradicating extreme poverty signifies moving all individuals above the minimum basic needs set. In contrast reducing inequalities of opportunities signifies allowing individuals to reach their desired ends, and making life outcomes less dependent on the ‘natural lottery’. As a result, eliminating poverty is a necessary condition to equalize opportunities, but not sufficient (Wilkinson & Pickett, 2009).
We define the second type of opportunities, as *extended opportunities*, because they move beyond basic needs and consider larger sets of opportunities in society. Reviewing MDGs as accounting for extended opportunities means aiming at equalizing access and functioning of goods or services beyond basic needs (e.g. higher education and health).

How can we account for extended opportunities in goals and indicators? MDG3 provides a good example since it looks at a specific opportunity (education) in an extended perspective (integrating access to all levels of education’s services). Progress is assessed against universal availability considering specific circumstances of disadvantage (i.e. girls vs. boys). Nevertheless, MDG3 (as well as other goals) does not reflect ‘functioning’, thus the real opportunity for girls to effectively *use* access to education, shaped for instance also by discriminatory attitudes in the family (UN, 2012). Measurements should also consider whether educational achievements (e.g. test scores), and not only access, are predicted by gender or any other circumstance (UNDP, 2010). Equalizing here signifies reducing the gap in outcomes predicted by circumstances. Yet equalizing does not necessarily mean equalizing results, as this would deny responsibility). Special attention is to be dedicated to higher gains for the most disadvantaged, in accordance with Rawls’ difference principle (Ferreira & Gignoux, 2011; Rawls, 1999; Roemer, 1998; UNDP, 2010; Van de Gaer, Vandenbossche, Figueroa, 2011).

In addition, societies - in order to be just - should not only equalize opportunities, but also guarantee that positions, or life outcomes, are ‘open to all’, to recall again Rawls’ difference principle. *Process opportunities* refer to the degree of ‘openness’ of the socio-economic system, enabling life outcomes to be fairly assigned, as the sole result of responsibility or choice, once opportunities are equalized. Fairness of processes can be negatively affected by ‘cultural’ or ‘systemic’ circumstances, such as racism or discrimination (Burchardt, 2006; Sen, 1997; UNDP, 2010). In most developed and developing countries, ‘systemic’ cultural circumstances, such as discriminations against women in the workplace, make processes towards the allocation of working positions unjust, because not solely dependent on effort and responsibility. This is reflected in the gender wage gap, as well as in the gendered gap between paid and unpaid work (MDG1 and MDG3) (UN, 2011, 2012; UNDP, 2010). Systemic circumstances affecting these processes are difficult to capture when using solely quantitative methods, just as it is quite complex to design what the specific goals and indicators should be. Nonetheless, it is crucial to use existing frameworks, such as anti-corruptions indexes or discrimination in the workplace to account for unfairness in processes undermining the effects of MDGs.
Equalizing opportunities of children (and women) through MDGs: from consensus on principles to dissenssus on implementation

In the previous section we analyzed, with the help of contemporary philosophy, the ‘what’ to equalize’, as opportunities and we explored how MDGs may capture the equality of opportunities dimension. Consensus can be found on the underlining principle of reducing the influence of the ‘lottery of nature’ on individual life chances. Nevertheless, dissensus could emerge at the stage of designing MDGs indicators and targets, in particular when considering the inter-generational transmission of inequalities as opportunities of one generation depend on the outcomes of the previous one.

Children are societies’ most vulnerable citizens. As stated in the Millennium Declaration (UN, 2000): “As leaders we have a duty therefore to all the world’s people, especially the most vulnerable and, in particular, the children of the world, to whom the future belongs” (para. I.2). Their development is entirely dependent on circumstances, which are shaped by other subjects (the family, the community or society at large), or ‘nature’ (i.e. talent and intelligence). Accordingly, children’s developmental ‘outcomes’ have to be considered as opportunities to be guaranteed equally to all.

International organizations, (UNESCO, UNICEF, WHO and World Bank) supported by scholars from various disciplines such as economics (Heckman, 2000 and 2008), neuro-sciences (Shonkoff and Phillips (Eds.), 2000) and sociology (Esping-Andersen, 2008 and 2009), outline that inequalities in life achievements (education, health, earnings, social position, well-being) are to a large extent moulded by disadvantage in accessing opportunities during the early years. Provision of high quality care and education before compulsory school age is universally considered as a prominent egalitarian policy, (Alderman (Eds.), 2011; Barnett, 2011; Barnett & Masse, 2007; Cunha & Heckman, 2006; Eming Young (Eds.), 2002; Engle et al., 2011; Heckman & Masterov, 2007; Heckman, Moon, Pinto, Savelyev, Yavitz, 2009; Lake, 2011; UNESCO; 2007; UNICEF, 2008). Therefore, one could argue that MDGs, in particular the MDG2, MDG3 and health indicators beyond mere survival, should include targets on the access to high quality early childhood care and education services.

Equally, we need to consider positive trade-offs of parents’ outcomes on children opportunities. Interventions addressing children’s negative circumstances, inherited from the family, might enhance their opportunities in terms of cognitive, non-cognitive and physical development (Alderman (Eds.), 2011; Irwin, Siddiqi, Hertzman, 2007; Naudeau et al., 2011; Ortiz, Daniels, Engilbertsdottir (Eds.), 2012; UNESCO 2007; UNICEF, 2008, 2010a, 2010b). Mother’s education, along with employment opportunities and income levels are highly correlated with children’s developmental outcomes (UN, 2011 and 2012; Esping-Andersen,
2008, 2009; Waldfogel, 2004). Consequently, MDGs looking at income and working conditions of women (MDG1), their education (MDG3) and health (MDG5) substantively contribute to equalize children’s opportunities (UNICEF, 2010a).

One generation’s opportunities (children) are shaped by gaps in the ‘outcomes’ of the previous generation (with major role for woman) in a cycle perpetuating the inter-generational transmission of disadvantage (Kanbur, 2009; UN, 2011, 2012). Therefore, equalizing the opportunities of children would also include equalizing at least partially the outcomes of their parents. Interactions among MDGs targeting different age groups reflect these dynamics. Although in principle, reducing inequalities for children can find agreement among experts and organizations, dissensus might appear vis-à-vis indicators accounting for reduction of income inequalities among adults (MDG1), specifically when moving beyond basic needs.

The more we augment the income threshold for MDG1, in particular for women, the more likely we reduce opportunities gaps in terms of development and educational outcomes for children (MDG2). However, it is important to highlight that in market-based economies income is considered as outcomes, and is believed to be an important instrument to reward responsibility and effort. Conversely, augmenting income for the more disadvantaged would mean enhancing top-down redistribution and this could be considered as undermining responsibility and effort, and therefore as unfair or inefficient. The disagreement is therefore on how to reconcile the redistribution of income and the reward of effort, choice and responsibility in respect of the principle of equality of opportunities.

This question is central to the post-2015 UN development agenda, not only in terms of ‘means’ (Fukuda-Parr, 2012; Vandemoortele, 2012), as macro-economic models and applied egalitarian policies, but also, and primarily, for the construction of MDGs. The point of fracture lies in the relations between circumstances and responsibility in determining life achievements. One important point of dissensus is on whether or not it is possible to make a clear distinction between a situation before opportunities are equalized (i.e. childhood) when circumstances totally account for inequalities, and after (i.e. adulthood), when responsibility and effort determine life results.

For those who assume that a cut between ‘before’ and ‘after’ is feasible, inequalities in adulthood are seen as fair in principle, because predominantly dependent on responsibility, choice or effort, and instrumental for economic efficiency. They emphasize the role of the free and deregulated market, as a compensatory system, the natural milieu of ‘merit’, able to overcome most of the negative endowments throughout life and ensure fair processes (Morabito and Vandenbroeck, forthcoming). This normative standpoint has influenced the so-called ‘Washington Consensus’ (Fukuda-Parr, 2012; Morabito & Vandenbroeck, forthcoming; UNDP, 2010), in favour of policies reducing state intervention, liberalization, and denying
redistribution (only in recent years, social sector’s expansion has been sponsored, but mainly concerning education and health). This approach has influenced not only policies but also the design of development indicators, such as the World Bank’s Human Opportunity Index (Paes de Barros et al., 2009), which aims at measuring inequalities by separating opportunities (for children) from outcomes (of parents): “Much more important than inequality of outcomes among adults is inequality of opportunity among children” (p. xvii). In addition, “Most people would probably view income gaps that arise from different choices as less objectionable than those related to ethnicity, location of birth, gender, or family background, which are all factors beyond the individual’s responsibility and thus might be deemed unfair … However, other potential sources of inequality may be necessary to give people proper incentives to provide the effort to require education and translate it into earnings … Equality of opportunities is desirable, equality of outcomes (earnings, income, wealth) not necessarily” (p. 26-27).

On the opposite side, one can argue that a clear cut between ‘before’ and ‘after’ is unrealistic, and therefore advocate for stronger income redistribution in adulthood. In this perspective, opportunities can never be completely or mostly equalized during childhood and the market is surely not the place favouring fairness along life paths. More importantly, responsibility, choices and effort are also shaped by circumstances, so they are equally to be considered as outcomes. Therefore, income gaps, as the mean to value responsibility and outcomes, are unjust when too large. Furthermore, they find no association between redistribution and economic inefficiency. On the contrary, the redistribution of income among women in particular, would reduce the impact of circumstances on children and in turn might stimulate economic development, benefiting from human talent (Esping-Andersen, 2008; Morabito & Vandenbroeck, forthcoming; Stiglitz, 2012). As outlined by the Inequality and Social Justice Roundtable Consultations held in London in 2011 (MDG Achievement Fund and Institute of Development Studies, 2011): “More equal distributions of income are not antagonistic to but supportive of sustained economic growth” (p. 4). This standpoint corresponds to the ‘Human Development’ approach (Fukuda-Parr, 2012; Jolly, 2011; UNDP, 2010) that favours policies expanding social safety nets, including income redistribution before taxation; and that advocates for devising development indicators accordingly. The UNDP’s Human Development Report 2010 (UNDP, 2010), for instance, accounts for the impact of less income inequalities (i.e. wages, earnings, and wealth) measured in terms of Gini Coefficient on enhancing Human Development Index (opportunities for education, health and income).
Conclusions

Contemporary egalitarian philosophy, including the work of Rawls, Sen, Dworkin and Roemer, has enlightened the nature and dynamics of inequality, shifting the equalisandum, the ‘what to equalize’, from outcomes to opportunities. Opportunities are goods and services, along with their functioning permitting individuals to be substantively free. They can be classified according to their influence on circumstances, defined as factors beyond individual control (i.e. socio-economic conditions, ethnicity, religion, gender, disabilities, and geography): basic opportunities for basic needs; extended opportunities distributed both by circumstances and responsibilities; and process opportunities (inequalities in access to positions and outcomes).

The Millennium Development Goals assess progress towards equality and social justice. We argue that these cannot suffice with looking at advancements in terms basic opportunities, i.e. the minimum set that every human being should have in order to survive and live in dignity. They should also take into account extended opportunities and process opportunities, accounting for larger inequalities present in the society (reducing the share of outcomes’ gaps along life paths shaped by circumstances).

A major problem remains: the selection of opportunities to enrich MDGs targets and indicators. The candidates to join MDGs either in terms of ‘basic’, ‘extended’ or ‘process opportunities’ are various, as various as individuals’ plans and ends within and between countries and societies. As Sen (1979) and Roemer (1998) argue, the choice of opportunities, outcomes and circumstances must consider social, political, economic or cultural specificities of a country, region or community. In this respect, adopting a ‘blue-print’ approach would be unsuitable.

Participation of beneficiaries, in defining the post-2015 UN development agenda is essential to capture what indicators are more relevant for peoples’ lives, in relation to their economic possibilities. Equally the choice of circumstances should consider both computable and unobservable determinants, and make use of both quantitative and qualitative methods; taking into account technical constrains (i.e. data availability and robust measurements) (Burchardt, 2006; Fukuda-Parr, 2012; Nayyar, 2012; UNDESA, 2012; Vandemoortele 2012; Von der Hoeven, 2012; World Bank, 2006; UNICEF, 2010a, 2010b; UNDP, 2010).

There is large consensus on equalizing what is determined by unfair circumstances, namely opportunity translated into MDGs indicators, especially when focused on the most vulnerable, the children. Still, dissensus might emerge on operationalizing equality of opportunity and defining indicators or measurable targets (Fukuda-Parr, 2012; Vandemoortele, 2012). While income redistribution is contested, it cannot be denied that one generation’s income (in particular of the mother) shapes the next generations opportunities. Therefore, a consistent reduction of income inequalities (i.e. MDG 1 going beyond basic needs), can contribute to the equality of children’s developmental opportunities.
Obviously, MDGs accounting for stronger income redistribution will find resistance from those underlining potential unjustness of ‘equalizing outcomes’, which denies reward of responsibility and choice in free market systems, and is economic inefficient. Others, underlining the unfairness of markets and pointing at the relation between income inequalities and economic development, will favor it. As outlined in the Human Development Report 2010 (UNDP, 2010), recalling Amartya Sen’s thoughts, “differences in reasonable people’s outlooks make perfect agreement unfeasible – but more important ... it is not necessary either. We can agree that some states of affairs are better than others” (p. 16). Or, as we argue, that some positions are more realistic.

As a matter of fact, the reality of millions of human beings, in particular women, is one of lacking opportunities since childhood, all along their life paths, due to socially and culturally constructed disadvantage, leaving little space (if any) for responsibility and choice in inequalities in socio-economic positions or outcomes, in adulthood. As the UN (2012) affirms: “Although they may enter the labour market with the same educational and skill levels as men, they face more barriers in reaching top-level occupations. Globally, women occupy only 25 per cent of senior management positions. Women’s jobs tend to be concentrated at the lower end of the labour market (i.e., less remunerative, less productive, micro in scale) and in a narrower range of occupations and activities (e.g., food processing, garment making, services)” (p. 23).

Analytical studies have clearly falsified the hypothesis that income inequalities yield economic efficiency, referring i.e. to the GDP growth of countries undertaking vast income redistributive policies, such as in Latin America (Berg & Ostry, 2011; Jolly, 2011; Krugman, 2012; Ortiz & Cummins, 2011; Ortiz, Daniels, Engilbertsdóttir (Eds.), 2012; Stiglitz, 2012). On the contrary, income gaps seem to be highly correlated with all indicators of welfare problems (Wilkinson & Pickett, 2009).

Finally, equality of opportunity entails values that represent the essence of any social contract founded on justice and solidarity (UN, 2000). Theories that radicalize the discourse on individual responsibility tend to substitute solidarity with individualism as societal ethos (Judt, 2010; Krugman, 2012).

In sum, an open debate about equality and justice is unavoidable and timely (UNDP, 2010; Vandemoortele, 2012). Equality and fairness for the most vulnerable, the children, in accordance with the Millennium Declaration, also includes breaking the inter-generational transmission of disadvantage. In this respect, it is highly unlikely that a distinction between opportunities before and after individual responsibility can be made and therefore that investments in the early years can be separated from more comprehensive redistributive policies. Critiques vis-a-vis the latter are not compelling both in terms of promoting effective social justice and economic development.
References


