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In search of goals

It seems the starting pistol has been fired in the search for what will succeed the Millennium Development Goals (MDGs) which of course 'expire' in 2015. Well they don't actually expire, as for many countries achieving them is still work in progress, but the deadline expires. So what comes next? And maybe more importantly, who should be defining what comes next.

There is a feeling that the MDGs, whilst emerging through the United Nations system, might have had a bit too much input from international organisations and agencies, rather than the countries themselves. So whilst every care is being taken not to denigrate the laudable goals of the MDGs, Africa wants to ensure it is placed more squarely in the middle of the discussions for the SDGs... the Successor Development Goals as they are being called.

A conference held in Tunis at the beginning of July brought together Ministers of Finance and Health from around Africa for a meeting entitled 'Value for money, sustainability and accountability in the health sector: a high level dialogue between Ministers'. The core driver was that while the evidence for investment in health in terms of economic (and employment) benefits seems irrefutable, maybe the only way to persuade Finance Ministers to dig deep into their pockets would be to get them to the conference table and convince them.

It was an interesting experiment. The Deputy Minister of Finance from Egypt (with tongue in cheek) joked about the potential conflict of interest on the impact on pension payments of keeping people alive longer! A Chinese delegate explained how the take-off for health in China occurred post-2003 when the Minister of Finance was reshuffled and made Minister of Health. Rather than constantly capping expenditure, he suddenly experienced how impossible it was to manage on the funds supplied. A scale-up followed. Huge benefits ensued.

Speaker after speaker then provided the irrefutable evidence that the dividend

of investing in health can only be beneficial, both for wellbeing AND for employment. Margaret Chan, DG of WHO was there, Donald Kaberuka, President of the African Development Bank (and host of the meeting) was there, Abdoulaye Janneh, Executive Secretary of the United Nations Economic Commission for Africa was there... and all appealed to the Finance ministers to loosen up and invest in health. But perhaps the defining appeal came from Dr Hans Rosling, Chairman of the Gapminder Foundation, whose lucid use of Power-Point to trace global change since 1960 was both entertaining and irrefutable.

And where did it lead us? Over the 34 years I've been with this journal I've seen us move through the gears from the advent of Primary care post Alma Ata, through the wretched years of Structural Adjustment programmes in the 1980s, and the stagnation of the 1990s, followed by Africa's heady growth spurt since the turn of the Millennium (in part natural economic progress, in part MDG stimulated), I was intrigued to see that the consensus on the way forward was solid: we need to seek the 'demographic dividend'. And what does that mean? Family planning. Back to a phrase that went out of fashion about 30 years ago. (We'll bring more on this in the coming issues, no time this time).

And for the SDGs? Again, very interesting, with ministers at the end of the meeting submitting off the cuff recommendations to Dr Kaberuka and Mr Janneh. They varied between Ivory Coast's call for 'a Marshall Plan for health' through to Chad's appeal that Africa should look at itself as being relatively rich and stop feeling sorry for itself. In between three firm themes: we must build capacity; increase finance; and invest in industrialisation to create the wealth that can pay for the health.

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